

project 
unloaded

ANNUAL REPORT *2024*



A MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER

[Project Unloaded](#) works to prevent gun violence by educating, engaging, and empowering teens through cultural campaigns and community partnerships that share a simple message: guns make us less safe. We sit at the intersection of public health, youth engagement, social marketing and culture. Through large-scale, data-backed social media campaigns, teen-facing local programs, and an inspiring youth council, we combine young people’s love of social media with a gun violence prevention message that can reduce gun use and save lives.

Our creative, youth-forward social media campaigns reach millions of young people with peer-to-peer, fact-based messages about why guns make us less safe. Through our community programming, we partner with local organizations to educate teens about how to change gun culture and build their social media marketing skills to spread the message online and in their schools and communities. The high school and college-age leaders in our Youth Council serve as our thought partners in everything we do at Project Unloaded and contribute ideas and content for our campaigns and partnerships.

Just three years old, we’ve already reached more than 6 million teens – more than a quarter of teens in the U.S. – with the message that they’re safer unarmed. In 2024, we’re showing what it means to reach young people at scale by:

- Bringing our signature [SNUG \(Safer Not Using Guns\)](#) campaign to **5 million teens in 12 cities**
- Engaging another **1.3 million teens** via our [Guns Change the Story](#) campaign, which is designed to connect with Black and Latino teens in communities deeply impacted by gun violence



Left: Youth Council Retreat, October 2024

Right: After School Matters teen shows off a Guns Change the Story sticker

Photos by Heather Eidson

THE TRACE

The Guardian

“The most ambitious effort to change Americans’ relationship to guns is being led by a nonprofit [...] called Project Unloaded.”

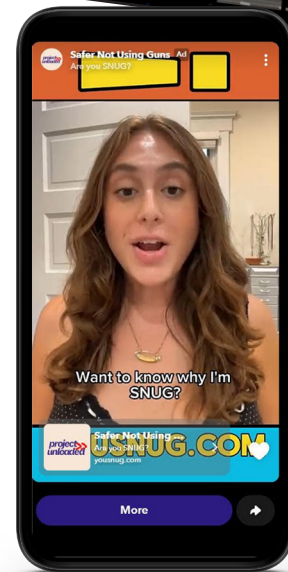
– Katie Worth for The Guardian/The Trace, April 2024

- Partnering with dozens of Gen Z content creators on Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube to spread the message that we’re safer unarmed
- Hosting community programs for **500+ teens in 3 cities** to educate them on the risks that come with gun use and train them to create social media content and campaigns spreading that message
- Expanding our Youth Council to 19 high school and college students, and launching our first Creator Corps of 15 young content creators

Heading into 2025, we’re not waiting for Congress, the White House or the courts to make change. Instead, our work hinges on young people who are fed up with gun violence and ready to write a different story when it comes to guns. If you doubt that our deadly gun culture can change, read on and learn about how we’re inspiring a generational shift in America’s relationship with guns. We couldn’t do it without your support.



With gratitude,
 Nina Vinik
 Founder and President



Top: City Club of Chicago hosts event focused on youth, gun violence and social media. Photo by Brandon Petrizzo, Video Parachute

Below: Snapchat ad for our SNUG campaign featuring Youth Council member Zoe Kaufman

REACHING YOUNG PEOPLE AT SCALE THROUGH OUR CULTURE CHANGE CAMPAIGNS

With two active campaigns, Project Unloaded reaches teens across the U.S. with a positive, engaging message: We're safer unarmed. Through these campaigns, we don't try to chastise or scare young people into staying away from guns. Instead, we aim to activate their own curiosity and empower them with the information they need to choose for themselves not to own or use guns.

Why teens? Because the teen years are a formative period for decision making about guns. While it's much harder to change the minds of adults, young people are still forming their views and want to learn more. Our [research](#) shows that young people are particularly receptive to fact-based information about the risks that come with having and using guns.

Research on young people's attitudes, knowledge and behaviors toward guns, along with the input of real teens, provide the foundation for our [SNUG](#) (Safer Not Using Guns) and [Guns Change the Story](#) campaigns, leveraging the power of social media and Gen Z to change the narrative when it comes to guns and gun violence.

PROJECT UNLOADED CAMPAIGN REACH



Through these campaigns, we've reached more than **6 million teens** (roughly 25% of all 13-17 year-olds in the US) coast-to-coast, with engagement data showing that the message is resonating. We worked throughout the year to ensure that our content was memorable and engaging to young audiences, reaching them with a variety of ads delivering similar messages without oversaturating our audience. With those goals in mind, we structured both campaigns with four 5-6 week flights that would reach young people an average of 6-8 times each over that period. If they engage with our content (meaning they watch an ad, like or comment on it, or click through to learn more), we'll reach them again, encouraging them to learn more about the issue and join our texting program for ongoing connection with Project Unloaded. This sustained interaction reinforces the message with our audience.

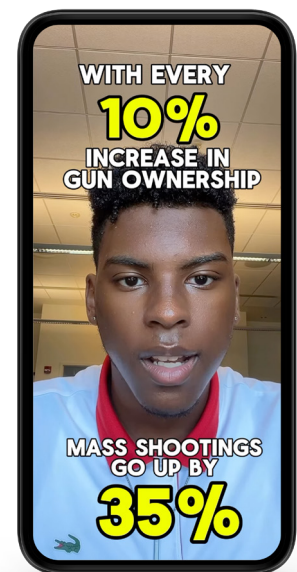
LIVING LIFE SNUG

SNUG (Safer Not Using Guns) combines firearm risk education with colorful graphics, delivered by teens, for teens. The campaign engages and empowers teens through simple facts about gun violence absent partisan or polarizing rhetoric. Since January 2022, the SNUG campaign has been reaching teens in the (virtual) places where they spend their time: Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. SNUG reaches young people via native content, influencer campaigns and targeted ads.

This year, our SNUG campaign reached **nearly 5 million teens** through social media content running on Instagram and Snapchat. Over the summer, we added new video content filmed by our Youth Council to our mix of SNUG ads, and some of their ads quickly became the highest performing content in our already well-performing campaign.

In 2024 SNUG reached teens in Charlotte, Columbus, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Seattle, and St. Louis.

The campaign continues to earn strong engagement. Teens watched **1.5 million SNUG ads to completion**. Our click-thru rate, meaning the number of times that teens clicked



Youth Council member Jayden Wright spreads the SNUG message



Left: Top performing graphic ad, created by our summer intern Shree Balasubramanian

Right: SNUG ad filmed by Youth Council member Maddie Bhuvan for Suicide Prevention Month

to look at our website or join our text list, exceeds Snapchat’s benchmark for work like ours. Our video completion rates averaged 8.3% across our SNUG cities, exceeding Snapchats metrics for a successful campaign. In 5 of our 12 SNUG cities the results were even stronger, with **roughly 1 in 10 SNUG ads presented to a teen watched to completion.**

GUNS CHANGE THE STORY

Through videos shot with local Chicago teens and MadLibs-style storytelling, [Guns Change the Story](#) challenges teens to consider how the presence of a gun can change the tone and risk profile of everyday moments, while sharing facts about how guns decrease safety. The campaign is designed to reach Black and Latino teens in communities disproportionately impacted by gun violence. In 2024, Guns Change the Story reached **1.3 million teens** in neighborhoods with elevated rates of gun violence in Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Sacramento and St. Louis. Campaign ads were **watched to completion more than 345,000 times.**



Teens in our program with After School Matters filmed content that became part of the Guns Change the Story campaign this fall

Peer-to-peer messaging is a hallmark of the Guns Change the Story campaign, with content created by students in our community partner programs.

For both our Guns Change the Story and SNUG campaigns, teens in our community programs and on our Youth Council created ad content asking their peers to sign up for texts from Project Unloaded. Ads filmed by teens in our community partner program asking other teens to text with Project Unloaded earned the highest average click-thru rate across all of our content.

ENGAGING CONTENT CREATORS

More than two dozen Gen Z content creators joined our movement this year, leveraging the platforms they've built on social media to reach young people with the message that guns make us less safe. Through this program, we intentionally work with creators who don't typically talk about politics or engage in social issues to try to reach teens online who may swipe past more traditional messages about guns and safety.

This year's influencer work included several firsts for Project Unloaded: Our new creator partners filmed and posted our first-ever content on YouTube, an important platform for reaching young men. [Our recent research found that 1 in 4 young men said they've learned about guns through YouTube.](#)

We were intentional about location too, partnering with five Black and Latino Chicago-based creators and a set of creators in Atlanta, with the goal of engaging our Guns Change the Story campaign audience through influencer content as well as digital ads.

Additionally, this year marked the first time we've engaged creators who are college students. This batch of creators includes current students who've lived through school shootings or college parties that turned into shootouts, and others who've been locked down because of threats. These creators brought authenticity, creativity and relatability to their work – and their work was effective.

Through more than 25 posts, some reposted on multiple platforms, these influencers earned an **average engagement rate 2-3x higher than industry standards** and spread the message that we're safer unarmed to their **combined audience of more than 1.58 million viewers across TikTok, YouTube and Instagram.**



Left: TikTok from Michigan State student @lacymae to her 167,000 followers about why she lives unloaded

Right: YouTuber @beingmylen shares a personal story about gun violence and urges his audience to consider how Guns Change the Story

EXPANDING OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

This year we built on the success of our 2023 Community Partner pilot program, deepening existing partnerships and expanding our reach to new cities, organizations and teens, all with the goal of inspiring teens to understand and spread the message that guns make us less safe.

In Chicago, we returned for another summer in collaboration with Chicago Public Schools' Choose to Change program, this time in collaboration with [Youth Advocate Program \(YAP\)](#), [BUILD Chicago](#) and [Lifeline to Hope](#). Fifty teens from around the city participated in a 6 week experience where they created and pitched their own social media campaigns to change gun culture. Advertising professionals from Havas Chicago joined the program as mentors to the students and hosted the teens' final pitch competition at the agency's downtown Chicago office, where their work was judged by Chicago Public Schools COO Charles Mayfield, actress, rapper, and philanthropist Ta'Rhonda Jones, multi-media artist and Chicagofootworkdotcom creator Kent Jones, University of Chicago Medical Center lead violence recovery specialist Christine Goggins, and Edgar Vilchez, a CPS alum and Project Unloaded Youth Council member. Read more about their pitch competition in [this story from CBS News](#) filmed at our culminating event.

We also launched after-school programs this year in collaboration with [After School Matters](#) and [Breakthrough Urban Ministries](#). Our "Social Media and Social Change" after-school program invites teens to turn their classroom into



Left: Choose to Change teens and Lifeline to Hope staff together at our summer 2024 final pitch competition

Right: Teens in our spring partnership with After School Matters pose with Olivia Brown, Project Unloaded's program manager, for community partnerships

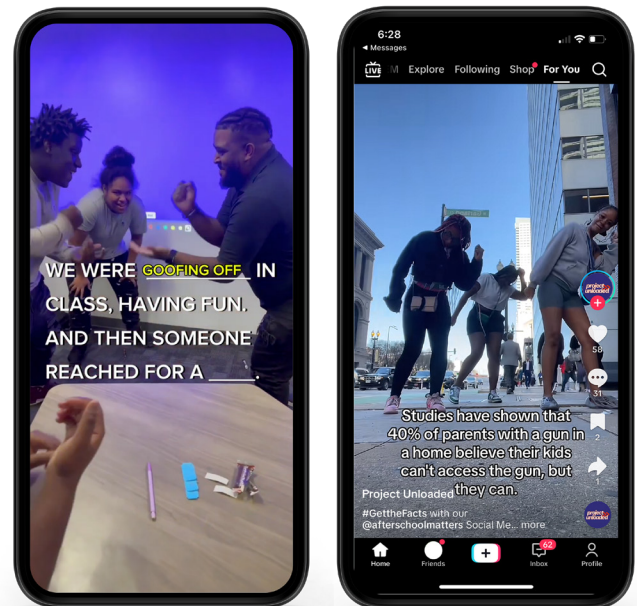
a marketing agency, creating content for our Guns Change the Story campaign. The content created in our after-school program continues to be some of the highest performing in the Guns Change the Story campaign. Read more about students' time in the program in [this story from WTTW](#).

In addition to our work in Chicago, we expanded our programs to Philadelphia and Sacramento this year. We partnered with the youth engagement and violence prevention organization [YEAH Philly](#) to challenge teens with a creative contest that inspired them to develop and pitch their own social media campaigns that could reach other teens with the message that they're safer unarmed. Five teams from YEAH, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Unity in the Community, and Mastermen Schools pitched their work to a panel of judges including Philadelphia leaders and influencers. The culminating event earned coverage in [Axios Philly](#), the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) and other outlets, highlighting the enthusiasm in Philadelphia for youth-led responses to gun violence.

In Sacramento, we've expanded our work through a partnership with [Sacramento Youth Center](#). Working with local facilitators trained by Program Manager Olivia Brown, a classroom of teens spent 5 weeks learning the facts about the risks of gun ownership and creating content to share this message with their peers. During the program, teens talked about what it meant to feel safe in their communities and dived deep in conversation around the beliefs that drive gun ownership where they live — and whether those beliefs were really rooted in fact. Some of the social media content created in this program has been integrated into the Guns Change the Story campaign and is now reaching their peers in the Sacramento area and beyond.

“We partner with Project Unloaded because their mission and goals are directly in line with our community violence intervention work. And on top of that, our teens like showing up. Project Unloaded shares a gun violence prevention message through programming that’s fun and engaging for young people.

– Danielle Peterson, Breakthrough Urban Ministries



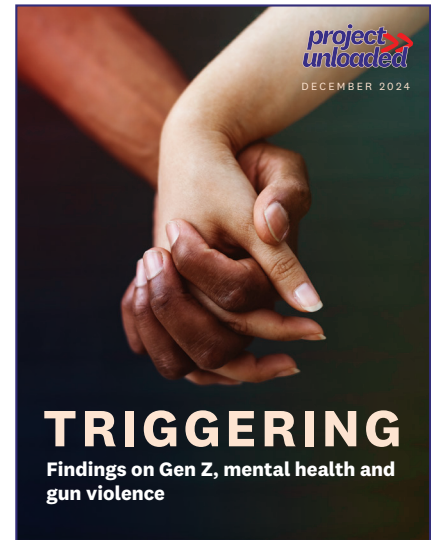
Left: Content featuring our Sacramento Youth Center teens
Right: Teens in our spring After School Matters program film a dance TikTok to share the facts on gun risks

GROUNDING OUR WORK IN RESEARCH + DATA

To better understand Gen Z’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviors around guns and gun violence in the larger context of their mental health, Project Unloaded partnered with C+R Research to conduct an in-depth qualitative and quantitative study. The findings, which are summarized in the 2024 report “[Triggering](#),” offer new insights into how mental health awareness and firearm violence prevention could be mutually reinforcing for young people, contributing to improved health and community safety.

Key findings include:

- **Gen Z and Guns:** Young people are familiar with guns and gun violence. 45 percent of young people in our sample live in homes with firearms. While protection is a key driver for gun ownership, there’s a significant portion of Gen Z that is undecided about future gun ownership. Mass shootings heavily influence their views on guns.
- **Gen Z and Mental Health:** Mental health is a top concern, but few young people are currently receiving help or treatment. They are open to discussing mental health and recognize the importance of staying safe.
- **Intersection of Guns and Mental Health:** The majority of young people would advise a friend struggling with mental health to stay away from guns. Members of Gen Z with firsthand experience with gun violence are more concerned about mental health.
- **Demographics:** Black and Latino Gen Z are less likely to live in homes with guns but more likely to experience gun violence. Black males report greater comfort with guns compared to Black females. Rural Gen Z, while familiar with guns, mirror the overall population in their likelihood of gun ownership.



40%

In spite of so much gun exposure, 40% of Gen Z is unsure about whether or not they’ll own a gun in the future — presenting an opportunity for effective risk education messaging

- **Opportunities:** There's an opportunity to engage the undecided Gen Z population on gun ownership and mental health. The research highlights the need for positive, fact-based messaging addressing myths around gun ownership. These findings also suggest opportunities for collaboration between mental health and gun violence prevention communities.

45%

of Gen Z said they were concerned about their personal mental health

55%

of young people who've experienced gun violence are worried about their mental health

31%

Less than a third of Gen Z are getting help for a mental health condition

Overall, the report emphasizes the importance of understanding Gen Z's views on mental health and guns to develop effective strategies for gun violence prevention. It also offered new understanding of the young people who are still undecided about gun ownership. Just over half are women; almost four in ten are men. Politically, 43% described themselves as independent, 26% conservative, and 29% liberal. With the largest share of Gen Z having neither conservative nor liberal ideologies, it's clear that risk education messaging can go further when it's removed from a polarized conversation. In spring 2025, Project Unloaded will unveil a new Gen Z-focused campaign inspired by this research.

ELEVATING YOUNG LEADERS

In July, we introduced Project Unloaded’s third and largest-yet [Youth Council](#), 19 teens and young adults from across the country who advise, shape, and create their own cultural projects to move their peers away from using guns.

Their accomplishments this year include creating dozens of peer-to-peer social media posts including our highest performing Snapchat content, speaking on panels, spearheading original research, and — for the first time — designing their own projects to help reshape gun culture. In-progress projects from Youth Council members include social media series about safety and culture, in-person convenings about safety beyond guns, toolkits for high school and college students, a choose-your-own-adventure game about the risks of guns, and more. And our Youth Council is making waves – in 2024 our Youth Council members were: invited to the White House; featured in outlets including [Scripps TV](#), [The 19th](#), [WFYI Indianapolis](#), and [The Trace](#); [spoke onstage at the DNC](#); and published in [Teen Vogue](#) and [The Chicago Sun-Times](#).

In addition to the Youth Council, we invited 15 young leaders to join our first-ever Creator Corps, which focuses on social media strategy and content creation, and provides another opportunity for youth leadership and engagement with Project Unloaded.

“Being on the Youth Council has shaped my future...I had always wanted to be able to contribute to the gun violence prevention movement, however it had always seemed out of reach. From my experience I have gained not only valuable memories but also the confidence to speak out and pursue change both in and outside of my community.

– Cheyenne Desmond, Youth Council member



Photos by Heather Eidson

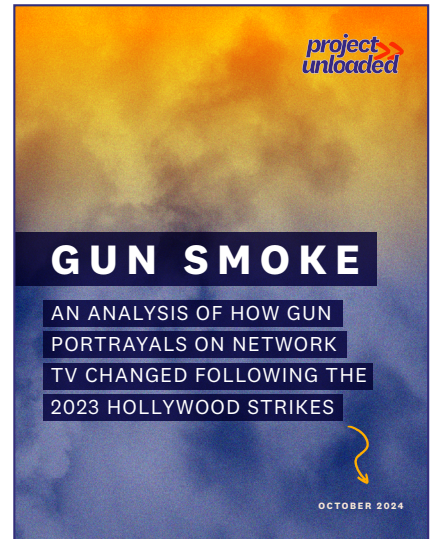
EMPOWERING GEN Z TO CHANGE POP CULTURE

GUN SMOKE: A REPORT BY PROJECT UNLOADED'S YOUTH COUNCIL

Our Youth Council completed the second installment of [Gun Smoke](#) this year, an original, first-of-its-kind youth-led research project about guns on TV. To uncover the narratives (and myths) that Hollywood spreads about guns — and to offer recommendations for improvement — our Youth Council watched over 250 hours of primetime network television across three years, logging all references to guns and analyzing show ratings.

Last year, our Youth Council discovered that gun portrayals on TV were down, as the Hollywood strikes resulted in less scripted content and thus fewer guns. This year, they discovered that gun use had returned to near pre-strike levels. The bad news: Gun narratives on TV are distorted compared to real life — Hollywood exaggerates the threat of armed criminals, and ignores the real risk of gun suicide. The good news: Audiences preferred content without guns, with shows without guns winning 96% of TV time slots.

The report was released via an [Indie Wire exclusive](#).



GROWING OUR FOOTPRINT IN OUR HOMETOWN AND BEYOND

As an organization, it's been a year of growth for Project Unloaded. We saw awareness and enthusiasm for our work increase following an in-depth profile of Project Unloaded published in [The Guardian](#) and [The Trace](#) in April. The reporter, Katie Worth, described Project Unloaded as the nation's **“most ambitious effort to change Americans’ relationship to guns.”**

In May, we left our fiscal sponsor and began operating as an independent nonprofit. As part of that move, we expanded our Board of Directors with issue experts and thought leaders including:

- David Brotherton, Brotherton Strategies
- Marcie Eberhart, American Eagle Outfitters Foundation
- Deborah Gillespie, DGCB Group
- Shira Goodman, Anti-Defamation League
- Matthew Hogenmiller, digital strategist
- Dr. Selwyn Rogers, University of Chicago
- Erika Soto Lamb, Showtime/MTV
- Nina Vinik, Project Unloaded

GROWING IN CHICAGO

We continued building our Chicago profile this year through more than a dozen media stories in outlets including [WTTW \(PBS\)](#), [WBEZ \(NPR\)](#), [Chicago Tribune](#), [Chicago Sun-Times](#), [Block Club Chicago/The Trace](#), and [CBS Chicago](#).

We also co-hosted an inspiring conversation on youth-led narrative and cultural change at the City Club of Chicago in partnership with The Joyce Foundation and WTTW. After a presentation from our founder, WTTW's Joanna Hernandez facilitated a panel discussion with Program Manager Olivia Brown, Board Member Dr. Selwyn Rogers, who is also founding director of the University of Chicago Trauma Center, Youth Council member Laia McClain, and Chicago Public Schools' Chief of Safety and Security Jadine Chou. Their dialogue explored how the power of Gen Z and social media can challenge the myths fueling gun culture. [Watch the full panel online.](#)

We also launched an Advisory Council, including members with expertise in youth engagement, social impact marketing, and violence prevention. These are the members of our new Advisory Council:

- Sarah Clements, Georgetown Law student
- Tim Daly, Joyce Foundation
- Arne Duncan, Chicago CRED
- Derrick Feldmann, Ad Council
- Anastasia Khoo,
- Tracey Meares, Yale Law School
- James Mercy, CDC Injury Center (retired)
- Desmond Patton, University of Pennsylvania
- Dan Romer
- Daniel Webster, Johns Hopkins University
- Garen Wintemute, University of California, Davis



Left: Youth Council members Anvesha and Lily spoke about changing gun culture at the White House, June 2024

Right: Teens in our community partnership program film ads urging their peers to join the movement

2025 PREVIEW

In the next several years, Congress and the White House are [poised to erase](#) some, if not most, of the federal progress that's been made in the last decade on gun violence prevention. At the same time, the Supreme Court could derail many hard-won state gun violence prevention measures.

In this environment, it's not enough to play defense — we need proactive, data-backed strategies that are independent of the whims of Congress or the outcome of any election.

In 2025, Project Unloaded will expand on our work to stop gun violence through cultural and narrative change by:

- Launching a third campaign designed to engage Gen Z on how guns make us less safe with a focus on youth mental health and firearm suicide prevention
- Expanding and optimizing our SNUG and Guns Change the Story campaigns based on teen feedback and engagement
- Doubling down on our work with Gen Z content creators on YouTube and other platforms to test tactics and approaches to reach more youth - particularly young men
- Formalizing our community partner curriculum with a highly adaptable toolkit for partners to use in their own programming
- Conducting new research to deepen our understanding of gun culture and how it can be changed
- Empowering our Youth Council to dream big as they carry out their own projects to change gun culture

By reaching young people before they've made up their minds on guns, Project Unloaded is inspiring the next generation of young leaders to make their neighborhoods safer and encourage their peers to decide against guns – and, over time, uproot gun culture. And we're just getting started.

With your support, we can rewrite the story of guns in America. And in this new story, the heroes don't sit behind desks in Washington – they're young people.

By empowering and encouraging young people to step up and speak out about how guns make us less safe, we can — and will — reduce gun violence in America.