

The logo for 'project unloaded' features the word 'project' in a blue, lowercase, sans-serif font, and 'unloaded' in a blue, lowercase, cursive font. A red double-headed arrow is positioned to the right of the text.

project
unloaded

DECEMBER 2024



TRIGGERING

**Findings on Gen Z, mental health and
gun violence**

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INTRODUCTION

[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**. With that mission in mind, we make it our goal to deeply understand how young people think about the important issues and decisions they'll face in their lives.

For the last three years, we've been talking to young people about what matters to them. In Project Unloaded's [2022 research](#) on Gen Z, we learned that mental health and gun violence ranked among young people's top concerns — above hot-button issues like reproductive rights and climate change. That research also found that young people were significantly more likely than older populations to express concern about the connection between guns and mental health in the context of the risk of gun suicides.

These concerns have only intensified in the post-pandemic landscape, where [more young people](#) are grappling with [anxiety and depression](#), as well as other [mental health struggles](#). At the same time, [gun ownership](#) and [gun carrying](#) among young people are on the rise. These pressures have contributed to elevated teen suicide rates — [including firearm suicide rates](#), particularly among [young people of color](#). To address these challenges, mental health experts and practitioners are working to destigmatize conversations around mental health for young people with the goal of making them feel comfortable seeking help. These efforts, and our prior research, left us wanting to know more. **How do young people's understanding of mental health, and the conversations they're having about mental health with their peers, impact their willingness to consider the risks posed by gun use with their mental health in mind?**

In 2024, to better understand Gen Z's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors around guns and gun violence in the larger context of their mental health, we partnered with C+R Research to conduct an in-depth qualitative and quantitative study. Our findings 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.

This is what we learned.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research focuses on the intersection of mental health and gun ownership, particularly among Gen Z.

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.
- **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 and addressing myths around gun ownership. These findings also suggest opportunities for collaboration between mental health and gun violence prevention communities.

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.

HOW GEN Z VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES GUNS

Gen Z is familiar with guns and gun violence

- 30% of Gen Z has experienced gun violence, ranging from being shot to witnessing an active shooter situation to a firearm-related incident involving a family member or friend.
- 45% of Gen Z live in homes with firearms and about one in five (19%) personally own a firearm. 47% of young people — 59% of men and 38% of women — have carried or fired a gun before. Of these, 24% carry a gun weekly or more frequently. Hunting/recreation is the most commonly cited reason for carrying a gun, except for among Black Gen Z members, 61% of whom cite protection as the primary reason for carrying a gun.

30%

of Gen Z has experienced gun violence

45%

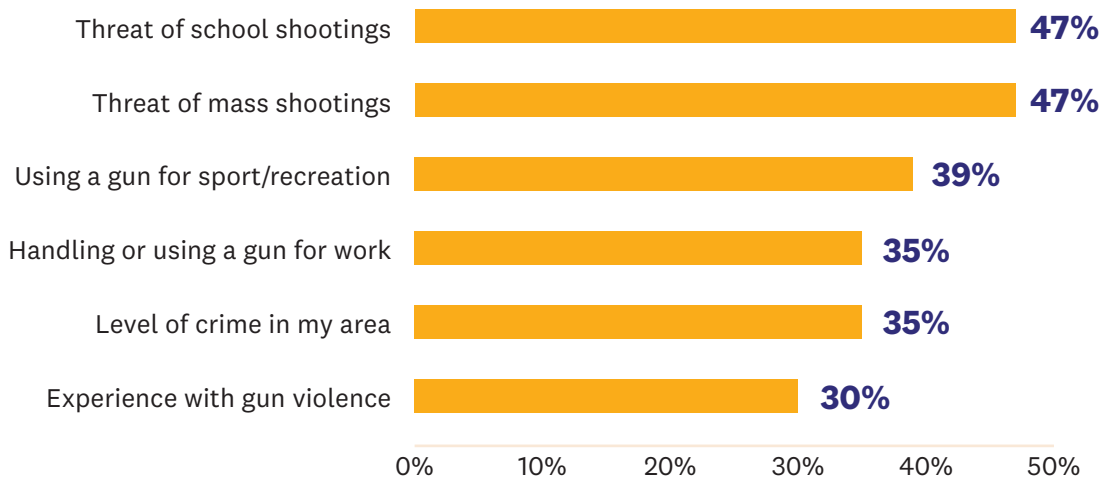
of Gen Z live in homes with firearms

Mass shootings factor heavily into Gen Z's views of guns

- A total of 57% of respondents said that the threat of a shooting at their school or a mass shooting strongly influences their opinions about guns and gun ownership.

How much influence has each of the following had on your own current opinions about guns and gun ownership?

(% Very / Somewhat believable)



Interest in gun ownership is driven by safety concerns

- The key reason for ownership: protection. It's the top reason cited by 72% of Gen Z who live in homes with a gun, while 63% of total respondents agreed that "Having a gun can help keep me and my family safe."
- Despite this widely held belief, teens and young people are equally receptive to other methods of staying safe. The same percentage of respondents who believed that guns increase their safety (63%) also agreed that there are "Other ways to protect myself/family that don't involve keeping a gun at home."

Nearly half of Gen Z has not made up their minds about firearms

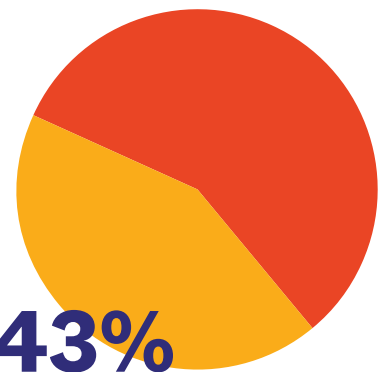
- Of young people who don't currently own a gun, 18% say they are very likely to own a gun in the future, while 25% say they are very unlikely to own a gun. 21% are unsure. Another 13% say they are just somewhat unlikely to have a gun in the future, while 23% are somewhat likely. Together, those who are unsure and those who are only somewhat likely/unlikely to own a gun make up 57% of current non-gun owners. This group is 40% of the overall Gen Z population.
- For those who haven't made up their minds about gun ownership, protection is cited by 69% as the top reason they might own a gun in the future, followed by hunting at 10%.

40%

of Gen Z are unsure about future gun ownership

Gun Storage

- Among young people in gun-owning homes (45% of our sample), 43% live in homes with guns stored loaded and 37% reported guns stored unlocked in their homes. One in five didn't know how the guns in their homes were stored. Black teens in urban areas and Gen Z women and girls were less likely to say they knew about how the guns in their home are stored.



of gun-owning households with young people do not practice secure firearm storage
(practitioners consider secure storage to mean that guns are stored locked and unloaded)

Gen Z's Views on Mental Health

Mental health is top of mind for many members of Gen Z, especially young people who have experienced gun violence

- Nearly half (45%) of Gen Z said they were concerned about their personal mental health.
- Young people who have experienced gun violence express heightened concern about their own mental health and that of those around them. 55% reported feeling worried about their personal mental health, compared to 39% of members of Gen Z without such experiences. Six in 10 of those who had experienced gun violence said they were concerned about a family member's mental well-being and 58% expressed similar worries about a close friend — 16 and 14 percentage points higher, respectively, than their peers without direct exposure to gun violence.

Despite their concerns, most members of Gen Z are not receiving mental health treatment.

- Less than a third of Gen Z (31%) are getting help for a mental health condition.
- Gen Z members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community are more likely to get mental health help or treatment (47%).
- Young people who have experienced gun violence are more likely to get mental health help or treatment (42%).
- The least likely to be receiving help or treatment are Black teens in urban areas (19%), Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI) young people (12%) and Gen Z males overall (23%).

We can broaden the conversation about mental health and guns.

- While nearly half of Gen Z live with at least one gun at home, many recognize the risks guns present in the context of mental health. Nearly 70% said that they were very or somewhat likely to advise a friend struggling with their mental health to stay away from guns, a finding that is consistent regardless of whether there is a gun in the house.

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

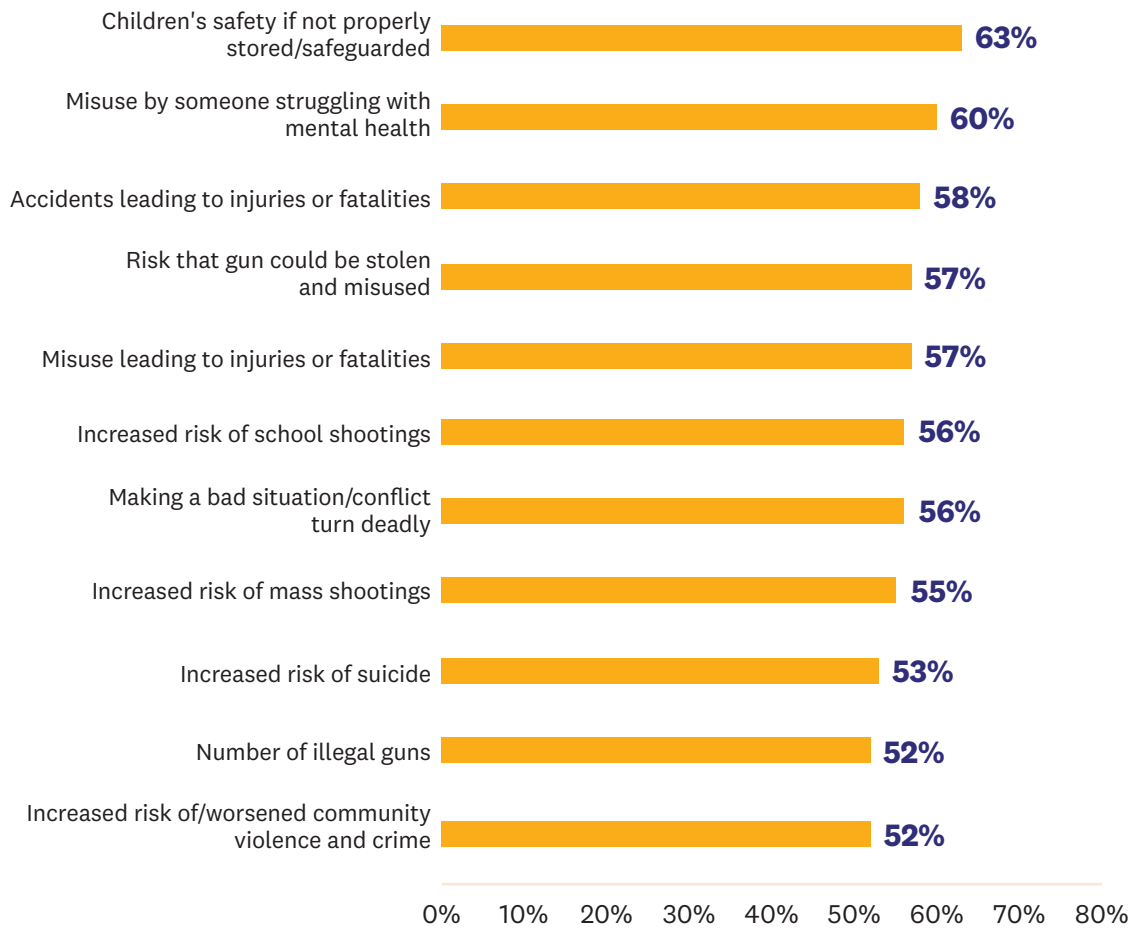
31%

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

- Members of Gen Z are less likely to make the connection between guns and increased suicide risk, compared to other concerns they have around guns. Respondents were most worried about unsecured firearms endangering children’s safety with almost two-thirds (63%) expressing concern.
- 60% said they were concerned about a gun being misused by someone struggling with their mental health.

When it comes to you and the people you love having access to guns, now or in the future, how concerned are you about the following?

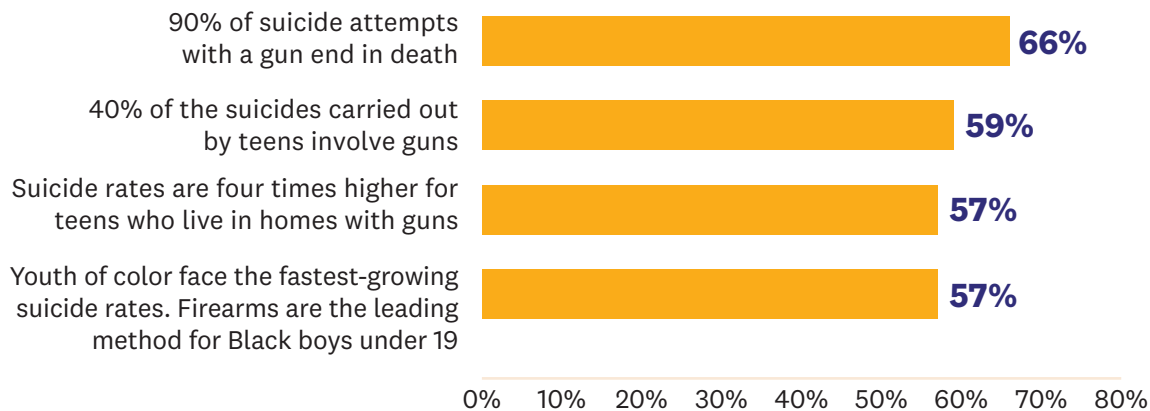
(% Very/Somewhat concerned)



- Only 53% identified concerns about guns increasing risk of suicide. Still, respondents found facts about firearms and suicide believable. They were most likely to say that they would believe and share these statistics, demonstrating an opportunity for educating young people about the risk of suicide when guns are accessible.

How believable do you find each statement?

(% Very / Somewhat believable)



A closer look: Black and Latino Gen Z

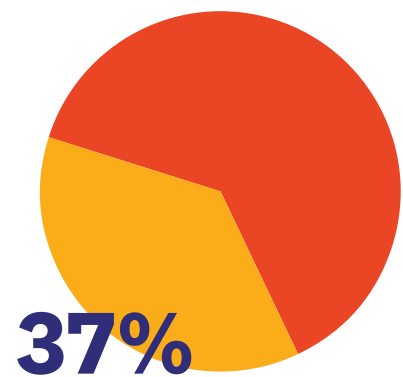
- Black Gen Z members are less likely to be receiving mental health help or treatment, with less than a fifth of Black teens in urban areas (19%) reporting that they were getting treatment, compared to 31% of overall respondents. Among all Black Gen Z members, 28% were receiving mental health help or treatment.
- Black and Hispanic members of Gen Z are less likely to live in homes with guns — 40% compared to 45% of the overall sample.
- These groups are also more likely to have experienced gun violence. 41% of Black and 43% of Hispanic respondents have experienced gun violence.
- Male Black Gen Z members reported greater comfort with guns compared to their peers. Notably, 63% of Black males said they were comfortable around guns, compared to 29% of Black females.
- Black Gen Z respondents were more likely to cite protection as the reason for carrying or having carried a gun, with 61% citing protection as the primary reason for carrying a gun.
- Black young people are more than twice as likely to be carrying a gun daily or weekly compared to their peers.
- Black Gen Z respondents were more likely to say that all of the guns in their home are stored loaded (35% of guns stored loaded vs. 22% in Gen Z homes with guns overall) or unlocked (30% vs. 21%).
- **Social media and YouTube are cited as key influences for one-third of Black Gen Z respondents in shaping their views about guns.**

A closer look: Rural Gen Z

- Rural Gen Z members are more likely to live in a home with at least one gun and more likely to have carried or fired a gun (55% of rural Gen Z vs 47% overall). While they are more likely overall to indicate they would own a gun in the future, one in five are still making up their minds. Similar to Gen Z overall, 22% of rural Gen Zers said that they are unsure about owning a gun in the future.
- One in five rural members of Gen Z report having had a personal experience with gun violence.
- Rural respondents living with guns at home were less likely to say that all the guns were stored loaded (17% vs 22% overall) or unlocked (19% vs 21%).
- Rural Gen Z members carry guns less frequently than Gen Z overall (16% carry weekly or more frequently vs. 22%), and are less likely to cite protection as their reason for carrying a gun.
- Rural members of Gen Z are equally likely to express concerns about their own mental health and the mental health of their close friends as members of Gen Z overall, and they are equally likely to talk to their friends about mental health. 27% are currently getting mental health treatment. Like other members of Gen Z, more than two-thirds of those in rural areas believe it is important to discuss staying away from guns with a friend who is struggling with mental health.

A closer look: Gender Differences Among Gen Z

- 37% of women and girls surveyed are very or somewhat likely to own a gun in the future, compared to 48% of men and boys.
- Female respondents also demonstrated a stronger connection between mental health and the dangers of guns than males surveyed. 53% of girls and women said they would be very likely to encourage a friend struggling with mental health to stay away from guns and weapons compared to 45% of men.
- Just 36% of female respondents say they're comfortable with a gun. 61% of men say they're comfortable with guns.
- Young men are less likely to be receiving mental health treatment than young women (22% of men vs 33% of women).



37%
More than a third of Gen Z women & girls say they're likely to own a gun in the future



“ More than 1 in 4 young men say YouTube has influenced their views on guns.

- More than a quarter of men say YouTube videos have influenced their views on guns (29% of men vs 19% of women).

There were notable differences in attitudes expressed by young men and young women regarding guns and mental health:

- Women were more likely than men to agree that your mental health is safer without guns (50% vs 42%).
- Just over a quarter (26%) of male respondents said they needed a gun because everyone around them has one. Just 11% of women agreed with that sentiment.
- Half of male respondents (50%), compared to just 38% of women and girls, agreed that having a gun could help you feel confident and in control.
- Males were also more likely than female respondents to believe that guns can “scare off criminals and lower crime.” 63% of men and boys surveyed agreed with that statement, compared to just half (52%) of women and girls.
- Males were less likely than females to agree that guns should be locked up and unloaded when not in use (73% vs 80%).
- Men and boys were far more likely than women and girls to see guns as tools to keep themselves and their family safe (69% vs 58%).
- Just 4 in 10 male respondents believe that a gun at home makes it more likely that a woman in a domestic violence situation would be killed, compared with 5 in 10 female respondents.
- **The only points of near-total agreement between male and female respondents were related to suicide.** Nearly three-quarters (73%) of men and women agreed that suicide with a gun is almost always fatal. And most males (57%) and females (56%) believed that having a gun makes it more likely that someone who attempts suicide will die.

What We Found About Gen Z's Political Views

- Politically, Gen Z is split with 30% saying they are conservative, 27% saying they are liberal, and 40% saying they are independent.

Gen Z's Political Views and Interest in Gun Ownership

Conservative vs Liberal	Overall Gen Z	Gen Zers Undecided About Guns*
Conservative (Net)	30%	26%
Conservative	18%	13%
Lean conservative	12%	13%
Independent	40%	43%
Liberal (Net)	27%	29%
Lean liberal	13%	15%
Liberal	14%	14%
Other	3%	3%

**We define "undecided" as members of Gen Z who are unsure or only somewhat likely or unlikely to own a firearm in the future.*

IMPLICATIONS

Through this project, we learned that gun violence and mental health struggles are impacting large numbers of young people today. Despite these impacts, few are getting mental health help or treatment while many see guns as offering protection. While there is a substantial body of evidence confirming the risk for suicide when guns are accessible, especially to young people, these facts are not well known by members of Gen Z. And in more than 40% of gun owning households with young people between 13-25, secure firearm storage is not the norm. These findings underscore the need for educating young people about these risks.

Our findings also provide reasons to believe this type of education will reach a receptive audience. Almost half of the total Gen Z population is still making up their minds about gun ownership and most are receptive to information about suicide risk as they make a decision on whether to own or carry a gun. We learned that talking to friends who are struggling with a mental health challenge about gun risks was something most young people are very open to doing.

We also learned more about the demographics of young people who are still undecided about gun ownership. Just over half are women; almost four in ten are men. They skew younger than the overall Gen Z population, although those who are 18 or older make up more than half of the undecided group. Politically, 43% described themselves as independent, 26% conservative, and 29% liberal. With the largest share of Gen Z having neither conservative nor liberal ideologies, this suggests that a risk education message can go further when we remove it from a polarized conversation. Providing positive, fact-based content about mental health and guns that resonates with Gen Z's current mindset offers one way to do just that.

A gap between the number of young people worried about mental health and those receiving help also underscores the importance of expanding access to information about resources that are available to young people who need them. These findings help chart a roadmap for how the mental health and gun violence prevention communities can connect

“ **These findings help chart a roadmap for how the mental health and gun violence prevention communities can connect with young people to raise awareness of mental health resources including information about the risks that come with firearm ownership.** ”

with young people to raise awareness of mental health resources including information about the risks that come with firearm ownership. Together, we can empower more young people with the knowledge and confidence to help themselves or others during difficult times and make choices that support their well-being first – instead of reaching for a gun.

Our Approach

Project Unloaded partnered with [C+R Research](#) on a three-phase study design: phases 1 and 2 consisted of a series of individual and small group interviews with teens from rural, suburban, and urban communities across the U.S. In phase 3, we surveyed 2,000 members of Gen Z ages 13 - 25 in a 15-minute online survey. Two additional groups were oversampled: 200 Black teens in urban areas ages 13-17; and 200 rural teens ages 13-17. Surveys were conducted between September 7-20, 2024.



EXPLORE **Digital Platform** **Interviews**

Objective: Gain insights into individual Gen Zers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about gun ownership



EXPLORE **Friendship Groups**

Objective: Learn how friends and peers influence attitudes on gun ownership and mental health



VALIDATE **Quantitative** **Online Survey**

Objective: Validate and evaluate messaging on mental health and guns, including analyzing subgroups of Black urban teens and rural teens

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