

# Shooting Straight:

**What TV Stories Tell Us  
About Gun Safety, How These  
Depictions Affect Audiences,  
and How We Can Do Better**

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## Executive Summary

On average, 110 people are killed by guns every day in the United States, with Black Americans disproportionately impacted. Young Black men are 20 times more likely to be killed by a gun than young white men, and between 2019 and 2020, deaths by guns increased by 39.5% among Black people. In 2021, for the first time, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared gun violence a “serious public threat.”

Firearms are the leading cause of death among children and teens, increasing by 29% from 2019 to 2020 alone. School shootings receive disproportionate media and policy attention and are a major source of fear, but 85% of child victims of gun homicide die in their homes, and over 80% of child gun suicides involve a gun owned by a family member. In addition, myths persist, such as the belief that gun violence is primarily caused by mental illness, or that a civilian “good guy” can intervene in an active shooting and save lives if they are allowed to carry a loaded gun.

**Little is known about how often gun safety and prevention measures are portrayed or discussed or the impact of such portrayals on audiences.**

The prevalence and impact of gun violence in entertainment media has been the subject of extensive research. Little is known, however, about how often **gun safety and prevention measures** are portrayed or discussed, in what contexts, or the impact of such portrayals on audiences. To address this gap, the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center’s Media Impact Project (MIP) conducted a research project with support from Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. This included:

- A content analysis of popular, scripted television dramas from the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 seasons.
- An experimental study examining the impact of two major gun safety storylines on audiences’ knowledge, beliefs, and policy support.

### Content Analysis

We conducted two rounds of content analysis, examining 250 episodes of 33 unique TV series for depictions of gun safety practices and common myths about guns, discussions of gun laws, and characteristics of those holding firearms as well as shooting victims. The results were consistent across both seasons we analyzed:

- Guns were ubiquitous, with about six in 10 episodes including gun-related content. However, fewer than 10% of episodes with such content included depictions of secure gun storage or discussions related to gun laws or origins.
- Common myths about gun violence, such as perpetrators as mentally ill or the civilian “good guy with a gun” who intervenes in an active shooting, were also rare.
- Law enforcement officers were involved in the majority of TV firearm depictions. There was a common narrative portraying law enforcement officers as a diverse group of “good guys” fighting against nameless “bad guys.”

## Experimental Study

We recruited 3,358 American adults, including parents and gun owners, and randomly assigned them to watch a clip from one of two gun safety-related storylines from *Grey's Anatomy* and *New Amsterdam*, or a control storyline (unrelated to guns) from *Chicago Med*.

Viewing the *Grey's Anatomy* storyline, which addressed an unintentional shooting in the home involving an improperly stored gun, led to:

- Greater knowledge of gun safety facts;
- Greater agreement that having a gun at home would make them feel **less safe**, but only among non-gun-owning respondents; and
- A stronger belief that storing guns and ammunition separately was important, but only if there were children in the hypothetical household.

Viewing *New Amsterdam* storyline, which focused on a student's trauma following an active shooter drill with simulated violence, led to:

- Increased support for drills **without simulated violence** (e.g., online training, tabletop exercises, lockdown drills), finding such approaches more effective and less emotionally harmful than approaches **with simulated violence** or having armed law enforcement officers providing security in schools. These preferences were particularly pronounced among those who did not own guns themselves;
- Increased support for policies outlawing active shooter drills with simulated gun violence in schools, as well as those requiring parental consent before any type of shooter drill, screening students for trauma after drills, and broader preventative policies; and
- Reduced support for policies requiring public schools to participate in some sort of active shooter training.

Both gun storylines, and particularly *Grey's Anatomy*, caused greater **reactance** — **the feeling that someone is trying to manipulate you or threaten your freedom to choose** — than the control clip.

- Gun owners experienced greater reactance to all three storylines.
- For each of the gun storylines, greater reactance was associated with greater likelihood of rejection of its gun safety messages, and less positive outcomes. Reactance suppressed, but did not eliminate, the positive effects of exposure to each of the gun storylines.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on these research findings, we propose the following recommendations for content creators and other storytellers to more accurately represent gun safety and prevention:

- Avoid portraying law enforcement use-of-force as heroic.
- Diversify depictions of those affected by gun violence.
- Include discussions of gun safety and common-sense gun laws.
- Appeal to common values.

## Introduction

Every day in the U.S., there are an estimated 110 gun-related deaths, totaling over 40,000 per year.<sup>1</sup> Black Americans are especially impacted by gun violence: firearm homicide rates among Black people increased by 39.5% from 2019 to 2020. Black men ages 15 to 34 were more than 20 times as likely to be killed with a gun than white men of the same age, and the number of Black women killed by guns also increased by 50% in the same time period.<sup>2</sup>

The impacts of gun violence are not limited to adults. Approximately three million children and teens witness gun violence every year,<sup>3</sup> and firearms are the leading cause of death for this group.<sup>4</sup> In fact, firearm-related deaths among children and teens increased 29% from 2019 to 2020, with more than 4,300 U.S. children dying as a result of firearms in 2020 alone.<sup>5</sup> In 2021, for the first time ever, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared gun violence a “serious public threat.”<sup>6</sup>

### School Shootings

Eighty-five percent of child gun homicides occur inside the home, but these types of shootings are less likely to receive news coverage than school shootings. Since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, shootings that take place in a school setting have been nearly four times as likely to receive coverage compared to other types of mass shootings.<sup>7</sup> Such coverage limits public understanding of the root of the problem — easy access to firearms and associated child gun injuries and deaths. As a result, much of the discourse around gun-safety has been restricted to in-school mitigation strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Efforts to prevent school shooting deaths often center on student and teacher preparation through active shooter drills. Ninety-five percent of American public K-12 schools have implemented active shooter drills and at least 40 states have mandated them.<sup>9</sup> However, there is no singular approach to active shooter drills and the term is generally used to describe a wide variety of strategies. Some drills, commonly referred to as “lockdown drills” ask students and teachers to practice hiding, barricading doors, and turning off lights. Other types of drills, sometimes referred to as “tactical drills,” might involve a law enforcement response or simulated gun violence. Some drills are announced ahead of time, while others are implemented without notice.<sup>10</sup> Because policies around active shooter drills remain vague and no centralized system exists for tracking different types of active shooter drills, it is unclear just how many schools are implementing which types of drills.

In addition to inconsistency around the methods used in active shooter training, there is little evidence to suggest such training methods are effective at preventing mass shootings or minimizing their impact.<sup>11</sup> In fact, active shooter drills do little to prevent the circumstances that lead to school shootings, such as the ease of acquisition of firearms, and are therefore best described as strategies to *mitigate* the damage in a school shooting situation. Despite wide reliance on active shooter drills in schools, such drills have been associated with negative outcomes, such as depression, stress, and anxiety.<sup>12</sup> In one survey of American youth, 60% reported that active shooter drills leave them feeling “scared and hopeless” and 21% reported feeling afraid to go to school.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than relying exclusively on active shooter drills, Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (hereafter Everytown) recommends a number of tailored gun violence prevention policies and interventions.<sup>14</sup> These include enacting,

**85 percent of children under 13 who are victims of gun homicide die in their home.**



enforcing, and raising awareness about secure firearm storage laws and creating supportive school environments. Key features of effective school safety programs include ways to determine if a student has access to guns and access to professionals who can provide mental health services.

### **Shootings in the Home**

While far less likely to receive media attention, youth gun deaths are much more likely to occur inside the home.<sup>15</sup> Eighty-five percent of children under 13 who are victims of gun homicide die in their home,<sup>16</sup> and over 80% of child gun suicides involve a gun owned by a family member.<sup>17</sup> From 2016 to 2020, 60% of child and teen deaths by firearm occurred through homicide, 35% through suicide, and 4% were unintentional.<sup>18</sup> An estimated 30 million children in the U.S. live in households with firearms, and 4.6 million live in a home with at least one loaded and unlocked gun.<sup>19</sup>

To protect children and teens from unintentional shootings in the home, Everytown recommends many of the same policy and programmatic solutions that are recommended for prevention of school shootings.<sup>20</sup> These include statewide secure gun storage laws that require gun owners to unload, lock, and separate guns and ammunition, providing secure storage information to parents through schools, as well as the Gun Shop Project, which provides firearm retailers, instructors, and customers with firearm suicide prevention educational materials.

### **Gun Violence Myths and Reality**

The myth that gun violence is caused by people with mental illness persists, despite evidence that those with mental health challenges are no more likely to commit gun-related crimes. A study by the National Center for Health Statistics indicated that only 3-5% of gun-related deaths in the U.S. are caused by people with a diagnosed mental illness.<sup>21</sup> In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of crime than the general population.<sup>22</sup> The United States is not the only country with mental illness, domestic violence, or hate-fueled ideologies, but our gun homicide rate is 25 times higher than other high-income countries.<sup>23</sup> The difference is easy access to guns.

Another pervasive myth suggests that gun deaths can be prevented by the presence of a non-law enforcement “good guy with a gun” who saves lives due to their access to a firearm. This myth is commonly used to justify lenient concealed-carry legislation that allows people to carry loaded guns in public. However, a recent study found American states that allow concealed carry have higher rates of gun homicide than those that do not.<sup>24</sup>

### **Study Overview**

Extensive research shows a high rate of gun violence in American entertainment media, which has been linked with aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal, and aggressive behaviors.<sup>25</sup> Little is known, however, about how often gun safety and prevention strategies are portrayed, in what contexts, or the impact of such portrayals on different audiences. To address this gap, the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center’s Media Impact Project (MIP) embarked on a research project with support from Everytown. This research included:

- Two rounds of content analysis tracking common myths about guns, depictions of gun safety practices, discussions of gun laws, and characteristics of both shooters and casualties in scripted television dramas from the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 seasons.

- An experimental study examining the impact of two major gun safety storylines — from *Grey’s Anatomy* and *New Amsterdam* — on audiences’ knowledge, beliefs, and policy support related to guns in the home and prevention and mitigation of school shootings.

## Content analysis

### Methodology

We conducted a systematic content analysis of two seasons of popular, scripted TV dramas (season 1: 2019-2020, season 2: 2020-2021), examining the following questions:

1. How often are firearms shown on TV, and in what contexts?
2. What kinds of characters are most likely to be shown holding or discharging firearms? Who is most likely to be shot on-screen?
3. How often do TV shows portray gun storage or discuss the origins of firearms or gun laws? How often do they include dialogue about the role of guns in domestic violence or suicide?
4. How often do TV shows perpetuate myths or stereotypes about gun violence, such as the idea that shooters are mentally ill, or the heroic “good guy with a gun”?

**We identified a common narrative portraying law enforcement officers as “good guys” fighting against nameless “bad guys.”**

For each of the two seasons, we identified 25 popular, scripted drama series (see [Appendix A](#) for detailed content analysis methodology). Seventeen of these series were included in both seasons, for a total of 33 unique series. We randomly selected five episodes from each season of each series, giving a total of 250 episodes. We rigorously trained 16 USC student research assistants to code these episodes for the presence of gun-related content. We then compared findings across the two seasons (findings were largely consistent across both years). When the format “(X,Y)” is used in this report, the first number or percentage refers to season 1 (2019-2020), and the second refers to season 2 (2020-2021).

### Guns Blazing

Guns were everywhere in popular scripted dramas, and particularly in shows focused on law enforcement.

- Around six in ten episodes (58%, 62%) included gun-related content. Of these, the majority (55%, 65%) were from police shows, which represented 36% of the sample.

**Guns were everywhere in popular scripted dramas.**



**The Walking Dead** AMC



**You** Netflix

- Season 1 had a total of 351 different gun-carrying characters (an average of 5 per episode), and season 2 had 406 (5.4 on average).
- Nearly one in three episodes (30%, 29%) portrayed at least one character discharging a firearm.

### Cops and Robbers

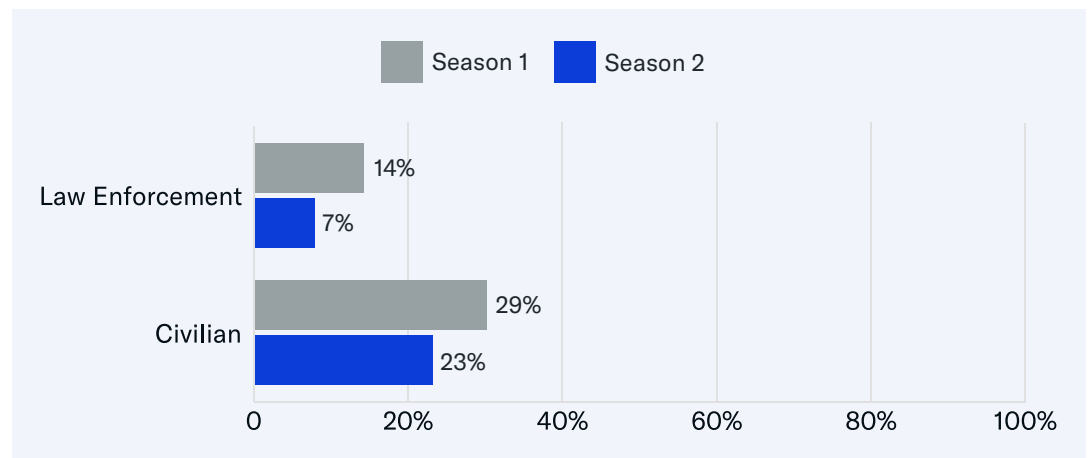
Law enforcement officers were involved in the majority of TV firearm depictions. We identified a common narrative portraying law enforcement officers as “good guys” fighting against nameless “bad guys.” Compared to law enforcement, civilians with guns were more likely to be unsympathetic.

- Of those episodes that showed a gun being discharged, more than half (20%, 15%) included at least one shooting by a law enforcement officer.
- Most characters with guns were law enforcement (57%, 60%).
- The majority of law enforcement characters with guns had large roles (58%, 52%), compared to relatively few civilian characters (17%, 29%).
- More than nine in ten enforcement characters with guns were portrayed as sympathetic (93%, 91%), compared to few civilian characters (20%, 26%). Interrater reliability (agreement between coders) was borderline for this item, so the precise numbers should be interpreted with caution.

Civilian characters were more likely than law enforcement to fire their weapon or shoot someone.

- Civilians who held a gun were more than twice as likely to shoot someone (29%, 23%) as law enforcement officers (14%, 7%).
- Relatively few episodes (10%, 13%) featured gunfire or shootings that were just between civilian characters.

**Figure 1.**  
**Percentage of gun-carrying characters who shot someone**  
 (N = 351, 406)



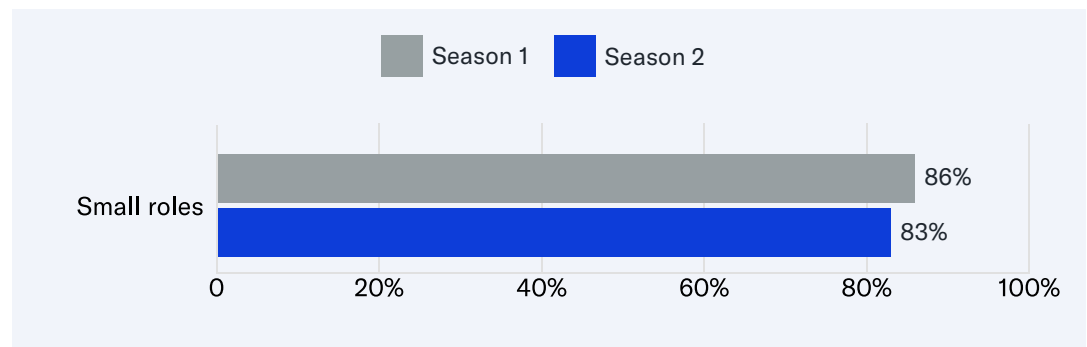


## Shots Fired

Whereas those holding guns were largely depicted as “good guys,” those shot by guns were typically portrayed in the model of “bad guys.” More than half of casualties were unsympathetic white men with small roles.

- One in three episodes (36%, 32%) showed at least one person being shot.
- Fourteen percent of gun casualties were law enforcement officers.
- Most gun casualties were unsympathetic characters (52%, 57%) and had small roles (86%, 83%). About one third of those shot (38%, 36%) were armed themselves. Reliability was borderline for how sympathetic the character was.
- Most were male (77%, 87%) and white (54%, 63%).

**Figure 2.**  
**Role size of**  
**casualties of**  
**gun violence**  
(N = 106, 111)



**While guns were ubiquitous, depictions of secure gun storage, origins, laws, and impacts of domestic violence and suicide were rare.**

## Gun Storage

While guns were ubiquitous, depictions of secure gun storage, origins, laws, and impacts of domestic violence and suicide were rare. Because these things appeared infrequently, interrater reliability was low for these items. The precise numbers should be interpreted with caution, but we can be confident that they appeared rarely.

When gun storage did appear, a mix of secure and unsecure practices was depicted.

- Across both seasons, fewer than 10% of episodes with gun-related content showed secure gun storage.
- *The Equalizer* illustrated secure gun storage, such as when an FBI agent places a handgun in a safe that is locked with an electronic combination. In another episode, a former CIA agent unloads a handgun and places it in a concealed, fingerprint-activated gun safe.
- Unsecure storage was evident in an episode of *FBI: Most Wanted*, in which a teacher stores a handgun in a dresser drawer.
- Fewer than 10% of episodes with gun-related content featured unsafe practices such as impaired gun use, shooting a gun into the air, or unattended guns that are loaded.

Few episodes showed the origins of guns, but covered a variety of sources.

- Across both seasons, 14% of episodes with gun-related content showed or described the origins of a firearm. These included being taken from family members or friends, acquired from strangers, stolen from an employee, and other miscellaneous sources.

- For example, in an episode of *NCIS*, a character acquires ghost guns — “privately made firearms, shipped in pieces and assembled by the user” — and many disassembled ghost guns are shown loosely stored in an open cardboard box. In reality, ghost guns are increasingly recognized as a serious problem.<sup>26</sup>

Episodes that included explicit discussion of gun safety, laws, domestic violence, or suicide were virtually nonexistent.

- Discussions of gun laws only appeared in two episodes, and were introduced in the context of characters charged with unauthorized possession and illegal sales of assault weapons.
- Season 2 of *FBI: Most Wanted* included an episode that referenced point-of-sale background checks, and an episode of *Grey’s Anatomy* vaguely referenced gun access as an abstract issue.
- Only one episode explicitly addressed gun violence in the context of domestic violence, and none in the context of suicide.

### **Myths and Stereotypes**

While flawed narratives popularized by the gun lobby do exist on screen, they are fairly limited. We found scant stereotyping of gun violence perpetrators as mentally ill, and very few examples of a heroic “good guy with a gun.” These things appeared too rarely to capture reliability, so the precise numbers should be interpreted with caution.

- Of characters who held a gun, only five across both seasons faced mental health challenges, while five struggled with addiction.
- Only eight episodes across both seasons showed a non-law enforcement individual intervening in an active shooting.

## Experimental study

### Methodology

Our content analysis research found that while guns are ever-present in scripted TV, depictions or discussions of gun safety and prevention measures remain exceedingly rare. When such storylines do exist, however, we sought to understand:

1. What impact do they have on audiences' knowledge, beliefs, and support for gun policies?
2. How do they affect different audience segments, such as gun owners and parents?
3. How do audiences respond to these storylines, and what role do these responses play in their ultimate impact?

To address these questions, we identified two major storylines from the previous five years addressing different aspects of gun safety and gun violence prevention:

- **Grey's Anatomy** (ABC) – The episode “Trigger Happy” (2016) addresses the consequences of an unintentional shooting that occurs after a child accesses an improperly stored weapon at home.
- **New Amsterdam** (NBC) – The episode “Perspectives” (2020) focuses on a child who is experiencing symptoms of trauma after participating in an active shooter drill with simulated gun violence at school.

We identified third storyline from a medical drama, involving a child but without any gun-related content, to serve as a control:

- **Chicago Med** (NBC) – A multi-episode arc from the 2020-2021 season involves a foster child facing a medical emergency.

We recruited 3,358 Americans ages 18 and older from Qualtrics Panels to

Participants were randomly assigned to view a 9-13 minute clip from one of the three storylines.



**Grey's Anatomy** ABC



**New Amsterdam** NBC



**Chicago Med** NBC

**Viewing Grey's Anatomy led to greater agreement that having a gun at home would make them feel less safe, but only among those who were not already gun owners.**

participate in an online survey in August 2021. We sought to recruit a sample approximately matched to U.S. Census data, but we also oversampled for gun owners. Thirty percent of American adults are gun owners, compared with 49% in our sample (defined as those with a firearm in their household, not including air guns, such as paintball, BB, or pellet guns).

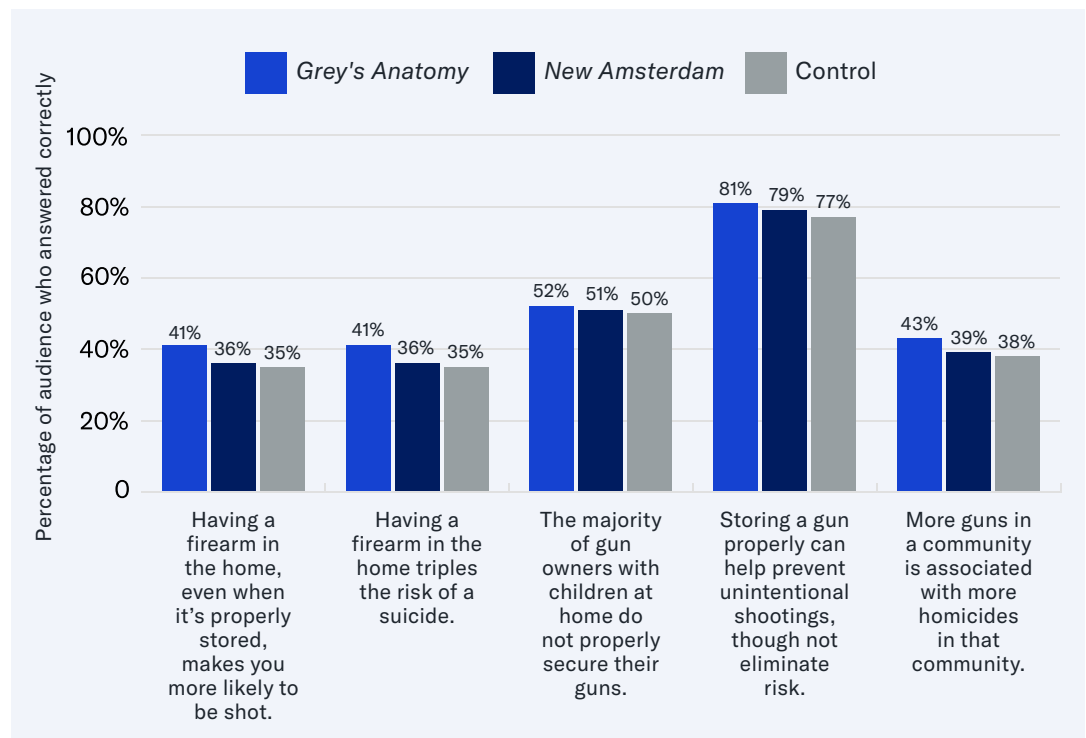
Participants were randomly assigned to view a 9-13 minute clip from one of the three storylines. Regardless of which storyline they were assigned, participants were asked about their knowledge and beliefs regarding gun safety in the home, beliefs about the effectiveness and emotional harm associated with active shooter training in schools, and support for related policies. We compared outcomes among those exposed to each of the gun-related storylines against the control group, and examined the underlying mechanisms of impact, such as psychological reactance to the story. Findings significant at a  $p < .05$  level are reported here (see [Appendix B](#) for detailed experimental study methods).

### Gun-Storage Storyline

We expected that viewing the gun-storage storyline on *Grey's Anatomy* would lead to increased awareness of the importance of secure gun storage and more ambivalent feelings towards having a gun at home. Indeed, compared to the control clip, the *Grey's Anatomy* storyline led to greater knowledge of gun safety facts. Still, only two out of five knowledge questions were answered correctly by the majority of participants in any condition:

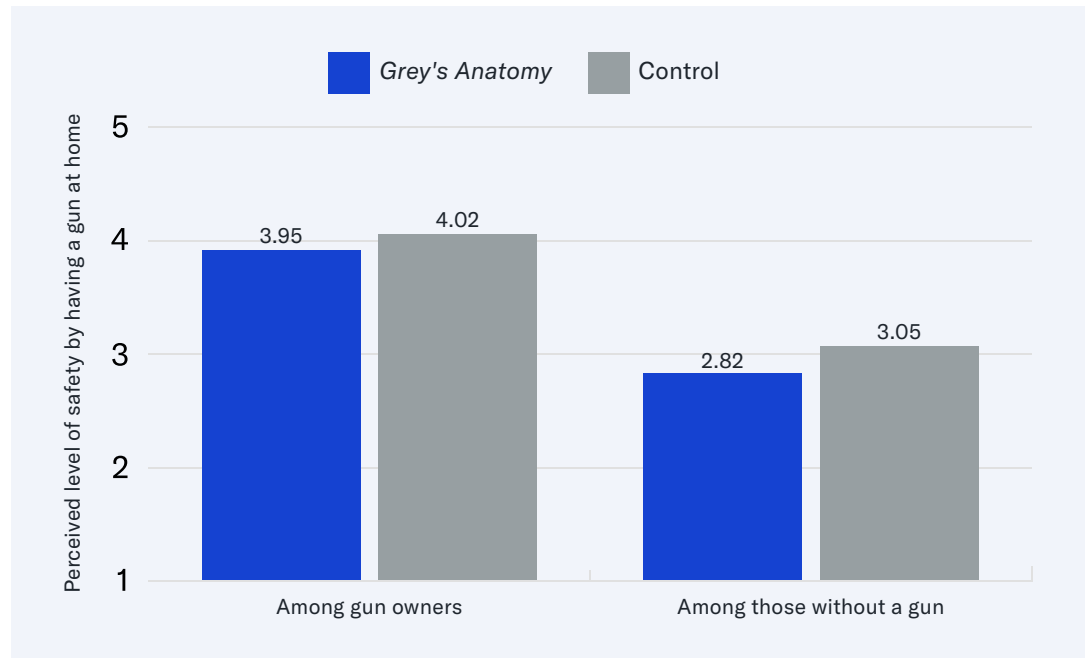
- "Storing a gun properly can help prevent unintentional shootings, though not eliminate the risk."
- "The majority of gun owners with children at home do not properly secure their guns."

**Figure 3. Percentage of participants who correctly answered "true" to each knowledge item**



Viewing *Grey's Anatomy* also led to greater agreement that having a gun at home would make them feel less safe, but only among those who were **not** already gun owners.

**Figure 4.**  
**Perceived safety**  
**of having a gun in**  
**the home, by gun**  
**ownership**



Finally, viewing the *Grey's Anatomy* clip led to a stronger belief that storing guns and ammunition separately was important, but only if there were children in the hypothetical household.

**Watching *New Amsterdam* led to a preference for drills that do not include any type of simulated violence.**

**Active Shooter Drill Storyline**

We expected the active shooter drill storyline on *New Amsterdam* to lead to a preference for drills that do not include any simulated violence and greater support for policies regulating such drills. As expected, those assigned to watch *New Amsterdam* showed a preference for drills that do not include any type of simulated violence, compared to those who watched the control clip.

Viewing the *New Amsterdam* storyline led to the following training approaches being perceived **as more effective**:

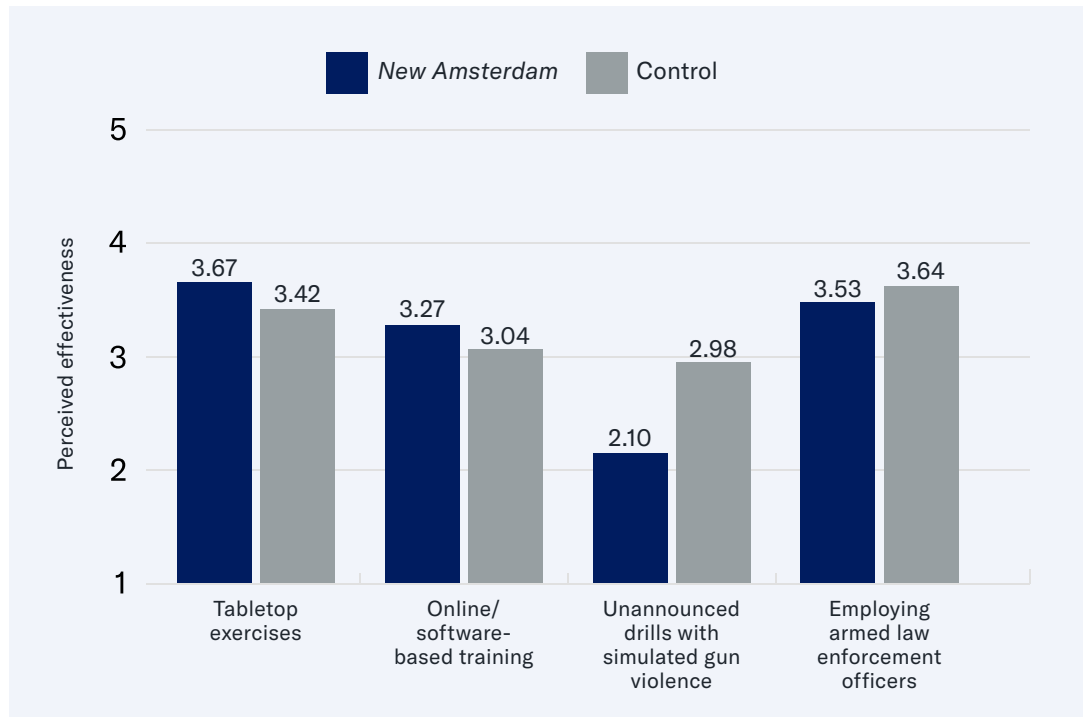
- Tabletop exercises, which involve bringing together groups of students and teachers to talk through a hypothetical active shooter situation step-by-step without engaging in a simulation;
- Online/software based training.

Meanwhile, this storyline led to these approaches being perceived **as less effective**:

- Unannounced active shooter drills with simulated gun violence; where some or all individuals involved believe it is a real-life active shooter event;
- Employing law enforcement officers to provide armed security in schools.

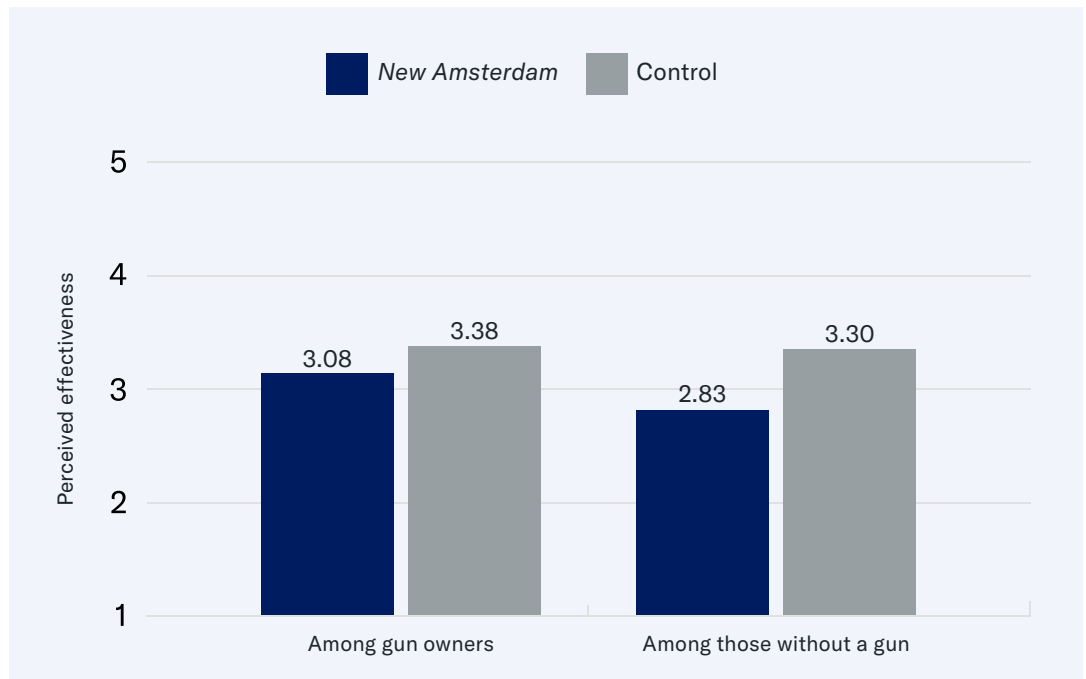


**Figure 5.**  
**Perceived effectiveness of different approaches to active shooter training**



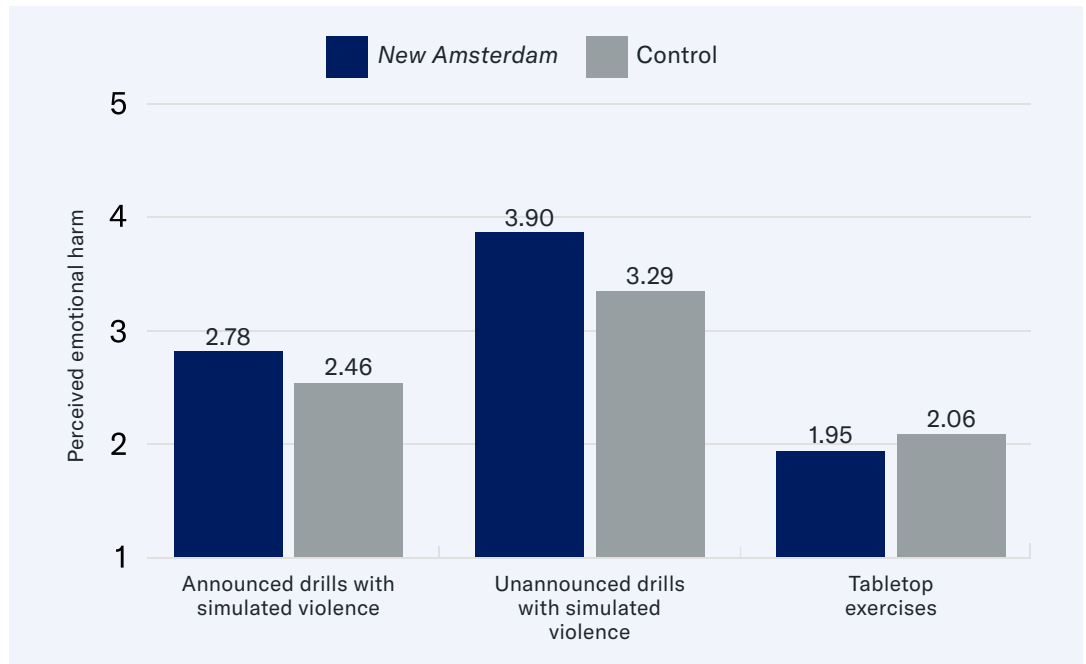
The *New Amsterdam* clip also led to a reduced belief that announced active shooter drills with simulated gun violence, where all individuals involved know that there is no real threat, are effective. This was especially true among those who were **not** gun owners.

**Figure 6.**  
**Perceived effectiveness of announced active shooter drills with simulated violence, by gun ownership**



The *New Amsterdam* clip caused viewers to perceive both announced and unannounced drills with simulated violence as more emotionally harmful, and tabletop approaches as less harmful.

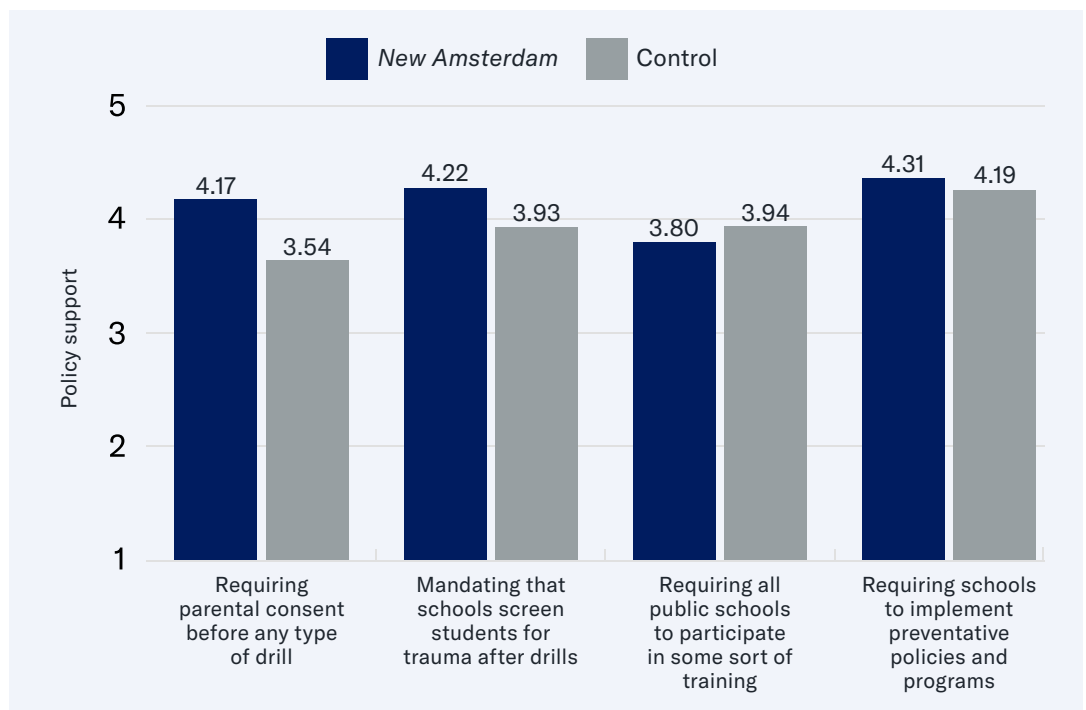
**Figure 7.**  
**Perceived emotional harm caused by different training approaches**



Compared to the control clip, the *New Amsterdam* storyline led to:

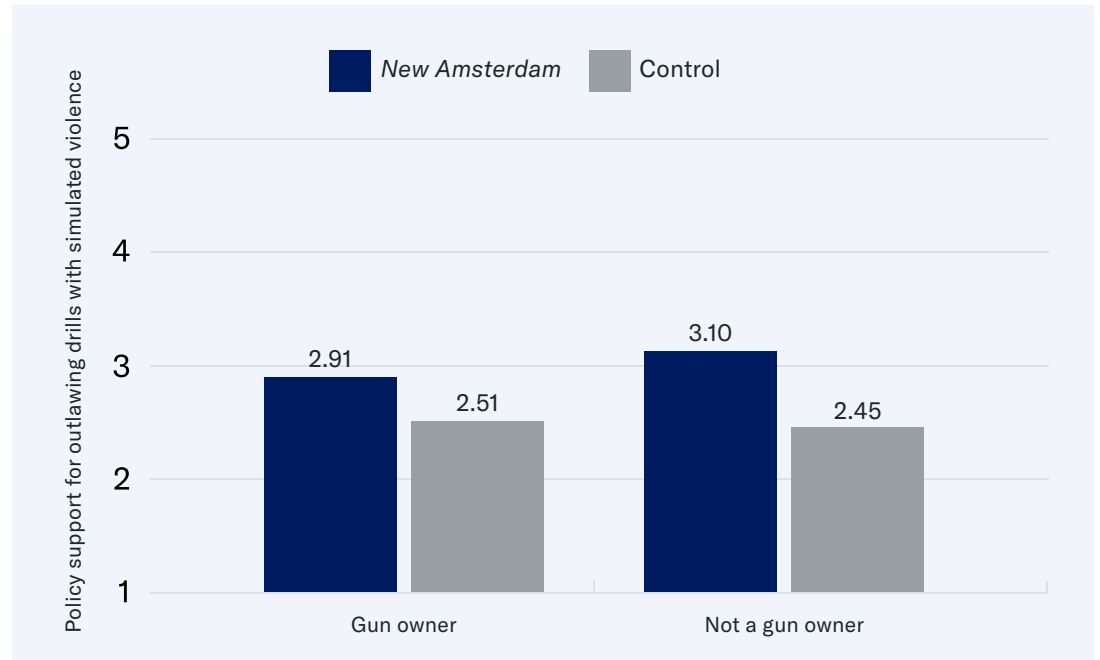
- Greater support for policies requiring parental consent before any type of shooter drill;
- Greater support for policies mandating that schools screen students for trauma after active shooter drills to provide counseling when needed;
- Lower support for policies requiring all public schools to participate in some sort of active shooter training;
- Greater support for policies mandating that schools have protocols and programs to prevent and intervene prior to a shooting, such as safe school design and promoting secure storage of firearms by parents.

**Figure 8.**  
**Support for policies regulating active shooter training in schools**



Finally, viewing *New Amsterdam* led to increased support for policies outlawing any type of active shooter drill with simulated gun violence in public schools. This was true of both gun owners and those who were not, but especially the latter group.

**Figure 9.**  
**Support for policies outlawing active shooter drills with simulated gun violence, by gun ownership**



**Viewing *New Amsterdam* led to increased support for policies outlawing any type of active shooter drill with simulated gun violence in public schools.**

### Role of Reactance

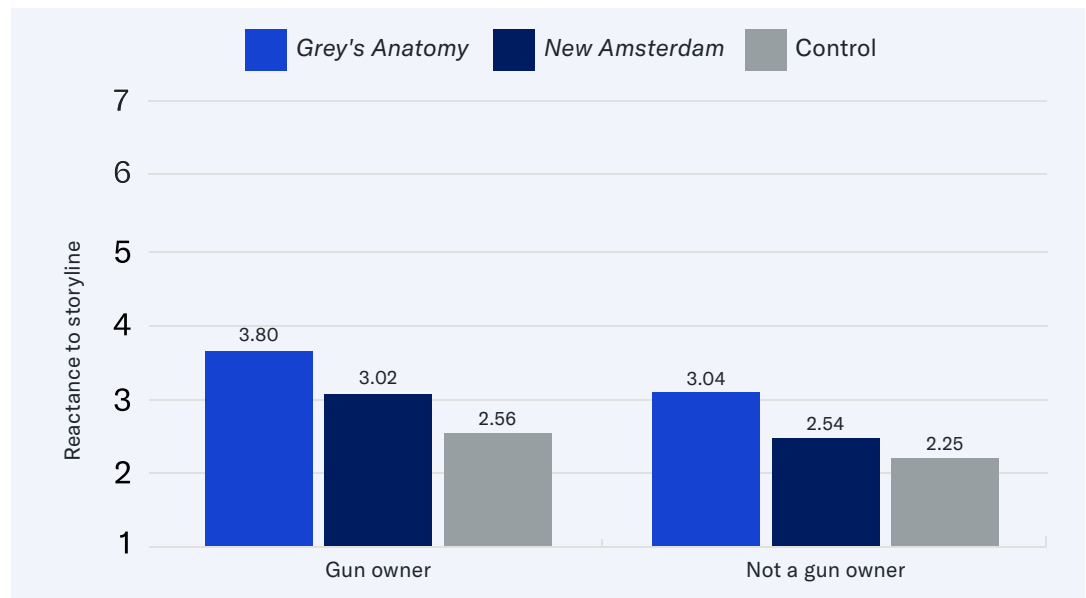
Psychological reactance is the unpleasant feeling that someone or something is attempting to limit one’s choices or freedom.<sup>27</sup> In the context of entertainment media, this generally means an audience member feels the content (or its creator) is trying to manipulate them or otherwise threatening their freedom to choose. Reactance is often associated with rejection of media messages.<sup>28</sup>

Viewers of each of the three storylines generally experienced fairly low levels of psychological reactance.

- However, both gun storylines, and especially *Grey’s Anatomy*, caused more reactance than the control clip.
- Gun owners experienced greater reactance to all three storylines than those who were not gun owners.

As expected, reactance to each storyline was associated with rejection of its gun safety messages.

**Figure 10.**  
**Reactance to the**  
**storylines, by gun**  
**ownership**



Among *Grey's Anatomy* viewers, those who experienced more reactance:

- Had lower knowledge of gun safety facts;
- Were less likely to believe storing guns and ammunition separately was important in households with children.

Among *New Amsterdam* viewers, those who experienced more reactance perceived:

- Tabletop exercises to be less effective and more harmful;
- Unannounced drills with simulated violence to be more effective and less harmful;
- Employing armed law enforcement in schools to be more effective.

*New Amsterdam* viewers who experienced greater reactance also had:

- Counterintuitively, greater support for policies outlawing drills with simulated violence;
- Reduced support for policies requiring parental consent, screening students for trauma, requiring schools to participate in some sort of training, and requiring schools to implement preventative policies and procedures.

Reactance to each storyline suppressed — but did not eliminate entirely — its positive impact on knowledge, attitudes, and policy support.

- Among those who watched the *Grey's Anatomy* clip, reactance suppressed the positive impact on knowledge of gun safety facts and the importance of storing guns and ammunition separately.
- Among those who watched the *New Amsterdam* clip, reactance suppressed the positive impact on the perceived effectiveness and emotional harm of trauma-informed training methods and support for policies regulating the training methods used in schools.

## Conclusion

The majority of episodes we examined from the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 TV seasons included gun-related content. Some common myths and stereotypes — including depictions of shooters as mentally ill and the heroic civilian “good guy with a gun” — were all but nonexistent. However, portrayals of gun safety and gun-violence prevention also remain rare.

The majority of gun content appears in police shows in which law enforcement officers are the protagonists. Indeed, most of the characters with guns are police officers. Law enforcement officers are generally portrayed as sympathetic and at least partially justified in their use of lethal force. These findings are consistent with the Lear Center’s 2020 research in collaboration with Color of Change, which found that “good guy” law enforcement characters — often people of color — frequently act as implicit endorsers of a variety of wrongful police actions.<sup>29</sup> This trope may give audiences the impression that any actions by law enforcement, up to and including shooting civilians, are inherently justifiable.

Whereas law enforcement officers with guns are depicted as diverse “good guys,” those who are shot on TV are typically nameless “bad guys,” who are — perhaps surprisingly — predominantly white. This inaccurate representation of gun casualties masks and distorts the ways in which shootings by law enforcement disproportionately affect communities of color. In reality, this violence is far from colorblind; Black Americans are three times more likely to be killed at the hands of law enforcement.<sup>30</sup>

Although portrayals of gun safety and prevention are rare, when they do appear, they can have a substantial impact on viewers’ knowledge, attitudes, and support for what Everytown refers to as common-sense gun laws.<sup>31</sup> A storyline about a child shooting a playmate with an improperly stored gun led viewers to feel less safe with a firearm at home, and made them more likely to endorse the importance of storing guns and ammunition separately. A second storyline about children traumatized by an active shooter drill caused such tactics to be perceived as less effective and more emotionally harmful. This storyline also motivated increased support for policies regulating the use of these training techniques in schools, particularly those with any form of simulated violence.

The impact of the gun storylines was generally stronger among viewers who do not own guns. This was due in part to the reactance these storylines — particularly *Grey’s Anatomy* — evoked among gun owners. This is unfortunate, given how rare TV storylines about secure gun storage are, and the fact that guns in the home, not schools, pose the biggest threat to children. Ultimately, however, it is not surprising that the *Grey’s* storyline prompted reactance among gun owners; it explicitly discussed the dangers of having firearms in households with children and featured one doctor confronting another about their gun ownership. While reactance dulled the impact of both storylines, they were still persuasive. We did not find any differences in impact between parents and non-parents, though viewers of the *Grey’s* storyline believed greater caution is warranted if there are children in the hypothetical home.

**Depicting gun casualties as predominantly white masks and distorts the ways in which shootings by law enforcement disproportionately affect communities of color.**



## Recommendations for Content Creators

The research described in this report highlights several strategies for content creators and other storytellers who wish to illuminate the realities of gun safety, gun-violence prevention, and use of force in the criminal justice system:

1. **Avoid portraying law enforcement use-of-force as heroic.** Color of Change has advocated for — and had some success with — reducing the number of police shows on the air.<sup>32</sup> Beyond canceling police dramas, content creators can complicate the narrative around use-of-force by avoiding portraying such actions as heroic and unproblematic. Consider showing law enforcement characters facing consequences, or at least scrutiny for such actions, which are rarely depicted.<sup>33</sup>
2. **Humanize and diversify depictions of those affected by gun violence.** Nuanced depictions of shooting victims can make audiences care about gun violence as a public issue. These depictions can be broadened to include the effects on those who survive, as well as witnesses and the loved-ones of those lost. Consider that calling attention to the very real racial disparities in gun violence is a delicate balance. “Colorblind” depictions of victims may give audiences the impression that such disparities do not exist, but at the same time, constant media images of dead Black and brown men can be retraumatizing to members of these communities.
3. **Include discussions of gun safety and common-sense gun laws.** Gun violence, including shootouts between cops and criminals, is overplayed on TV. Gun safety represents a largely untapped story opportunity. When told, these stories can change hearts and minds and even shift policy support. If they choose to depict or discuss a school shooting, content creators might consider explicitly drawing a connection to unsafe storage or gun laws in the show’s geographic setting.
4. **Appeal to common values.** Heavy-handed stories can be alienating to gun owners who feel their freedoms are being threatened, or their beliefs mocked. Instead of making gun owners the antagonist, appeal to the common values shared by parents and others who care about keeping children safe.

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