FREEDOM FROM GUN VIOLENCE

A NEW MESSAGING GUIDE TO REFRAME THE DEBATE AND WIN REAL SOLUTIONS

True freedom starts with safety. Give us freedom to learn, worship, and pursue our dreams without fear of gun violence.

ICE agents shoot man in car in northern California

Hospital security guard shot and wounded in AZ

Man dies by suicide in parking lot of veterans' hospital in Texas

Student shot 2 and then himself at CO high school

Shot fired in FL Costco parking lot after argument caught on video

4 killed, 8 injured at church shooting in Michigan

Sleeping child killed when bullet flies through wall in Oregon

"I lost my little girl": Ohio family mourns child after unintentional shooting death

Gunman fires from boat into NC restaurant, killing 3

NAMING THE PROBLEM

WE NOW LIVE IN PERPETUAL FEAR OF GUN VIOLENCE

The gun violence enabled and abetted by gun rights extremists, firearms manufacturers, and their political allies—the "guns everywhere" lobby—affects every person in this country both directly and indirectly.

- Gun violence is now the **leading cause of death** of children and teens,[1]
- **58 percent** of American adults or someone they care about has **experienced gun violence**,[2]
- Some **85 percent** of American adults report experiencing some level of **anxiety or stress** about gun violence,[3]
- Potential visitors to the U.S. are even **warned of shooting risks.**[4]

These facts tell a stark story: The violence caused by our failure to regulate guns is shaping our behavior, our movements, and our sense of what is possible. When the threat of gunfire shapes daily decisions, our freedoms become theoretical rather than lived. The United States—despite its wealth, power, and commitments to liberty—has become the least-free wealthy democracy in the world because so many freedoms cannot be exercised without fear.

INTRODUCTION

The dominant way we talk about gun violence is failing us. While Americans overwhelmingly oppose our status quo of guns and gun violence everywhere and support commonsense gun safety laws, that has not translated into the comprehensive policy reform we need given the magnitude of our national gun violence problem. As advocates, we need to ask ourselves, what is required to move the country from widespread agreement with our demands to actually achieving them? One answer is to reset the terms of engagement.

For decades, the gun lobby has defined the debate, casting gun ownership as the ultimate expression of American freedom and framing any reform as an attack on constitutional rights. The pro-gun lobby message is simple, emotional, and identity-based: Gun ownership is an absolute right that's rooted in the Second Amendment, superior to every other right, and integral to freedom and safety. Traditional GVP messaging—policy lists, statistics, and even stories of tragedy—has not been competitive with the fear-based, values-driven narrative the gun lobby advances.

This guide offers a different path forward: a new way to talk about gun violence that centers freedom, life, and safety, and that reclaims patriotic language. To shift what is politically possible, our narrative:

- Reclaims freedom as the core value anchoring gun safety demands,
- Exposes the villains of this story who are taking away our freedoms and endangering our families by pushing guns everywhere and blocking laws that would keep us safe,
- Inspires a broad, diverse coalition that sees gun violence for what it is: an assault on our freedoms and a barrier to safety, dignity, and democratic participation.

This guide reflects the following:

- Years of gun violence prevention (GVP) organizing,
- Lived experience as advocates of color in a historically white movement,
- Deep frustration with policy stagnation despite overwhelming public support, and,
- Growing alarm at how "guns everywhere" is eroding fundamental freedoms, weakening democratic institutions, and endangering daily life in America.

This guide is a first step in changing the trajectory of the national gun violence debate in a new direction that makes sweeping change finally possible.

As we dive in, it's important to highlight that the goal is to advance gun safety policies that allow all of us to have increased safety and freedom in our daily lives.

Following our messaging and engagement guidelines, we close this document with a brief policy agenda and a historical analysis of how we got here.

OUR NEW FRAME

FREEDOM FROM GUN VIOLENCE

Freedom is a core American value. Across surveys, American voters routinely select "freedom" as the value that matters most, and this is true of respondents across demographics and ideologies. In research spanning diverse issues from unions to healthcare to voting rights, freedom has consistently proven to be the most potent framing to engage our base and move persuadable audiences toward progressive leaders and policies.

Our new narrative centers our freedoms: the freedom to be safe, the freedom to live with dignity, and the freedom to fully participate in civic and community life without fear. With "freedom from gun violence" as our rallying cry, we make ours a patriotic cause and rhetorically connect our vision to that of other progressive movements, from Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms to the Civil Rights Movement's Freedom Riders to marriage equality's Freedom to Marry campaign. When we assert that true freedom requires freedom from gun violence, *we reclaim a fundamental American value from our opposition.*

CORE NARRATIVE

No matter our color or background, zip code, or income, all of us want the freedom to move through our lives without the anxiety and fear that gun violence could erupt at any time. But the "guns everywhere" lobby blocks commonsense gun safety solutions that the vast majority of us favor. Allowing anyone to buy a gun and murder our neighbors is a choice we don't need to keep making. When we come together to vote, strike, and march to stop gun violence and defend our freedoms, we can make sure that all of us can make it home safe.

Narrative Elements

VALUE **Freedom to be safe and to know our loved ones are too.**

True freedom starts with safety—our freedom to learn, worship, and pursue our dreams without fear of gun violence.

VILLAIN **The "guns everywhere" lobby is taking away our freedom.**

Gun rights extremists, lobbyists, firearms manufacturers, and their political allies and supporters block every protective policy and work to dismantle those that already exist. This "guns everywhere" lobby relentlessly pushes firearms into every corner of our lives, into as many hands as possible, all in the pursuit of profits and political power.

VISION **Reasonable gun laws protect people and ensure our most basic freedom—to be safe and to know that our loved ones are too.**

Gun safety policies protect our freedom—freedom for us to return home safe to the people we love.

Narrative Themes

1. "Guns everywhere" is taking away our freedoms

Gun violence doesn't just threaten safety—it strips away our constitutional freedoms. When we live in fear of being shot, our ability to learn, worship, assemble, vote, and speak freely is compromised. Rights mean little when people do not feel safe enough to exercise them.

2. More guns do not bring safety

Communities with more guns experience more shootings, suicides, and unintentional deaths. A society saturated with firearms creates fear and instability—not freedom. True safety is what allows freedom to flourish.

3. Americans are tired of living in fear

Parents fear school drop-offs. Workers scan for exits. Faith communities debate armed security to protect against intruders with guns. Young people practice active shooter drills instead of focusing on learning. Everyday decisions—from grocery shopping to attending events—are shaped by the possibility of gunfire.

4. Leaders have failed to protect us

Many elected officials choose gun-industry demands over public safety, offering sympathy instead of solutions. Their refusal to act has allowed gun violence to spread and has weakened the freedoms they are sworn to protect.

5. Reasonable gun laws protect rights—they don't violate them

Policies like background checks and safe storage respect responsible gun ownership while preventing guns from falling into dangerous hands. Only extremists claim that any guardrail is unconstitutional. The true threat to our freedoms is a society where gun violence dictates who can safely exercise their rights. We are not asking for no-guns-anywhere, but for gun safety policies that allow all of us to have the increased freedom of safety.

ENGAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Understand and respect the intersections

Gun violence touches nearly every facet of American life, and is a barrier to justice, opportunity, safety, and democracy—undermining the very conditions required for people and communities to thrive. It does not exist in a silo. It is a systems-level crisis that destabilizes our economy, weakens our democracy, deepens inequality, and erodes the basic freedoms we depend on to live, work, and thrive. Recognizing these intersections strengthens our coalition by giving advocates multiple, authentic entry points into the conversation.

VOTING RIGHTS

Armed intimidation at polling places threatens free and fair elections. When voters fear showing up to cast their vote, democratic participation becomes compromised.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Active shooter drills traumatize students and teachers. The push for armed staff and costly security measures pulls resources away from instruction, counseling, and student support, especially in already underfunded districts. Studies show that adding more guns around children does not increase safety,[5] while exposure to violence undermines learning, attendance, and long-term outcomes.[6]

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Armed protestors create a climate of fear outside clinics, and inflammatory rhetoric has fueled violence against providers. The presence of guns raises the stakes for anyone seeking or providing care, turning access into a question of personal safety.

IMMIGRATION

Violence fueled by U.S.-sourced weapons trafficked into Latin American countries is driving displacement, forcing families to flee their homes and seek safety at the U.S.-Mexico border.[7] Gun-rights ideology often feeds racist narratives portraying immigrants as threats, emboldening vigilante actions at the border and in communities. These dangerous narratives not only dehumanize those seeking safety, they escalate tensions and put both migrants and local residents at greater risk of harm.

HEALTH & HEALTHCARE

Firearm injuries cost hundreds of billions of dollars each year,[8] burdens carried by hospitals, taxpayers, and families. Survivors often face a lifetime of physical and mental health challenges, while healthcare providers experience trauma and burnout. Gun violence strains an already fragile healthcare system and deepens existing health disparities.

CLIMATE CHANGE

A warming climate is linked to increases in interpersonal violence, including shootings.[9] As temperatures rise and communities face growing instability, gun violence is likely to intensify, further compounding the impacts of climate change.

ECONOMY & BUSINESS

Gun violence disrupts local economies, lowers property values, and drives up insurance and security costs for businesses.[10] Workplace shootings and the fear of violence reduce productivity, strain employees, and make it harder for communities to grow and thrive economically.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & FAMILY SAFETY

Access to firearms dramatically increases the lethality of domestic violence.[11] Survivors are far more likely to be killed when an abuser has a gun, turning dangerous situations into deadly ones and undermining safety within the home.

FIRST AMENDMENT & FREE EXPRESSION

The presence of guns at protests and public gatherings suppresses free speech and civic participation. Armed intimidation silences voices, discourages peaceful assembly, and weakens the foundations of a functioning democracy.

CIVIL RIGHTS & RACIAL JUSTICE

Gun violence and armed intimidation disproportionately silence marginalized communities and civil rights advocates.

LAW ENFORCEMENT & PUBLIC TRUST

The proliferation of firearms increases risks for law enforcement and contributes to an escalating arms race between civilians and police.[12] This dynamic heightens tensions, increases the likelihood of deadly encounters, and erodes trust between communities and those sworn to protect them.

COMMUNITY STABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH

In communities impacted by daily gun violence, fear becomes a constant presence—affecting sleep, mental health, and social cohesion.[13] Chronic exposure to violence destabilizes neighborhoods and limits opportunities for growth, healing, and opportunity.

VETERANS & SUICIDE PREVENTION

Veterans face disproportionately high rates of firearm suicide, with guns involved in the vast majority of cases.[14] Easy access to lethal means during moments of crisis turns preventable tragedies into permanent loss.

MEDIA, CULTURE & MISINFORMATION

Gun violence is often sensationalized or distorted in media and culture, while the gun lobby uses entertainment and messaging to normalize firearms and spread fear-based narratives that shape public perception and policy.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Gun violence undermines fundamental human rights—including the right to life, safety, education, and freedom of assembly. The inability to prevent widespread gun deaths places the United States at odds with basic global human rights standards.

MORE ENGAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Do Not Reinforce or Repeat Distorted 2A Framing

Avoid affirming the gun lobby's absolutist reading of the Second Amendment, for example, by saying "I support the Second Amendment." You can acknowledge lawful gun use, like hunting or sport shooting, without giving air time to their frame. Keep the focus on the lives and freedoms stolen from us by pervasive gun violence, created by the "guns everywhere" lobby.

Avoid Stereotypes and Dehumanizing Language

The "guns everywhere" lobby uses racialized fear and dog whistles to justify unlimited gun access. Do not repeat or legitimize these frames, even to negate them. Emphasize shared safety and community well-being instead of inadvertently echoing their messages.

Know Your Audience

In this debate, there are essentially two groups: people who support limits on gun access to improve community safety and freedom (including many gun owners), and people who are ideologically opposed to any limits. Values—not wording—drive this issue. Lean into freedom, safety, responsibility, and constitutional rights.

WHEN ENGAGING SUPPORTERS

Encourage and model the "freedom from gun violence" frame. Help shift supporters from policy-heavy messaging to values-based language that resonates more broadly and makes for easier repetition.

WHEN ENGAGING GUN OWNERS

Lead with shared values—freedom, responsibility, and community safety. Avoid opening with policy details. Most gun owners support reasonable limits but react defensively if they feel their identity or rights are being attacked. Appeal to their belief in the full Constitution, not just one amendment.

WHEN ENGAGING LAWMAKERS

Focus on accountability. Their votes determine whether people can live, learn, worship, and assemble without fear. Make the choice clear:

- Protect public safety and freedoms, or
- Put American lives at risk to pad the profits of the "guns everywhere" lobby.

RESPONSES TO COMMON OPPOSITION ARGUMENTS

"The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

We must stop dangerous individuals from getting guns in the first place. Relying on armed confrontations after violence has already begun is a proven failure that gets many more people killed.

"You want to take away my guns."

We want to increase gun safety and stop dangerous people from accessing dangerous firearms so easily. Reasonable safeguards protect *your* safety, *your* family's safety, and *your* freedom to live without fear.

"You're violating my Second Amendment rights."

We are defending *your* freedom to live in safety. Uncontrolled access to guns threatens families and strips away patriotic freedoms, including *yours*. When we live in fear of being shot and killed, all of our fundamental freedoms—our freedom to learn, worship, and speak freely—are stolen from us.

THE POLICY PACKAGE THAT RESTORES FREEDOM

To reclaim freedom from gun violence, we need a comprehensive approach that addresses both access to firearms and the broader systems that enable violence to persist. No single policy is enough on its own; together, these reforms create the foundation for a safer, more stable, and more free society.

A comprehensive reform agenda includes:

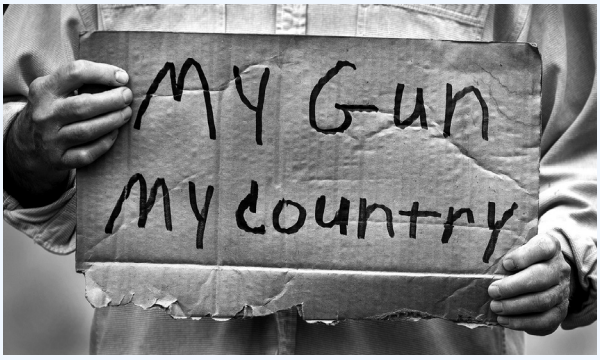
- Universal background checks
- Permit-to-purchase requirements
- A ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines
- Safe storage mandates
- Extreme-risk protection orders
- Major investment in community violence intervention
- Repeal of the gun industry's special protections
- Federal funding for gun violence research
- A fully resourced and empowered Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF)

These policies work together to reduce easy access to firearms, prevent violence before it occurs, and ensure accountability for those who profit from or enable the crisis. Most importantly, they protect public freedom and safety—the freedom to learn, work, worship, gather, and live without fear of gunfire.

UNDERSTANDING OUR OPPOSITION

HOW A FALSE NARRATIVE TOOK HOLD

Modern gun-rights ideology is the result of a deliberate, strategic, and well-funded effort to transform a limited, collective constitutional provision into an untouchable, individual right eclipsing all others. Understanding how this transformation happened helps us challenge the myth that gun rights are absolute or immovable.



Rooted in Racism and Social Control

As historians Carol Anderson, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Carl Bogus have documented, the Second Amendment was drafted largely to protect local militias. These militias existed to control enslaved and native peoples, and to enforce racial hierarchies. In states like Virginia and South Carolina, where enslaved people made up as much as 40% of the population, leaders demanded codified protections as a condition for agreeing to ratify the Constitution.

The Second Amendment itself reflects this: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State…"

For nearly two centuries:

- Courts rarely referenced the Second Amendment,
- States and cities regulated guns—what types could be owned, who could carry them, and where,
- Even the National Rifle Association (NRA), founded in 1871, focused on marksmanship and safety, not individual gun rights.

The idea that the Second Amendment guaranteed an individual right to own any type of firearm was virtually nonexistent in American law before the late 20th century.

The Narrative Shift: From Group Right to Individual Right

The modern gun-rights movement began in 1977, when a far-right faction took over the NRA in what became known as the "Cincinnati Revolt." This moment transformed the NRA from a sporting and safety association into an aggressive political lobbying machine that embarked on a decades-long campaign to transform how Americans understood the Second Amendment. They elevated a once-obscure militia clause into a sweeping individual entitlement. Then, they shifted public perception by flooding political, legal, and cultural spaces with their new interpretation.

Central to this effort was the creation of a powerful cultural identity around guns. Firearms were rebranded not as tools, but as symbols of personal freedom, masculinity, patriotism, and self-reliance. To make that identity stick, the NRA and gun industry invested in a vast infrastructure: a sophisticated media and messaging

apparatus; political lobbying and candidate endorsements; well-funded think tanks producing revisionist history; legal scholars advancing a new constitutional theory; grassroots organizations that framed gun ownership as central to "real" American identity; and close partnerships with right-wing media, militias, and white nationalist groups eager to amplify the message.

None of this happened by accident or arose from an organic shift in public opinion. It was a calculated political project.

The Heller Breakthrough

This campaign reached its defining victory in 2008, when the Supreme Court's decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* declared that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to possess a firearm, unrelated to militia service. No major court had ever interpreted the Constitution this way.

Former Chief Justice Warren Burger famously condemned the idea of individual gun rights as "one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American public by special-interest groups," underscoring just how radical and politically driven this reinterpretation was.

With Heller, the gun lobby achieved what it had spent decades working toward. It cemented its rewritten narrative into constitutional law, gave far right groups a judicial green light to demand virtually unlimited gun access, and handed the firearms industry a powerful new marketing tool. Perhaps most importantly, Heller shifted the terms of political debate—from questions about public safety to arguments centered on what gun rights individuals are supposedly owed.

> **"This has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word fraud, on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime."**
>
> **– Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger on the individual rights interpretation of 2A**

Weaponizing Fear and Identity

After Heller, the gun lobby doubled down on messaging designed to stoke fear and racial resentment. Their communications painted a picture of constant threat, rooted in racism and xenophobia: people of color "coming to get you," immigrants "invading your community," the government "coming for your guns," and the idea that "only a gun makes you safe." These narratives were crafted to tap into anxieties about demographic change, social movements, and shifting political power.

The weaponization of identity cuts both ways. Turning communities of color into threats and turning gun owners into "real Americans" and even heroes.

Bruen and the Expansion of Gun Industry Power

In 2022, the Supreme Court's decision in New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen pushed this ideology even further. The Court ruled that modern gun laws must align with a narrow, selective reading of "historical tradition," imposing a misguided new standard in a country with vastly different conditions, technologies, and public safety needs than existed in the 18th century.

The effects were immediate and sweeping, emboldening gun rights extremists to unnecessarily challenge the invalidation of numerous long-standing safety measures across the country. In the wake of Bruen, the constitutional landscape is now shaped less by evidence, data, or public safety, and more by a politicized, revisionist version of history that ignores the realities we face today.

The Consequences

Today's dominant Second Amendment narrative fuels racialized violence, legitimizes armed intimidation, undermines democratic participation, weakens public institutions, and obstructs life-saving policy reforms.

It is a narrative engineered to provoke outrage and shut down debate. All of this is the deliberate outcome of a decades-long, heavily resourced campaign designed to protect profits and political power—not the public.

To reopen and shift the debate, we need a frame that is just as powerful, and one that speaks directly to the same foundational values. "Freedom from gun violence" reframes the issue entirely, asserting that true freedom requires freedom from violence, and that constitutional rights belong to all of us—not just those who claim an unlimited right to bear arms.

ENDNOTES

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NOTES

Unchecked "guns everywhere" has taken away our freedom to live, learn, worship, work, and participate fully in our democracy. It has reshaped daily life in America and eroded freedoms that should be guaranteed to all of us. Ending this crisis requires more than policy change—it requires a unified narrative rooted in values Americans share: safety, dignity, responsibility, and constitutional rights that actually protect people, not weapons.

Reclaiming freedom from gun violence is not only possible—it is essential. Every person in this country deserves the freedom to live without fear.

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