

# 15 RESEARCH-BASED INSIGHTS TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH WITH RESPECT TO GUN VIOLENCE

In a survey of 2,000 11th and 12th graders:

**40%**

showed high amounts of fear about shooting and violence in schools.

**6 MONTHS LATER**

these students were more likely to have an anxiety disorder.

Guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens in the United States. **85%** of child and teen homicides occur in the home, and **80%** of gun suicides occur with a gun owned by a family member.



## AVOID THESE THINGS WHEN PORTRAYING GUN VIOLENCE

## RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Please go to page 3 for research sources.

**1**

**Avoid highlighting the act of violence, counting the number of deaths, depicting injuries, or naming weapons used.**

**Why?** Sensationalizing gun violence increases the appeal for teenagers and leads to copycats who hope to beat the previous school shooter's "record."



A 2018 study from the IZA Institute of Labor Economics found that "news coverage is suggested to cause approximately three mass shootings in the following week".

**2**

**Avoid neatly wrapped storylines that emphasize immediate healing from the trauma of gun violence.**

**Why?** To best portray the healing process, it is important to depict the near term effects of gun violence exposure on students, (e.g. chronic absenteeism) as well as the long term effects (e.g. adverse impacts on employment post-adolescence).



Showing the long-term impacts of gun violence helps viewers internalize the real-life consequences of this kind of violence.



**Extended adolescence**, which includes ages 10-25, is a critical period of development when young people gain independence and form their values.



PORTRAYING GUN SAFETY ON SCREENS

**3** Portray appropriate gun safety behavior, especially for teen characters who have firearms in their homes.

**Why?** Guns are often portrayed on TV and movies with little attention to safe handling. By showing guns locked up, out of reach of young kids, or removed from the home of a friend who is suicidal, you can provide better, and more responsible examples for gun owners.



Children shown a movie featuring guns were almost three times as likely to pull the trigger of a real revolver (disabled) that was placed in a playroom, compared to kids who had seen the same movie with guns edited out.

**4** Limit the number of guns involved in storylines with teens.

**Why?** Often young people learn about guns from the media they consume.



46% of boys and young men named video games as a source of gun information. 62% of Black young people listed TV & film as where they learned about guns.

**5** Show police resolving conflict with tools other than guns.

**Why?** Portraying the use of guns as a means to stop “bad guys” glorifies guns and their role in society.



TV shows and movies typically portray police as the heroes that use firearms to defeat antagonists, leading viewers to believe that guns are necessary to protect themselves and their families.

STIGMA AND STEREOTYPES

**6** Portray characters reporting legitimate warning signs—such as leaked plans via social media—to the appropriate authorities rather than making judgments based solely on behavior or appearance.

**Why?** Subjective judgments of an individuals’ behavior, appearance, or mental health status have been found to be unreliable predictors of violent or criminal behavior and perpetuate harmful stereotyping.



A study of 170 perpetrators found that nearly half leaked their plans in advance of a mass shooting, with 44.3% leaking specific details.

**7** Do not conflate violent behavior and mental health.

**Why?** People with mental health problems are most often shown as violent in the media, yet in real life are more likely to be the victims of violence.



72% of characters with mental health conditions were perpetrators of violence in films.

**8** Refrain from using racial identity to profile a school shooter.

**Why?** Focusing on demographics can perpetuate racist stereotypes, which can lead to violence toward an ethnic community.



News coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting used many Asian stereotypes, including descriptions of the Korean perpetrator as “asocial” and “asexual”. Coverage of the White perpetrator of the Columbine shooting did not demonstrate the same trends.

**9** Portray non-White teens grappling with the anxiety and fear caused by gun violence.

**Why?** Movies and shows often focus on the White teenage experience with gun violence in the form of anxiety or fear. On the other hand, the Black or Hispanic teenage experience with gun violence is often portrayed as “gang” related, and the Asian American teen experience with gun violence is rarely if ever shown.



Gun violence in White schools receives higher rates of media attention than similar violence in minority schools, even though minority students are more likely to face school-based gun violence.



PORTRAYING HEALTHY WAYS OF SEEKING HELP

**10** Show adolescents sharing their fears about gun violence and school shootings with their friends.

**Why?** Youth are reluctant to seek professional help for their mental health. Normalizing these conversations makes it easier for teens to realize that they are not alone.



Modeling healthy peer-to-peer support (i.e. Identifying signs of mental health concerns in friends, talking to friends about these concerns, and helping friends access appropriate services) can help youth feel more at ease opening up to others.

**11** Show teens talking about their fear of guns and school shootings with their parents.

**Why?** Modeling adolescents talking to their parents can help both the teen and the parent learn healthy communication about challenging topics.



Parental support is a critical protective factor in limiting the psychological impact of indirect violence.

**12** Show teens accessing therapy and other mental health services in the wake of incidents involving gun violence.

**Why?** The long-term outcomes of teens who seek mental health services after gun violence exposure are better than those who do not seek help.



Exposure to a school shooting leads to chronic absenteeism, grade retention, and reductions in high school and college graduation.

**13** Portray teens engaging positively with youth-serving community organizations after experiencing gun violence incidents.

**Why?** Many young people who are impacted by gun violence lack parental support or access to therapy.



Social and emotional learning programs have been found to reduce the negative effects of children exposed to gun violence.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

**14** Portray parents sharing strategies with other parents to support their children when they've been impacted by a gun violence incident.

**Why?** Parents can better support their children if they have skills and examples to follow from, television, films, and social media.



Parental support is a critical protective factor in limiting the psychological impact of indirect violence.

**15** Show parents having positive and solutions-oriented conversations about their safety concerns with school administrators and personnel.

**Why?** Positive conversations help shift the mindset behind how we deal with and regulate gun violence.



Many students show a great deal of anxiety around school shootings, so portraying a safe space for conversations regarding gun violence at school could benefit students' anxiety levels.

RESOURCES

Borum et al., (2010); Cabral et al., (2020); Chen et al., (2015); Cimolai et al., (2021) Cox & Rich, (2018); Everytown for Gun Safety, (2023); Giaccardi et al., (2022); Jamieson & Romer, (2021); Kay et al., (2010); Lubman et al., (2017); National Academies of Sciences (2019); Park et al., (2012); Peterson et al., (2021); Pieper et al., (2023); Price et al., (1992); Project Unloaded, (2022); Riehm et al., (2021); Smith et al., (2010), Wanda Parham-Payne, (2014)



The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS) at UCLA is the only adolescent-centered organization that brings together the academic and creative communities to unlock the power of storytelling and help the next generation thrive and grow. Our primary aim is to support film and television storytellers who are working towards changing entrenched cultural narratives around key issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, mental health, and inequality. CSS is affiliated with UCLA through the faculty appointment of our founder, Dr. Yalda T. Uhls, in the Psychology Department, one of the highest-ranked in the world. We have more than 100 academic collaborators from universities around the world. Our award-winning work has been featured on NPR and in the Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, Variety and more. You can learn more about our work at [scholarsandstorytellers.com](http://scholarsandstorytellers.com)

## CSS RESOURCES

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### Toolkit for Storytellers: Mental Health

This page contains links to tip sheets, articles, research reports, videos & podcasts, and additional resources for storytellers looking to accurately portray how adolescents experience their mental health in everyday life and to promote positive mental health outcomes in young people.

## MORE RESOURCES

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- [Trigger Warning: Gun Guidelines for the Media - HH&S at the USC Norman Lear Center & Brady](#)
- [Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports](#)
- [Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention](#)
- [Sandy Hook Promise](#)
- [Gun Violence and Suicide Prevention](#)
- [How To Support Survivors And People Impacted By Gun Violence](#)
- [Strategies for Supporting Families Impacted by Gun Violence](#)
- [Prevent and Prepare -- Gun Safety](#)
- [What Gun Violence Does to Our Mental Health](#)
- [Understanding and Depicting Gun Violence in Entertainment](#)
- [Resources for Victims and Survivors of Gun Violence](#)
- [Show Gun Safety: Empower the Creative Community in the Movement to End Gun Violence - Brady](#)

