

NONFICTION STORYTELLING ON GUN VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

WHERE WE'VE BEEN
AND WHERE WE CAN GO

SUNDANCE INSTITUTE DOCUMENTARY FILM PROGRAM



THE
KENDED A
FUND

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LETTER FROM THE SUNDANCE INSTITUTE DOCUMENTARY FILM FUND

Dear Colleagues,

In 2016, we partnered with The Kendeda Fund to cultivate, fund, and elevate stories that addressed one of the most significant public health and equity issues in America: gun violence. We supported stories where gun violence intersected with other social issues, like suicide, domestic abuse (*A Journey Into the Storm*, dir. Sandra Salas), everyday gun violence (*When Claude Got Shot*, dir. Brad Lichtenstein), mass shootings, movement building (*Newtown* and *Us Kids*, dir. Kim Snyder), community violence, and resilience (*Charm City*, dir. Marilyn Ness). In 2017 we hosted a small event that brought together film makers, journalists, cultural thinkers, and activists to talk about the role of documentary film in effecting progressive social change around the culture of gun violence in the United States. This gathering reached across sectors and disciplines, forging new alliances and coalitions.

However, given the magnitude of the gun violence epidemic in the United States, there are still stories that need to be told, new voices that need to be heard, and new alliances that need to be forged. So, in the spring of 2020, we commissioned this report to inform our strategy around building a more robust pipeline of stories that address gun violence in the U.S., as well as to highlight ways of working more collaboratively within the field of gun violence prevention. Our fundamental goal was to explore the challenges film makers face in getting films in this space funded, from production through impact. We also wanted to outline opportunities for collaboration between film and issue funders, as well as activists and film makers, to push for social, cultural, and policy change.

More than just providing information, it is our hope that this report acts as a catalyst to promote dialogue and help build local coalitions between artists, funders, and advocates. Together we can work toward, empowering national movements, reframing the conversation to include BIPOC communities, reaching conservative audiences, and motivating policymakers to support community-based approaches of violence prevention.

We have also committed \$250,000 through the generous support of The Kendeda Fund to support nonfiction short stories addressing gun violence. The initial findings of this report helped inform our collective strategy moving forward: one with a focus on the intersectionality of gun violence with broader issues of racial justice; housing segregation; lack of investment in public infrastructure, education, and public health; policing; criminal justice; domestic violence; mental health; suicide; and corporate

influence on guns. Additionally, we are committed to highlighting and supporting stories from within communities, from filmmaking teams who have been personally affected by this issue. In our review and selection process, we involved impacted communities and sought to include panelists with a diverse range of lived experiences.

It is our hope that this report and the surrounding dialogue will lead to more equitable collaborations among stakeholders, grounded in partnerships with the communities most affected by gun violence and in specific issue areas that intersect with gun violence.

We are grateful for Eliza Licht, Will Jenkins, Michon Boston, and Alice Quinlan and the incredible research and analysis they offer in this report. We are also deeply appreciative of The Kendeda Fund, David Brotherton (fund advisor for gun violence prevention and communications) and Diane Ives (fund advisor for people, places, and planet), for their incredible thought partnership, generosity, and commitment to this space. And lastly, thank you for taking the time to read this report. We look forward to engaging in further conversations to ensure this important work continues.

Hajnal Molnar Szakacs
Director, Institute Granting

Paola Mottura
Film Fund Director, Sundance Documentary Film Program



INTRODUCTION

As Americans, we are experiencing epidemic levels¹ of gun violence that have taken an astounding toll across all communities but disproportionately on communities of color. Today, this violence persists, with weapons that are much more powerful and plentiful than ever before in our history. To frame the conversation we hope to inspire with this report, a few establishing facts:

- ❖ Every day, more than 100 Americans are killed with guns and 200 more are shot and wounded.
- ❖ The U.S. gun homicide rate is 25 times that of other high-income countries.²
- ❖ Black Americans are nearly 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide, and 15 times more likely to experience gun assaults.
- ❖ Black men were more than twice as likely to die by firearms than White men in 2019.
- ❖ In an average month, 57 American women are shot to death by an intimate partner, and many more are shot and wounded.
- ❖ More than 1,000 people are fatally shot by police in an average year, with Black Americans experiencing three times the fatal police shootings as white Americans.
- ❖ Nearly two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides, and 74 percent of these are white men.
- ❖ Firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens.
- ❖ 58 percent of American adults or someone they care for have experienced gun violence in their lifetime.³

Documentaries and other forms of non-fiction storytelling can play a critical role in challenging dangerous fantasies behind U.S. gun culture, exposing who is profiting from gun violence, and highlighting solutions that many people don't know about or don't believe actually work. Documentary storytelling can also give a platform to underrepresented voices and experiences of gun violence.

How can filmmakers, funders, other media gatekeepers, and gun violence prevention organizations work together to enrich documentary storytelling in this space, expand narratives around gun violence, and spur systemic change? What are the challenges artists face in creating work related to gun violence from funding an idea to collaborating with stakeholders? What are proven successful strategies and best practices for effective documentary film marketing, outreach, distribution, and impact campaigns relating to gun violence?

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics/news/pandemic-shootings-gun-violence-lifetime-high-1176451>

² <https://efsgv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019CDCdata.pdf>

³ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-in-america/>

To begin to answer these questions, we interviewed more than 25 filmmakers, funders, and gun violence prevention leaders about their experiences working at the intersection of nonfiction storytelling and gun violence prevention. We are grateful for their participation and honest insights.

We commenced our work on this report in June of 2020, with most of our interviews taking place over the summer of that year. Our research overlapped with a moment of immense social upheaval in the United States and abroad; the global reckoning around racism and police brutality in reaction to the murder of George Floyd, as well as the crushing toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic fallout, laid bare the pervasive racism and inequity in our societal systems. It is essential that we discuss racism and inequity within the documentary field, and this conversation continues to be front and center thanks to the work of groups like Beyond Inclusion and so many others. We acknowledge that much of what we explore in this report has been articulated previously, and that work to address these issues is already underway, with a number of people of color hired into leadership positions within the field and many projects in the pipeline.

We hope the following report will provide a jumping-off point for further efforts to expand this crucial collaboration.

Alice, Eliza, Michon & Will



METHODOLOGY

Our research objectives for this report were to:

- ❖ Organize and analyze qualitative data in order to highlight successful strategies and best practices in designing and executing effective documentary film marketing, outreach, distribution, and impact campaigns relating to gun violence.
- ❖ Identify potential challenges artists may face in the realization of work tackling issues related to gun violence, from production, marketing, and distribution, to connecting and collaborating with stakeholders in the gun violence prevention sphere.

The findings and takeaways in this report are the product of a series of frank, open conversations with key stakeholder groups with specific perspectives: film makers, funders, and gun violence prevention leaders. We sought their candid reflections, rooted in their own experiences and unique perspectives, about what it would take to create a more robust ecosystem for nonfiction storytelling about gun violence. This report is only a first step in a series of conversations with a limited number of people in three fields meant to set the stage for further inquiry and analysis that casts a wider net.

Drawing on a core series of questions, we conducted interviews with 27 individuals, including funders in the gun violence prevention space, leaders of key community organizations at the forefront of the issue, and film makers and impact producers who had either worked on or are currently working on a documentary about gun violence prevention. We also spoke to a small number of film makers and producers who were unable to finish their films. Through an online survey, we also connected with additional film makers who had experience pursuing funding and support for films related to gun violence prevention, all of which either had yet to be released or were not yet completed. We acknowledge that the film makers we interviewed do not necessarily represent the communities that their films cover. This is a key finding in the report, and reflects larger systemic issues in the field.

From these interviews, generously and frankly given by our interviewees, we came away with a series of further questions, provocations, and theses that can hopefully help inspire continued growth in this sector of documentary storytelling, and help catalyze support for film makers who wish to tell stories about this critical issue.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY KEY LEARNINGS FOR FILM TEAMS AND FUNDERS



UNDERSTAND THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, GUNS, AND GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION (GVP)

Gun violence has taken an incredible toll across all communities, but disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. Many activists, filmmakers, and funders spoke of the evolving racial dynamics within the gun violence prevention movement. National recognition for activism and movement building around gun control has largely centered on organizations led by white people, and has often focused on shooting incidents involving white victims and mass shootings. At the same time, there are many local BIPOC-led advocacy groups focused on preventing the everyday violence devastating their communities, and on the way this violence intersects with broader issues of housing segregation and underfunded public infrastructure, education, and public health. There has been limited collaboration between these groups until more recently, and disparities and tensions remain.

Documentaries can help build bridges between these groups, show ways to work together towards common goals, and tell a bigger story by unpacking the systemic, social, and structural forces on all sides of gun violence.

CENTER STORIES ABOUT COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS AND OTHER OVERLOOKED STORIES

Advocates emphasized the need for more films highlighting community-based approaches and other solutions to gun violence. Political leaders and the general public often don't know about or don't believe in the effectiveness of community-based violence prevention programs, so they rely on traditional methods of policing and enforcement. Films can make an impact in changing people's attitudes and help win support for community-based programs, which have been significantly underfunded (*The Interrupters*, *Charm City*, and *QUEST* are examples of how this can work).

Many GVP advocates also hoped for more documentaries on the leading cause of death by gun violence: suicide.



EMBRACE COMPLEXITY AND REFRAME WHAT WE CATEGORIZE AS A GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION FILM

Documentaries have the power to break down silos within movements — often by holding two competing truths within the same film. While care is needed to avoid perpetuating stereotypes about violence in BIPOC communities, these stories must still be told in order to address the causes and solutions for gun violence. Filmmakers and organizations alike stressed a need and desire for films that move beyond narratives about mass shootings. It is crucial, they said, to see stories that delve deeper into history and systemic issues. This is an invitation for funders to embrace complexity and reframe what people normally categorize as a gun violence prevention film.



Us Kids

INCLUDE SUBJECT AREA EXPERTS IN YOUR FUNDING DECISIONS AND BE AWARE OF BIASES AND BLINDSPOTS

While finding funding is frequently cited as a challenge in any type of documentary filmmaking, filmmakers pointed to unique hurdles and perceived biases they faced in making gun violence films specifically. Multiple filmmakers spoke of difficulties finding funding for films centered on BIPOC experiences with gun violence. Care is needed to avoid perpetuating stereotypes about violence in BIPOC communities. These stories must be told authentically, with attention to nuance, showing the causes and solutions for gun violence in order to engage affected communities. Funders should consider partnering with subject area experts with a connection to the affected communities to better understand the obstacles in telling and funding these stories.

Some filmmakers felt perceived pressure from funders to have a clear message and agenda before starting production, which often conflicted with their filmmaking approach. Early input from GVP partners can help shape the story and be a part of the story development and research process. At the same time, funders should strive to embrace a multiplicity of messages and a variety of approaches to impact campaigns.

ENGAGE DIFFERENT AUDIENCES WITH FILMS

Advocates observed that many gun violence films seem to be intended for politically moderate, white audiences. They encouraged more storytelling for specific audiences, including communities of color impacted by gun violence; conservative, faith-based, and rural audiences; and progressives who don't prioritize GVP despite its intersectionality with their agendas.

TAKE CARE WITH POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC STORY ELEMENTS

Advocates and community leaders identified certain storylines as potentially problematic, or even harmful, if not told in the right way. They stressed the importance of involving affected communities in the full creative process if film makers decide to pursue these types of stories. Potentially problematic elements include:

- ❖ Racial stereotypes when portraying gun violence
- ❖ Overemphasis on sadness, loss and gratuitous scenes of violence
- ❖ Scapegoating mental illness for gun violence
- ❖ Disproportionate emphasis on mass shootings

CONSIDER THE ROLE OF FILMS IN NARRATIVE CHANGE AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Many movement funders have questions about what role films can play in their overall funding strategies.

GVP-oriented funders may not fund films about GVP due to a lack of familiarity with the film industry, difficulty quantifying impact compared to other strategies, and a tradition of funding journalism rather than documentaries or other storytelling forms. However, documentaries can tell a fuller story by unpacking the systemic, social, and structural forces leading up to the point of a violent act, as well as the full range of effective violence prevention strategies.

A growing body of research shows that documentary film can shift cultural narratives, break political gridlocks, and impact short-term and long-term movement goals:

- ❖ [Social Justice Documentary: Designing For Impact](#) [Center for Media & Social Impact](#)
- ❖ [Documentary Impact: Social Change Through Storytelling](#) [Inspirit Foundation](#)
- ❖ [The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit](#) [Doc Society](#)

Collaboration between movement funders, activists, film makers, and social science researchers could be very helpful in furthering this work.

START PLANNING AND PARTNERING FOR IMPACT EARLY AND MEASURE YOUR IMPACT

If film makers want to prioritize impact and engagement, they are encouraged to add an impact producer to their team during the production of the project. They can begin the work of partnership development and creating the informed impact strategy often needed to secure funding. Impact producers, in coordination with key partners and advisors, can begin developing goals for the campaign and put strategies in place to both achieve these goals and measure the film's impact.

When designing the film’s impact campaign, it is important to have honest conversations with organizations working in the gun violence space who can both use the film as a tool in their work and promote the film to their networks. GVP organizations can bring their expertise to the table as a part of a film’s impact campaign. The campaign ultimately benefits from advocacy organizations being involved from the very beginning. In addition to helping with planning the campaign, organizations can assist in identifying partners, supporting theatrical engagement and community events, and developing resources and toolkits to accompany the film. It is always appropriate for GVP organizations to discuss potential compensation for providing their time and expertise when supporting film’s impact campaigns.

Community organizations in particular expressed that too often they are expected to assist with community events or other engagement activities without being consulted on how these may or may not align with their mission and goals.



Filmmakers and impact producers should make sure that the partnership is collaborative and mutually beneficial, and that the realities of local organizations are respected. The impact campaign should honor and elevate these organizations while simultaneously moving the campaign toward its impact goals. It’s important to communicate about expectations early in the relationship and follow through on communication. Filmmakers and impact producers should engage partner organizations like the experts they are. When possible, consider building compensation for partner organizations’ efforts into the budget of impact campaigns.

While all impact campaigns should be specific to community partners’ needs and the film’s specific goals, there are a number of metrics that can be used to gauge the film’s reach, visibility, and impact, including attitude and behavior changes. This can be done through host and audience surveys, curated panels and events, social media feedback, and monitoring of resource use. There are several guides to measuring media impact that can be helpful to funders in the suggested reading section below.



PROVIDE APPROPRIATE SUPPORT FOR FILM PARTICIPANTS AND FILM TEAM

Filmmakers should be clear about potentially retraumatizing aspects of the film making process and the film's release. Funders and film makers should consider how to provide support to both film crews and film participants. Is it possible to provide access to mental health care at key moments during the production and campaign? Filmmakers should make sure that film participants are properly prepared for what it will mean to have a film be shown widely. If they are going to be a part of an impact campaign, it's helpful to discuss explicitly what their involvement will look like and establish ground rules for screenings with external partners. For example, the team could establish a rule that participants are not to be put in the position of having to watch the film, or excerpts from it, during a public event.

Filmmakers also need to address questions around compensation for participants and the exploitation of victims of violence. This should be tackled early in the planning process and built into production and impact budgets.

EMPOWER BIPOC FILM TEAMS AND PARTICIPANTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCES

Filmmakers spoke about systemic racism within the documentary community. For decades, white, often privileged film makers have built careers on telling stories and exploring issues that affect communities of color. It's crucial that funders and gatekeepers interrogate who's telling the story. The goal should be to empower, support, and uplift people from communities affected by gun violence and promote solutions that come from within these communities.

SUGGESTED READING

- ❖ [The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit](#) [Doc Society](#)
- ❖ [Documentaries on a Mission: How Nonprofits Are Making Movies for Public Engagement](#) [Center for Media and Social Impact](#)
- ❖ [Prenups for Partners](#) [Active Voice Lab](#)
- ❖ [Understanding Distribution and Audience Engagement](#) [The Fledgling Fund](#)
- ❖ [Social Justice Documentary: Designing for Impact](#) [Center for Media and Social Impact](#)
- ❖ [Response to the Impact Measurement Debate](#) [The Fledgling Fund](#)
- ❖ [Philip Napoli, "Media Impact Assessment and Beyond"](#) [MIT Comparative Media Studies](#)
- ❖ [Measuring Impact: Just How Does Film Drive Change?](#) by Beadie Finzi [DocSociety](#)
- ❖ [Assessing the Social Impact of Issues-Focused Documentaries: Research Methods and Future Considerations](#) [Center for Media and Social Impact](#)
- ❖ [The Media Impact Project](#) [The Norman Lear Center, USC](#)
- ❖ [*The Interrupters* Impact Case Study](#) [Doc Society](#)
- ❖ [*The Armor of Light* Impact Report](#)
- ❖ [QUEST: Discussion Guide](#) [POV](#)
- ❖ [*Charm City* Pilot Report](#)
- ❖ [The Fledgling Fund Impact Workbook](#)
- ❖ [Case studies, The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit](#) [Doc Society](#)
- ❖ [List of media resources](#) [Learning for Action](#)

HOW WE GOT HERE

GUN VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

The gun is intrinsic to the United States' history, culture, and system of government. While the Second Amendment may be the most widely known and most contested gun policy in the United States, there has been a long history of policymaking to determine who can have guns, what kinds of guns they can possess, and how they can use them. There have routinely been racial aspects to these policies. The first gun control law was passed in 1640 and prohibited Black people from owning guns.⁴

Guns were used to control enslaved and free Black Americans before and during the Civil War. Guns were also prominent in the story of western expansionism, or "manifest destiny." They were central to the killing and removal of Indigenous people to make room for white settlers and to encourage the expansion of slavery into the new territories. In the years leading up to the Civil War, views on gun ownership often differed between residents of Northern states and Southern states. As noted in *The Atlantic*, "Slavery, honor, and their associated violence spawned a unique weapons culture [in the Southern states]. One of its defining features was a permissive view of white citizens' right to carry weapons in public." In Southern states, guns were used routinely by white men in duels, and against slaves and abolitionists. It is revealing that modern day Supreme Court rulings in favor of gun rights have relied on precedents set by the opinions of pro-life judges from the Southern states before the Civil War.⁶



After the Civil War, and the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1866 (ratified in 1868), Black Americans were able to acquire guns as an inalienable right as U.S. citizens, and use them for protection against racial violence. In an 1892 essay, the anti-lynching activist and journalist Ida B. Wells Barnett argued that "a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every Black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give." During this period, many white communities took action against Black Americans' access to guns. In his 2014 book *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms*, Fordham University law professor Nicholas Johnson writes, "Whether as police forces, private militias, or terrorist night riders, ex-Confederates pursued a ruthless campaign of political violence to disarm and disenfranchise blacks."⁹

⁴ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/07/second-amendment-was-always-intended-to-protect-white-people/>

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-origins-of-public-carry-jurisprudence-in-the-19th-century/407809/>

⁶ <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/features/army-nationalism-and-public-carry>

⁷ *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* by Ida B. Wells Barnett (1892, subsequently reprinted in 1893-1894).

Available on Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm>

⁸ Johnson, Nicholas. *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (2014)

⁹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/07/second-amendment-was-always-intended-to-protect-white-people/>



Newtown

Over the last century, high-profile gun violence events, usually affecting white victims, have led to bursts of advocacy and policymaking. Following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Gun Control Act of 1968 limited gun sales. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1994 was passed more than a decade after the shooting of President Ronald Reagan and his press secretary James Brady, for whom it was named. The legislation mandated five-day waiting periods and background checks for gun sales. At the same time, an assault weapons ban was enacted, which ten years later was allowed to expire by Congress. In 2010, President Obama tried and failed to pass significant gun safety laws after mass shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, and Aurora, Colorado.

The 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, inspired a national wave of activism. The Black Lives Matter movement pushed for major reforms of the justice system, including stricter gun policies for police and the public. In 2018, the Parkland school shooting mobilized a younger coalition of activists who focused on state-level gun policy reforms. In 2020, the fatal shooting of Breonna Taylor once again focused national attention on police gun violence and how it conflicts with the right to self-defense. As with similar high-profile gun incidents, the National Rifle Association (NRA), the gun rights advocacy organization with an overwhelmingly white membership, remained conspicuously silent in defending the rights of gun owners who are people of color.

The NRA's feared lobbying, legal, and marketing strategies have routinely overwhelmed gun violence prevention efforts for decades, although recent legal problems have hampered its efforts somewhat.¹⁰ The NRA has secured hundreds of legislative victories at the state level, thwarted federal gun safety policies, and won judicial victories all the way up to the Supreme Court.¹¹

The NRA's central message can be summed up as, "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun."¹² This mantra has been repeated over and over as self-evident truth by political leaders and local activists alike. It is based on a fantasy, one created in part by decades of books and movies about lone heroes — almost always white men — who save the day by shooting faceless,

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/21/839999178/secret-cordings-reveals-nra-s-long-gambles-against-the-organization> 100 mill

¹¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/state-ways-to-try-gun-control-2013-4>

¹² <https://www.nrablog.com/articles/2016/7/ago-od-guy-wit-ha-gun/>

¹³ <https://nation.time.com/2013/09/16/read-the-aim-the-science-behind-police-shooting-bystanders/>

¹⁴ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-in-america/>

nefarious attackers while dodging every bullet that comes their way. However, in real life, a 2008 RAND Corporation study of the New York Police Department found that the accuracy of trained police during gunfights averaged only 18 percent.¹³ And for the population as a whole, “access to a gun doubles the risk of death by homicide.”¹⁴ But this pro-gun mythology persists. “Even though we have all the facts on our side, it’s not a rational conversation any more,” said Robyn Thomas, executive director of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

“It’s this irrational fear-based argument. Without getting too existential, they believe, ‘The world is a scary place but if I have a gun, I’m going to be okay, I’m going to control the outcome of my experience.’ But that’s not how it works when there’s a gun involved.”

--Robyn Thomas,

Executive Director, Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

In recent years, the gun violence prevention movement has experienced a number of significant challenges. Due to the outsized influence of the NRA, conservative judges, and congressional gerrymandering, among other factors, it has become very difficult to pass meaningful legislation at the federal level. For years, efforts to pass popular federal laws, like universal background checks for gun purchases or reauthorizing the assault weapons ban, have been defeated by NRA-backed politicians. As one activist noted with frustration, “We’ve been talking about background checks for 15 years.” In addition, advocates say the federal agencies responsible for regulating guns or studying the impact of gun violence are limited by political pressure and legislation.

Advocates have turned to state and local governments with more success. In the first five months after the 2018 Parkland shooting, 55 new gun control laws were passed in 26 states.¹⁵ However, the NRA and other gun rights activists have also won significant victories at the local and state levels, through policies like “Stand Your Ground,” which has expanded to about half of the states.¹⁶ There are significant differences in state gun violence rates as a result, due in part to the patchwork of state laws on background checks, red flag laws, and gun permitting rules.

Advocates have also successfully pushed businesses to take responsibility for the roles they play in profiting from and enabling gun violence. This has led to changes to reduce access to guns by major corporations like Walmart.¹⁷ However, the growth of online gun sales, including sales of ghost guns (guns assembled at home from parts purchased separately, making them untraceable), presents new challenges.

Many GVP activists spoke of the evolving racial dynamics within their movement: As mentioned previously, national activism around restricting access to guns has traditionally been led by white people and has often focused on shooting incidents involving white victims. These groups tend to have more funding and recognition. Efforts to prevent and de-escalate community violence have primarily been led

¹⁵ <https://giffords.org/press-release/2018/07/midyear-trendwatch/>

¹⁶ <https://criminal.fidlaw.com/criminal-articles/states-that-ave-stand-your-ground-laws.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/03/walmart-plans-to-dramatically-step-back-to-mgun-sales-after-orri-fshootings.html>

by people of color in communities of color. These groups tend to have less funding and little recognition outside of their local communities.

Also, these groups approach gun violence as part of a wider system of injustice and inequality — inequalities which have carried over into the GVP movement itself, as well as what stories are told about it. However, efforts are being made to change this.

“The solutions that were being pushed and the policy that was being pushed [by national GVP groups] was really focused on mass shootings. It was not focused on gun violence as a holistic issue, and the leaders who were advocating weren’t advocating for the folks who have been impacted the most [by gun violence].”

**--Greg Jackson,
Executive Director, Community Justice Action Fund**

More recently, there has been increased collaboration among some of these groups, particularly around promoting public health approaches to gun violence, although disparities and tensions remain. “We are trying to shift the narrative around what gun violence is — and then really advancing policies to address the crisis as a public health crisis, and not necessarily a hardware concern,” said Jackson of the Community Justice Action Fund. There has also been more collaboration between national GVP groups and the Black Lives Matter movement, after some initial resistance to the idea that police violence is “just as much a problem that we, as a gun violence prevention community, should be prioritizing as any other kind of gun violence,” said Chelsea Parsons, vice president of gun violence prevention at the Center for American Progress. As Robyn Thomas, executive director of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, noted, “There is rising gun violence in a lot of cities where there’s police brutality.” This has been a challenge to some GVP coalitions, which have long counted on city police chiefs as key allies in efforts to reduce access to guns.

In the face of these changes and challenges, advocates say it is important to pursue a range of solutions. “There are national and legislative solutions, cultural and community-based solutions, and behavioral change like using gun safes and locks. It’s at every level,” said Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety. “People tend to think it’s background checks or nothing — and while that particular law is crucial to reducing gun violence, there are many other initiatives that also make a difference.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ Gun policies and culture in the United States have **usually been biased against communities of color**.
- ❖ It has become very difficult to pass meaningful legislation at the federal level, so **advocates have turned to state and local governments with more success**.
- ❖ **National activism around restricting access to guns has primarily been led by white people and often tied to shooting incidents involving white victims**. These groups tend to have more funding and recognition. Efforts to prevent and deescalate community violence have primarily been led by people of color in communities. Efforts at broader collaboration are growing.
- ❖ Advocates say it is important to **pursue a range of solutions**, including both gun safety policies and violence prevention strategies.

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Reframing the Gun Debate](#) | Stanford Social Innovation Review
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EFFECTIVE IMPACT STRATEGIES USED BY GUN VIOLENCE-RELATED FILMS

For decades, documentary films have told stories about communities affected by gun violence and the systems that promote and profit from gun culture. Some of these have had significant impact at the local and national levels; however, this impact is not always well-known. We spoke to a diverse group of filmmakers and impact producers about their experiences and how their films made a difference.

Below are examples of strategies that filmmakers and impact producers used with past films that were particularly effective in achieving their impact goals within their broader impact plans.



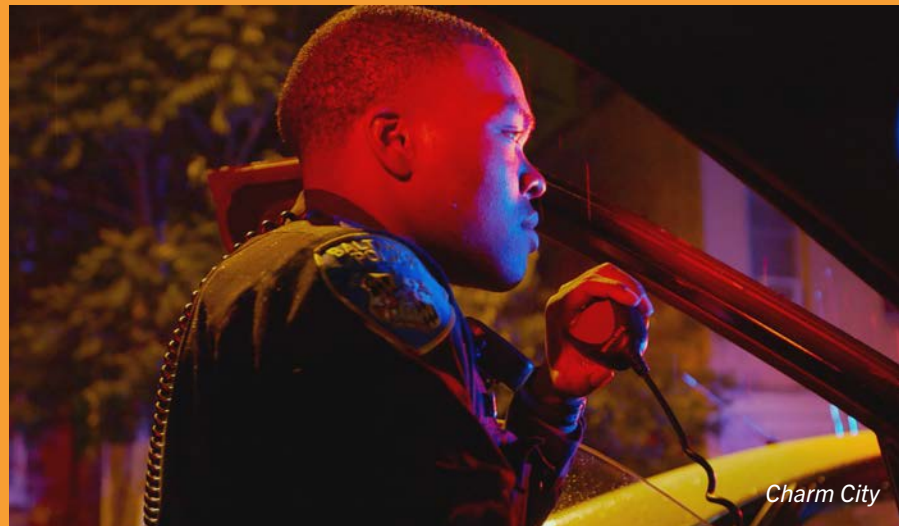
BUILDING LOCAL COALITIONS



Filmmaker **Marilyn Ness** said *Charm City*¹⁸ was able to meaningfully shift attitudes about gun violence in Baltimore through local coalition building, “exceeding expectations by many, many folds.” Progressive Councilman Brandon Scott, who was featured in the film, was recently elected as mayor. According to Ness, *Charm City* helped shift the views of many white voters in the Democratic primary. These voters “likely would have previously voted for certain candidates they had always voted for,” but after watching the film, many voted instead for the more progressive Scott. Part of the efficacy of *Charm City* was linked to people’s “motivation” for tackling gun violence in Baltimore City.

Ness emphasized that the threat of gun violence concerns both white and Black communities in the city. “Baltimoreans understand that a distrust of police results in more violence. And more violence requires police interventions, which further strengthens the distrust of the police,” she said. Ness felt “incredibly successful beyond [their] wildest expectations in engaging the police.”

***Charm City* is now mandatory viewing for every Baltimore police officer as a part of their training. Monique Brown who in the film wrestled with being a Black woman and a police officer, has been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and has been put in charge of all police-community relations and the SWAT.**



The film also featured Safe Streets, an evidence-based public health program focused on reducing gun violence in youth. Safe Streets’ participation in the film’s impact campaign helped strengthen their position as an effective alternative to police interventions and helped frame gun violence as a public health problem, also a tenet of Brandon Scott’s mayoral campaign. The program was moved from the Department of Health to City Hall and became a mayoral initiative. Ness noted that the partnership with Safe Streets increased their locations across the city and exposed citizens to a “community led solution to gun violence.”

¹⁸ <https://www.charmcitydoc.com/aboutfilm>

My main motivation to make the film was to explore what's not working between police and citizens. I understood that there was a divide that people couldn't cross. You were either Black or blue and you couldn't be both. I thought there's no way to have productive civic engagement if people can't speak to one another. With the film, I wanted to serve two audiences that might perhaps not otherwise speak.

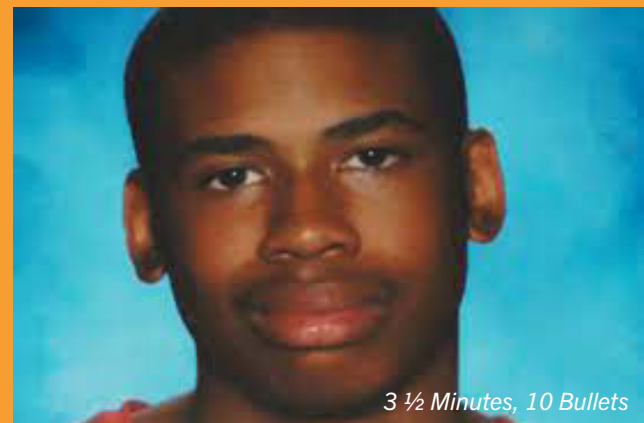
The idea was that you would see the side you believed in reflected honestly and then you would have to sit with the other side that you didn't think you believed in. The whole goal was just opening a window on a view you don't know, and it seems to be very successful in that regard when we measured the data. The data did seem to show the film does function that way. People can see themselves and then begin to glimpse what it means to be the other side.

EMPOWER NATIONAL MOVEMENTS



According to impact producer **Su Patel**, the film *3 ½ Minutes, 10 Bullets*¹⁹ supported national movement building in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter movement that was emerging in Ferguson at the time. Patel was brought on while the film was still in the edit phase to think through partnerships, this was before Michael Brown was killed. The film engaged evangelical and other faith communities, which Patel said were "incredibly supportive, engaged, and involved and wanting to learn more." However, Patel stressed that the "real work" to be done was in the white community, something the film did in partnership with the social justice organization PICO Network (now Faith in Action), who "from the get-go recognized the value in the film." Patel said PICO Network was "very involved in Ferguson, and so we did a lot of movement building with them. We were working with them to try and bring on white evangelical partners to do implicit bias work in their community."

Patel also highlighted a successful partnership with the American Bar Association, which used the film for regional education on Stand Your Ground laws.



¹⁹ <https://www.hbo.com/documentaries/3-1-2-minutes-10-bullets/about>

REFRAMING THE GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION CONVERSATION TO CENTER COMMUNITIES OF COLOR, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERED SOLUTIONS

Filmmaker **Sabrina Schmidt Gordon**, who produced *QUEST*²⁰ and also served as impact producer, stressed the importance of reframing the conversation around gun violence prevention to include communities of color, restorative justice and community empowered solutions. This is something she aimed to do with the film *QUEST* by working with Everytown and their Moms Demand Action network. They held talkbacks and information stations during the film's theatrical run.



Everytown recognized the opportunity the film presented to reframe the conversation around gun violence in communities like North Philly, and that a national commitment to gun violence prevention is incomplete without an intersectional framework that includes communities of color," said Gordon.



They are planning public and in-home hosted screenings with every one of their local chapters around the country, and will be discussing other initiatives to leverage the Rainey's story, including congressional and policymaker screenings, civic tech projects, action items, and more.

²⁰ <http://questdocumentary.com/>



REACHING CONSERVATIVE AUDIENCES

*The Armor of Light*²¹ was developed to reach pro-life, evangelical Christians. Impact producer **Jamie Dobie** said the film team was less concerned about audience numbers than about reaching the right audience with the specific goal of impacting how they thought about the issue of gun violence. According to Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety, this helped build strong partnerships because the narrative [was] well focused.

The film team did not try to take on the entire issue of gun safety; they really knew their audience and understood their audience before making the film. That way, they were able to have a clear plan and understand the role a nonprofit partner could play in that plan.²²



The Armor of Light

The Armor of Light was released around the time that Everytown was beginning to grow its grassroots network, particularly through the Moms Demand Action chapters. “We were finally in every state, and we could host advocacy days in red states, too,” said Howey. “*The Armor of Light* film was a tool for Moms Demand Action chapters in more conservative parts of the country. They could use that in their own personal organizing and activism and discussions with their families and religious communities. [The film was] another medium for discussion, and another way of engaging our grassroots beyond attending an advocacy day or calling your legislators or other more traditional political actions.”

²¹ <https://www.armoroflightfilm.com/>

²² <https://impactguide.org/static/library/TheInterrupters.pdf>

MOTIVATING POLICYMAKERS TO SUPPORT VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Strategic screenings of *The Interrupters*²² (Dir. Steve James) helped raise awareness of and build support for violence intervention programs in cities across the country, including Chicago where the film takes place. After Chicago Mayor Emanuel attended a screening of *The Interrupters*, his office committed \$1 million in funding for the program. The Chicago Sun-Times reported: “*The Interrupters*...caught Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s attention. Worried about the city’s rising tide of bloodshed, Emanuel was impressed with CeaseFire’s strategy of sending experts into the streets to mediate gang conflicts and stop shootings.



The Interrupters



...The mayor decided to put his police superintendent, Garry McCarthy, and CeaseFire founder Gary Slutkin in the same room a few months ago to discuss a possible partnership.”

A screening for the United States Conference of Mayors resulted in the conference adopting a resolution that “affirm[ed] its support for public health approaches to violence prevention as pioneered by the CeaseFire health approach.”²³

Other mayors across the country attended screenings as well. While the program in Chicago has faced ongoing challenges and funding cuts, filmmaker **Steve James** noted that “the interest generated by the film helped get similar programs jumpstarted in a lot more cities.”

²³ <https://impactguide.org/static/library/TheInterrupters.pdf>

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGING GATEKEEPERS, FILM PARTICIPANTS, AND AUDIENCES



3 ½ Minutes, 10 Bullets

ENGAGING FUNDERS, PROGRAMMERS, AND DISTRIBUTORS

The most cited challenge from filmmakers was finding production funding. While this is not an unusual problem, a number of concerns were raised specifically to stories about gun violence, particularly violence affecting communities of color. Similar concerns were raised about other gatekeeping processes, including festival programming and distribution systems.

Filmmakers suggested several reasons for why this disconnect may be happening:

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

Filmmakers expressed tension between their aim in setting out to make a truthful film and funders' ideas of what stories their films should tell. Filmmakers want to approach the topic of gun violence from varying angles; however, some filmmakers found that funders appeared less willing to back projects that were sympathetic to gun owners or police. This conflicts with some filmmakers' commitment to authentic storytelling, where directors are following characters and allowing stories to emerge naturally.

For funders, being able to tolerate different perspectives is important, said Peter Nicks, who directed *The Force*, so we don't get locked into a one-dimensional approach to gun violence. Some funders may struggle to support films that contain content that does not directly align with their mission. For example, several filmmakers spoke of a reluctance from some funders to get behind work that could portray the police in a more complex or even a positive light. Many filmmakers do not want to approach a project with a biased or predetermined idea of how law enforcement or other groups should be portrayed; doing so, Nicks says, may actually prevent them from uncovering what is happening in a community. Nicks described how one funder almost pulled funding for his film *The Force* because they felt the police were cast in too positive a light. Marilyn Ness similarly described some funders' lack of interest in funding a film that might show police in a complex or positive way. She said: "Our liberal world was really afraid of it. They just could not bear the thought of someone trying to humanize the police and then in the end, I think they all saw what I did and were like, 'Oh yeah, it did work.'"



Additionally, a one-sided, anti-gun perspective, while it may be the perspective of the filmmaker, may restrict a film from engaging with the perspectives which are necessary to understand these problems and potential solutions.

RACIAL BIAS AND LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE GATEKEEPING SYSTEM

Multiple film makers spoke of hitting a wall when it came to finding funding for films centered on the experiences of communities of color with gun violence. They suggested this could be a result of gatekeepers mostly being from white communities not affected by gun violence, underlying systemic racism, and/or racial anxiety about projects that highlight gun violence in communities of color for fear of perpetuating stereotypes. “You know, I’m really pissed and I’m angry and hurt by what I believe is the woeful, intentional denial of the devastating loss of Black bodies that is happening every day in the Black community that is really related to racial inequity and systemic racism that nobody is talking about,” said Marco Williams, the director of *Murders that Matter*. “And nobody is really funding these films.”

Impact producer Su Patel had a similar experience looking for funding for *3 ½ Minutes Ten Bullets* (dir. Marc Silver). She described reaching out to potential funders from both GVP organizations and racial justice organizations and receiving funding solely from the latter.



Sabrina Schmidt Gordon, producer of *QUEST* (dir. Jonathan Olshefski), struggled to get impact funders and GVP organizations to see her film as a “gun violence film” because it centered around the day-to-day experiences of a Black family where gun violence contributed one element to the overall story. “People were wishy-washy, for lack of a better word, around fully embracing *QUEST* as a gun violence film,” she said. “Even people who wanted to support our engagement never really wanted to deal with the gun violence piece of the story.” It was surprising to me that it was a little bit of a hard sell for gun violence prevention funders.”

Some funding organizations have become more aware of how racial bias affects their efforts, but there is a lot of work to do. Amber Goodwin, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund, recounted a conversation with a group of white funders in which she was asked in a blunt manner how to “get white people to care about Black people” — a question she felt was up to the white funders to answer rather than herself, as a Black woman.

Some film makers suggested there may be resistance from white funders to supporting films that might appear to perpetuate stereotypes of violence in BIPOC communities. Sabrina Schmidt Gordon found this tension in developing the impact campaign for *QUEST*. “I found generally a lot of people just shied away almost as if they would be playing into a stereotype if they were to support [a film campaign on] gun violence,” she said.

“But the fact of the matter is, this young girl that we’re all rooting for, PJ, was impacted by *gun violence*. I hoped to find ways to address this that could be holistic and meaningful and not focused on vilifying the community, but really amplifying all of the wonderful things about that community that people tend to forget.”

--Sabrina Schmidt Gordon,
Producer and Impact Producer, *QUEST*

She believed the film could have had an even greater impact in affected BIPOC communities if the project had received more funding and more interest from GVP funders. “I think we finally had a film that was able to force people to really look at communities’ response to gun violence differently,” she said. “But I feel like that potential is still waiting to be realized.”



Marco Williams added that the types of films about gun violence that often gain traction nationally have been made about mass shooting events that largely occurred outside of the Black community. “I believe that there’s a reason,” said Williams. “That reason is that Black bodies don’t matter, and they’ve only suddenly mattered to the wider population in the world [recently].” He stressed that the gun violence happening in Black communities is equally important despite the fact that it hasn’t received as much attention. Williams also expressed his frustration at a general lack of interest or enthusiasm from funders for stories centered on Black communities. He said he had a much harder time finding funding for stories about gun violence and Black communities than he had for previous films.

Filmmakers and advocates also noted hopeful moments of cultural shift in the last decade, including how some groups have recently been more open to funding projects centered on gun violence in Black communities and more eager to engage with movement building.

GATEKEEPER DESENSITIZATION

Another struggle that seems to clog the pathway for more films about gun violence is convincing gatekeepers, including media buyers and festival or other programmers, that there is a need for more stories on these topics, not fewer. Some film makers felt there was a sense of desensitization and fatigue toward stories about gun violence among individuals who have programming and purchasing power. A number of film makers are ready to bring new voices to this subject but felt that some gatekeepers weren’t open to this. Many gatekeepers in the documentary industry still rank personal narrative as the gold standard of storytelling. However, many film makers spoke of the need to tell a fuller story that

incorporates history, systemic violence and racism. Filmmakers are looking for opportunities to step away from individual narratives and look at community histories and systems instead.

DIVERSE APPROACHES TO IMPACT AND STORYTELLING

In our conversations with filmmakers about impact campaigns, some expressed anxiety over the perception that a strong impact campaign concept is necessary in order to secure production funding; this can put undue pressure on filmmakers to conceptualize a film's impact potential before the project has been fully developed.

Producer Jameka Autry said, "We're trying to fit everything into this grant bubble. There's a question on every grant application about the impact campaign. But some films don't have an impact campaign, just good storytelling, and for that to be the prerequisite on grant applications disqualifies you from a lot of funding off the bat."

Todd Chandler, the director of *Bulletproof*, explained that, to him, the impact potential of a film is secondary to actually telling the story, or that it may be something a director only feels comfortable addressing after the film is finished. Chandler feels that focusing too much on an impact campaign too early may give a film too strong of an agenda or result in a heavy-handed message.


At the same time, several GVP leaders raised concerns that filmmakers keep coming to them with the same kinds of film plots, based on personal observations that often don't represent the larger realities of gun violence. GVP leaders encouraged filmmakers to share their early concepts with those on the frontlines as early as possible, engaging them as story advisors and taking their feedback into consideration.

When getting a project off the ground, filmmakers and funders may be approaching this process from different starting points and with different priorities, but they share similar end goals: to inform and engage audiences. Filmmakers who are interested in impact can and should engage with GVP issue experts early in their process. At the same time, funders should be open to multiplicity of messages and the intersectionality of issues, ultimately expanding the definition of what constitutes a film about gun violence and how impact campaigns can support them.

ISSUE FUNDERS' LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH FILMS

There is a small but growing number of GVP issue funders who also fund films related to their issue areas. For these funders, it can be helpful when filmmakers have thought through the impact potential in tandem with the production of the film. For instance, Lindsay Firestone from Bloomberg Philanthropies explained, "For impact projects, I am most impressed when filmmakers are thinking about impact from the start and come to us with a really thoughtful strategy." She asks filmmakers, "Tell us why your story needs to be a film. Tell us why this story in particular needs to be told." These are easy questions to answer for the right project.

There was a general consensus that few GVP issue funders have funded films in the past. Funders' explanations for this included a lack of familiarity with the world of documentary film, difficulty quantifying impact of films compared to other strategies, and a tradition of funding journalism rather than documentaries. Funders expressed their concerns about how a film's message would communicate to the specific audiences they want to engage.



Some funders said that they focus largely on policy and systemic change through research and lobbying, and didn't see a role for films or culture change strategies in their mission. They said they feel that it's more effective to work in concert with journalism and news sites with large reader bases, since films seem more unpredictable.

Documentary films about pressing societal issues are generally supported by film funders, who tend to prefer the approach of character-driven stories, said filmmaker Jameka Autry. She argues that this limits what kind of films can be made about issues like gun violence or economic justice. This could provide an opening for GVP issue funders to become more involved in supporting a wider range of stories.

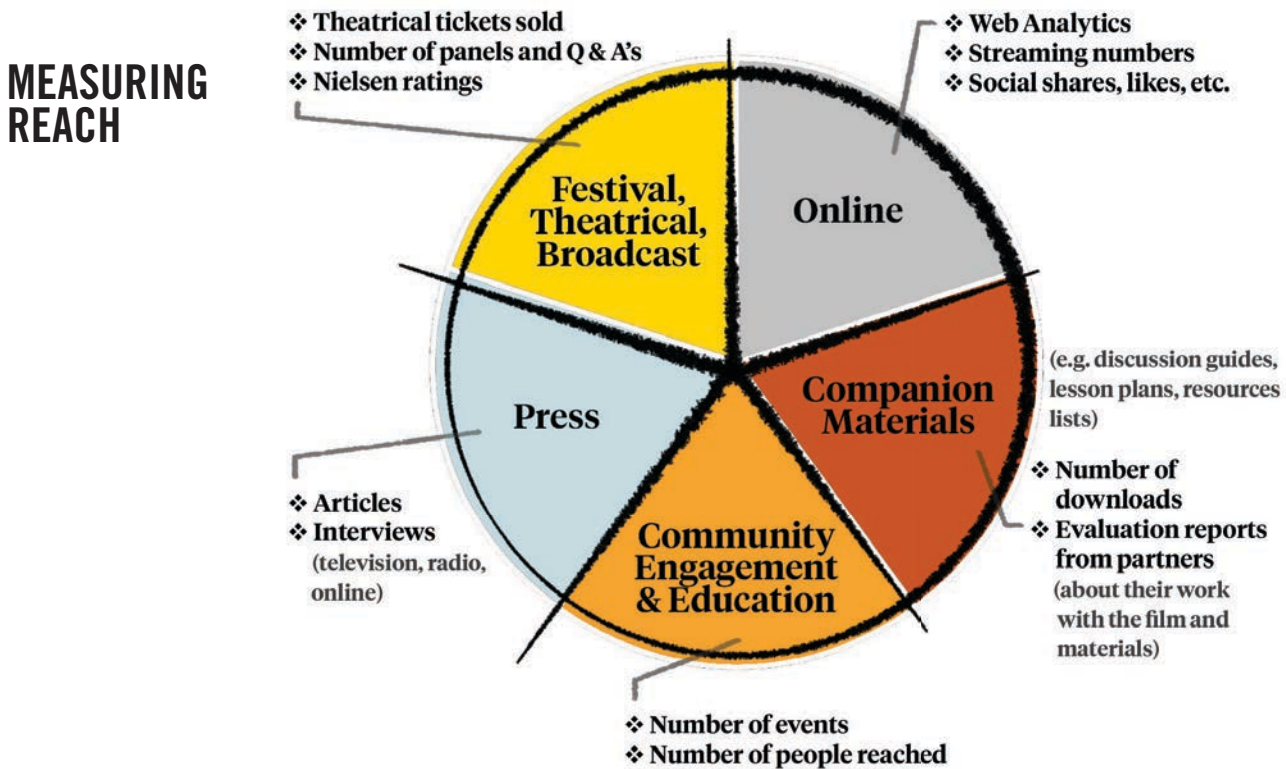
Issue funders found it helpful to learn about how past documentaries have had significant impact, as well as the social science research that has been done on the impacts of documentary films. There is clearly an opportunity to raise awareness among issue funders about narrative potential and the components of successful film impact campaigns.

Doc Society's Impact Field Guide has many helpful resources to help plan and measure the impact of film campaigns: <https://impactguide.org/>.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT MEASURING IMPACT

A number of funders did not feel confident about how to measure a film's impact, whether that be by setting attainable goals or accessing the actual reach and impact of the film's campaign. There has been much writing done regarding ways to approach impact measurement, including accounting for its limitations. Please see the reading list below for great resources to explore.

While all impact campaigns should be specific to community partners' needs and the film's specific goals, there are a number of metrics that can be used to gauge the film's reach, visibility, and impact:



MEASURING FEEDBACK: ATTITUDINAL/BEHAVIOR CHANGE

❖ **Qualitative and quantitative host surveys that ask partners about their experience**
 (goals for organizing screening, how participation advanced their work, and any outcomes or successes of note).

Community and Educational Events

❖ **Quantitative and qualitative feedback collected through audience surveys.**
 For example, the percentage of people who said they learned something new, or will share their views on a specific issue (such as background checks) with their representatives

❖ **Anecdotal feedback**
"I am so moved I will bring this issue up with our school board in the next meeting."

❖ **Reviews**
 (if they mention the issues, how they were affected by the film)

❖ **Online comments on social media, op-eds that reveal how people discuss the issue in the news**

❖ **Accomplishing specific program or policy goals**
 (for example, new funding for programs or training for staff)

Festival and Theatrical

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ A number of filmmaker makers found that funders appeared less willing to support projects seen as sympathetic to gun owners or police.
- ❖ Multiple filmmaker makers spoke of difficulties finding funding for films centered around BIPOC experiences with gun violence.
- ❖ While care is needed to avoid perpetuating stereotypes about violence in BIPOC communities, these stories must still be told in order to address the causes and solutions for gun violence.
- ❖ Some filmmakers feel pressure from funders to have a clear message and agenda before starting production, which often conflicts with their filmmaking approach.
- ❖ Even though many funders seem strongly motivated by the potential of filmmaker impact campaigns, filmmakers struggled to find funding for their impact campaigns.
- ❖ Gatekeepers may express fatigue with this issue but there is an opportunity to demonstrate that there is more storytelling needed in this space.
- ❖ GVP Funders may not fund films because of a lack of familiarity and expertise in the world of documentary film, difficulty quantifying impact compared to other strategies, and lastly a tradition of funding journalism rather than documentaries.

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- ❖ [Counteracting Extractive Storytelling In The American South And In Global Communities Of Color](#) IDA
- ❖ [Story Shift](#) Working Films
- ❖ [Beyond Inclusion](#) Ford Foundation
- ❖ [The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit](#)

ENGAGING FILM PARTICIPANTS

WHO TELLS WHOSE STORIES?

When you're telling the story of gun violence, the question is who is the author," said film maker Peter Nicks. "It's not just "What is the impact of this film?" but "What is the cultural impact of the process of making the film itself?" We need more people of color telling these stories and more people from these communities telling these stories."

These questions are being raised in the context of larger efforts to address historic racism in the documentary film industry, where generations of well-sourced, white-led film teams have made careers telling stories of marginalized communities of color. We saw this issue reflected in preparing this report, too. For example, while we interviewed a diverse group of film makers, a disproportionate number of the films with wide distribution and well-funded impact campaigns were made by white directors. This issue extends to funders and industry gatekeepers, as well as the GVP community.



When it comes to stories about gun violence, a film team's experiences with guns and gun violence should also be considered. With this in mind, funders can take steps to prioritize film makers who come from affected communities or who have personal experiences with gun culture and/or gun violence.

"We've been trained to believe that hiring just one person from a marginalized group you're making a film about is OK, and that this person will provide cover against criticism of misrepresentation or exploitation," said film maker Randall Dottin. "If you're telling a story about a marginalized group that you don't belong to, it's important to understand that you're engaging a whole community, and in order to prevent the story from having the gaze of an outsider, it's a good idea to populate your team with several people and not rely on one person to represent a whole community or culture. It would be a tremendous help to film makers and the stories they tell if funders could ask questions about how they plan to fill that gap if the producing team has too few people from the marginalized group populating the story."

There are a growing number of initiatives in the documentary film industry to train, recruit, and support more film makers of color, which can play a role in addressing some of these concerns. Funders and gatekeepers have roles to play as well, by being transparent about decision-making processes and by ensuring people from affected communities have significant input in these processes.

Greg Jackson, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund, also encouraged film teams to take steps to “uplift” individuals affected by gun violence through the film making process and related impact campaigns.

“...even the high-profile people of color who have been impacted by gun violence are not getting the same level of financial support or sponsorship [as white victims]... They’re being burdened and taken for granted.”

**--Greg Jackson,
Executive Director,
Community Justice Action Fund**



There are myriad ways that film teams can help empower marginalized voices in this space, including providing film production credits to affected individuals in their films and ensuring proper compensation for affected individuals speaking at film festivals and community screenings or advising on impact campaigns.

FOSTERING TRUST BETWEEN FILM TEAMS AND FILM PARTICIPANTS

In gaining access to film participants, many times film makers are walking into situations of significant trauma. If the situation is a mass shooting, parachute media coverage can make families wary of letting someone new in.

When trying to tell stories around community violence, filmmakers are often treading on scarred ground, where individuals and communities have been burned by inaccurate or damaging coverage.

It can be difficult to gain access to participants and maintain those relationships over time. Navigating film maker and participant relationships is at the core of discussions around equity and ethics in documentary film making. When your subject matter is another human being’s trauma, what are your responsibilities throughout production and distribution? Filmmakers, funders, and community advocates had some common recommendations for those pursuing any story related to gun violence.

PARTICIPANTS SHOULD HAVE AGENCY

“We had to win trust of the Interrupters that we followed and that took time,” said Steve James, director of *The Interrupters*. “A key to winning trust...was giving agency to the Interrupters around our filming. Making it clear that they held the cards.”



“They decided if we were there or not. If we were there and the mediation was going south because of us, or we were a distraction, and the Interrupter wanted us to leave, we left no questions asked.”

--Steve James,
Director, *The Interrupters*

Brad Lichtenstein describes a time when he canceled a planned shoot for *When Claude Got Shot* because a character didn't want to be filmed: “We were scheduled to do a followup interview and we had permission from the department of corrections, but we got there and he just looked so frightened. I said, “Nathan, are you okay? Are you not comfortable with us proceeding?” And I admit, I really wanted that interview. But he just looked overwhelmed and he said, “Maybe next week.” But that was it, we never got another scene or interview with him.”

FILMMAKERS SHOULD CLEARLY COMMUNICATE ABOUT USE OF VIOLENT FOOTAGE

It is essential that filmmakers communicate clearly with families of victims around using footage of shootings. While this may seem obvious, many organizations emphasized the need for filmmakers to slow down and make sure they are doing due diligence and make no assumptions.



One advocate relayed a story where a filmmaker invited the family of a victim to a screening without telling them that the footage of their family member's shooting would be shown. Beyond simply informing families that footage will be used, there should be an open discussion between filmmaker and family about why it is important to the filmmaker to include the footage. What goals will it achieve? How does it contribute to the success of the filmmaker?

It was recommended that filmmakers set aside time to do private screenings of the filmmaker with families prior to any public screenings. This is even more necessary if families are to be involved in any way with distribution or an impact campaign.

FUNDERS AND FILMMAKERS SHOULD CONSIDER OPTIONS FOR FAIRLY COMPENSATING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR EXPERTISE

There is a long-running debate about the ethics of compensating the participants in nonfiction films, which is particularly relevant to filmmakers about gun violence. "People need to be paid for their stories," said Amber Goodwin, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund. She noted that Black survivors of gun violence "who are doing the work get zero support. And I don't mean like they're not on magazine covers. They can't pay their bills; they don't have enough food."

Many documentary filmmakers consider their work part of the journalistic tradition, and so draw a line at paying sources or participants. But this does not make all the ethical questions go away. As Lisa Leeman wrote in *Documentary Magazine* years ago, "Who is to say that these people who open up their lives to us shouldn't be compensated in some way? But in what way, so that the filmmaker is not compromised?"²⁴

Filmmakers have found ways to share resources with filmmaker participants in a number of ways, including hiring participants as part of filmmaker impact campaigns or ensuring honorariums for speaking engagements about a filmmaker. It is important to discuss these things with participants and community partners, so that there is shared understanding of the process. It can be helpful to build subject compensation directly into the filmmaker impact budgets.

FUNDERS SHOULD OFFER SUPPORT FOR FILM TEAMS' AND PARTICIPANTS' MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Many filmmakers and advocates spoke of the mental health challenges they faced in making filmmaker about gun violence, as well as the potential for secondary trauma, and emphasized the importance of having strong mental health support for both filmmaker teams and for filmmaker participants. "Our staff was really undersourced in terms of mental health so I brought in a psychologist," said Brad Lichtenstein, who encouraged filmmaker makers to "plan for mental health."

²⁴ <https://www.documentary.org/feature/money-changes-everything-but-lets-considering-whether-documentaries-should-pay>

Since many film makers may not have mental health insurance, funders could consider providing mental health coverage for film teams dealing with traumatic topics. Filmmaker Sandy Salas said when she first started, “it was unheard of to ask funders for support for mental health care for film makers.” Later on however at a Firelight Media lab, film makers were encouraged to add mental health support into the budget for these types of films. “I can’t tell you how happy I am,” she said. “It’s hard.”

Salas said it also can be helpful for film makers to reach out for support and guidance to other film makers who had traumatic experiences in their films, too.

Filmmakers also need to take into account the trauma that their participants have gone through and how the process of filming as well as participating in film screenings later on, can retraumatize people. “In the last few months, one of our character’s friends was killed, another lost a brother, another kid was shot,” said film maker Peter Nicks. “The story of survival of gun violence is another burden that survivors and Black people continuously have to tell and people still choose not to understand or get,” warned Amber Goodwin, Executive Director of the Community Justice Action Fund.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ It can be difficult to have access to participants, and **maintain that relationship over time.**
- ❖ Participants need to have **agency and decision-making power about when to film.**
- ❖ Be clear about potentially **retraumatizing aspects** of the film making process and release.
- ❖ Filmmakers need to address questions around **compensation for participants** and the exploitation of victims of violence.
- ❖ Since many film makers may not have mental health insurance, **funders could consider providing mental health coverage** for film teams dealing with traumatic topics.
- ❖ Filmmakers also need to **consider the trauma experienced** by the film participants.

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Money Changes Everything? or Does It?: Considering Whether Documentaries Should Pay for Play](#) [ID A](#)
- ❖ [Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work](#) [Center for Media & Social Impact](#)
- ❖ [Who is Telling Whose Story, To Whom, and Why?](#) [ID A](#)
- ❖ [Whose Story?: Five Documentaries on \(Avoiding\) Extractive Filmmaking](#) [ID A](#)

ENGAGING AUDIENCES

Multiple interviewees felt that many gun violence films were made with white, politically moderate audiences in mind. Advocates and film makers highlighted several other audiences that film makers could seek to engage through their stories:

PROGRESSIVE AUDIENCES WHO DON'T PRIORITIZE THE ISSUE

While many gun violence films take pains to be nonpartisan, several GVP advocates identified a key audience as “progressives who think gun violence is important but have other priorities that come in line first,”



--Chelsea Parsons,

Vice President, Gun Violence Prevention at the Center for American Progress

Films can help mobilize these groups who agree with the principles but may not have done anything about it, taking them from passive interest to action, said Noelle Howey, Senior Director of Cultural Engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety. “People feel like it’s hopeless and will never get better. They need to see that some things are actually working like the differences between states with high and low gun violence because of state laws that make a huge difference. These progressives can include local elected leaders, like mayors, who advocates noted often are not aware of community based solutions.

Advocates argue that films have great potential to draw connections between gun violence and other problems, like housing, education, and health care. “Gun violence is an issue that has, historically, really been talked about in isolation,” said Parsons. “Part of that stems from the fact that the conversation is often driven by mass shootings as horrific, isolated incidents, but I think the advocacy space is, more and more, talking about and thinking about the issue in a more intersectional way. I think that there’s a lot of potential for there to be some really compelling storytelling along those lines.”

CONSERVATIVE, FAITH-BASED AND RURAL AUDIENCES

As *The Armor of Light* demonstrated, there is a strong audience among conservative faith communities for honest, challenging films on gun violence. Advocates repeatedly praised the film’s outreach campaign, but couldn’t name another film that has effectively followed up with similar audiences in the years since it was made.

Advocates also said there is a huge gap in films about gun violence. As noted elsewhere, two out of three gun deaths are by suicide, and white men are at particularly high risk. “But there’s almost no content about them,” said Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety. “That’s a hard audience to reach. These are men who, in many cases, felt connected to hunting culture and felt affinity for their firearms. Even NRA members are aware of this growing tragedy among their members, according to advocates.

And on other topics, gun owners have complicated views. “From my reading of poll data, [gun owners] support lots of different gun safety policies like background checks,” said Robyn Thomas, executive director of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. “It’s just not something they want to get in the mix with the NRA about. They’re not willing to speak out against the NRA, but they don’t agree with their positions. How do we give a voice to those people in a way that helps move the needle?” Filmmaker Kim Snyder said, “So many NRA guys came up after Newtown screenings and said, ‘You’re going to get to guys like me with this.’”

In these conversations, filmmakers expressed that progressive and conservative Americans may not necessarily need to be persuaded to support gun violence prevention as a concept; rather, the greater need lies in motivating them to step up, and in showing them how to take specific actions to help.



COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE

At the same time, advocates observed that many films about gun violence appear to overlook audiences from communities of color, which are so deeply impacted by gun violence. This can be done in part by commissioning more films for audiences of survivors and people directly impacted by gun violence, particularly in communities of color. Other advocates added that local leaders of color, like mayors, business leaders and police chiefs, may not be aware of how effective violence prevention and public health models can be for their communities because they only know about enforcement approaches.

NAVIGATING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL POLITICS OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION



Filmmakers, advocates and funders all told stories of navigating the internal politics of the GVP movement. While united in a common end goal of reducing gun violence, the movement, like most such movements, is continually grappling with significant divides related to power, approach and lived experience. Decades of personal and sometimes physical threats, as well as trauma from personal experience with gun violence, can heighten the tensions.

As Robyn Thomas, Executive Director of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, advised, “I think you have to start by knowing the field you’re walking into. You have to walk into it with a good grasp of who the players are, where their power lies, what the personality types you’re dealing with are, so you can navigate the best way to not step on toes but also not be bullied.” Filmmaker Peter Nicks added,

“When making films about gun violence, you need a team of good advisors. A team of rivals, who will push you and challenge you.”

Filmmaker Kym Snyder said, “There’s politics in every nonprofit space, and it’s really tricky. Some advocacy organizations understand that stories can be an engine that helps their cause, and some act like you need them more than they need you.” One advocate told of a filmmaker who got calls from powerful people in the GVP movement saying, “If you don’t put me in your movie, I will complain about your movie from the inside when you release it.”



Aligning too closely with national advocacy organizations can have disadvantages for filmmakers if the film “becomes instrumentalized and immediately closes itself off to a whole raft of communities, of viewers who are going to dismiss it because it’s associated with this particular organization that maybe has a set of politics or policies for which they’re advocating that people disagree with.”

--Todd Chandler,
Director, *Bulletproof*

As noted earlier, national GVP groups have been typically led mostly by white people and are often linked to high-profile shootings involving mostly white victims. At the local level, and often under the national radar, are many community-based violence prevention groups, which are often led by people of color from the communities. These groups often approach gun violence as part of a wider system of injustice and inequality.

Greg Jackson, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund, said, “The solutions that were being pushed and the policy that was being pushed [by national GVP groups] was really focused on mass shootings. It was not focused on gun violence as a holistic issue, and the leaders who were advocating weren’t advocating for the folks who have been impacted the most [by gun violence].”

As discussed elsewhere in this report, these dynamics also affect filmmaker relationships with funders, distributors, and other gatekeepers.

In addition to these internal politics, the gun advocacy space is one of the most high stakes, politically charged, and complex social issue spaces today. Even well-informed and well-intentioned storytelling efforts can go awry. Several advocacy leaders spoke of the fallout over the editing of a scene with gun rights advocates in the film *Under the Gun*. One advocate said this experience shows the importance of filmmakers being “exceedingly cautious when it comes to how you’re treating the material, to whom you’re talking, how you’re representing all of that. The stakes are very, very high in this space.”

Despite these political challenges, filmmakers can serve as catalysts when they get it right. As filmmaker Kim Snyder observed, “The thing the documentary space can do so well is break down silos within movements, so these different folks can come together around a story.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ While united in a common end goal of reducing gun violence, **the GVP movement, like most such social movements, is continually grappling with significant divides** related to power, identity, approach and lived experience.
- ❖ **National GVP groups have typically been led mostly by white people**, linked to high-profile shootings involving mostly white victims, and focused on gun policy making. At the local level, and **often under the national radar, are many community based violence prevention groups, which are often led by people of color from the communities**. These groups often approach gun violence as part of a wider system of injustice and inequality in their communities. However, there has been more collaboration recently.
- ❖ Documentaries have **the power to break down silos** within movements.
- ❖ **GVP politics are high stakes** and small errors can have wide repercussions.

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Policy Work | CJ Action Fund](#)
- ❖ [Open Letter From March For Our Lives](#)
- ❖ [The Racial Politics of Gun Control | CNN](#)
- ❖ [How The Gun Control Debate Ignores Black Lives | ProPublica](#)

STORY IDEAS FROM ADVOCATES AND COMMUNITIES

Advocates said there is a need for more storytelling on gun violence, but emphasized that filmmakers should listen to guidance from those on the frontlines and affected community members when choosing which types of stories to present.

Filmmakers could benefit from having conversations with advocates and community leaders in the early stages of developing their concepts — not necessarily about impact campaigns, but to better understand how the story they hope to tell would fit into the broader narratives and developments around gun violence. “I hear from people who seem to think they are making the first film about gun violence,” cautioned one advocate, who encouraged filmmakers to do a good landscape analysis early on.



EXPLAINING SYSTEMS OF VIOLENCE

For people of color directly impacted by gun violence and featured in many films, there is a cultural expectation of “resiliency” in the face of the crisis as they engage in community-based organizing. What can be overlooked is the entrenched system of institutional racism and socioeconomic disparities that can undercut and complicate their best efforts. For many community-based organizers, these systemic forms of discrimination and inequity complicate the work they’re doing; they must find a way to create and sustain effective solutions and alternatives within the very circumstances that are working against them, and in which gun violence thrives.

“It’s important [to show] the full picture of someone who committed a violent act — how they got there, how they were first traumatized — everything that happened to them first, before they got to that point,” said Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety.



“Most of the people who commit a violent act with the gun are a victim first and that’s often overlooked. So I think you’ve got to humanize both sides of the gun. This is a public health crisis.”

**--Amber Goodwin,
Founding Director, Community Justice Action Fund**

Documentaries can tell the fuller story by unpacking the systemic, social, and structural forces on both sides of the gun—such as:

- ❖ Discriminatory housing practices including redlining, lack of investment and effectiveness of institutions, services and infrastructures in communities affected by gun violence;
- ❖ Lack of trust in the institutions that serve the community, including law enforcement, local government and government services;
- ❖ High unemployment in communities impacted by gun violence;
- ❖ Gentrification and resulting overpolicing;
- ❖ Economic impact of ongoing gun violence on communities.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and intensified social and racial inequities in the United States, and gun violence is no exception: Communities of color are experiencing the deadly effects of both health crises.²⁵ From March to May 2020, the pandemic spurred an increase in gun sales at a time when school-age children were at home (perhaps alone). COVID-related social isolation, quarantine measures and job losses contributed to an increase in domestic abuse and intimate partner violence worldwide.²⁶ There was a slightly higher rate of suicide calls compared to previous years.²⁷ These trends raise concerns given the sharp increase in gun sales during the same time.

Exploring gun violence as a public health crisis, through a fully socioeconomic framework, is imperative. Telling the full story can lead to building stronger and more effective strategies for community-based alternatives and other solutions.

GUNS AND SUICIDE IN THE U.S.



Nearly two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides, and 74 percent of these are white men.²⁸ But according to a recent national poll, only about one in four Americans knew that the leading cause of gun deaths is suicide.

The public perception is likely warped by a general stigma around open discussion of mental health issues, which is closely tied to suicide, argues Sam Meyerson in the Harvard Political Review. However, if activists hope to significantly reduce gun violence in American society, they must overcome this culture of silence and consider the close link between access to guns and suicide.²⁹

These misperceptions may be unintentionally magnified by the GVP community itself, which advocates say is made up mostly of people affected by mass shootings or community violence. Chelsea Parsons, vice president of gun violence prevention policy at the Center for American Progress, pointed to other hidden tensions that may keep this community's voice from being heard: "I think that a lot of the family

²⁵ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-and-covid-19-colliding-public-health-crises/>

²⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7264607/>

²⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-human-costs-of-the-pandemic-as-it-time-to-prioritize-well-being/>

²⁸ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-in-america/>

²⁹ <https://harvardpolitics.com/suicide-related-deaths/>

members of people who lose their lives to gun suicide feel like their survivorship is different in some way. I think that there is still this feeling of a person doing something to themselves, which therefore makes them less worthy of empathy. But Parsons thinks that storytelling can be helpful in breaking down this stigma.

In addition, advocates noted that the profile of a high number of suicide victims aligns with the profile of the NRA's base: white men in rural communities.

Multiple advocates said they wished there were more films that addressed guns and suicide. "There are towns across the country that have been decimated by gun suicide," said Noelle Howey. "Filmmakers may not know how to get in there to tell the story, but it is really a problem, and one that doesn't have a lot of storytelling now. It's even hard for us to get a lot of details about it. Death by suicide is not something that typically appears in the newspaper."

Another challenge can be convincing funders and other gatekeepers, who may have similar misconceptions as the general public. "Some funders and others were like, 'I'm sorry that happened to you, but what's the bigger story? Why should we invest in this film? What's the value to audiences and programmers?' That's hard to hear," said Sandy Salas about her upcoming film on her parents' murder-suicide.



“When I was able to bring elements in to make the film bigger and broader, and tie that context into my family story and my healing, it all of a sudden captured programmers attention: ‘She isn’t just telling a sad story, she’s relating this to a bigger problem and it needs to be addressed right now.’ You need to have a sense of urgency.”

**--Sandy Salas,
Director, *A Journey Into the Storm***

Because public understanding about mental illness is often limited, mental health advocates have been working for years to support accurate portrayals of mental illness, treatment and recovery in the media. These efforts are relevant for documentary film makers as well.



“To reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking, we must show depictions of characters in film and television both managing or overcoming mental health conditions and suicidal ideation. By showing audiences that people who live with and manage their mental health in an authentic way, we can encourage people, and those who surround them, to be more sophisticated in managing their mental health.”³⁰

**--Dr. Christine Moutier,
Chief Medical Officer, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

As with other portrayals of gun violence, consideration needs to be taken regarding the risks of triggering and the potential for imitation when suicide and suicidal ideation are depicted in documentaries. Organizations like the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention can help advise film makers as they navigate these choices.

“People are resorting to gun violence because that’s the only option they think they have. My dad thought that was his only option,” said Sandy Salas. “It’s really hard, and people want to turn a blind eye, but it can give people a path to healing their own trauma and finding peaceful solutions that don’t have to resort to gun violence.”

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [It’s Time to Recognize Suicide as a Driver of Gun-Related Deaths | Harvard Political Review](#)
- ❖ [What the “Black on Black Crime” Fallacy Misses About Race and Gun Deaths | The Washington Post](#)

SHOWING SOLUTIONS: PUBLIC HEALTH AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

“If there’s a way to tell stories of how we can save lives, that has to be the bottom line,” said Amber Goodwin, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund. Advocates repeatedly said there is a real need for more films about how to fix the problem of gun violence. “We’ve been doing it completely wrong for most of the last hundred years, but we can fix it,” said Robyn Thomas, executive director of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. A big obstacle is that so many people “from community members to public officials from all parties don’t know about evidence-based solutions, or don’t

³⁰ <https://annenberglaw.usc.edu/news/research-and-impact/media-issues/marketing-mental-health-conditions>

believe they work. Thomas said when she shared a study on Oakland's successful violence intervention program, even conservatives were taken aback at the results: "They were like, 'This is incredible. I had no idea. How can we get this word out?'"

Local, state and federal laws that limit access to guns have been shown to be effective in reducing gun violence as discussed earlier in this report. These laws include background checks, red flag laws, and types of permits to carry guns.

Meanwhile, a growing number of leaders in the GVP movement are taking the approach that gun violence spreads like a disease: "When an individual is victimized by or exposed to violence, it increases the likelihood that they will be victimized again or become a perpetrator." Violence intervention programs identify individuals who are at the highest risk of shooting or being shot to reduce violence through targeted interventions.³¹

"The premise is that a small number of individuals are responsible for a large proportion of the violence," explained Rev. Michael McBride, director of urban strategies and the LIVE FREE Campaign at Faith in Action. "So we can really focus on this small number of individuals and get an outsized result on the volume of violence."



This approach is shown in *The Interrupters*, which many advocates pointed to as a model for showing community solutions. Advocates repeatedly said they wished there were more films like it. "The Interrupters was life-changing for me, personally, because it really lifted the voices of people who had at one time been a part of the crisis and were now trying to change it," said Greg Jackson, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund. "You got to see everything it takes to proactively address gun violence and not just the typical cops and bobbies approach. So that was huge for me."

"Violence interruption is a story that needs to keep getting told because it's evolving," said Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety. "There are not often enough solu"

³¹ <https://www.peacefirst.org/sites/default/files/201903/Violence%20Intervention%20Fact%20Sheet%20Design%20Feb%202019.pdf>

tions-oriented stories where you see hospital-based interventions, crime prevention through environmental design, trauma-informed interventions, hip hop trauma counseling. All these things have data to show they're effective and move the needle. But a lot of people don't know these things exist.

I think that's an area where there are a lot of really powerful stories that can be told just following the work that a lot of those folks do in really trying to intervene in retaliatory cycles of violence," added Chelsea Parsons, vice president of gun violence prevention policy at the Center for American Progress. "That's a place where I could actually see a really strong connection between the film and a campaign effort to get a city or a state to invest more money in that kind of program." This is what happened when *The Interrupters* was shown in Chicago; later, the program got funding from the city for the first time. Such funding is urgently needed because violence intervention programs are consistently underfunded, particularly in comparison to funding for law enforcement.



The Interrupters

Filmmakers need to be aware of these power dynamics both in making their films and in planning impact campaigns, because sometimes increased attention can bring its own set of problems. "A lot of these programs, when they do well, they get defunded, and then the problem comes back," said Jackson. For example, when the organization featured in *The Interrupters* had problems later on, they lost funding. "It was like, 'Let's defund it. This is not going to work,'" said Jackson. "Then they went right back to crime control, and if you look at the murder rate in Chicago, you can see a direct correlation between the funding for these programs and the jumping numbers."

This does not mean that the films need to become promotional videos for organizations. When making *The Interrupters*, filmmaker Steve James said he wanted to make "a solution-oriented film that was also not an unequivocal endorsement of a particular solution or organization." This also enabled the film's impact campaign to give a platform to a wide range of local community groups at screenings across the country.

Films that lift up the effectiveness of community-based programs will also help to shift broader strategies in the GVP movement. “I think that those have often been seen as local, isolated programs unconnected to broader efforts to address gun violence,” said Parsons. “What we have tried to do much more purposefully over the last couple of years is really start incorporating support for those kinds of programs as part of our policy priorities.”

At the same time, Rev. McBride warned against framing these approaches in ways that could put the burden one hundred percent on Black people to [solve community violence] as an effort of personal and social responsibility, but not as a civic responsibility [of government].

“It takes relatively little money to get these programs implemented,” noted Antonio Cediell, urban strategies campaign manager at Faith in Action. “But whether the mayor is a Democrat or Republican, it’s an arm-wrestling match, you know, begging them [to support violence intervention programs].”

As filmmaker Peter Nicks cautioned, another challenge for these programs—as well as for related policy changes in public health and education—is that you need long-term investments to see change. “Films can play a role in maintaining public support for these programs and policies over the long haul, and help counter establishment pressure to shut them down before they can produce significant results.”

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Community-Based Public Safety Strategies](#) | Everytown Research & Policy
- ❖ [Community Justice Action Fund](#)
- ❖ [Issue Areas: Gun Violence](#) | Faith in Action

CORPORATE INFLUENCE ON GUNS

“When you talk about gun violence, you usually talk about the person who ends up pulling the trigger and there’s little emphasis on how that individual got that gun in the first place.”

**--Igor Volsky,
Executive Director, Guns Down America**

Amid the political arguments over gun rights and gun safety, stories of the business side of gun violence are often missed (with some notable exceptions, like *Bowling for Columbine*). Some advocates say gun manufacturers’ profit motive plays an outsized role in making assault weapons so readily available. “It’s a money-making scheme by the gun industry,” said Robyn Thomas, executive director of the Giffords Law

Center to Prevent Gun Violence. It's not just gun manufacturers who profit from growing gun sales. So do banks, stores, delivery companies, and online marketplaces. "On Facebook, you can very easily trade guns and sell guns despite the very nominal bans that are in place, and that's a situation where Facebook is clearly profiting off armed extremists on its platform," said Volsky.

So-called "ghost guns" may be the most dangerous recent development in online gun sales. These build-it-yourself homemade guns are made from gun parts purchased separately from a seller, not a federally licensed dealer or manufacturer. Ghost guns go undetected because they don't require background checks or registrations, which makes the weapon untraceable.

Some GVP organizations, like Guns Down America, have focused their efforts on pressuring businesses into adopting gun safety policies. "Corporations really feel like they have to pick a side right now, and it's so important to pick the right side, because if they pick the wrong side, their most important asset—their brand—is going to really suffer," said Volsky. In response to customer and stockholder pressure, particularly in the wake of the Parkland shooting, major corporations like Walmart have started to take steps to promote gun safety and limit access to guns.

While corporations make these decisions for a variety of reasons, advocates said it would be helpful for such stories to be told. For example, firms could follow executives or employees of banks or businesses pushing for changes related to gun sales. These stories could show people who are inside other corporations how to change their systems, too, and could inspire customers and stockholders to take action.

On the other side, firms could follow cases where people were killed by guns linked to malpractice by a gun dealer. "There are lawsuits about this," said Chelsea Parsons, vice president of gun violence prevention at the Center for American Progress. "So following some of those cases and those stories and those families as they try to navigate the legal system could be really interesting."



DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Guns Down America](#)
- ❖ [Community Justice Action Fund](#)
- ❖ [What the “Black on Black Crime” Fallacy Misses About Race and Gun Deaths](#) | The Washington Post
- ❖ [In a Writer on Cop Shows, A Lot Doesn’t Sit Right With Me.](#) | New York Magazine
- ❖ [America’s Complex Relationship with Guns](#) | Pew Research Center (2017)
- ❖ [Economic Impacts of Gun Violence](#) | Urban Institute

INCREASE IN MILITARY-STYLE WEAPONS AMONG COMMUNITIES AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

The success of gun manufacturers in creating a civilian demand for military-style weapons has helped boost the profitability of the gun industry, and increased the availability of these weapons across the country. Easily accessed military-style weapons are also favorite tools of organized crime, drug traffickers, and violent extremists.³²

Citing these and other reasons, law enforcement agencies have called for more powerful weapons and military tech for themselves.



Since 1997, the Department of Defense has shared more than \$7.5 billion of excess military property — including small arms, rifles, vehicles — with over 8,000 law enforcement agencies through the Law Enforcement Support Office program.³³

By accepting the excess equipment and training on weapons of war, local police departments also adopt a military model of operations. The justification for this program, and others like it, is that a military-equipped police force is more capable of reducing crime. But the military model can increase the adoption of a more aggressive and lethal form of policing, widening the chasm of distrust between law enforcement and the communities they serve.³⁴ These questions are explored in the 2015 documentary *Peace Officer*, in which former sheriff William “Dub” Lawrence searches for answers after seeing his son lawfully killed in a controversial standoff with the very same SWAT team he helped

³² <https://vpc.org/studies/militarization.pdf>

³³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053168017712885>

establish. The 2016 film *Do Not Resist* directed by Craig Atkinson, who is the son of a SWAT team member himself, documents the rapid militarization of police forces, and includes perspectives from criminal justice reformers, policymakers, law enforcement leaders, officers on the ground, and the citizens who are supposed to feel safer (but often don't). From a nonpartisan angle, Atkinson looks at the changes in police tactics, training, and equipment, forcing viewers and communities to ask whether militarization supports or undermines the traditional domestic law enforcement mission to serve and protect the public.

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [Ghost Guns: The build-yourself firearms that skirt most federal gun laws and are virtually untraceable](#) 60 Minutes
- ❖ [The Militarization of the U.S. Civilian Firearms Market](#) 2011 Report from the Violence Policy Center
- ❖ [A report on the Law Enforcement Support Office \(LESO\) program](#) Defense Logistics Agency
- ❖ [Do Not Resist Discussion Guide](#) PBS POV Community Engagement & Education

GUNS AND PROTESTS

The increased visibility of guns and militarized weapons at political protests has raised many questions and concerns about gun laws, racism, civil discourse and public safety.

Public protests, coupled with the expansion of open carry laws in states like Virginia, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Michigan, have increased awareness and tensions and fueled the debate about Second Amendment rights, racial injustice, and guns in public spaces. These stories continue to evolve, with civilian militias playing a major role.



“This is not neutral... The presence of people who are heavily armed has real impact in intimidating and in the potential for further violence.”³⁵

**--Kathleen Belew,
Professor, Historian, University of Chicago**

Militia groups have successfully used social media to organize, recruit, and assemble, drawing on well-used gun culture themes of patriotism, the Second Amendment, and defending their social and racial communities.

³⁴ <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9181>

The protection of property has served as a rallying cry for mostly white militias to gather at Black Lives Matter protests, despite the fact that most of these protests have been peaceful. Meanwhile, Black gun owners, including the NFAC (Not F**king Around Coalition) and Minnesota Freedom Fighters, have mobilized to provide protection to protesters, and to act as a counter show of force at demonstrations. However, as Kurt Lee wrote in the Los Angeles Times, “Black men armed with legally registered guns are viewed differently by many in law enforcement and other parts of society than, say, white militia members who stormed state capitols waving their firearms without repercussions in recent months.”³⁶

Black militia and armed security at protests may seem to contradict civil rights movement narratives around nonviolence. To put the narratives in full context requires inserting the missing stories of Black Americans in the South who supported the nonviolence movement and also owned guns for practical purposes and, if necessary, for self-defense against the anti-Black terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, lynch mobs, and other threats. Though they did not march armed alongside nonviolent protesters, these activists provided protection to civil rights workers. As the journalist and activist Charles E. Cobb, Jr. argued in his book *This Nonviolent Stuff Will Get You Killed*, gun ownership was a practical concern for them, at a time where “trying to exercise the ordinary rights of citizenship could get you killed.”³⁷

Second Amendment rights and Black self-defense against racial injustice during the 1960s and 1970s are explored in documentaries such as *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (dir. Stanley Nelson).

³⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-trumps-response-to-white-supremacist-groups-means>

³⁶ <https://www.latimes.com/world/nation/story/2020-09-11/la-na-cl-01-black-militias-in-minnesota>

³⁷ <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/freedom-summer-violence-and-nonviolence/>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ Documentaries can tell the fuller story by unpacking the systemic, social, and structural forces leading up to the point of a violent act, as well as the full range of effective violence prevention strategies.
- ❖ Many GVP advocates hoped for more documentaries on **the leading cause of death by gun violence: suicide.**
- ❖ Advocates say we need **more solutions-oriented stories about gun violence,** especially about public health, community approaches like violence interruption.
- ❖ **Many businesses that profit from guns directly and indirectly are sensitive to** narratives that could impact their reputations to their customers.
- ❖ **Gun culture goes beyond rural, white males** and has quietly infiltrated many aspects of American life.
- ❖ The **increased promotion and availability of military-type guns to civilians and police** has had significant consequences in communities.
- ❖ The **recent prominence of armed civilians at political protests** is raising questions and concerns about gun laws, racism, civil discourse and public safety.

DIVE DEEPER

- ❖ [What Trump's Response to White Supremacist Groups Means](#) [PBS NewsHour](#)
- ❖ [Armed and Black: How a group of men licensed to carry guns say they are seeking racial justice](#) [LA Times](#)
- ❖ [This Nonviolent Stuff Can Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible](#) [Duke University Press](#)
- ❖ [Richmond Gun Rally: Thousands Of Gun Owners Converge On Virginia Capitol On MLK Day](#) [NPR](#)
- ❖ [Armed Protesters Storm Michigan State House Over COVID-19 Lockdown](#) [Forbes](#)
- ❖ [Three million more guns: The Spring 2020 spike in firearm sales](#) [The Brookings Institution](#)



POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC STORY ELEMENTS

GVP advocates and community leaders identified certain storylines as potentially problematic, or even harmful, if not told in the right way. They stressed the importance of involving people from affected communities in the entire creative process if filmmakers decide to pursue these types of stories.

OVEREMPHASIZING MASS SHOOTINGS

Films usually focus on the most accessible parts of gun violence, like school shootings or mass shootings. Even though only a small percentage of gun deaths are from mass shootings, these events dominate storytelling around gun violence in the United States.³⁸

“In the wake of Parkland, we were tracking 40 to 50 documentaries,” said Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety. “Not all came to pass, but many did. So there are massive incidents that get an enormous amount of coverage. Some will be incredibly powerful, but there are so many compelling aspects to this issue that haven’t been explored in film.”

Filmmakers, funders, and GVP organizations alike emphasized a need to diversify the types of stories being told about gun violence. Erika Soto Lamb, formerly with Everytown for Gun Safety, called for “more storylines about the everyday gun violence that causes our country to have such disproportionate homicide and suicide rates.”

RACIAL STEREOTYPES WHEN PORTRAYING GUN VIOLENCE IN BLACK AND LATINX COMMUNITIES

When telling stories about communities of color, film makers should take a rigorous self-inventory of their own biases and perspectives, even if they are from the same community. As noted earlier, advocates and film makers called for more film teams that reflect the communities they’re seeking to portray. Community organizations, funders, and film makers alike warned that stories that paint caricatured portraits of communities and lack depth are deeply harmful. Such stories can perpetuate myths about community violence, which is mostly perpetrated by a very small number of individuals. They can also dehumanize those involved.

“When there’s a white incident of gun violence, news tells the story of the assailant and of the victim. It’s all about these two humans,” observed Greg Jackson, executive director of the Community Justice Action Fund. “But what happens when we talk about Black gun violence? It’s yellow tape, police sirens, cops picking up bullet shells. It’s a really dehumanizing approach to tell the story...”



“...When a white person passes from gun violence, you don’t see chalk outside and and body bags, no, you see their face, you see them playing soccer in high school, you see their family.”

**--Greg Jackson,
Executive Director, Community Justice Action Fund**

Advocates also called for more stories that explain the systems behind gun violence and that show what goes on before and after a shooting incident.

³⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-tells-us-about-gun-deaths/>

FOCUSING TOO MUCH ON GRIEF AND VIOLENT ACTS

Noelle Howey, senior director of cultural engagement at Everytown for Gun Safety, cautioned that too often in films about gun violence, “there’s one emotional lever that everyone is upset and sad and crying.” As Igor Volsky, executive director of Guns Down America, explained, “It’s no accident that most content in this space is survivor-driven. At the end of the day, you connect with a very moving story of how someone’s life changed, how a community’s life changed, because of a single gunshot.”

Advocates noted that there are also production choices that can traumatize audiences, particularly violence survivors, like pointing a gun at the camera, extensive scenes of violence or gunfire, or focusing more time on the shooter than the victims.

From an advocacy standpoint, films that leave audiences feeling despondent can be counterproductive. So advocates called for other ways to tell stories that can leave audiences feeling motivated to act.

SCAPEGOATING MENTAL ILLNESS FOR GUN VIOLENCE

In stories about mass shootings, the media and some politicians tend to overemphasize stories related to mental illness in a perpetrator. This focus can perpetuate the false narrative that individuals with mental illness are the primary drivers of gun violence. Chelsea Parsons, vice president of gun violence prevention at the Center for American Progress, cautioned, “I think that any storytelling around the intersections of mental illness and guns, particularly from the perspective of people with mental illnesses as perpetrators, should be approached with extreme caution, because it’s not helpful to anybody to tell stories that exacerbate that misperception.”



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ **Stories about mass shootings continue to dominate the gun violence storytelling landscape**, although such events account for a small percentage of gun deaths in the United States.
- ❖ Film teams that do not come from the communities they are filming **run the risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes and omitting societal or historical contexts for violence**.
- ❖ There is an opportunity for the next wave of documentary films tackling issues related to gun violence to **move beyond individual moments of tragedy and seek to tell broader stories**, focusing on solutions and providing more context about the complex systems around gun violence.
- ❖ Scapegoating mental illness for gun violence **perpetuates false myths about both mental illness and the real sources of gun violence**.

RECOMMENDED AREAS OF STUDY

Based on our interviews and research, we recommend consideration of the following next steps for the field:

- ❖ Building on this report to release a more expansive survey of filmmakers, impact producers, and others in the field, as well as media analysis of GVP themes in documentary films, in order to expand on our findings.
- ❖ Workshops to introduce GVP funders and those from related issue areas to the field of film impact campaigns including case studies, best practices, impact measurement tools, and research.
- ❖ Workshops for GVP community activists about how to navigate being part of documentary films as participants and/or as partners on impact campaigns.
- ❖ A six-month working group composed of funders, programmers, filmmakers, impact producers, and community leaders to study the question of how to ethically and equitably compensate community leaders and violence survivors for their time and skills. The recommendations of this group will be shared widely with the film community, and a follow-up review one year later will survey the field to see how the recommendations are being implemented.

- ❖ A five to eight year media impact campaign that links together multiple film and other media stories about the intersectionality of gun violence and prevention, in partnership with national and community organizations. The goal for the campaign would be to raise awareness and financial support for the strongest evidence-based GVP initiatives around the country. A longer campaign like this is needed because policymaking and funding cycles usually extend beyond the timeframe of a typical single film release and campaign. The campaign would include dedicated resources to measure short and long term impact.
- ❖ A survey and analysis of gatekeeper positions at leading festivals and distributors to determine the percentage of decision making gatekeepers who have been directly impacted by gun violence. The findings of this analysis will be shared with gatekeeping organizations, along with guidance on how to recruit and promote more individuals directly affected by gun violence to gatekeeper positions.
- ❖ A gathering of funders, filmmakers, and impact producers looking at the efficacy of documentary storytelling to move the needle on the issue of gun violence.
- ❖ Work with one or more universities to fund a research project looking at the efficacy of shorts supported through the Sundance Institute Open Call as tools for social change.



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Sandy Salas, Director, *A Journey Into the Storm*

Marilyn Ness, Director and Producer, *Charm City*

Peter Nicks, Director, *The Force*

Kim Snyder, Director and Producer, *Newtown* and *Us Kids*

Marco Williams, Director and Producer, *Murders That Matter*

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Robyn Thomas, Executive Director, Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

Igor Volsky, Executive Director, Guns Down America

Report Design by **Betsy Tsai**

LOGLINES FOR THE FILMS MENTIONED IN THIS REPORT

CHARM CITY (dir. Marilyn Ness) delivers a candid portrait of citizens, police, community advocates, and government officials on the frontlines during three years of unparalleled, escalating violence in Baltimore. The film highlights the positive actions undertaken by groups and individuals, optimistically offering humanity as common ground.

3½ MINUTES: TEN BULLETS (dir. Marc Silver) dissects the aftermath of the murder of 17-year-old Jordan Davis and the trial of Michael Dunn who, in 2012, shot him repeatedly at a Florida gas station for playing his music too loudly.

QUEST: A Portrait of an American Family (dir. Jonathan Olshefski) is an intimate documentary film that captures ten years in the life of a family living in North Philadelphia.

THE ARMOR OF LIGHT (dir. Abigail Disney, co-dir. Kathleen Hughes) follows an Evangelical minister and the mother of a teenage shooting victim who ask, Is it possible to be both pro-gun and pro-life?

THE FORCE (dir. Peter Nicks) At a powderkeg moment in American policing, The Force goes deep inside the embattled Oakland Police Department as it struggles to confront federal demands for reform, the rise of #BlackLivesMatter, and an explosive scandal.

WHEN CLAUDE GOT SHOT (dir. Brad Lichtenstein) Three strangers brought together by gun violence humanize and disrupt the narrative about so-called "Black on Black" crime in America.

THE INTERRUPTERS (dir. Steve James) Members of the activist group CeaseFire work to curb violence in their Chicago neighborhoods by intervening in street fights and showing youths a better way to resolve conflicts.

NEWTOWN (dir. Kim Snyder) A look at how the community of Newtown, Connecticut, came together in the aftermath of the largest mass shooting of schoolchildren in American history.

UNDER THE GUN (dir. Stephanie Soechtig) A look at the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre where 20 children were murdered at their school by a resentful, gun-obsessed shooter, but led to no changes in American federal gun laws.

BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE (dir. Michael Moore) Filmmaker Michael Moore explores the roots of America's predilection for gun violence.

PEACE OFFICER (dirs. Brad Barber, Scott Christopherson) Dub Lawrence, the founder of Utah's first SWAT unit, investigates the death of his son and other shootings related to an increase in violent SWAT team raids.

MURDERS THAT MATTER (dir. Marco Williams) Murders that Matter documents an African American, Muslim mother, who, in the aftermath of her youngest son's murder, vows to save all the other sons, on both sides of the gun fight as an activist, then as a candidate for political office, then with her appointment as supervisor of victim services for the Philadelphia Office of the District Attorney, and once again as a candidate for political office.

BULLETPROOF (dir. Todd Chandler) What does it mean to be safe in school in the United States? Safe from what, and from whom? Bulletproof poses and complicates these questions through a provocative exploration of fear and American violence.

A JOURNEY INTO THE STORM (dir. Sandra (Sandy) Salas) At some point in almost everyone's life, there comes a challenge so overwhelming, so painful, that it forces a course of action to run and hide, or to turn and head bravely into the storm. For filmmaker Sandy Salas, that defining challenge occurred on the day her father took a gun and killed her mother, and then turned the gun on himself. Into the Storm is the heart-wrenching, inspiring journey of Sandy's life as she confronts the complexities of the domestic violence that shattered her family.

REPORT AUTHOR BIOS



Michon Boston, Engagement and Impact Strategist

Michon Boston is an impact consultant and writer. She founded the Michon Boston Group Ltd in 2010 providing strategic impact planning for nonprofit organizations, public media, independent documentary and new media producers for content featured on PBS, HBO, Amazon and national/international film festivals. Michon's writings are published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *Washington City Paper*, *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, and *The Root*. She has also served on selection panels for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Multicultural Alliance, and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Michon is a recipient of a NEH grant for "A History of Black Women at Oberlin College" now part of the collections in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NY Public Library. Michon is based in Washington, DC.



Will Jenkins, Political and Policy Advisor

Will has more than fifteen years of communications and policy experience in the Obama White House, the Department of Health and Human Services, Congress, and international nonprofit organizations. He also has trained or advised hundreds of filmmakers and other media makers on social issue and political storytelling and strategies through the Sundance Institute, the South by Southwest Festival, the Tribeca Film Institute, Warner Bros., ViacomCBS, FRONTLINE, Good Pitch, and other organizations. During his time in the federal government, Will worked on a wide range of issues, including criminal justice reform, drug policy, mental health, immigration, the environment, healthcare, national security and education. He also worked on President Obama's "Now Is the Time" initiative in response to the Sandy Hook school shooting. Will is the Director of the Civic Leadership Stories Project at the Center for Media & Social Impact and has co-authored a [series of studies](#) on creative media and political advocacy. He was Policy Director for the Impact Film Festival at the 2012 Republican and Democratic National Conventions, where he coordinated screening discussions with politicians, filmmakers, celebrities and reporters. In 2013, he developed the American Film Institute's first Political Bootcamp for Filmmakers. He is an associate producer of an upcoming feature documentary about the politics of criminal justice. He serves as a board member of Working Films, an advisor to the New Left Accelerator, and a co-chair of the NEXUS Working Group for Film, Media and Story.



Eliza Licht, Engagement Strategist and Impact Consultant

Eliza has been working in the social issue documentary field for 20 years as an impact strategist, producer, and curator. She develops and implements engagement strategies to maximize the impact and visibility of documentary films. At Red Owl, she creates and executes campaigns that implement overall strategy, partnership development, the production of high quality educational resources, as well as tracking, measuring, and evaluating impact. Before Red Owl, Eliza spent 17 years building and expanding the community engagement and education department at the PBS documentary series *POV*. As Vice President of Content Strategy and Engagement, she set priorities and direction for the organization, along with EPs and fellow executive staff, oversaw the Community Engagement, Communication, and Programs departments, worked closely with the programming team on series selection, and spearheaded broadcast campaigns for over 250 films. Under Licht's leadership, *POV* saw a 1000% increase in events, including over 800 screenings annually, and over 46,000 direct engagements with in-person audience members. As Red Owl's managing partner, Eliza works closely with clients to develop their goals and vision for engagement and impact. Eliza has served on juries for DOCNYC, Hot Springs Film Festival, and Brooklyn Film Festival, and on funding panels for the National Endowment of the Arts, Black Public Media, and the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage.



Alice Quinlan, Impact and Engagement Consultant

Alice is an impact and engagement consultant with more than eight years of experience using storytelling to drive social change. Recent projects and clients include UNLADYLIKE2020, forthcoming on PBS's award-winning biography series *American Masters*, *Born to Be* by Tania Cypriano, Doc Society and *POV*, PBS's flagship documentary showcase. Previously, as the Director of Community Engagement and Education at *POV*, Alice developed strategic national engagement campaigns for *POV* documentaries, produced resources around *POV*'s features, shorts and digital projects, and facilitated 700+ free screenings nationwide every year with her team. Prior to joining *POV* in 2014, she founded the KRTS Youth Media Project in Marfa, TX, a part of PBS Student Reporting Labs, and managed the American Graduate campaign at Marfa Public Radio, a project of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Her reporting work has appeared on Monocle Radio, Marfa Public Radio, PRX: ReMix with Roman Mars, Fronteras: The Changing America Desk and in *Wherever Magazine* and *The Big Bend Sentinel*. She graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with a degree in Philosophy in 2011.