
Responsibility as Common Ground

A Communications Guide For
Reframing Gun Safety In America

The purpose of this document

There is widespread perception that the U.S. is polarized on gun violence prevention and there is no common ground. That's a fallacy. The point of this white paper is to dispel these two myths: That there is no common ground and there is nothing to be done.

The following report demonstrates there is significant common ground between gun owners and non-owners. This paper will seek to help align our conversations, promote common purpose, and inspire effective action to reduce gun violence in the United States.

What this paper will not do

This paper does not seek to supplant the work that gun violence prevention groups including Brady, Everytown for Gun Safety, Giffords, and March for Our Lives have been doing for years or the work of individuals who have worked tirelessly to reduce gun violence in the United States. Nor is this paper intended for legislative or political purposes. This research provides the framework of a common language for media and impact organizations that can engage a broader audience committed to change.

Executive Summary

THE LANGUAGE USED TODAY when speaking about gun violence has been framed in largely political ways.

This report shows that more than nine in ten gun owners and non-owners agree that gun safety is the responsibility of all gun owners and that more than 60 percent of gun owners and 77 percent of non-owners view gun violence in the U.S. as extremely or very serious.

There is language, messaging and framing around common sense gun safety laws and practices that will appeal to a majority of Americans – including gun owners.

In this report we'll reveal the Responsibility Framework, which shows significant potential in engaging both gun owners and non-owners alike, and across the political spectrum. Despite the polarizing rhetoric often used in the media, there is a clear pathway to creating greater agreement through the right framing of this critical issue, increasing the likelihood that effective policies addressing gun violence will be enforced.

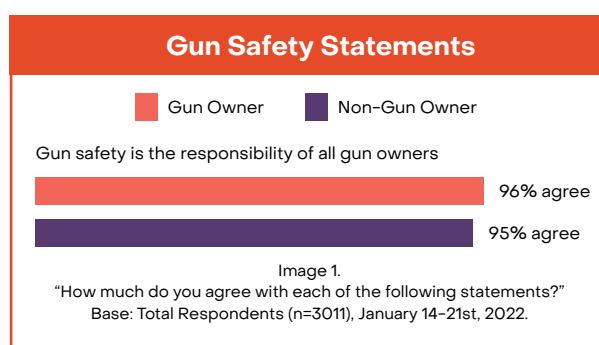
This report has been developed by experts in media, communications, and research via the Gun Safety Alliance, with research conducted by independent market research firm, Alter Agents.

More than 90% of both gun owners and non-gun owners agree that it's important for people to know about gun safety. There is an opportunity to educate Americans on specific gun safety measures.

FROM JANUARY 14-21, 2022, **Brady** and the **Gun Safety Alliance** engaged independent research consultancy **Alter Agents** to conduct research among 3,000+ U.S. residents, including 2,000+ gun owners*, to reveal the most effective language and strategy for productive conversation around gun violence prevention. This report builds on the data-driven insights from Alter Agents' work, as well as other efforts, to provide a framework for clear and actionable messaging that can be used by journalists, influencers, legislators, advocacy groups, and the American public.

The goal was to identify areas of commonality among all Americans, gun owners and non-owners alike, around issues of gun safety and gun violence and to develop new language that would engage both sides. We tested different versions of gun safety messaging between these two groups—overall and within subgroups (e.g., gender, race, geography)—to determine what language best resonated and what groups would be most receptive to it.

Gun owners generally agree that gun safety training and programs can prevent accidents and improve safety. In addition, more than half



of non-gun owners (61%) and nearly half of gun owners (44%) would support well-known companies taking a stand on decreasing gun violence.

Prior research from Pew demonstrates that broad agreement already exists on some policy proposals (2021). Majorities across parties favor some policies that would restrict gun access:

- Preventing those with mental illnesses from purchasing guns (85% of Republicans and 90% of Democrats support this)
- Subjecting private gun sales and gun show sales to background checks (70% of Republicans, 92% of Democrats)
- Majorities in both parties also oppose allowing people to carry concealed firearms without a permit

*While the words "firearm" and "gun" are often used interchangeably, the research used the word "gun." Therefore, references to the research results will use the word "gun" exclusively.

Our findings revealed that we have much more in common than we expect. While the pervasive view is that Americans are more divided than ever, **THE STUDY FOUND:**

Gun owners and non-gun owners
have some shared beliefs
on what matters most:

Gun owners are responsible for gun safety.

Gun owners can be spurred to action:

They believe that responsible gun ownership starts with them.

There is an opportunity
for brands to play a role

in teaching everyone about gun safety through employee and consumer programs.

Responsibility is an effective frame
for achieving alignment.

Key Points of Agreement

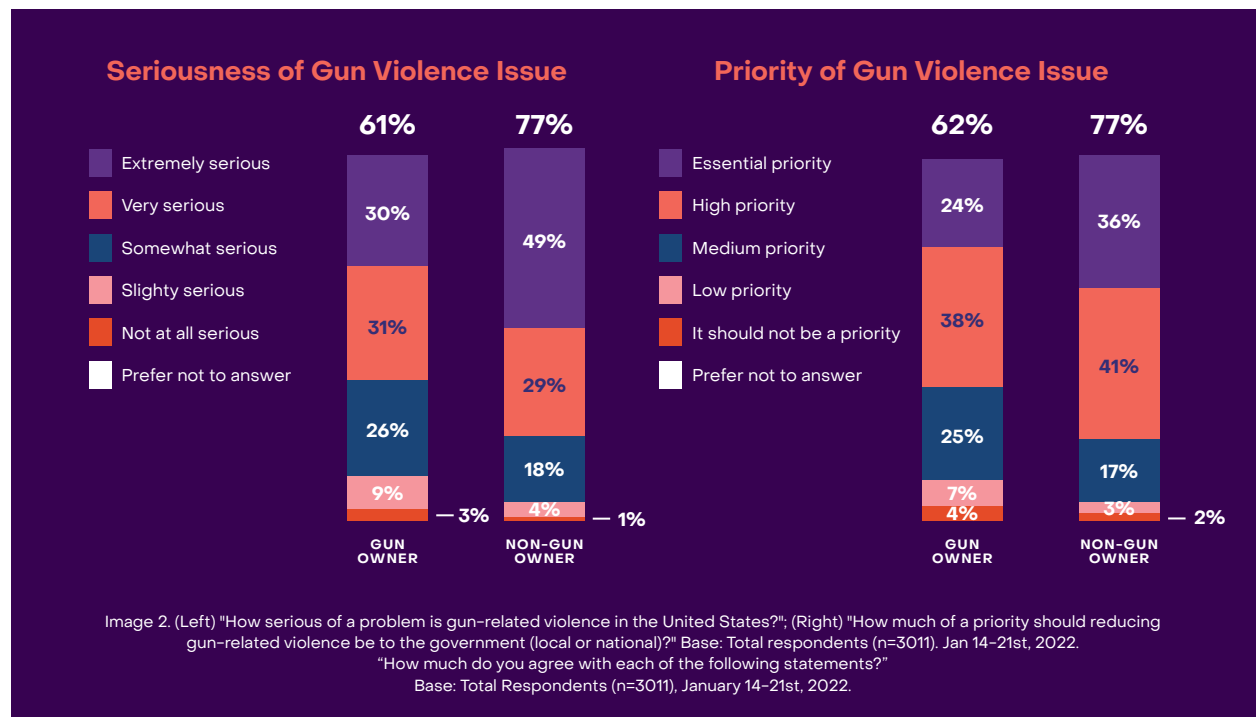
FROM ALTER AGENTS RESEARCH:

Gun owners and non-gun owners alike feel that violent persons should not own guns and that gun owners are responsible for the safety of their guns.

Agreement with Statements		
	Gun Owner (n=2011)	Non-Gun Owner (n=1000)
Some Americans should not be able to own guns if they are violent or mentally unstable	90%	89%
Gun owners must be responsible for the safety of their guns	96%	92%
Gun owners must be responsible for preventing their guns from getting into the wrong hands	94%	91%

Table 1. "How much do you agree with each of the following statements?,"
Base: Total Respondents (n=3011), Jan 14–21st, 2022.

While non-gun owners are more likely to view gun violence as a serious issue than gun owners, three-in-five gun owners still rate it as an extremely or very serious issue and of essential or high priority (this was done prior to the fatal school shooting at Uvalde, Texas and subsequent mass gun violence events).



Gun Safety Language as a Connective Force

A key insight of this report is that developing a common language around gun safety is something that promotes better engagement among a broader group of Americans, both non gun owners and gun owners alike. Our research finds that nearly all gun owners (90%) agree that it is important for all people to know about gun safety measures. Roughly two-thirds of gun owners and three quarter of non-gun owners also indicate that they would support an organization of gun owners advocating for gun safety, and nearly 50% would support brands taking a greater stand on issues related to gun safety.

	Non-Gun Owner (n=1000)	Gun Owner (n=2011)
IMPORTANCE OF GUN OWNER SAFETY MEASURES		
Important for people, regardless of if they own guns or not, to know about these gun safety measures	92%	90%
LIKELIHOOD TO SUPPORT ORGANIZATION		
An organization of gun owners advocating for gun safety	64%	76%

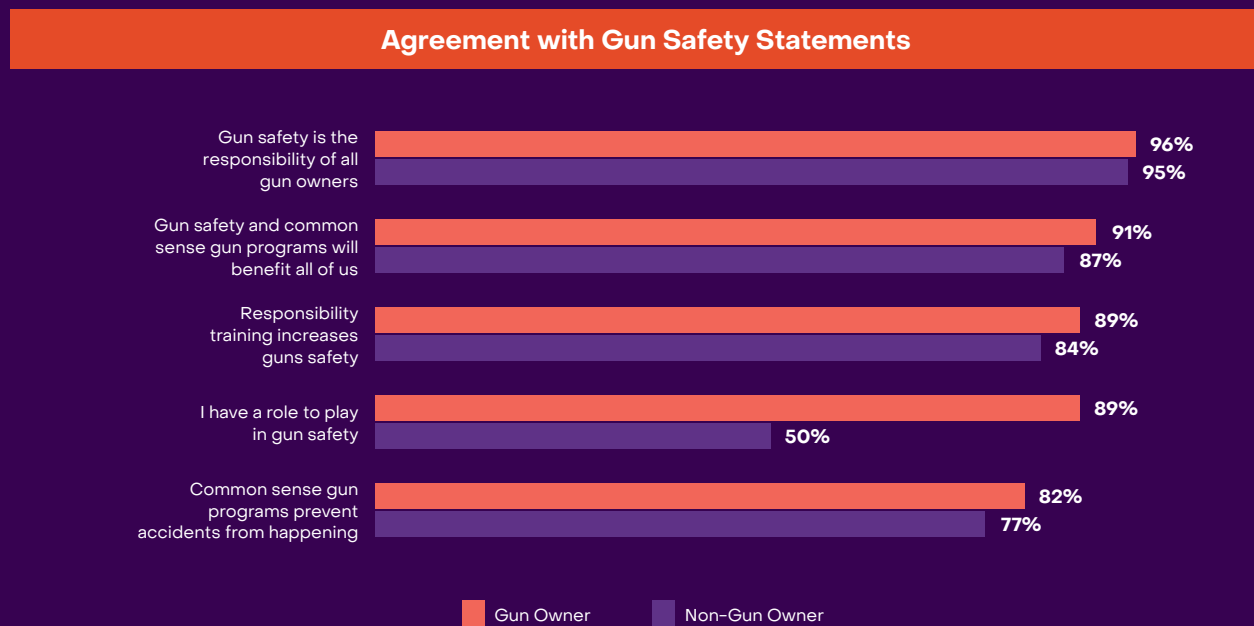
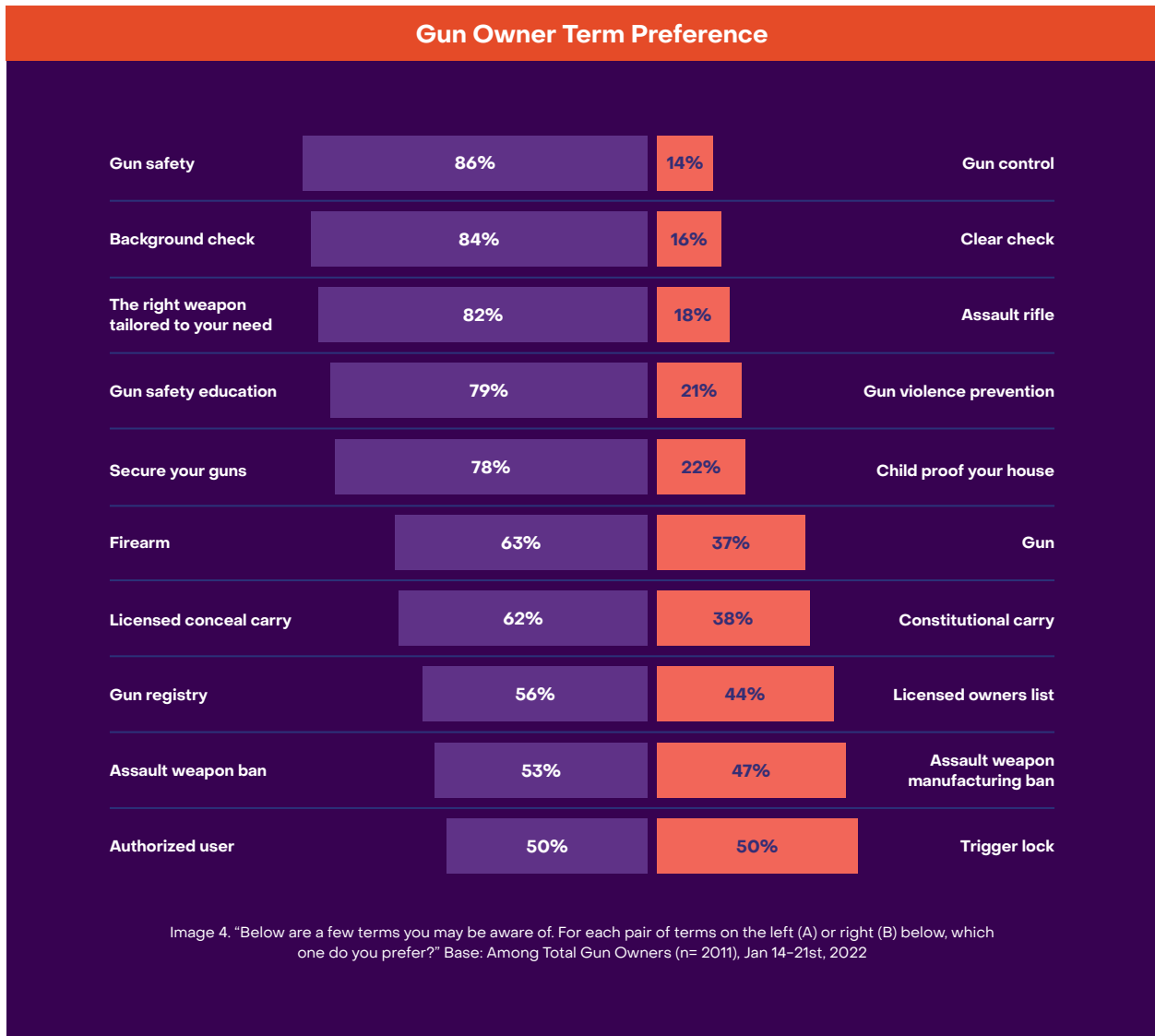


Image 3. "How much do you agree with each of the following statements?"
Base: Total Respondents (n=3011), January 14-21st, 2022.

Language That Resonates with Gun Owners



When asked about different language options, gun owners have strong preferences. Terms such as “gun safety,” “background check,” and “the right weapon tailored to your need” were all preferred by a large margin over their alternatives. “Gun safety” was the highest

preferred term by gun owners, who chose that term over “gun control”. “Secure your guns” and “gun safety education” were also preferred over “child proof your house” and “gun violence prevention.” The term “firearm” was significantly preferred by gun owners over “gun.”

Gun owners provided some insights, in their own words for these findings:

“There is no need for assault rifles, repeaters, AK 47's, etc. That should only be for the army. **I wish there were no such things as guns.** If used properly, I can see hunting for meat, but I no longer do that.”

– Gun Owner

“**Gun owners ARE responsible for their actions** and bad choices come with consequences”

– Gun Owner

“The NRA are too extreme in their zeal to defend assault style weapons and accessories and those who use them recklessly. It is empirically evident that we have a problem with gun violence in this country and **as a gun owner I am ashamed of the lack of oversight.**”

– Gun Owner

“I think they [NRA] fight too hard against common sense programs to keep guns away from mentally unstable people by fighting further background checks and regulations. I believe people should be allowed to own guns but we should be a little more careful in our country in regards to guns... I just recently saw a man at a pharmacy with a gun tucked into the back of his pants where anyone could grab it as he was paying. **It was a dangerous handling of a gun in my opinion, even if he was a good guy with a gun.**”

– Gun Owner

“ **I believe in responsible gun ownership and some people should not have access to guns.**”

– Gun Owner

“**I like the messages placing safety responsibility on the shoulders of the owners.**”

– Gun Owner

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CONVERSATION: THE RESPONSIBILITY FRAMEWORK

Our research finds that, while we may agree on the seriousness of gun violence and gun safety issues, today those advocating for more gun safety tend to speak from a frame of “empathy” – talking about the pain and tragedy that can come from guns. However, most gun owners who engage in this conversation tend to speak from a framework of “freedom” and “rights”.

In evaluating conversations around guns and gun safety in this country it became clear that arguments and messages mostly only reach those who already agree – with little impact on those on “the other side.” Parallel conversations occur with individuals and groups talking past each other about what they think is the same topic (firearms), but are actually mutually exclusive topics (freedom/rights and empathy).

To validate our hypothesis further, we tested a series of messaging statements.

These statements emphasized (1) parental gun responsibility, (2) freedom from fear and violence, (3) prevalence of firearms where they are not welcome (e.g., church, schools, parks), (4) bad actors granted access to firearms, and (5) taking moral, apolitical action to reduce gun violence. The clear winner was around the notion of responsibility – talking about how responsible parents take steps to keep their kids safe from dangers (cover outlets, keep medicines out of reach, etc.). It got similarly high scores across “appeal,” “likable,” and “effectiveness” with all cohorts.

Our research finds framing the discussion around firearms in terms of “Responsibility,” allows greater agreement and alignment. The responsibility framework taps into a positive sense of identity. It separates people into two sides: “responsible people” and “irresponsible people.” Most people like to see themselves as responsible. So by framing messaging this way, people naturally want to be on the responsible side. It also implicitly praises the responsible people, and only goes after the irresponsible types.

Gun Owner Response to Concepts					
Based to those reviewing each concept	Parents: Simply Responsible Every Day A	America: A Gun on Every Corner B	Freedom to be Free from C	Be an Action Hero D	Take Action Not Sides E
Appeal	84%	26%	55%	50%	52%
Likeability	82%	28%	54%	50%	52%
Effectiveness	79%	32%	52%	45%	44%

Table 3. “How appealing do you find this message?”; “How likable do you find this message?”; “How effective do you think this message is in engaging gun owners to support gun safety programs?” Base: Among All Gun Owners (n=2011), January 14-21st, 2022.

ILLUSTRATIVE MESSAGING REFRAMES FOR MEDIA AND INFLUENCERS:

Below are some examples of how these messages could be reframed effectively:

FROM	TO
Americans kill each other with guns 25X the rate of other high-income countries	The US allows more people to use firearms irresponsibly than any other high-income country
Gun violence is estimated to cost the American economy at least \$229 billion every year	Irresponsibility has a cost: In the U.S. irresponsible uses of firearms cost \$229 billion every year.
90% of guns used in crimes come from about 5% of gun dealers	Responsible gun dealers care deeply about only selling to people who can be responsible owners. But 5% of dealers do not.

Table 3. Gun safety messages reframed around responsibility, 2022.

Advocating for stronger background checks might sound like this (repetition here is intentional, not intended as exact copy, but for emphasis):

Background checks are about making sure that only people most capable of being responsible can get a firearm – it would be irresponsible to do otherwise. We know keeping firearms out of the hands of those unwilling or unable to use them responsibly saves lives. Responsible states that require background checks on all handgun sales see less irresponsible use of firearms. They have less than half as many mass shooting incidents as well as lower rates of gun suicides and gun trafficking. Most of us don't want people who are unable, or unwilling to use a firearm responsibly to have easy access to them. Why have we not made this harder?

After all, in America, we try to keep people unwilling and unable to be responsible driving a car from getting behind the wheel. So, why are we not doing the same for firearms? That only seems like the responsible thing to do.

Talking about breaking through opposition to passing new laws might sound like:

More than a year ago, the U.S. House of Representatives took responsibility and passed bipartisan legislation to close loopholes in the background check system. But a handful of senators irresponsibly refused to do the responsible thing to protect our children – and instead continue to block this common sense legislation to bring more responsibility to gun ownership in America from even coming up for a vote.

SOCIAL INSIGHTS DATA SUGGESTS “RESPONSIBILITY FRAMEWORK” LEADS TO IMPROVED DISCOURSE:

To support our research further the authors of this paper engaged with a leading social media platform to evaluate conversations around gun safety, gun rights, and gun responsibility. We found the following insights which align with our insight on framing and amplifying the conversation around responsibility.

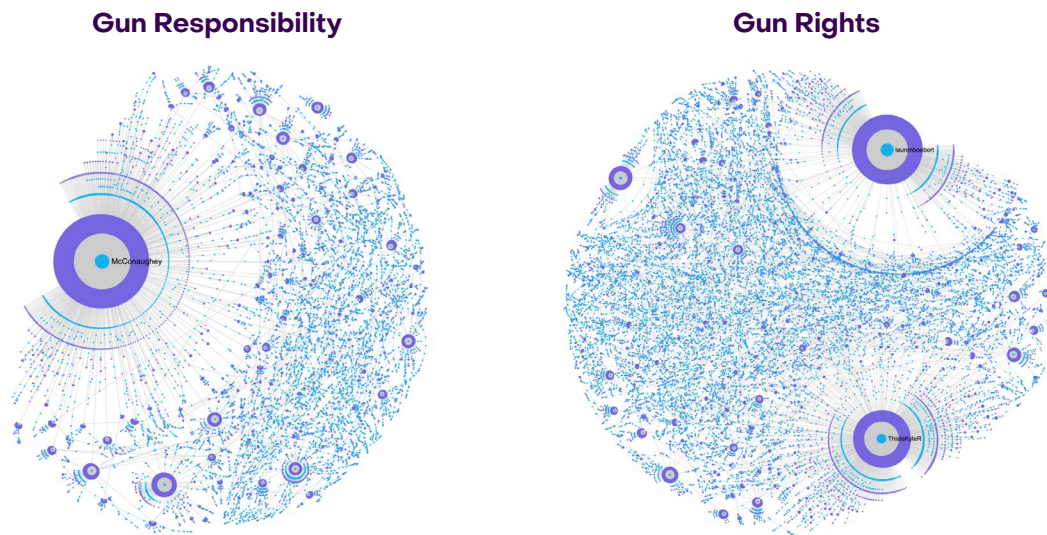


Image 5. Visualization of nature of conversation for gun responsibility vs. gun rights in social media posts

The conversation about gun rights and gun control overlap heavily on social media:

- 62% of people who post about Gun Rights also post about Gun Ban/Control/Restrict
- 46% of people who post about Ban/Control/Restrict also post about Gun Rights

But these spheres of conversation rarely intersect with messaging around gun responsibility:

- Only 2.2% of people who post about guns using language related to Ban/Control/Restrict also post about Gun Responsibility
- Only 3% of people who post about Gun Rights also post about Gun Responsibility

In the above graphic, each purple node represents a reply to a post, each blue

node represents the end of that specific conversation. The graphic on the left has a higher density of purple nodes and longer conversation chains indicating more discussion is happening. Whereas the one on the right has a dense network of short blue nodes, indicating that people are replying and reacting more than having a discussion.

These insights illustrate that when we share a message about “gun responsibility” people from both sides are willing to have more of a dialogue instead of being emotionally reactive. Messaging about “gun responsibility” may raise awareness and lead to more meaningful conversations that spur action. Initial messaging research also indicates "firearm responsibility" would be an even more inclusive phrase helpful in engaging gun owners.

AD TESTING FURTHER ILLUSTRATES IMPACT OF “RESPONSIBILITY FRAMEWORK”

As we were concluding the initial research, we had an opportunity to put our theory into practice. The non-profit group “States United to Prevent Gun Violence” set out to push for new firearm safety legislation in the wake of the Uvalde shootings. We quickly created messaging based on the responsibility frame – which ran in donated media placements generating over 60 million impressions.

The Vidmob platform was able to provide some key insights into the success of this messaging.

For example, on a leading social media platform, 22 assets were tested with 15.7k impressions. These results showed that the word “responsible” dramatically increased performance of the ads tested.

Assets that contained the word “responsible” saw a **13.5% INCREASE IN ENGAGEMENT** in all KPIs compared to campaign average for the month in which the ads ran, while assets that didn't feature “responsible” tracked below campaign average.

KPIs	Account Average	Contains Responsible	Does not Contain Responsible
Engaged Users Rate	7.6%	13.5% ▲ 76.64%	7.3% ▼ 4.42%
Click Rate	3.3%	4.3% ▲ 31.51%	3.2% ▼ 1.82%
Video Completion Rate	0.37%	6.8% ▲ 1734.04%	
3-second View Through Rate	2.8%	23.7% ▲ 748.08%	1.6% ▼ 43.14%
10-second View Through Rate	0.54%	9.9% ▲ 1734.04%	
Video Completions/View Through Rate	13.2%	28.6% ▲ 116.26%	

Image 6. Vidmob “gun owner responsibility” ad KPIs, 2022.

ADS TESTED INCLUDED ONES LIKE THESE:



Image 7. Examples of gun safety advertisements that stress gun responsibility over gun control, 2022.

Implications

FOR EVERYONE

It's easy to assume that firearm safety is a hotly contentious issue amongst the voting public, but this is not supported by our research. The data collected here suggests that an overwhelming majority of Americans are strongly in favor of proper gun safety protocols, legislation, and education. Almost everybody wants to contribute to solving the issue of gun violence in the U.S.. A tonal shift in media coverage from "gun control" to "gun safety" and "firearms responsibility" has the potential to ameliorate tensions and move the conversation forward among a broader audience

FOR THE MEDIA AND INFLUENCERS

We expect that research and conversations about gun safety will increase in the coming weeks, months, and years. To translate those learnings into positive change, it's essential that influencers and content creators use common language and framework. Those speaking with the media and amplifying messaging around gun safety and gun violence may want to consider consistent usage of the "responsibility frame" to help the message be received by a wider audience and to help it stick.

The responsibility framework changes the conversation so it isn't an attack on anyone and their identity/morality, but on those who aren't as responsible. This leaves room for others to hear the message, and be willing to act, i.e., to avoid having anyone go into "fight or flight" the moment they hear this kind of message.

Once people start using the language of "responsibility", it draws them into the worldview that we MUST take steps to ensure responsible owners and ownership, while keeping firearms out of the hands of those

unwilling (bad actors) or unable (too young, compromised, or unhealthy) to be responsible.

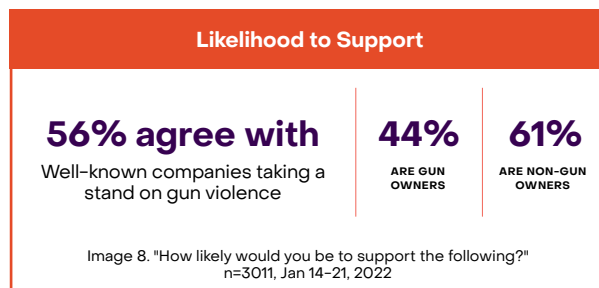
The approach is not about "explaining the problem better" or "presenting a better argument for a particular policy," but rather changing the framework. A good framework can be exceedingly powerful in bringing people together and making progress possible.

For media and influencers interested in having an impact, it will take adoption, consistency, and persistence to change a framework in society. This change won't happen overnight, but as framing around seatbelt safety, fire safety, and drunk driving has, the responsibility framework in the gun debate also has the potential to have a meaningful and long lasting impact. The more pervasive and widely used a frame becomes, the more influence it will have.

FOR BRANDS AND BUSINESSES

Consumers are drawn to brands that reflect their own values and perspectives. However, many businesses still opt to remain silent on topics they believe are controversial, including gun safety.

Because the research conducted by Brady United and the Gun Safety Alliance found that positioning gun safety as a responsibility appeals to both gun owners and non-gun owners, businesses contemplating taking a stand on gun safety may find that language and framing that focuses on "responsibility" does not have the negative consequences they might fear.



How to Take Action

RETHINK the unproven notion that gun safety is a widely polarized issue

RECOGNIZE that 9 in 10 Americans agree about the importance of improving gun safety and that 7 in 10 agree about the seriousness of gun violence in the U.S.

RE-EVALUATE the risk of taking a stand. A clear stance on matters of gun safety and firearm responsibility is relatively low risk and may play an important role in reducing gun violence

RESPONSIBILITY FRAMEWORK For influencers and those speaking to the general public, consider adopting the “responsibility framework” for increased impact

RESEARCH Continue to advocate for and invest in research on the impact of gun violence and data driven ways to reduce gun violence, polarization, and deadlock

Learn more at GUNSAFETYALLIANCE.ORG

