

PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE THROUGH EFFECTIVE MESSAGING

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OVERVIEW: HOW TO USE THE GUIDE PAGE 1

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS PAGE 3

OVERALL MESSAGING GUIDANCE PAGE 6

FOUR KEY TOPICS PAGE 10

- The Toll Taken By Gun Violence
- How Gun Violence Can Be Prevented
- Role of the NRA
- Second Amendment

THE BASIC MESSAGING MATCH-UP PAGE 32

AUDIENCE VARIATIONS PAGE 34

HIGH-PROFILE GUN VIOLENCE INCIDENTS PAGE 40

TOPIC-BY-TOPIC GUIDANCE PAGE 45

- Shoot First Laws
- Background Checks
- Concealed Carry Reciprocity
- Fast and Furious
- Gun Trafficking
- Assault Weapons

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OVERVIEW:
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

In the second half of 2011, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted an extensive survey research project that took a deep look at American attitudes towards guns, gun violence, and advocacy around gun violence prevention.

The research drew a vivid portrait of the attitudes and opinions of a number of key audiences and offered clear messaging guidance for those advocating more vigorous efforts to build public support for critical gun violence prevention measures.

This messaging guide builds on that research. It has been prepared by a team of communicators who have brought to the table decades of experience advising organizations on message development and strategic communications:

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> **JOHN NEFFINGER AND MATTHEW KOHUT,** principals in KNP Communications, a highly-regarded communications consulting firm. Neffinger and Kohut have more than a decade of experience preparing politicians, corporate executives, and others to communicate effectively.

This guide is intended to help organizations and individuals choose effective arguments and language when communicating with the public on behalf of stronger public policies to prevent gun violence. It is not intended to offer media training advice on topics such as how to prepare for a media appearance or advice about specific media such as how to write a press release or prepare a compelling email message.

Its purpose is to offer clear advice about effective frames and messages across a broad variety of communication opportunities.

We recognize that actors within the gun violence prevention movement don't move in lockstep when it comes to which policy approaches they advocate for and what specific stance they take on any given issue. This guide seeks to provide effective guidance to get groups' message across within the range of policy choices.

We also realize that individual spokespeople and organizations have their own personalities and modes of expression when discussing gun violence and what can be done to prevent it. But, our hope is that this guide will provide a solid foundation for a range of personalities, organizations, and styles and a general sense of direction that communicators find helpful.

The guide is divided into seven sections:

A brief summary of the research findings

General messaging guidance

Four key topics that are at the center of almost any gun violence conversation

A look at the basic messaging match up between gun advocates and gun violence prevention groups

A discussion of audience variations in messaging

Recommendations for dealing with high-profile gun violence incidents

Guidance on a series of individual topics

We encourage you to read through the guide to familiarize yourself with its contents. Our hope is that it will be something you use on a regular basis to address individual topics or situations. We also hope you will provide feedback so that the utility of the guide will grow and improve over time.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

We won't, by any means, attempt a complete report on the research findings. But, it does seem worthwhile to highlight a few of the points most relevant to ongoing messaging efforts.

THE OVERALL LANDSCAPE

1. Advocates for gun violence prevention win the logical debate, but **lose on more emotional terms.**
2. There is an **intensity gap** that has built up over years. In the general public, those who view themselves as supporters of gun rights are more deeply committed to and emotionally invested in their position than those supporting stronger gun violence prevention measures.
3. Generally speaking, people are unfamiliar with – and surprised to learn – **how easy current laws make it** to acquire guns and carry loaded weapons.
4. There is **wide personal experience with gun violence.** 40% of respondents report that they or someone they know personally has been a victim of gun violence.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Three key themes drive the most powerful arguments for gun violence prevention:

   ONE: The serious personal toll that gun violence takes on people's lives.

   TWO: People's right to be free from violence in their communities.

   THREE: The changing nature of weapons towards more powerful, military-style ones that make us less safe.

2. The notion that today's weapons are different in kind from what was available in the past is an especially powerful idea and helps make the case for new levels of concern and scrutiny around access to weapons.

MATCHING MESSAGES TO AUDIENCES

1. On the gun violence issue – as on most public issues – it pays to know as much as possible about who you are talking to.
2. The weight and power of the three key themes we have mentioned **varies substantially by audience.**
3. As a result, when the opportunity arises to target your message, there is great advantage to doing so.
4. For example, when talking to men, it is important to know that they are much more motivated by protecting people from "gun crime" than preventing "gun violence." Women are motivated by both.
5. How to discuss the NRA is another example. It's critical to know that our base supporters are very critical of the NRA's role in enabling gun violence. But, most general audiences view the NRA as a mainstream organization.

ACTORS

THE GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION MOVEMENT

The **gun violence prevention movement is dormant** in the public imagination. That's not to say there isn't an interested audience out there. It's just that there is a major lack of awareness of where to go to become engaged on gun violence prevention.

THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA)

The NRA is **seen as a mainstream organization by most Americans** although elements of our base see its leadership and organizational stance as extreme. Engaging the NRA as if it is one side of a political fight is counterproductive because it feeds into a view of the debate over gun violence as an unengaging interest group conflict.

It is far better to discuss the NRA in terms of the role its officials play in **preventing people and communities from protecting themselves** from the terrible personal toll that gun violence takes on people's lives.

The issue is **how** to talk about the NRA with different audiences, **not how frequently** to discuss the NRA.

Because of the organization's name and identity, it is more powerful – especially when talking to the base – to **discuss the specific NRA rather than the generic "gun lobby."**

LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS

Police and other law enforcement officials have **excellent standing with most Americans** and are a crucial ally to gun violence prevention advocates. For most audiences, the testimony of police and other law enforcement officials is compelling and trustworthy.

What's more, the fact that policies advocated by the NRA put law enforcement officials at risk seriously weakens the NRA's arguments.

POWERFUL FACTS AND IMAGES

1. **Alarming facts** open the door to action. And **powerful stories** put feeling and emotional energy behind those facts.
2. It's not helpful to try to drown your audience in a flurry of facts and statistics. It is far more effective to zero in on a handful of simple facts that are both compelling and memorable.
3. Here are some of the facts that met that test in the research:

    - There are no background checks or ID requirements in most states for private sales, including private sales at gun shows.
    - There are virtually no restrictions on the type of weapons available for purchase in America, including assault weapons and ammunition magazines that store up to 100 bullets and can shoot 20 rounds in 10 seconds.
    - Police and law enforcement officers are more at risk, due to the availability and power of new weapons.

        Reinforcing example: Police forces in places like Chicago and Miami are outfitting officers with assault weapons so that they aren't outgunned by criminals.[1]

4. **It's not just about words.** Powerful and emotionally-engaging images are vitally important reinforcers of strong messages. For example, intimidating images of military-style weapons help bring to life the point that we are dealing with a different situation than in earlier times.

OVERALL MESSAGING GUIDANCE

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

#1: ALWAYS FOCUS ON EMOTIONAL AND VALUE-DRIVEN ARGUMENTS ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE, NOT THE POLITICAL FOOD FIGHT IN WASHINGTON OR WONKY STATISTICS.

It's critical that you ground your messaging around gun violence prevention by making that emotional connection. Don't skip past emotional arguments and lapse into a passionless public policy voice. And don't make the gun violence debate seem as if it is a political "food fight" between two interest groups.

There is a reason why the NRA falls silent at times of high-profile gun violence incidents. The last thing they want is an American conversation centered on the terrible toll that gun violence takes on people's lives.

#2: TELL STORIES WITH IMAGES AND FEELINGS.

Our first task is to draw a vivid portrait and make an emotional connection. We should rely on emotionally powerful language, feelings and images to bring home the terrible impact of gun violence. Compelling facts should be used to back up that emotional narrative, not as a substitute for it.

WARNING: Don't break the power and undermine the value of emotionally powerful images and feelings by appearing squeamish or apologetic in presenting them.

#3: CLAIM MORAL AUTHORITY AND THE MANTLE OF FREEDOM.

We should emphasize that one fundamental freedom every American should have is the freedom to be safe in our homes and neighborhoods – freedom to live our lives without the constant threat of gun violence hanging over our heads.

The NRA likes to talk about its work as the defense of American freedom. Recognize that, depending on the audience, both sides of the debate have the opportunity to claim moral authority. But, don't yield that ground. Fight for it by emphasizing that a reckless disregard for the gun violence that plagues so many people's lives is morally bankrupt and doesn't have anything to do with protecting freedom.

#4: EMPHASIZE THAT EXTRAORDINARILY DANGEROUS, MILITARY-STYLE WEAPONS ARE NOW WITHIN EASY REACH ACROSS AMERICA.

We have to make clear to people that this isn't a conversation about your grandfather's hunting rifle. The fact that military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines are routinely available to people in most states is alarming – and surprising – news to many Americans.

#5: EMPHASIZE THAT AMERICA HAS WEAK GUN LAWS AND DON'T ASSUME THAT PEOPLE KNOW THAT.

It is important to emphasize that current laws allow easy access to guns for criminals, mentally unstable people, and even terrorists. Generally speaking, the public makes the assumption that our nation's gun laws are much stronger than is actually the case.

The truth is, it is far worse than most people think. And when they learn what is really true about our gun laws, it raises serious concerns.

#6: CHALLENGE THE NRA ON YOUR TERMS, NOT THEIRS.

We will discuss the NRA in more detail in the next section. But, at the very outset, it is important to emphasize two critical points:

- Whether to spend much time talking about the NRA depends upon whether we are talking to our base (where an NRA focus is often worthwhile) or broader audiences (where an NRA focus is far less likely to be helpful).
- Even with the base, we need to always connect our comments to the NRA's role in exposing people to needless violence.

Simply "taking on" the NRA as if "defeating the NRA" is our mission never serves our interests. Pointing out the direct link between laws the NRA promotes or blocks and the tragic human impact of gun violence is almost always more effective.

It's effective to emphasize that the vast majority of NRA members are law-abiding gun owners who agree with common sense laws to keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of dangerous people—the NRA's officials and lobbyists are the problem.

LANGUAGE DOS AND DON'TS

DO talk about "preventing gun violence."

DON'T talk about "gun control."

DO advocate for "stronger" gun laws.

DON'T use the term "stricter" gun laws.

FOUR KEY TOPICS

Later in the guide, we offer messaging advice on a series of gun violence prevention topics. In this opening section, we address four critical topics that are at the heart of almost any conversation or debate about gun violence.

On each topic, we cover the following:

- The key principles that should guide our messaging strategies (and, where appropriate, the most dangerous messaging pitfalls to avoid).
- "Back of the envelope" facts that are especially helpful to have at hand. (These aren't a comprehensive statement of the most critical facts about the issue – just a quick guide to a few items with powerful communications potential.)
- Examples of powerful language to use.
- Examples of ineffective language to avoid.
- "When they say x, you say y" guidance on arguments and counter-arguments.

TOPIC:
THE TOLL TAKEN BY GUN VIOLENCE

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

#1: ALWAYS START WITH THE PAIN AND ANGUISH THAT GUN VIOLENCE BRINGS INTO PEOPLE'S LIVES.

The death, injury and heartache caused by gun violence are devastating – and that's what makes people care about it and want to do something to end it. The threat and reality of gun violence disrupt and send fear rippling through whole communities.

It is a stark daily reality in the lives of millions of Americans. Perhaps most unsettling of all is the fact that these levels of violence, fear and turmoil are so unnecessary. We know what can be done to lessen and prevent gun violence, but it takes political will and organized public pressure to get it done.

#2: USE STATISTICS TO REINFORCE AN EMOTIONAL ARGUMENT, NOT TO REPLACE IT.

Statistics, properly used, can be a powerful way to make people understand the human reach and impact of gun violence in America. But they should always be used to undergird an emotionally persuasive case.

Never let a dry recitation of the facts disguise the fact that you are deeply saddened and moved by the terrible human toll that gun violence claims.

#3: USE IMAGES THAT BRING YOUR MESSAGE HOME.

Even when you are only using words to make your case, use them to draw a persuasive portrait of the way gun violence disrupts people's lives. And, wherever possible, strengthen your message with compelling images.

#4: TELL STORIES WITH FEELING AND ENERGY.

It's not enough to have a persuasive story at hand, you have to tell that story in a way that comes across. That means being emotionally present as you tell it – and conveying it not only as if it's the first time your listeners have heard it, but as if it's the first time you've conveyed it.

#5: IF YOU SPEAK IN A VICTIM'S VOICE, MAKE YOUR STORY ACCESSIBLE, NOT EXCLUSIONARY.

Many of the most active advocates and voices in the gun violence prevention movement are people who have personally lived through a life-changing gun violence experience. That painful reality gives such spokespeople special moral authority.

But, it's crucial how a person coming from such a personal place conveys his or her story. If there is a "you will never walk in my shoes" element to a victim's presentation, it can have an unintentional distancing impact on those on the receiving end of the communication.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

Unless we act, more than 120,000 people will be killed by guns during the next presidential term of office.[2]

40% of Americans have themselves or personally know someone who has been a victim of gun violence.[3]

Between 1955 and 1975, the Vietnam War killed over 58,000 American soldiers – less than the number of civilians killed with guns in the U.S. in an average two-year period.[4]

The United States has 5% of the world's population and 50% of the world's guns.[5]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



It breaks my heart that every day in our country (state or city) children wake up worried and frightened about getting shot."



Just imagine the pain that a mother or father feels when their young child is gunned down."



The real outrage – the thing that makes this violence so unforgivable – is that we know how to stop it and we're not getting it done."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



There's a clear body of research demonstrating the high social cost of gun violence."



The policy outcomes we're after are the ones that can have the most beneficial impact on the rates of violence among the most affected populations."



Of course, gun violence affects people's lives. But, it also has a devastating economic impact to the tune of over $100 billion a year. That's a number that should get every American taxpayer's attention."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENT

SILENCE (If you pay close attention, you'll notice that our opponents seldom address gun violence directly.)

BEST WAY TO COUNTER

You don't hear much from the NRA and their allies when violence strikes. That's because they can't possibly defend their reckless agenda in the face of such terrible human pain and suffering.

If an honest citizen with a gun were present, this might not have happened.

There's not a shred of credible evidence that more guns and more shooting save people's lives. More guns and more shooting mean more tragedy.

TOPIC:
HOW GUN VIOLENCE CAN BE PREVENTED

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

#1: START WITH PEOPLE, NOT LAWS.

In discussing why so many people are needlessly dying from gun violence, don't fall immediately into a discussion of laws. Start with the fact that people are needlessly dying as a result of gun violence. Laws matter because, if they're strong enough, they can keep people alive.

#2: MAKE IT CLEAR THAT WEAK AND RECKLESS POLICIES PUT WEAPONS IN THE HANDS OF DANGEROUS PEOPLE.

It doesn't have to be this way. Always emphasize the needless nature of gun violence. Make it clear that gun violence is rampant in America because sensible gun laws have been undone, reckless new measures have been passed, and glaring loopholes in our current laws have been allowed to remain open.

#3: WITH BASE AUDIENCES, EMPHASIZE THE UNIQUELY DESTRUCTIVE ROLE THAT THE NRA PLAYS.

When talking to base audiences, put responsibility for the stunning lack of common sense in America's gun laws where it belongs – at the feet of the NRA. For decades, NRA officials, the firearms industry, and their allies on Capitol Hill have waged a relentless effort to gut common sense gun laws and to pass reckless measures that put more people at risk. This has been matched by an equally vigorous effort to hamper the enforcement of gun laws at every turn. For example, the NRA has advocated for guns in sensitive places, such as in national parks,[6] bars, and college campuses,[7] and for loaded gun carrying without a permit.[8]

#4: EMPHASIZE THE EXTRAORDINARY SCALE AND SCOPE OF WEAPONS THAT ARE LEGALLY AVAILABLE IN AMERICA.

Make sure people understand the ease with which even the most dangerous of weapons can be acquired in the United States. There are few meaningful restrictions on the scope and scale of weapons that can be legally bought across America – including deadly, high-capacity military-style weapons.

#5: BE CLEAR THAT WE KNOW HOW TO PROTECT PEOPLE FROM GUN VIOLENCE, WHICH MAKES FAILURE TO ACT INEXCUSABLE.

This isn't a situation where we don't know what to do or are stymied in the face of an intractable problem. We know what it would take to prevent so many people from dying or being injured by gun violence. But those steps aren't happening because of a failure of leadership.

People will keep dying and being maimed for no good reason until concerted public pressure forces elected officials to act.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

The U.S. has the highest rate of firearm deaths among 25 high-income nations.[9]

More children are shot and killed in the U.S. than anywhere else in the industrialized world. In fact, the overall firearm-related death rate among U.S. children under the age of 15 is nearly 12 times higher than that among children in 25 other industrialized nations *combined*.[10]

Americans own far more firearms – including military-style weapons and handguns – than people in other industrialized nations. We have 5% of the world's population and 50% of the world's guns.[11]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



There's no mystery to why so many people are dying and being maimed by guns in America. We have some of the weakest gun laws in the world."



Just imagine the pain that a mother or father feels when their young child is gunned down."



The NRA wants powerful, dangerous weapons in every neighborhood. That's not freedom, it's fear."



Our police officers are at risk every day when they confront criminals who are armed to the teeth with military-style weapons that are freely available."



Don't believe for a minute that this is about your grandfather's hunting rifle. We're talking about assault weapons built to do the most damage possible in the shortest amount of time."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



Our experience promoting gun violence prevention measures in Congress and state legislatures has been that we always run into a brick wall of opposition built by the NRA."



We're doing our best to pass stronger laws, but the NRA is incredibly powerful and too few politicians have the courage to take them on."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

The best way to reduce gun violence is to enforce the laws that are on the books, not pass more unenforceable ones.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

Our police officers work hard every day to enforce the laws we have. But they are hamstrung by the gaps and loopholes in our laws that flood our neighborhoods with powerful, dangerous weapons. As the NRA's lobbyists work to weaken our gun laws, they are making the job of the police harder and putting all of us at risk.

If we want to reduce gun deaths, we should emphasize gun safety education and training.

I'm all for gun safety. I'm also for stronger laws and tougher enforcement. That's how you save people's lives.

TOPIC:
ROLE OF THE NRA

When talking about the NRA and its role in the gun violence conversation in America, it is critical to be alert to audience differentiations. The fact is, our base supporters and the general public have fundamentally different views of the organization and its role in American life.

When talking to our base, it is both worthwhile and effective to challenge directly **the role the NRA plays in exposing people to senseless gun violence.** But, even in this context, we need to be alert to two concerns:

- We need to make it clear that we're taking on the NRA because we are alarmed by the way it blocks effective efforts to end gun violence and advances dangerous laws and policies **that put people at risk.**
- We need to avoid being drawn into a contest that looks like a struggle between competing interest groups rather than a determined effort to protect people from gun violence.

When we are communicating with the general public, we need to be aware of the fact that, beyond our base, people have a positive impression of the organization and its role.

Some organizations may choose to take on the long-term task of redefining the general public's relatively benign sense of the NRA and its role. But, unless you've made that your mission, we should be aware that, on today's facts, framing our arguments in "anti-NRA" terms for those broader audiences is, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counter-productive.

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

#1: EVEN WITH OUR BASE, IT'S NEVER JUST ABOUT THE NRA. IT'S CRITICAL TO CIRCLE BACK TO THE DESTRUCTIVE ROLE NRA OFFICIALS PLAY IN EXPOSING PEOPLE TO SENSELESS GUN VIOLENCE.

There is clear benefit in challenging the power, tactics and policies of the NRA when talking to our base. But, because of the outsized role the NRA plays in determining how America deals with guns, there can sometimes be a tendency to use a kind of communications shorthand focusing on the NRA itself. It is essential to not skip past connecting our concerns about the NRA to a much more fundamental concern: people who are dying every day because NRA officials and lobbyists stand in the way of common sense measures that could keep people safe.

The question we need to focus on isn't "What are we going to do about the NRA?" It's "How are we going to push past the NRA lobbyists and finally deal with the terrible toll that gun violence is taking on people's lives?"

#2: EMPHASIZE THAT NRA LOBBYISTS HAVE NOT ONLY GUTTED COMMON SENSE LAWS, BUT ACTIVELY PROMOTED RECKLESS MEASURES THAT PUT MORE PEOPLE AT RISK.

It's easy to fall into talking about the NRA as a force that blocks effective gun violence prevention measures from being enacted. That understates their role. The NRA's lobbyists have actively gutted sensible measures that were once on the books. And they have relentlessly—and, far too often, successfully—pressed for passage of reckless new laws. In addition, of course, they have worked around the clock to hamper and block the enforcement of America's gun laws.

For example, the NRA has advocated for the following policies:

- A federal law allowing gun carrying in America's national parks;[12]
- A federal law allowing guns on Amtrak trains;[13]
- Congressional appropriations riders that prohibit policy makers, law enforcement, researchers, and advocates from accessing crime gun trace data;[14] and
- State laws that allow people to carry loaded handguns in bars, schools and places of worship.[15]

#3: AVOID BEING DRAWN INTO A HEATED INTEREST GROUP VERSUS INTEREST GROUP BATTLE WITH THE NRA.

NRA officials would like nothing better than to keep provoking a political food fight between themselves and interest groups pushing for "gun control." That's the framework that serves their interests, not ours.

It draws attention away from the human tragedy of gun violence, drains the emotion from the conversation, and disengages people who have no interest in being dragged into such a disheartening exchange.

We want to keep the focus on what really matters – the pain and turmoil that gun violence brings into people's lives and the indefensible ways NRA lobbyists stand in the way of efforts to end that violence.

#4: REMEMBER THAT MOST AMERICANS CONSIDER THE NRA TO BE A MAINSTREAM ORGANIZATION.

When we move beyond our base, the view that gun violence prevention advocates have of the NRA and its role doesn't align with public perceptions. When asked which of the following statements comes closest to their own opinion, 35% of registered voters chose the first and 57% selected the second.

> "The NRA is an extreme organization with too much power in Washington that blocks any attempts to reduce gun violence in America."
>
> "The NRA is a mainstream organization that protects our Second Amendment rights and provides information about gun safety."

But, there is a sharp ideological divide. People who consider themselves liberals choose the "extreme" statement by a 2 to 1 margin (60% to 27%). Conservatives are even more dramatically tilted in the other direction. 81% choose the mainstream description and only 13% the extreme one. Moderates are split right down the middle.

All of this is to say that, outside of our base, an easy assumption that people think of the NRA as an out-of-control, extreme organization would be misplaced.

#5: ALWAYS DRAW DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN NRA OFFICIALS AND THE ORGANIZATION'S RANK-AND-FILE MEMBERS.

As numerous polls in recent years have shown, there is often a stunning gap between the extreme positions taken by NRA officials and the opinions of rank-and-file NRA members. That's a divide that should be quite troubling to the NRA.

What it means for us is that we should avoid lumping NRA lobbyists and the members of the NRA into the same category. And, where possible, we should point to the support that common sense measures like universal background checks have even within the ranks of the NRA.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

The NRA's own members are often at odds with the group's extreme leadership. For example, a 2012 poll for Mayors Against Illegal Guns[16] revealed that:

74% of NRA members support requiring background checks of anyone purchasing a gun.

87% of NRA members agree that support for Second Amendment rights goes hand-in-hand with keeping guns out of the hands of criminals.

75% of NRA members believe permits should only be granted to applicants who have not committed any violent misdemeanors, including assault.

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



The NRA officials like to talk about freedom. Well, how about our right to be free from the gun violence killing our children and ravaging our neighborhoods."



There's a reason why NRA officials go silent when tragedy strikes. Nothing they say can explain why they constantly block steps that could prevent gun violence from tearing people's lives apart."



We need politicians who care about the pain and turmoil gun violence creates rather than worry about irritating the NRA's lobbyists."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



The NRA is an extremist organization and they have to be stopped."



No matter what the NRA says, we're not trying to take anyone's gun away."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENT

The NRA is about one thing – defending American freedom.

BEST WAY TO COUNTER

We all love our freedom—including being free from gun violence and all the pain it brings into people's lives.

We're defending the Constitution, which protects our right to bear arms.

Maybe they missed the Declaration of Independence, which defends life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If it weren't for the NRA, elites in our country would be infringing on our rights every day.

The NRA's high-powered lobbyists aren't defending everyday folks. They're a giant operation defending powerful gun manufacturers at every turn.

TOPIC:
SECOND AMENDMENT

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

#1: DON'T LET OUR OPPONENTS OVERSTATE WHAT THE SUPREME COURT'S RULINGS DID.

Many of our opponents seek to interpret recent Supreme Court decisions as a "game over" moment that rules out a wide range of effective measures to prevent gun violence. That's simply not the case.

Yes, there is a right to possess a handgun in the home for self-defense, but the Court also indicated support for sensible regulations on the types of weapons, who can possess them and the places where they are permitted.

#2: EMPHASIZE THAT THE SUPREME COURT'S RULINGS DO NOT, BY ANY MEANS, RULE OUT SMART GUN REGULATIONS.

The Supreme Court's rulings do not prevent effective gun regulations. Far from it.

In the *District of Columbia v. Heller* ruling, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote: "Like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited…nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms."[17]

And, since *Heller*, courts nationwide have found a wide variety of firearms laws constitutional because they can help prevent gun deaths, injuries, and crimes in communities across the country.

#3: LOOK FORWARD. DON'T RE-LITIGATE THE COURT'S RULINGS.

In discussing the Second Amendment and the Court's rulings, it's important to look to the future – emphasizing that gun violence prevention groups are confidently moving forward. We should emphasize in our public communications that the Court's rulings have left plenty of room for effective efforts to prevent gun violence.

In fact, the Court made it clear that the right secured by the Second Amendment is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose.[18]

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the Court ruled, for the first time, that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to possess a handgun in the home for self-defense.[19]

In *McDonald v. Chicago*, the Court ruled that its interpretation of the Second Amendment extended to state and local gun laws, not just those in the District of Columbia and other federal enclaves.[20]

Since *Heller*, courts across the nation have found a wide range of firearms laws constitutional.[21]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



In the court of law and the court of public opinion, we will never yield in our efforts to use strong laws to protect people from gun violence."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



The legal interpretation of Second Amendment protections is complex. The nuances of these decisions will take years to sort out."



We're not trying to take away anyone's Second Amendment rights. That has never been our goal."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

The Supreme Court has ruled very clearly. It's time for our opponents to stop advancing laws and regulations that they know violate the Constitution.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

The gun lobby is trying to use these court cases to wipe out a whole generation of gun violence prevention laws that save people's lives. We won't let them get away with it.

I don't care what they say. Anti-gun people are trying to take away our Second Amendment rights.

The big Second Amendment issues have been settled here. This is about taking reasonable steps to keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of dangerous people.

THE BASIC MESSAGING MATCH-UP

THE CORE GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION MESSAGE

Gun violence takes a terrible personal toll, claiming over 30,000 lives every year. For every person who dies from a gunshot, two others are wounded. We all hear about mass shootings like in Tucson or Aurora, but senseless gun violence happens every day to people we never hear about.

Mothers and fathers across America wouldn't be suffering the pain and heartache that come with shootings if we had stronger gun laws on the books. But, rather than working for stronger laws, powerful forces in our society are driving to weaken, gut and obliterate those laws. Their recklessness puts our families and our law enforcement officers at risk.

We're fighting for our freedom – freedom to be safe and secure in our communities, from the violence plaguing our neighborhoods, freedom from the fear and anguish that gun violence brings into our lives.

Every day, more and more Americans fall victim to the NRA's extreme, fear-based agenda. They want any gun to be available to anyone, no questions asked. They want powerful military-style weapons to be in every community.

Our country is headed in the wrong direction on guns. Nearly anyone including terrorists, convicted criminals or the dangerously mentally ill can buy a gun from a private party seller. In most states, there are no background checks or even proper ID required for people who buy guns from private sellers, including at gun shows.

Federally, there are virtually no restrictions on the type of weapons available for purchase in America including assault rifles and ammunition magazines that store up to 100 cartridges and can shoot 20 rounds in 10 seconds.[22] And only a handful of states ban such weapons and magazines.[23]

To make matters worse, the NRA keeps forcing reckless laws through in state after state – from Shoot First statutes that encourage gun-toting vigilantism to open and concealed carry laws that allow loaded weapons in even the most inappropriate places.

The NRA's dream is to have weaker laws . . . easy access to guns for those who should never have one . . . increasingly more dangerous weapons. It all adds up to putting more and more people at risk. None of this will change until we push back, break the NRA's grip, and demand effective action to reduce the needless toll that gun violence is taking on people's lives.

THE CORE GUN RIGHTS MESSAGE

American freedom is under attack. Media and political elites in our country have an anti-gun agenda that they are trying to force down our throats. These anti-gunners will do anything to attack your right to keep and bear arms. They think the Second Amendment is a government-granted privilege. You and I know that it is a God-given birthright – one the NRA and our allies will never relinquish.

Our opponents see an America where only criminals have guns . . . where defending your family against a rapist, a murderer or a thug is illegal . . . where women are left defenseless on America's streets and even in their own homes.

We have a right to protect our families and will never yield to those out to create an America with more crime and less freedom.

The anti-gun elites in this country want people to believe that guns are evil. They say we cling to our guns and our religion. You bet we do. And we will never yield as they try to force us to register and relinquish our weapons. We will always insist on our right to be responsible for our own safety, protection, and survival.

Every so-called "reform" they advocate, every "sensible measure" they put forward is just one more step toward their real goal – an America with fewer guns and less freedom.

Fortunately, millions of Americans are alert to their schemes and irrevocably opposed to their efforts to undermine American freedom. We will never yield an inch to their anti-gun agenda. And any politician who acts to put our freedoms at risk does so at his or her own peril.

AUDIENCE VARIATIONS

The guidance offered throughout this document is intended to be solid, general messaging guidance – useful and effective in a wide range of situations. However, we always want to take advantage of opportunities to shape and nuance our message when we know we are talking to a specific targeted audience.

So, with the survey data as our guide, this section of the guide looks at the places where message variations for different audiences are the most critical:

- Talking to our base
- Differences by gender/age combinations
- Communicating with minority audiences

SOME KEY METRICS

In the sections below, we will use shorthand to describe various audiences' responses to a handful of key survey questions. Here is the complete wording of the survey questions referred to by this shorthand.

GUN LAWS SHOULD BE STRONGER: "In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of guns should be made stronger, less strong, or kept as they are now?"

NRA EXTREME OR MAINSTREAM: "Please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view even if neither is exactly right.

> The NRA is an extreme organization with too much power in Washington that blocks any attempts to reduce gun violence in America.
>
> The NRA is a mainstream organization that protects our Second Amendment rights and provides information about gun safety."

BEST REASON TO ACT

Respondents were asked which of the four following reasons was the most important in their own mind as a reason to do something about reducing gun violence in America:

> "The NRA and the gun lobby are too powerful and have too much influence over politicians and laws without anyone to stop them." (Our shorthand: NRA too powerful)
>
> "Every death from gun violence is a tragedy and no family should have to go through that pain." (Our shorthand: tragedy)
>
> "All Americans should have the freedom to be safe in their own communities." (Our shorthand: free to be safe)
>
> "It is too easy these days for dangerous people to get their hands on dangerous and powerful weapons." (Our shorthand: easy and dangerous)

EXPOSED TO GUN VIOLENCE: "Have you or anyone you know personally ever been a victim of gun violence?"

TALKING TO OUR BASE

DATA POINTS

There are a couple of different ways to identify what we might call a base audience for gun violence prevention. One is those respondents who identified themselves as liberal and the other – more specific to the issue at hand – is the 35% of the respondents who agreed that the NRA is an extreme organization.

We report below on both audiences. Our base is:

- **Far more likely to believe gun laws should be stronger.** (51% for all respondents, 66% for liberals, 80% for NRA is extreme.)
- **More likely to consider the NRA extreme.** (35% for all respondents, 60% for liberals.)
- **Less focused on "free to be safe."** (32% for all respondents, 18% for liberals, 17% for NRA is extreme)
- **More focused on "NRA too powerful."** (13% all respondents, 25% liberals, 26% NRA is extreme.)
- **Slightly more open to personal tragedy as a reason to act.** (19% for all respondents, 25% for liberals, 23% for NRA is extreme.)

MESSAGING GUIDEPOSTS

1. Feel free to be more pointed and skeptical about the NRA and its motives.
2. Still avoid a political food fight framework. Always oppose the NRA because it recklessly exposes people to terrible gun violence.
3. Focus on the link between the NRA and easy access to guns for dangerous people.
4. Don't dwell on the "free to be safe" argument.
5. Give people places where they can step in and have an impact. (opposing a policy that puts people at risk, exposing an NRA outrage, etc.)
6. Talk about a hard fight, but don't make it seem like a hopeless one.

TALKING TO MINORITY AUDIENCES

DATA POINTS

In terms of sample size and reliable data, the clearest divide in the research is between white and non-white respondents. Here is what stands out:

- **A majority of non-white audiences report being or personally knowing someone who was a victim of gun violence.** (39% for white and 51% for non-white respondents.)
- Non-white audiences are **more than twice as likely to say they are likely to take action** on reducing gun violence. (20% for white and 48% for non-white respondents.)
- **Support for making gun laws stronger is substantially higher** among non-white audiences. (44% for white and 71% for non-white respondents.)
- Non-whites are **more likely to consider the NRA extreme.** (32% for white and 45% for non-white respondents.)
- But, there is little difference when it comes to which reason for acting against gun violence is most important. See the chart below:

REASON	WHITE RESPONDENTS	NON-WHITE RESPONDENTS
Free to be safe	32%	27%
Easy and dangerous	27%	29%
Tragedy	20%	24%
NRA too powerful	13%	15%

MESSAGING GUIDEPOSTS

1. Be alert that it is more likely than not you are talking to someone who has personal experience with gun violence.
2. Know that you go into the conversation with a strong presumption that the person not only favors stronger gun laws, but may be interested in acting against gun violence.
3. Keep a balance between the "easy and dangerous" and "free to be safe" arguments just as you must with all audiences.
4. Don't make it about the NRA. Make it personal.

AUDIENCE VARIATIONS ACROSS GENDER/AGE GROUPS

DATA POINTS

- Women are far more likely than men to express a willingness to take action to **reduce gun violence.**
- But, when the wording shifts to **reducing gun *crime***, men (especially older men) put themselves strongly back in the picture.
- A single-minded focus on gun crime doesn't make sense when talking to women, but it is worthwhile to occasionally work in the phrase "gun crime and violence."
- Women are far more likely than men to support making gun laws stronger.
- Women, especially older women, are more likely to consider the NRA extreme.
- Men gravitate to the "free to be safe" argument. Women to the "easy and dangerous" argument.
- Younger women are far more likely to report personal experience with gun violence. (56% for young women, in the 30s for all other audiences.)

MESSAGING GUIDEPOSTS

1. Remember that men, especially **older men, more easily adopt the mantle of crime fighter** than someone concerned about gun violence.
2. Appeal to men by emphasizing our right to be safe from violence in our communities.
3. Appeal to women more out of concern that it's too easy for dangerous people to get their hands on dangerous weapons.
4. Remember that, for a majority of young women, their attitudes towards gun violence stem, in part, from direct personal experience.

COMMUNICATING TO AUDIENCES THAT DISAGREE

We've talked about how to persuade different types of audiences. What about situations where you find yourself communicating to individuals or audiences who are openly hostile to your point of view?

DATA POINTS

There are a lot of hostile audiences out there. Some regard any discussion of gun violence prevention as merely a pretext to infringe on their Second Amendment freedoms and/or way of life. Even mainstream audiences may have deep sympathies for these arguments. Although many Americans support our positions, some of the arguments that stand in the way of stronger gun violence prevention laws also have broad mainstream appeal. A person advocating from an NRA perspective would find substantial public agreement with assertions such as these:

- Gun violence prevention laws only affect law-abiding citizens.
- Criminals get guns illegally now and they will get guns illegally in the future.
- We don't need more gun laws, we just need to enforce the laws on the books so criminals can't get guns so easily.

Note there is an inherent contradiction in these positions—people see laws as ineffective at stopping criminals from getting guns, and yet say that stronger enforcement of existing laws will do just that. Regardless, it is important to anticipate the "better enforcement" argument from our opponents.

MESSAGING GUIDEPOSTS

There are a number of things you can do when confronted by an audience that may be unfriendly or even hostile to your arguments.

1. Remember, your goal is not to convince hostile audiences that you are right; your goal is to establish that you are a reasonable person who understands their point of view. Time spent demonstrating that you understand and sympathize with their concerns is time well spent.
2. When fielding a hostile question, always begin your answer by identifying a point (or points) of agreement with your audience. Examples of connecting language might include:
    - We all deserve the right to be safe and free.
    - For lots of Americans, when they were growing up, their dad had a hunting rifle. There's a tradition of gun ownership in this country that we can all respect.
    - Our Constitution and our laws are what keep us safe and free.
    - We can all agree that military-style weapons should not be in the hands of criminals, terrorists, or people who are dangerously mentally ill.
3. Keep in mind the previous guidance about separating NRA members from their officials and lobbyists.
4. Remember that protecting people from gun crime is more appealing to male audiences than preventing gun violence.

HIGH-PROFILE GUN VIOLENCE INCIDENTS

OVERVIEW

The debate over gun violence in America is periodically punctuated by high-profile gun violence incidents, including Columbine, Virginia Tech, Tucson, the Trayvon Martin killing, Aurora, and Oak Creek. When an incident such as these attracts sustained media attention, it creates a unique climate for our communications efforts.

The purpose of this section of our guide is to present some advice about how to make sure our communications are powerful, impactful and appropriate to these unique circumstances.

We believe that the following nine guideposts should be helpful both when we encounter high-profile incidents that attract national attention – and when a similar dynamic occurs in a local community.

#1: DON'T HESITATE TO SPEAK OUT.

There can be a tendency to adopt a quiet "wait and see" attitude when a high-profile gun violence incident happens. The truth is, the most powerful time to communicate is when concern and emotions are running at their peak. While we always want to be respectful of the situation, a self-imposed period of silence is never necessary.

#2: EXPRESS CONCERN FOR VICTIMS (WITHOUT A "BUT").

It's appropriate to open with an expression of concern for the victims and their families.

> *"No family should ever have to go through what the families of these victims are going through right now. Our hearts go out to them."*

However, all too often, such expressions of sympathy are followed by a "but" statement. (But, the real issue here is . . . But, what we have to focus on is . . .But, what I want to draw your attention to is . . . etc.)

That has two negative consequences. The "but" makes the expression of concern seem less heartfelt and more like something we had to get out of the way before getting to what we really wanted to say. "But" can be read as a way for the speaker to say "I didn't really mean what I just said."

And, the "but" breaks the link between the violence people are shocked by and the next thing we're about to say. Our goal is to establish that link, not break it.

So, we need to use language where our message flows from the expression of concern into our broader argument. It can't be an abrupt pivot. In these situations, expressions such as "look," "actually," and "that's why" work a lot better than "but."

> *"Losing a child, a mother or a husband is every family's worst nightmare. That's why we have to tell our political leaders we won't wait for the next tragedy before they act to prevent the gun violence that's tearing people's lives apart."*

#3: DON'T ASSUME THE FACTS – AND DON'T WAIT FOR THEM.

Experience tells us that the specific facts of a high-profile gun incident are revealed over time. If we jump to conclusions about those details, we could find ourselves at odds with reality as events unfold.

So, the smartest thing to do is avoid linking our message and arguments to any one set of partially-revealed facts. We shouldn't assume the facts.

But, we also shouldn't argue ourselves into inaction while we await clarity about details.

The clearest course is to advance our core message about preventing gun violence independent of facts that may shift on us over time. ("While we don't know the specifics of this tragedy, we know far too many people are killed by weak gun laws in this country.")

Of course, once a fact is clearly established, it makes sense to rely on it to advance your case.

#4: ASK HARD QUESTIONS.

One way to link our arguments to an event without being trapped by shifting circumstances is to ask questions – ones that point to approaches and policies that we favor, but that resonate with special emotional power at the time of a high-profile shooting.

Where did the gun come from? Did the shooter have to undergo a background check before he got the gun? Did the shooter have a permit for the gun? Did the shooter own more than one gun? Did he have high capacity ammunition magazines with him? How many rounds did he have on him? Did the shooter have to observe any kind of waiting period before he got his hands on the guns? Or did he get them right away no questions asked?

#5: NEVER APOLOGIZE.

The worst thing to do in a situation like this is to apologize or disclaim an unworthy motivation. ("The last thing I want to do is politicize this situation" . . . "I'm not trying to take anyone's gun away" . . . "I know this is a time for mourning and reflection, but")

Your audience can't be comfortable with what you're saying if you signal your own discomfort.

#6: RECOGNIZE THAT YOUR AUDIENCE HAS BROADENED.

A high-profile gun violence incident temporarily draws more people into the conversation about gun violence. It opens the eyes and ears of folks who, in more "normal" circumstances, don't pay much attention to the issue of gun violence prevention. (A parallel is the expanded audience that relief groups have when a tsunami or devastating hurricane hit.)

That means we should seek out opportunities to engage these newly accessible audiences – through mainstream media appearances, online outreach, and other channels. But, it also means we have to be alert to the differences in talking to our established base and to the "uninitiated."

When talking to our base, the emphasis should be on the need for urgent action to respond to the crisis at hand. We're picking up a long-running conversation with a special focus and intensity.

But, when talking to broader audiences, we want to make sure we meet them where they are. That means emphasizing emotion over policy prescriptions, keeping our facts and our case simple and direct, and avoiding arguments that leave people thinking they don't know enough about the topic to weigh in.

#7: SEEK A LONGER-TERM RELATIONSHIP IN A PERIOD OF HIGH ATTENTION.

In terms of building support, our goal at moments such as this should be to make a connection with someone that will be sustainable after the individual incident fades from memory. Among other things, that means framing our calls to action more broadly than a response to the individual situation at hand.

If we convince someone to act quickly in response to what has happened, we need to move just as quickly to broaden the conversation and pivot to a longer-term commitment to ending gun violence.

#8: DON'T LET POLICYSPEAK DRAIN THE EMOTION FROM THE MOMENT.

There is often a compelling case to be made for immediate action, pivoting from the emotion of a high-profile incident to calls for legislative action or specific policy changes. Those who seek to make that pivot have to be careful not to drain the emotional power out of the moment.

An emotionally-driven conversation about what can be done to prevent incidents such as the one at hand is engaging. A dry conversation about legislative process and policy is far less engaging.

Choice of language, constantly connecting the policy to how it impacts people's lives, and avoiding being dragged into the nuances of specific policy prescriptions are all critical here.

There is a balance to be struck between broadening public engagement at moments like this and advancing specific policies.

#9: CHALLENGE THE NRA'S SILENCE.

The NRA's communications stance during high-profile gun violence incidents is easy to describe: They go silent.

That's because they know they have nothing to gain from being dragged into a conversation where both the facts and the emotional energy work against them.

We should freely and openly challenge their silent treatment approach.

> *"It's no accident that, at times like this, the NRA disappears into the woodwork. That's because they know that their reckless agenda is indefensible especially in the face of this kind of tragedy. That's why they've gone into hiding."*

TOPIC-BY-TOPIC GUIDANCE

TOPIC:
SHOOT FIRST LAWS

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

These laws raise a frequently-confronted question. Should we "buy into" the language and positioning of our opponents or seek to define the debate with our own language?

Their proponents call these statutes Stand Your Ground laws. But, **Shoot First** and **Kill at Will** laws are far more accurate and persuasive. If a phrase such as "Stand Your Ground" laws gains broad usage among both proponents and the media, we may need to use it as a reference point. But, we should quickly shift to language that positions our argument more persuasively.

Another phrase that we should avoid whenever possible is "duty to retreat." It may be an established legal principle, but in the public square, it sounds weak and hard to defend.

ONE MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THESE LAWS ARE NEEDLESS IN THE FACE OF AMERICA'S ROBUST SELF-DEFENSE LAWS.

Since the founding of our country Americans have enjoyed the right to self defense. We have also repeatedly and resoundingly rejected vigilantism. American law has long acknowledged our right to defend ourselves in our own homes.[24] The law also recognizes our right to defend ourselves outside the home if we are in situations where the threat cannot be safely escaped.

So-called Stand Your Ground laws recklessly distort these well-worn self-defense principles, creating situations where a person can escape legal responsibility for his actions simply by claiming that he felt threatened.

TWO EMPHASIZE THAT THESE LAWS ESCALATE EVERYDAY CONFLICTS INTO LETHAL EVENTS.

One of the biggest dangers with Shoot First laws is that they make it frighteningly easy for simple misunderstandings to become lethal events. With these laws, everyday conflicts can now escalate more easily into deadly shootouts and killers can escape prosecution just by claiming they felt threatened.

THREE MAKE IT CLEAR THAT SHOOT FIRST LAWS PROVIDE COVER FOR GUN-TOTING VIGILANTES.

Many of these laws give drug dealers, domestic abusers, and other gun-toting vigilantes a free pass and more leeway than on-duty police officers and soldiers on the field of battle. Self defense should not be judged only from the view of the shooter. Otherwise, anyone can claim to have felt threatened and, as long as there are no surviving witnesses, he can all too readily escape responsibility for a reckless act of violence.

FOUR LET PEOPLE KNOW THAT PASSAGE OF SHOOT FIRST LAWS IS PART OF A CONCERTED NRA CAMPAIGN.

The NRA forced the first "Shoot First" law through in Florida in 2005. And now, thanks to a sustained NRA campaign to impose these laws, 26 states currently have some variation of a Florida-style "Shoot First" law.[25] It's all part of an active campaign to weaken our gun laws and expose more and more Americans to the tragic personal toll that gun violence is taking on our communities.

We need to get these dangerous laws off the books and out of our lives.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

Across the country, 26 states have some kind of "Shoot First" law on the books.[26]

In some states, "Shoot First" laws give untrained civilians more leeway in the use of force than an on-duty police officer or a soldier on the front lines in Afghanistan.[27]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



These reckless laws have gun-toting vigilantes roaming the streets making all of us less safe in our own neighborhoods."



Who could think it makes sense to give untrained people more leeway in the use of force than we give on-duty police officers or soldiers at war?"



All a person that shoots someone has to do is claim that they felt threatened at the time and they literally get away with murder."



Now anyone with a gun can claim they were afraid and get away with murder."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



It has long been established in law that, outside the home, a person has a 'duty to retreat' from a confrontation if he or she can do so safely."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

They want us to remain unarmed and defenseless against criminals and thugs.

That's crazy. These laws give criminals, drug dealers and other thugs the ability to get away with murder.

The right to self-defense doesn't end at someone's front door.

Everyone has the right to self defense. Shoot First gives vigilantes a pass when they kill innocent people.

If we don't pass and preserve self-defense laws, innocent people will be left in danger.

These reckless laws don't protect innocent people. They allow out-of-control vigilantes to gun innocent people down.

No one can tell you that you have a "duty to retreat" when threatened by a murderer, rapist, or robber.

I agree. No one has a duty to retreat if they've been cornered by a criminal. But, if you can avoid a confrontation, it's not just the legal thing to do, it's by far the safest thing to do.

TOPIC:
BACKGROUND CHECKS

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

ONE

EMPHASIZE BACKGROUND CHECKS AS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL WAYS TO KEEP GUNS OUT OF THE HANDS OF DANGEROUS PEOPLE.

Sometimes the simplest ideas can have the most dramatic impact. Since its launch in 1998, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) has blocked more than 1.6 million permit applications and gun sales to felons, the seriously mentally ill, drug abusers and other dangerous people who are prohibited by federal law from possessing firearms.[28]

Completing the necessary paperwork for a background check takes a gun buyer mere minutes, and more than 91 percent of these electronic screens are completed instantaneously.[29]

TWO POINT OUT THAT BACKGROUND CHECKS WON'T HAVE THEIR FULL IMPACT UNTIL EVERY GUN SOLD IN AMERICA IS SUBJECT TO A BACKGROUND CHECK.

A critical flaw in the background check system is the loophole that results in two out of every five guns sold in America changing hands without a background check.

What we need is a background check for every gun sold in America.

This loophole is known as the "private sale loophole." The law allows occasional sellers not "engaged in the business" of selling firearms to sell guns without a license–and without processing any paperwork.[30] At gun shows and in other settings, many sellers abuse that loophole by calling themselves occasional sellers.

We should emphasize the need to stop private sales from being a device where criminals, people with severe mental illness, and terrorists can easily acquire the most dangerous weapons. All we are asking is for all gun purchasers to be required to pass background checks that help keep guns out of the hands of criminals, terrorists and the seriously mentally ill.

THREE EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING SURE MILLIONS OF MISSING RECORDS ARE ADDED TO THE DATABASE.

Serious gaps in the system are allowing firearms to be sold to dangerous people. **Time and again we let dangerous people slip through the cracks.**

It happens in high-profile situations like the Virginia Tech massacre and the Tucson shootings that took six lives and wounded 13 others including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. And it happens all too often in the gun violence that claims 86 lives every day.

That's because millions of records identifying seriously mentally ill people and drug abusers as prohibited purchasers are missing from the federal background check database because of lax reporting by state agencies.

FOUR

FOCUS ON THE SIMPLICITY OF BACKGROUND CHECKS. AVOID MAKING THE SYSTEM SOUND COMPLEX OR BUREAUCRATIC.

At heart, we're calling for two relatively simple steps that would make the NICS background check far more effective at keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people:

- Making sure that millions of missing records are added to the database.
- Eliminating loopholes and requiring a background check for every gun sold in America.

We need to keep the conversation focused on that reality. That means avoiding the temptation to delve into more complex explanations of exactly how the law works and the intricacies of implementation.

IMPORTANT NOTE: In addition to making sure missing records are added to the database, there is a strong argument for expansion of the prohibitions to include other categories of persons who pose a danger to themselves or others.

This would necessitate adding a third element to our argument about what's needed to make background checks really work:

- A background check for every gun sold.
- No missing records.
- Stronger prohibitions for those with convictions for violent misdemeanors and who are dangerously mentally ill.[31]

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

In a YouTube video, an al Qaeda spokesman urged the terrorist group's sympathizers in the U.S. to exploit weak American gun laws to get their hands on weapons to use against Americans.[32]

All four guns used in the Columbine school massacre were bought at gun shows without background checks.[33]

86% of Americans[34] and 82% of gun owners[35] support requiring all gun buyers to pass a background check, no matter where they buy the gun and no matter who they buy it from.

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



When an al Qaeda spokesman is openly talking about our loose gun laws as a tool for terrorists, don't you think it's time to act?"



At gun shows we can see the private sale loophole in action. We can't let gun shows be a place where criminals, terrorists and the dangerously mentally ill can get the guns they wouldn't stand a chance of purchasing from a licensed gun dealer."



The few minutes it takes to complete a background check will save people's lives. How can we not do that?"

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



Background checks are one of several measures that, taken together, could ameliorate the impact of gun violence."



I'm not bothered if we pass some laws that make it a little harder for a guy to get his hands on a gun."



You wouldn't believe the stuff that happens at these gun shows. It's like nothing you or I have ever experienced."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

Background checks are just one more way that anti-gun people try to keep guns out of the hands of law-abiding citizens.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

Actually, the vast majority of gun owners support background checks to make sure dangerous people don't get their hands on guns.

We don't need the federal government stepping in to tell me whether I can sell my rifle to my brother-in-law.

Look, we can have modest exceptions for close family sales. But that's not what's going on. Millions of guns are being bought and sold without a background check.

There is no gun show loophole. The law is the same at gun shows as it is every place else.

You and I both know that gun shows are a place where the dangerous private sale loophole in the law gets exploited.

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

This is just an effort to shut down gun shows, the place where Second Amendment defenders can meet and connect and mobilize.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

What we want to see is an end to gun shows being shopping bazaars for criminals, terrorists, and the seriously mentally ill.

Don't fool yourself. Most criminals don't go to gun shows to get their weapons.

According to an ATF study, 30 percent of guns involved in federal trafficking investigations are connected to gun shows.[36] That's something we need to bring to an end.

TOPIC:
CONCEALED CARRY RECIPROCITY

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

ONE

EMPHASIZE THIS PROPOSAL AS A BRAZEN ATTEMPT TO TAKE DECISIONS ABOUT WHO IS TOO DANGEROUS TO CARRY A LOADED, HIDDEN GUN IN PUBLIC OUT OF THE HANDS OF LOCAL LEADERS.

States and cities across the country have always had the authority to decide whether some people are just too dangerous to carry a loaded,[37] hidden gun in public. These are decisions that have traditionally been left to the states for good reasons. But the NRA and the gun lobby want to change that.

The NRA is pushing for federal control of state laws. The NRA wants Congress to take the decision about who is too dangerous to carry a loaded weapon in public out of the hands of local leaders. These proposed laws – one of which has already passed the House of Representatives – would override state laws, forcing states that have tight restrictions on who can carry a loaded, hidden gun in public to allow hundreds of thousands of gun-toting people from other states to carry these dangerous guns into their communities.

TWO

TELL A SIMPLE STORY: CONCEALED CARRY RECIPROCITY WOULD PUT PEOPLE AT RISK BY OVERRIDING LOCAL PUBLIC SAFETY LAWS.

Under forced reciprocity, all 49 states that allow concealed carry would be forced (in the case of visitors to their state) to honor permits from every other state.

Except for residents of their own state, the state with the strictest restrictions on concealed carry would be forced to honor permits from the state with the most lax restrictions.

THREE DRAW ATTENTION TO THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS EXAMPLES OF THE KIND OF PEOPLE A STATE WOULD BE FORCED TO LET INSIDE ITS BORDERS WITH A LOADED WEAPON.

Point out that reciprocity would force states to allow the carrying of hidden, loaded guns in public places by out-of-state permit holders who we know nothing about but have been found to have records of domestic violence or who haven't even completed basic gun safety training to carry loaded guns in public.

Passing these laws amounts to letting Congress gut local laws designed to keep people safe.

FOUR IF THE FACTS DON'T FIT YOUR STATE, CONSIDER AN ALTERNATIVE LINE OF ARGUMENT.

Because the strength of state laws varies dramatically across the country, the "leave these decisions in local hands" argument may not resonate in some states especially those that have terrible state-level laws and leadership unfriendly to gun violence prevention measures.

In those cases, it may make more sense to rely on the argument that more guns in more places will make us less safe.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

82% of gun owners believe the states, not Washington, should decide who can carry hidden guns in public places.[38]

Concealed carry permit holders have killed over 460 people – including 14 law enforcement officers – since 2007.[39]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



There's real wisdom in letting local communities have the right to decide who can carry a loaded, concealed weapon in public."



If someone is carrying a hidden, loaded gun in [insert state-specific place, e.g. Times Square] you want to know something about them. That's true no matter where you live."



How dare Congress jump in and override the decisions of local leaders and police about what it takes to keep people safe from gun violence?"

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



Concealed carry reciprocity permits the carrying of loaded weapons contrary to the standards set by a state – with the exception of the home state restriction."



I'm not trying to interfere with people's Second Amendment rights."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

Congress should recognize that the right to self-defense does not end at state lines.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

What about the right innocent people have to keep untrained, out-of-state people from carrying loaded, hidden guns into their communities?

We're trying to protect public safety and reduce crime.

That's just crazy. Public spaces should be places where families can go freely and safely and not be overrun by unknown people carrying hidden, loaded guns.

TOPIC:
FAST AND FURIOUS

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

ONE

ACKNOWLEDGE FAST AND FURIOUS AS A BOTCHED OPERATION AND THEN PIVOT TO WEAK GUN LAWS.

There is no need to get drawn into a detailed defense or re-litigation of Fast and Furious. We are better off acknowledging that it was a botched operation and then quickly moving on to a broader conversation about weak gun laws and guns flowing into the hands of drug cartels.

TWO

MAKE CLEAR THAT THE ROOT PROBLEM IS WEAK GUN LAWS THAT MAKE IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO STOP THE FLOW OF DANGEROUS WEAPONS INTO MEXICO.

This whole episode reminds us how weak our gun laws are in this country – especially when you consider that some of the states with the weakest laws are right along the border. That makes it alarmingly easy and convenient for U.S. weapons to flow into the hands of Mexican drug lords.

The ATF has long been hampered by lack of resources to enforce federal laws, and difficulties convincing federal prosecutors that there are sufficient grounds to seize guns and arrest straw purchasers, cases made more difficult because of notoriously weak federal and state gun laws.[40]

THREE

WHEN TALKING TO THE BASE, DON'T HESITATE TO CHALLENGE THE MOTIVES OF THE NRA.

It is the height of hypocrisy for the NRA to be attacking the ATF's enforcement capabilities after they have waged a decades-long effort to hamstring the agency's ability to enforce the nation's gun laws.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

Between 2006 and now, more than 50,000 people were killed in drug cartel violence south of the border.[41] When the recovered guns that are used in these crimes are traced, it turns out that 69% of these guns originated from gun dealers in the United States.[42]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**

> I'll tell you what's really fast and furious here. The way the NRA and its allies play **fast** and loose with the facts – and how **furious** the American people should be that the NRA's constant attacks on the ATF help gun-runners get away with murder."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID

> Fast and Furious was a complicated program, but stopping gun-running is a complicated business."

> Fast and Furious may not be right. But, the damage it did pales in comparison to our ongoing inattention to U.S. gun-running into Mexico."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

It's an outrage when federal agents look the other way as hundreds of guns flow into the hands of murderous drug dealers.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

If the NRA wants to stop gun-running, they'd stop throwing roadblocks in the way of federal agents who put their lives on the line to stop gun-running thugs.

Apparently, anti-gun people aren't always opposed to people being killed by guns.

The best way to stop the killing is to strengthen the laws and give the ATF all the resources it needs. The NRA has done just the opposite.

TOPIC:
GUN TRAFFICKING

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

ONE

EMPHASIZE THAT GUN TRAFFICKING LEADS TO THE SCOURGE OF VIOLENCE CLAIMING THOUSANDS OF LIVES EVERY YEAR.

Wherever it takes place, gun trafficking always leads directly to incredible levels of violence. Military-style weapons sold in the U.S. to gun traffickers play an alarming role in arming Mexico's brutal drug trafficking cartels.[43]

And here in the U.S., when the NRA and its allies work to weaken gun laws in a particular state, they aren't just putting people in that state at more risk of gun violence. Research shows that states with weak gun laws end up being the top source of illegal guns recovered in out-of-state crimes. In fact, in 2009, ten states accounted for nearly half of the guns that crossed state lines before being recovered in a crime.[44]

TWO

MAKE IT CLEAR THAT FAILURE TO CONTROL GUN-RUNNING LETS INCREDIBLY DESTRUCTIVE WEAPONS FLOW INTO THE HANDS OF BRUTAL DRUG CARTELS IN MEXICO AND BRUTAL CRIMINALS HERE IN THE UNITED STATES.

Don't assume that people realize how easy it is to acquire destructive military-style weapons in the U.S. – whether for use domestically or across international borders.

AK-47s, capable of discharging a 30-round magazine in less than a minute, are widely available in gun stores just a short distance from the Mexican border. With AK-47s and other similar weaponry, traffickers have firepower that equals -- if not exceeds -- that of Mexican police and military personnel.[45]

The middlemen who organize the straw purchasers to buy these weapons can resell them for three times or more what they paid in the U.S.

THREE POINT TO SOLUTIONS – RESTRICTIONS ON STRAW PURCHASERS, CLOSING THE PRIVATE SALE LOOPHOLE, BANNING ASSAULT WEAPONS AND HIGH CAPACITY MAGAZINES AND ENFORCING THE BAN ON FOREIGN-MADE ASSAULT WEAPONS, AND CRACKING DOWN ON CORRUPT GUN DEALERS.

Gun trafficking involves multiple sources and constraining it will require a multi-pronged effort. But, that doesn't mean we can't point to specific steps that we know would help end the flow of guns and the murderous trail of gun violence that they leave behind. But, our government has so far failed to act even though we know that weak gun laws give gun traffickers virtually unfettered access to military-style weapons.

One key step would be eliminating the private sale loophole. Under federal law, background checks are not required for private sales by unlicensed sellers, making them a perfect point of purchase for traffickers working to arm domestic criminal enterprises and Mexico's drug cartels.

The most common channel in domestic gun trafficking is straw purchasers – someone buying firearms on behalf of a convicted felon, juvenile or other prohibited purchaser.

One reason gun trafficking flourishes is that efforts to trace and enforce illegal guns have been hampered by underfunding and a long-running intentional effort to hamstring ATF.[46]

Stronger U.S. gun laws on sales of multiple weapons and ending the severe restrictions that are currently placed on the ATF's ability to trace weapons are essential to genuine progress stopping the flow of weapons into the hands of brutal drug-trading organizations.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

Corrupt licensed dealers are a huge threat to public safety. A comprehensive 2000 ATF report found that one percent of federally licensed firearms dealers are responsible for selling almost 60 percent of the guns that are found at crime scenes and traced to dealers.[47]

A large portion of gun transfers in the U.S are not subject to a background check. An estimated 40% of the guns acquired in the U.S. annually come from unlicensed sellers who are not required by federal law to conduct background checks on gun purchasers.[48]

Straw purchasers – people who buy guns on behalf of prohibited possessors – are a major source for gun trafficking. An ATF study of firearms investigations found that 46% of its investigations involved straw purchasers.[49]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



Every year, thousands of people are gunned down by brutal drug cartels with weapons that flow from the U.S. to Mexico with incredible ease."



If the NRA wanted to make it easier for drug merchants to get access to dangerous weapons, I don't know what more they could do than what they're doing already."



When one state makes it easy for gun trafficking thugs to do business, more people in neighboring states die."



If the NRA really cared about stopping gun crime, they'd be working right by our side to crack down on rampant gun trafficking."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



There are a series of inter-related state and federal measures that, taken together, could have a serious impact on gun trafficking in America."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

Maybe the first step in stopping the flow of guns into Mexico is ending ATF scandals that intentionally let weapons reach drug criminals' hands.

An NRA that constantly harasses U.S. law enforcement is the best protection the drug cartels could ever hope for.

The ATF is out of control. And making sure they're not putting our Second Amendment rights at risk is the first order of business.

If the NRA wants a stronger, more effective ATF, they should put an end to their decades-long efforts to undermine it.

They say they're going after gun traffickers, but their real target is making it harder for law-abiding citizens to exercise our right to bear arms.

Every responsible gun owner in America should be in favor of a crackdown on out-of-control lawbreakers.

We don't need more laws on the books. We just need to enforce the ones that are already there.

If the NRA really believed that, they wouldn't be throwing every barrier they can think of in the path of ATF and other law enforcement efforts.

TOPIC:
ASSAULT WEAPONS

KEY MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

ONE

POINT OUT THAT MILITARY-STYLE, SEMI-AUTOMATIC ASSAULT WEAPONS HAVE ONLY ONE PURPOSE.

A fact that is only beginning to penetrate the public imagination is that incredibly destructive, military-style assault weapons are readily – and legally – available in most parts of our country.

Many people assume that it is illegal to manufacture, sell or possess such weapons and they are alarmed to learn otherwise. We have to drive home the message that these weapons are indeed available even though there is no conceivable sporting or civilian purpose to these weapons.[50]

They are useful for one and only one purpose – to kill as many people as possible in the shortest period of time.

TWO

EMPHASIZE THAT BANNING ASSAULT WEAPONS COULD BE A PIVOTAL STEP IN RESTORING COMMON SENSE TO AMERICA'S GUN LAWS.

For a full decade, the United States had in place a ban on the sale of assault weapons. But, thanks to the lobbying power of the NRA, that ban was allowed to expire in 2004. Putting a new, stronger ban on assault weapons in place would be a powerful first step in restoring common sense to America's gun laws.

Banning the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines would send a powerful signal that America is ready to get serious about ending the frightening levels of gun violence that plague our communities.

THREE MAKE IT CLEAR THAT ANY NEW ASSAULT WEAPON BAN SHOULD DEAL WITH THE LOOPHOLES THAT WEAKENED THE ORIGINAL MEASURE.

There were some dangerous loopholes which the NRA lobbied for in the original assault weapon ban including ones that allowed gun manufacturers to skirt the ban by making cosmetic changes in weapons.[51] We should emphasize that a new ban must close those loopholes.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE FACTS

Assault weapons and high-capacity magazines are the weapons of choice for mass shootings. The Columbine killers and the Aurora shooter used assault weapons, while the shooters in the Tucson, Fort Hood, and Virginia Tech tragedies were all armed with high-capacity magazines.[52]

EXAMPLES OF **POWERFUL LANGUAGE**



Powerful assault weapons have only one use – to kill as many people as possible in as short a period of time as possible."



Americans don't want military-style weapons on our streets, but NRA officials do. That proves how out of touch they are with American values."



When the NRA does the bidding of gun manufacturers who profit from the sale of these military-style weapons, there's a lot of collateral damage."

SOME **INEFFECTIVE LANGUAGE** TO AVOID



I don't see how you justify the sale of most guns. But, these military-style weapons are especially beyond the pale."

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE SAYS... **AND HOW TO COUNTER**

STRONGEST OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

This is just a first step. Once they ban these weapons, they'll be coming after your handguns and your rifle.

BEST WAYS TO COUNTER

The NRA should just come out and say it: there are no weapons so dangerous that they shouldn't be on sale at your local gun shop.

There's no proof that ending the assault weapons ban made America any more dangerous.

Tell that to the police officers on the front lines staring down ever more dangerous military-style weapons in the hands of hardened criminals.

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LOADED
SHOOTING
SAFETY
SURVIVORS
VICTIMS
WEAPONS
NEIGHBORHOOD
HANDGUN
YOUTH VIOLENCE
PERSONAL
FAMILIES
VICTIMS
DANGEROUS
LAWS
OUTRAGE
CRIME
VIOLENCE
CHILDREN
VICTIMS
POLICE
PERSONAL
SAFETY
TOLL