University of Chicago Crime Lab, the MacArthur Foundation, and Get In Chicago announce the Chicago Design Competition to reduce youth violence in Chicago

Youth violence is a chronic problem across the country and is the leading cause of death for African-American males ages 10 to 24, responsible for more deaths than the next nine leading causes combined. Nationally, one-third of homicide victims are under age 25; in Chicago it is 46%.

Today marks the announcement of a new collaborative effort to reduce youth violence in Chicago. This initiative builds on many ongoing local efforts to transform how Chicago and other cities approach youth violence and the closely related challenges of increasing school engagement, building human capital, and improving life outcomes among disadvantaged youth.

The Crime Lab, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and Get In Chicago, has launched a design challenge that seeks to identify promising interventions to address the problem of youth violence. The competition will bring together the front-line knowledge of practitioners, the leadership of policymakers, and the insights of researchers. One or more winning entries will receive up to $1 million each in funding support.

Since its launch in 2008, the University of Chicago Crime Lab has worked to test innovative
approaches to crime and violence by partnering with government agencies and nonprofits to carry out randomized controlled trials of promising policies and interventions. The MacArthur Foundation has a longstanding commitment to Chicago’s neighborhoods, and the health and vitality of the city and region as a whole. The Foundation supports efforts to reduce and prevent youth violence as part of a strategy to shut down the pipeline of adolescents who become involved in gun violence. Get In Chicago is a public-private partnership focused on violence prevention and intervention. It was launched in March 2013 to identify, fund and rigorously evaluate evidence-based programs that lead to sustainable reductions in violence for individuals and communities most affected by violence and poverty.

With this Design Competition, Chicago is leading the way in developing evidence-based strategies to prevent youth violence by building on novel research in behavioral economics, psychology and neuroscience. Laurence Steinberg, professor of psychology at Temple University and Crime Lab affiliate, is a nationally known expert on adolescence and the author of *Age of Opportunity: Lessons From the New Science of Adolescence* whose work suggests the real impact successful programs can have on young brains, during a time when great development is possible. “By looking for promising, innovative interventions geared toward keeping youth safe at this pivotal moment in their lives, the University of Chicago Crime Lab and its partners are not only leading the way to improve the lives of adolescents in Chicago. They are also building the field of knowledge and the body of evidence about how researchers, policymakers and practitioners can work together to develop programs and rigorously test their effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.”

This initiative demonstrates a new paradigm in research and practice that seeks to bring rigor and responsiveness to pressing urban challenges and generate scientific evidence about what works for whom and why – evidence to help the public sector and its partners in philanthropy and the nonprofit sector do the most social good possible per dollar spent.

“Our goal is to generate evidence about what works to improve youth life outcomes, in particular by lowering the risk of violent behavior or violence victimization,” said Toni Irving, Executive
Director of Get In Chicago. “This evidence in turn could help inform large-scale violence prevention efforts in Chicago and other cities.”

The approach to evaluating the programs will be similar to what the Crime Lab has successfully used with Youth Guidance’s Becoming a Man (B.A.M.) program, selected in an earlier design competition, and more recently with Match Education’s high-intensity math tutoring program. By subjecting these programs to scientific evaluation, the Crime Lab has been able to generate objective outcomes data about what works to reduce youth violence and improve schooling outcomes. That evidence led to the programs being significantly expanded to include more youth at numerous high schools across the city of Chicago. It has also garnered interest from policymakers from across the U.S., and was a key motivation for President Barack Obama’s 2014 “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative.

With the launch of this new design competition, Roseanna Ander, Executive Director of the Crime Lab and the University’s Urban Education Lab, notes, “There is no shortage of innovation among people in Chicago who are working to find solutions to the problem of youth violence. What is in shorter supply is rigorous evidence about what works and for whom. We are eager to partner with non-profit service providers who work to keep youth in our city out of harm’s way, to give them access to opportunities that can enrich their lives, and to create a safer and more vibrant Chicago.”

The design challenge guidelines request a letter of interest by March 2 from nonprofit organizations that have programs focusing on youth ages 13 to 18 years who live in communities of high levels of violence, and/or focusing on the parents of these youth. Applicants will need to present a clear description of the problem the intervention seeks to address and how they envision the program will work to improve the life chances of young people at risk of violence or victimization.

The organizations must also be willing to work with the UChicago Crime Lab to structure the intervention so that it can be rigorously evaluated. Complete eligibility and application details can be found at Chicago Design Competition.
The most promising ideas will be selected in late March and those applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal. The awards will be announced later this spring and the funded programs would be slated begin to support at-risk youth in summer or fall of 2015.