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# Building safer communities: Behavioral science innovations in youth violence prevention



*Attendees of Project Unloaded Choose to Change® Showcase. Photo by Chicago Public Schools.*

## ABSTRACT

New insights from the field of behavioral science open new doors for addressing a seemingly intractable, and uniquely American, public health crisis: gun violence. This brief presents results from a study of the Chicago-based Choose to Change® (C2C®) program, a partnership between non-profits Brightpoint and Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP)™. The data show that it is possible to create large and lasting reductions in violent-crime arrests among a program population that has historically been hard to reach: youth who are increasingly disconnected from school. If gun violence = guns + violence, then anything that reduces the prevalence of violence overall can be an important part of the solution to solving gun violence.

## INTRODUCTION

For 50 years, America has leaned too heavily on a single policy lever (incarceration) to address violent crime. But results from the Chicago-based Choose to Change® (C2C®) program highlight that we can simultaneously reduce gun violence *and* imprisonment through evidence-based effective prevention, while society continues the important ongoing work to address the larger forms of inequality we see in Chicago and throughout American life. In fact, to the extent to which uncontrolled gun violence is a headwind to efforts at local community economic development or desegregation policies, by driving people and businesses out of neighborhoods with high rates of shootings, anything that can reduce gun violence - including programs like C2C® - can create important tailwinds for efforts to address the root causes of violence.

One of the key insights behind programs like C2C® is that the vast majority of violent crime in America are not crimes of profit but rather crimes of passion - including rage. Most violence starts with words, which turn into arguments. Unfortunately, in the US context, far too many of those arguments end up in tragedies because someone has a gun. Data from cities across the country show that arguments of some form are at the root of between sixty and eighty percent of all homicides.<sup>1</sup>



The shift in perspective from, ‘What is wrong with you?’ to asking, ‘What happened to you?’ can be a beneficial perspective and reframe existing challenges in a trauma-informed lens that puts healing at the forefront.”

**C2C Therapist**

Who gets into arguments? Everyone. Though not all end in tragedy, conflict is normal human behavior. That means we can learn a lot about the antecedents of gun violence, and what to do about it, by capitalizing on what has been learned about how people make judgments and decisions in their day-to-day lives - that is, from the field of behavioral economics.

Most existing policy approaches to violence implicitly assume that violent behavior is driven by premeditated, rational benefit-cost calculations. That leads to a focus on policies that try to either deter crime through the threat of harsher punishment, or else incentivize people away from crime and violence involvement through things like job programs.

Yet a key insight from behavioral economics is that in the real world, normal people are *not* always rational benefit-cost calculators. They sometimes make mistakes, particularly when trying to navigate exceptionally challenging situations. The key lesson was summarized by a staff member at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) several years ago, who said that he always tells the youth detained there: “If I could give you back just 10 minutes of your lives, none of you would be here.”

C2C®, a partnership between non-profits Brightpoint and Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP)<sup>™</sup>, seeks to help young people better navigate high-stakes situations that could lead to violence. C2C® focuses on youth who are beginning to disconnect from school (and so at elevated risk for crime and violence involvement) and provides them with a combination of behavioral economics-informed programming and intensive mentorship and other supports (partly as a way to both incentivize program participation and reinforce the behavioral economics-informed content).<sup>2</sup>



*Attendees of Project Unloaded Choose to Change® Showcase with Mayor Brandon Johnson and CPS CEO Pedro Martinez. Photo by Chicago Public Schools.*

A new study confirms C2C® is indeed able to prevent violence. Structured as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the sort that provides gold-standard evidence in medicine, the C2C® evaluation shows that **participants are 39% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime within 24 months** compared to youth not offered the program.

Particularly promising about C2C® is its ability to reach those youth at higher risk for violence involvement – those who are more disengaged from school and have prior criminal justice contact. This group tends to be the hardest to reach with our usual social policy levers. Among school-age youth who were shot in Chicago, for example, around 90% were disengaged from school at the time, making them out of reach for most social services. Impacting gun violence at scale requires figuring out how to serve these high-needs youth. C2C® shows that’s possible.



*Choose to Change® participants at their mentoring group session. Photo by Beking Media.*

## THE CHOOSE TO CHANGE® PROGRAM

To understand why C2C® works so well, we might start by describing what happens during a social interaction. The first step most people take is trying to get a read on the situation – What’s going on? What is the other person thinking? What are their intentions? We make lightning-fast assumptions based on our prior experiences. They’re so automatic that we often don’t notice how our brains are reacting.

This reflects one of the key insights from behavioral science: **Our brains have two modes of thinking, System 1 and System 2**, of which only one we have any awareness:

1 What we normally think of as “thinking” – **conscious, deliberate thinking, or System 2** – is what we use when we’re solving a tough problem, dealing with uncertainty, or exercising self-control. It’s great at critical thinking, but it’s relatively slow and mentally taxing.

2 Because System 2 is mentally effortful, our minds as much as possible rely on a different type of thinking – System 1 – to quickly, effortlessly and automatically deal with routine situations. Without System 1, none of us could make it through our daily lives. But the strengths of **System 1 – fast, effortless, automatic** – means that it can make costly mistakes, especially in fraught, high-stress situations.

Unfortunately, too many people find themselves living in neighborhoods that force them to navigate an outsized number of fraught, high-stress situations. For example, untreated stress and trauma is more common in economically disadvantaged communities, which in turn depletes mental bandwidth and leads people to rely even more on System 1 (as Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir show in their 2013 book *Scarcity*).

C2C® draws on behavioral economics principles to help young people see how their normally useful System 1 responses can get them into trouble when misapplied or over-generalized during fraught, high-stakes social interactions.

What does the behavioral economics program content look like? One common feature of these types of programs is exercises that ask participants to role-play a conflict, real or hypothetical. For example, youth might be asked why the conflict started, but then the program providers push youth to notice their subjective System 1 interpretations by asking questions like, “What would a *camera* have seen?” The “camera view” shows what someone *actually* did—our brains tend to fill in the rest. “You *say* he got mad, but what did he *actually* do? He furrowed his brow — the rest [of his emotions] your mind filled in?” The point is to show that System 1 thinking automatically creates a set of assumptions about the other person and the situation. By separating the ‘camera view’ from their assumptions, youth begin to “slow down” their thinking and consider other ways the interaction could go.

Other exercises help students think about how negative past experiences might influence the way we interpret others’ actions. For example, participants hear a vignette about “Jake,” who moved around a lot and was often picked on and beat up by peers. Jake now gets bumped in the hallway in this school – how is he likely to respond? Why? Youth in the session learn to help identify the System 1 triggers related to this event. This scenario highlights the gap between objective reality (the bump) and how system 1 thinking interprets reality (this is more bullying). Based off his past experience with bullying, Jake could easily intuit someone else’s intentions and future actions in a way that may or may not be accurate. If he decides how to act based on faulty assumptions, the interaction can go south.

Crucially, emotions tend to come along with the assumptions we make. Because System 1 is effortless and invisible to us, we often don't even notice how we feel — even though these feelings influence the decisions we make about what to say and do next. Noticing that we make assumptions is important, but so is noticing how situations make us feel, and how feelings like fear, anger, and shame cause us to act in ways that may not be in our best interest. That's why C2C® sessions start with a 'check-in' or "temperature check" where youth are asked to reflect on how they're feeling — how distressed they feel and how in control they feel on 1-10 scales— to become more aware of how their unconscious (System 1) thoughts and feelings may affect them.

C2C® is designed with these behavioral economics insights to help youth approach social interactions in a way that's more aligned with their System 2 goals. By "slowing down" their automatic System 1 responses and thinking through how past experiences—including serious trauma—can affect their instinctive or intuitive behaviors, youth ideally become better able to navigate difficult, high-risk situations.

C2C® also provides intensive mentoring and wraparound supports to support young people in other aspects of their lives (food security, housing, transportation, etc) and help connect the behavioral economics programming to their everyday lives.

Mentors come from the same communities as C2C® youth and have faced a lot of the same difficulties; the mentality of C2C® staff is that there are no "bad" kids, only bad situations.

The mentors, known as advocates, take youth on recreational outings and help them practice "slowing down" their responses in various social interactions. **When kids are in tough situations outside of the program, their advocate helps them practice healthy coping strategies.** By providing kids with both tools and mentorship, youth can "learn by doing" while they build the confidence and skills to navigate conflict.

Of course, there are factors beyond behavioral economics that matter for gun violence. Root causes like segregation, discrimination, and poverty have contributed to high rates of gun violence in predominantly low-income communities of color. As we work to address the macro causes of inequality, in the meantime we can also help youth better navigate the fraught, high-risk situations they too often encounter day to day growing up in unforgiving neighborhoods.



*Photo by Chicago Public Schools.*

## RESULTS

C2C® doesn't increase punishment for misbehavior, it doesn't teach youth what they should or should not do, and it doesn't fix social problems like poverty and discrimination. What C2C® *does* do is help youth realize that their automatic System 1 thinking can get them into trouble in difficult, high-stakes situations. Is this actually helpful?

Yes. Two years after the program, C2C® reduces the likelihood youth will be arrested for a violent crime by **39 percent**. The beneficial impact of C2C® persists at least until **36 months past randomization**: participants are **23 percent less likely to be arrested** and **28 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime**. The effects are largest for the most serious violent crimes (like aggravated assault and battery), consistent with the idea that C2C® helps people avoid particularly high-stakes situations where things can go really wrong. C2C® was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) that meets the highest “FDA standard” for evidence.<sup>3</sup>

## AN ACCUMULATING PORTFOLIO OF ENCOURAGING RESULTS

What is it about C2C® that matters most for preventing violence involvement among participating youth? In principle we can't determine that just from the C2C® results themselves, because as noted above C2C® provides a bundle of services to participants. But we can form some reasonable hypotheses by triangulating these results with what we know from past studies.

The research on providing material resources (cash, jobs, housing, food subsidies, etc.) suggests mixed effects overall on crime involvement – we generally see some reduction in property-crime offending but less consistently so for the most socially harmful type of crime that C2C® seems to have such large impacts on: violent crimes.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the mentoring component of C2C® could be part of the effect on violent-crime involvement.<sup>5</sup>

And implicated in this as well would seem to be the behavioral-economics component of C2C®, given that the program's success in preventing violence echoes that of similar behavioral economics-informed interventions.

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These outcomes are promising for both their magnitude and longevity, and a crucial component is that C2C® is successful at engaging higher-risk young people who are also the hardest to reach. Participants face many barriers to participation, including a lack of trust and disconnection from school, but of those who participated, C2C® youth received **an average of 176 hours of wraparound services** and **attended an average of nine sessions**. This suggests that the intensive programming of C2C® is effective at reaching, engaging, and serving youth with greater needs.



*Attendees of Project Unloaded Choose to Change® Showcase.  
Photo by Chicago Public Schools.*

Examples include Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man (BAM) program, Heartland Alliance's Rapid Employment and Development Initiative (READI), and even some programming carried out for many years inside the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC).

BAM targets youth in 7-12 grades who are still connected to schools and are at a relatively lower risk of gun violence and criminal justice involvement than youth in C2C®. BAM helps youth “slow down” their automatic thinking in high-stakes situations, resulting in a **45 percent drop in violent crime arrests**, a **30 percent drop in overall arrests**, and a **19 percent increase in on-time high school graduation**. As with all social programs, scaling can be a challenge; whether BAM successfully scales or not remains an open question,<sup>6</sup> but there is at least proof of concept that the program can have remarkable impacts when delivered with high fidelity.

READI serves adults most at risk of gun violence involvement. Prior to READI, **35 percent of participants had been shot** and **98 percent had been arrested**.

The results, though less statistically precise than one would like (and less precise than those from BAM), suggest **shooting and homicide arrests dropped by 65 percent**, and **victimizations for shootings and homicides declined by 43 percent** among those referred by outreach workers.

A randomized behavioral economics intervention in the Cook County JTDC reached youth who were already incarcerated at the time they received programming. Results indicated that the intervention **reduced readmission rates by 21 percent**.

Where does C2C® fit in to this landscape?

BAM, because it's school-based, only works with young people still enrolled in school. READI and the JTDC program also have positive impacts, but they focus on working with either youth who have been detained, or people who have reached adulthood and still are at very high risk of gun violence involvement. Ideally, we would not want to limit ourselves to helping just those who are still in school or have to wait to help people until they are either detained or reach their 20s or 30s. C2C® shows we don't have to do that.

**One youth stressed the importance of strength-based mentoring from an adult, noting,**

“He’d been there, done that, he’d been my age before. . . actually, listening and taking advice from someone who knows and not just trying to put off their opinion on you, someone who was actually in this situation and overcame it.”

**In response to the importance of the therapy, one youth said,**

“I learned how to walk away and not act on everything and make a permanent decision on a temporary situation.”



Attendees of Project Unloaded Choose to Change® Showcase. Photo by Chicago Public Schools.

## IMPLICATIONS

The bad news is that for 50 years, we've leaned too heavily on a single policy lever (incarceration) to address violent crime.

The good news is that new evidence from programs like C2C® and others built on the same behavioral science insights show that **it is possible to simultaneously reduce violence and imprisonment** through programs that prevent violence from happening in the first place.

SCAN TO READ MORE ABOUT THE C2C® STUDY



## ENDNOTES

1. See for example Miethe, Terance D., Wendy C. Regoeczi, and Kriss A. Drass. 2004. *Rethinking Homicide*. Cambridge University Press.
2. YAP™ refers to the wrap-around services provided as part of the program by the mentor or advocate as “YAPWrap”™. For clarity we refer to these services as “mentoring” to help readers situate these additional services within the larger social service landscape.
3. See Abdul-Razzak, Nour and Hallberg, Kelly, “Unpacking the Impacts of a Youth Behavioral Health Intervention: Experimental Evidence from Chicago,” Working Paper 2024 for more details.
4. The available research suggests that jobs programs could matter for teens, but income transfers do not seem to have the same effect, and neither jobs nor income transfers (in-kind or cash) seem to generally have effects on violent crime involvement among young adults. See Jens Ludwig and Kevin Schnepel, forthcoming, “Does nothing stop a bullet like a job? The effects of income on crime,” *Annual Review of Criminology*.
5. See for example the Blueprints for Violence Prevention review sponsored by the US Department of Justice; [www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/204274.pdf](http://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/204274.pdf)
6. See for example Monica Bhatt et al., “Scope challenges to social impact,” National Bureau of Economic Research working paper 2021.

## OUR PARTNERS



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