

Untapped Levers for Reducing Gun Violence: The impact of Behavioral Science Programs Webinar - Q&A

October 10, 2024

Question:

Do other counties have mandated law enforcement reporting systems similar to the US's? If not, this could make it difficult to compare homicide rates among the various countries.

Answer:

We know many countries do systematically collect information on mortality, criminal legal involvement or other data from law enforcement, yes. So, our understanding that gun violence is dramatically higher in the US than other OECD countries is not contingent on reporting.

Question:

Choose to Change seems very intense (8 hours of mentoring per week). Curious: Did the facilitators "stick" with the program and were they able to make the 8 hours/week on a consistent basis?

Answer:

Because of the structure of the program mentoring hours are split between community and school time, frames allow participants to be able to get the complete 8 service hours.

Question:

How have you measured violent crime arrest reduction?

Answer:

All of these programs were implemented as part of an experiment so we could compare treatment to control outcomes. We track arrests in arrest records from the Chicago Police Department or the Illinois State Police. In addition, for READI Chicago, we are currently looking into health data from IDPH (IL Dept of Public Health) to see if information on ER visits give us a different or same answer as the police records. Men may not get arrested because clearance rates are low but they might still seek medical help.

Question:

How do the programs adapt to the diverse drivers of violence and gun crime, such as substance use, poverty and inequality, mental health and organized crime/gang activity, and how do they work across the life course? Are there different, specially designed tools used for adolescents?

Answer:

Certainly, the extant conditions of poverty, structural inequality and racism, mental health and legal involvement are present in the lives of all of the participants of each of these programs (to varying degrees). One thing that excites us is the large reductions in violent crime arrests despite those conditions being equally true for those that participated and those that didn't. The programs discussed here span a spectrum of individuals with respect to age and engagement - BAM was HS freshman and sophomore, coming to school - all the way to READI, which was for adult men aged 18-40 (average age 24).

Question:

What is a "violent" arrest? Are there certain statutes/ charge categories considered as "violent" vs. "non-violent"?

Answer:

It can vary by study, but in general we consider a crime category to be violent the associated charge lands in any of the following FBI categories: homicide, rape, robbery agg assault, aggravated battery, simple assault, and simple battery. The same was true for the evaluation of READI Chicago. We used the federal definition of "Part One" arrests. However, we also pulled out separately shooting and homicide arrests and shooting and homicide victimization because we wanted to focus on gun violence involvement very specifically.

Question:

What research methods were used to be able to attribute these changes to the program?
How many people participated in C2C?

Answer:

C2C was studied using a randomized controlled trial, where eligible young people were randomly assigned to either receive the program or to the control group. This allows us to isolate the impact of the C2C program. READI Chicago was also evaluated using the same methodology- a randomized controlled trial. READI Chicago identified almost 2500 eligible men, half of whom we could offer the program to (that's how much money was available to serve participants). BAM was also evaluating using an RCT. There were a few thousand boys involved in the BAM studies - though there were four over various years.

Question:

Are you also tracking incidences of violent crime across the jurisdiction? And if so, have you seen a reduction in incidences of violence with the implementation of these programs?

Answer:

We are able to look at victimization as well as see similar results.

Question:

Thanks so much for helping us understand the findings and surprises from this careful work! What implications could this have for schools — either their *goals* (for example, to build some of these social and emotional skills for students even earlier), or for the *methods* that schools use (like how they structure their roles and time, or how they ensure students stay connected)?

Answer:

What a great question! I think this is a key question for all of us to think through. My take: we should figure out how to build in this skill building as part of our SEL curriculum and health class, especially for adolescents. The Education Lab is starting to work with partners to develop an open-source curriculum now that may be used or adapted in school-based and out of school time settings.

Question:

You cited percentages of improvement in the reduction of violence. On what population sizes are these percentages based for the various programs? My impression is that the programs affect relatively small populations...in the hundreds, rather than the thousands, for example.

And how selective are these programs in terms of the people who choose or are selected to participate in them (vs. those who do not participate in the programs and may possibly be more violence-prone individuals)?

Answer:

There were a little over 2,000 young people in the C2C study sample, roughly half of whom received an offer of the program. The program was offered to young people aged 13-18 and met one of the following criteria:

- Gang affiliated or at risk of involvement
- On juvenile probation
- Guilty of a weapons offense
- Disruptive in school or disengaged
- Victim or witness of traumatic violence
- Exhibits other risk factors for criminal legal system involvement

The READI Chicago evaluation identified 2500 men in Chicago aged 18-40 across three community areas in four years (2017-2021). About half, or 1200+ men were offered the chance to participate in READI Chicago (the rate limiting step was financial resources). We tried to be as inclusive as possible to identify men at acute risk for gun violence involvement in the next 18 months through three referral pathways - 1) community outreach worker referrals, 2) data driven pathway, 3) referrals through jail and prison.

Question:

These are very promising statistics. I hope our governmental officials will read these findings and support programming.

Answer:

We agree. Thank you!

Question:

I believe you mentioned an IL task force. . .can you provide the full name for that organization?

Answer:

The Northern Illinois Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force. They are organized by US Attorney's offices and supported by federal Project Safe Neighborhoods funding.

Question:

Are the evaluation reports publicly available?

Answer:

Find links to read more about the research here:

<https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/2024/10/untapped-levers-for-reducing-gun-violence-the-impact-of-behavior-change-interventions/>

Question:

Were there reduced rates of violence overall in the community? What overall trends were there in Chicago?

Answer:

Each of these interventions were designed to really understand the effectiveness of the program for individuals; we can't yet speak to the efficacy at a community level because of their research and program design. One of the reasons for setting it up this way is that overall, since the 2016 surge in gun violence in Chicago we have seen a decrease in gun violence, then a surge in 2020, and then a decline again. Without such a rigorous research design we might conflate reductions overall with program effectiveness, which might be misleading.

Question:

To what degree have you been able to understand whether the encouraging reduction in subsequent violent crime arrests reflects a genuine suppression of crime or a statistical artifact, that is, a selection effect something like regression toward the mean? That issue emerged to considerable controversy in the late 1970s in the UDIS evaluation here in Illinois.

Answer:

Because these studies employ a randomized controlled trial, we are able to rule out other explanations for these reductions such as regression to the mean by comparing the individuals who received the treatment to those who were placed in the control group based on a random lottery. The only difference between these two groups is the offer of the program.

Question:

What is the overall goal of your behavior change interventions?

Answer:

Awareness of thoughts-emotions-actions. Clinicians' goal is to educate participants on understanding these aspects in addition to enhance their knowledge about trauma, stress and how to manage it properly. As participants gain more knowledge, they are aware and can control their behaviors long term.

Question:

I know the study focused on the impact of interventions on violent arrests, did the researchers look at non-violent arrests tangentially throughout the study?

Answer:

Most of these studies will look at arrests for multiple crime categories (violent, property, drug, etc). We break it out because the social costs of these types of crime and causes of different types of crime could be different. For the youth forums, we found large proportional reductions in violent, property, and drug crime.

Question:

The Crime Lab press release about C2C says it demonstrates "large and lasting reductions in gun violence and imprisonment." The evaluation itself doesn't seem to address outcomes with respect to either gun violence as such or imprisonment as such. Is that correct?

Answer:

Gun crimes make up much of the violent arrests that were examined. By reducing violent arrests these programs also have the downstream effect of reducing incarceration.

Question:

How effective would any of these programs be in a segregated city where the "Code of Street" is very prominent?

Answer:

All these programs were tested in Chicago which has high levels of segregation.

Question:

Has there been any research of when the behavior or potential impact began; be it environment or genetics in non-school age youth?

Answer:

Yes, research has been conducted on identifying genetic influences in non school age youth. These studies focus on early childhood experiences and their potential long-term effects, highlighting the importance of the "early childhood window" for development and how early environmental factors can interact with genetic predispositions.

Question:

Are there any unintended consequences of your interventions?

Answer:

In Choose to Change (C2C), we did not see any unintended consequences in that on average, everyone in the program was helped. What we did see is that Choose to Change could not reduce all criminal justice engagement. So, while C2C reduced arrests, and in particular arrests related to violent offenses by significant amounts, it did not change a young person's likelihood of being stopped by a police officer. To us this highlights both the promise of these individual type of interventions, but also the potential limits to address other factors that also lead to criminal legal engagement.

Question:

How can a police department - who doesn't have the capacity etc to implement these sorts of programs - use some of the information to be a partner in violence reduction?

Answer:

A lot of these programs were implemented by other practitioners, so police departments can be helpful in directing people to the programs that are available in the community. And programs like the youth forums intervention were very low cost (in terms of time and money) so a huge budget isn't always required for a program to be effective!

Question:

Earlier, Monica mentioned heterogeneity of impacts across different groups in READI. What groups had the largest impacts and did any have null impacts? Did the other studies find significant heterogeneity between different subgroups on who the programs were more or less effective for?

Answer:

We measured violence involvement in four ways: 1) an overall index of shooting and homicide arrests, shooting and homicide victimization, as well as other violent arrests, 2) each of the three components separately. We did not see statistically significant effects in the overall index that combined these components. We did see very large and statistically significant reductions in shooting and homicide arrests. The effects of shooting and homicide victimization was also large and negative, though not statistically significant. We saw variability in other types of arrests. There were three referral pathways into the program: 1) community-based referrals, 2) data driven referrals, and 3) referrals through jail/prison (CCSO & IDOC). We saw the largest and statistically significant reductions for men coming through the community-based referral pathway. More variable for guys coming through the data driven pathway.

Question:

Assuming that there may have been other organizations with similar programmatic approaches that also had evaluation needs, what were some factors related to these specific programs that impacted your decisions to evaluate them?

Answer:

Great question! Becoming a Man and Choose 2 Change were both winners from a citywide design competition asking for interventions that could possibly reduce youth violence. The winners were selected by a committee representative of community-based organizations, government officials, civic and philanthropic leaders, and others. READI Chicago was stood up in part as a response to the surge in gun violence in 2016. It was run by Heartland Alliance, but they put out an RFP for 7 community based organizations - outreach and transitional job - in the 3 community areas that were prioritized. The three prioritized community areas were those most impacted by gun violence at the time.

Question:

Jens Ludwig recently analyzed the costs to take READI to scale and argued it is not scalable for financial feasibility reasons. Is there a proposed process to provide these learning in way that the underlying basic ideas can be delivered at greater scale through average neighborhood mentoring and related programs?

Answer:

Here it's important to distinguish cost, cost effectiveness, and then the willingness of the public sector to take on those upfront costs. READI Chicago cost approximately \$24,000 per participant per year (it was a two-year program). Even with the uncertainty in overall effects, we estimate the cost-effectiveness of READI Chicago to be \$4-\$18 for every \$1 invested in the program. However, that requires either philanthropy or government to take on the up-front costs, which we have seen does not seem to be feasible (or hasn't been to date). I think a response is the kinds of interventions that Jon Davis discussed - 4 90-minute sessions - or other ways to scale. Metropolitan Family Services is now "unbundling" READI to try to give parts of the program to those that might benefit most based on their participant profile. I think scaling is a big challenge for all of these social programs and if folks have ideas, we are all ears!

Question:

How are C2C coaches selected? Does each coach mentor more than 1 person at a time? Do you have trouble finding coaches?

Answer:

Coaches are Clinicians with a master's degree in social work, counseling or any related mental health field. Some of them are licensed and non-licensed in Illinois. Additionally, mentors are selected using zip code recruitment. This is to ensure that mentors are familiar with the culture and community of our participants. Mentors have up to 10 youth at a time.

Question:

How do you measure the sustainability of behavior change interventions? Are there specific metrics or indicators that can be used to assess whether participants are maintaining the new behaviors they have learned?

Answer:

For these interventions, we track study participants (in the treatment and control groups) in different administrative data sources like police arrest records, schooling records, etc. so that we can see how outcomes are affected over long periods of time.

Question:

I am in Baltimore which is a hyper segregated city. I have been conducting research regarding community violence among youth and emerging adults for the past decade.

Answer:

Thank you for doing that important work. It would be interesting to compare what you are learning in Baltimore to some of the things we've been seeing in Chicago.

Question:

How do you avoid perpetuating stereotypes or biases in behavior change interventions? What steps are taken to ensure that the interventions are inclusive and equitable?

Answer:

Clinicians are trained on culturally relevant topics, so they are able to tailor the interventions according to the population they are serving. In addition, they work with the school to navigate the needs of the student and their family/community.

Question:

I so appreciate all of this data and research. Wonderful work. I am struck especially by the impact of 6 hours of tools and therapy in the juvenile system. It doesn't surprise me as juveniles are craving attention and both want and need to be seen. They are also kids heavily impacted by trauma who need connection and tools. Likewise, I am buoyed by the impact of wrap around services. My two questions are:

1. Have any of the nonprofits looked at using Compassionate Inquiry and Internal Family Systems Therapy with the parents for the wrap around services?
2. Has the Crime Lab looked at how awareness and fairness in Juveniles laws, RICO, and older gangster members being locked up, may have converged to contribute to the vacuum for juveniles to be drivers of violence in Chicago?

Answer:

1. Wrap around services are done by the community partners so they don't use a clinical background for wrap around services. However, family clinical services are offered to parents in case they have concerns or want to deep dive into therapy.

On 2 - not directly but would love to talk more!

Question:

Monica, what is the timeline on rolling out the open curriculum that you are working on? Is there any plan to provide training for organizations?

Answer:

The program manual for Choose to Change is available on the Crime Lab website.

Question:

Monica, what is the timeline on rolling out the open curriculum that you are working on? Is there any plan to provide training for organizations?

Answer:

We are just getting started so are at the very beginning! We hope to make the curriculum available by next summer.

Question:

IMO it is important for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and potential participants to understand this, but also for the broader public. I am seeing the question of “can afford these programs”; I wonder about a reframe to “can we afford not to invest in these young people?”

Answer:

I agree, though certainly that is a values-based question that we must all weigh in on together in our democracy!

Question:

Have you explored any network effects these programs may have within the community? Additionally, how might the program's effectiveness vary depending on a participant's proximity or closeness to a gang?

Answer:

Yes, great question! We did some preliminary work on this in C2C and have yet to update this, but I know that some work by Sara Heller and others are looking to see if BAM and READI have spillovers, you can look here for a preliminary analysis:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rbkj03yo_RAN2qdtjJFhhvS4WhcgApR2/view?usp=sharing

Question:

How do we get the newsletter?

Answer:

<https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/news-events/newsletter/>

Question:

In addition to the positive findings shared here, did any of studies have any null or disappointing findings that researchers or practitioners didn't expect?

Answer:

In READI Chicago, our "primary" outcome (which we pre-specify ahead of time, for integrity) was null - we saw lots of variability and it was not statistically significant. That index was made up of three components - shooting and homicide arrests, shooting and homicide victimization, and other serious arrests. We didn't see any effects for other serious effects, huge & significant declines for shooting and homicide arrests, and reduction for victimization but not statistically significant. That was all surprising to us!

In C2C, we saw the largest reductions in whether or not a person has an arrest but did not see statistically significant reductions in the number of arrests. Among violence arrests, we see more consistent reductions in both any arrest for violence and number of violent arrests. We have some theories about why that we elaborate more in the working paper: <https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/resources/unpacking-the-impacts-of-a-youth-behavioral-health-intervention-experimental-evidence-from-chicago/>

Question:

How were the 2500 high risk males identified?

Answer:

Through three referral pathways - 1) community-based referrals from outreach workers from community partners, 2) data driven pathway identifying men most likely to be involved in gun violence in next 18 months, and 3) institutional referrals through IDOC and CCSO upon release ("warm handoffs") - IDJJ as well.

Question:

Nour brought up the idea of environmental factors (the example was systemic racism in arrests) potentially limiting the impact of these individual-focused programs. What are some policy levers that may be effective in making sure programs such as these don't run into those barriers?

Answer:

Great question. There is some work by the Crime Lab (<https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/projects/situational-decision-making/>) that showed some training for police officers can reduce discretionary arrest rates. I also think it would be great to work with law enforcement agencies to see if working on trainings to address bias could be impactful (and how changing police behavior could make programs like C2C more or less effective).

Question:

Do you know how many participants continued to receive CBT or other mental health services after the program ended? Is there capacity in the community to provide those services to participants who seek them?

Answer:

Throughout the Choose to Change program the coaches are able to have check in with participants if they are concern about other issues more than the ones discussed in the sessions. The purpose of check in is for them to be in a continuing way to receive MH services.

Question:

What are the future goals and aspirations for the Choose to Change program? Are there any plans for expansion or replication in other communities?

Answer:

CPS has been running an "expansion" of the C2C program since ~2022. You can read more about the expansion here:

<https://www.chalkbeat.org/chicago/2021/10/25/22745286/chicago-public-schools-choose-to-change-antiviolence-program-pedro-martinez/>

Question:

How is "violent crime arrest reduction" calculated? Is it specific to the individual before and after programming or in comparison to a larger control group?

Answer:

These studies are all part of randomized experiments, so the reductions are measured by comparing the average number of arrests in the treatment group v. the control group. Arrests are measured using either Chicago Police Department arrest records or Illinois State Police arrest records.

Question:

Have any jurisdictions outside Chicago implemented C2C? Or are any currently considering doing so?

Answer:

YAP has started to implement C2C-like principles/include CBT in their mentoring in their other work across the U.S.

Question:

Did the outreach workers for READI have a defined set of criteria they used to identify the individuals they would work with? Or did they use more informal decision-making about who should participate?

Answer:

We wanted them to identify men who were most likely to be involved in gun violence in the next 18 months. We refined some minimal criteria for inclusion - mostly under the age of 40, has had prior criminal legal involvement, lived in one of the five community areas (three geographic neighborhoods) in which READI operated, and a couple of others. But the other thing we did early on is have ongoing continuous improvement "implementation" reports where we came together in groups to understand who was being recruited and "norming" on the right criteria. So I think that the "accountability" for who was being identified came from a few sources - 1) data transparency, where we showed characteristics of referrals by community area and provider, 2) relationships between READI staff and outreach workers / orgs, and 3) social norming over time through meetings, seeing group dynamics in the program.

Question:

To what extent do these programs and the evaluation research feature restorative justice principles and practices?

Answer:

Our Education Lab did a study of restorative practices programs that were implemented in Chicago Public Schools- learn more here:

<https://educationlab.uchicago.edu/projects/restorative-practices/>

Question:

I have been sharing this proverb "far and wide":

It takes a village to raise a child. When the child is not embraced by the village, the child will burn it down to feel its warmth.

This African proverb keeps me grounded. Stops me from pathologizing youth and forces me to look at environmental, etc. factors that lead to behaviors that make us uncomfortable.

Answer:

Thank you for sharing, and for joining us today.

Question:

Please repeat those therapies cognitive/ narrative/?

Answer:

Cognitive behavioral therapy, Narrative therapy, and acceptance commitment therapy - this was an example from the Working on Womanhood program that we evaluated with Youth Guidance that showed reductions in PTSD, anxiety and depression as a result of engagement in that curriculum.

Question:

Thank you for answering. Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to other interventionists? What key strategies or approaches have you found to be most effective in addressing the unique challenges?

Answer:

Yes, please see the C2C program guide:

<https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/resources/choose-to-change-c2c-program-guide/>