

Reducing Gun Violence, Advancing Justice

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Why Might READI Chicago Work to Reduce Gun Violence? Qualitative Evidence from the Field

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The Problem at Hand

Gun violence has devastating consequences for individuals and communities, burdens that disproportionately concentrate in low-income, Black communities. Recently, there has been an influx of funding and programming that has begun to explore non-law enforcement responses to curbing gun violence.

This burgeoning field, known as “community violence interventions” or CVI, has been around for decades but has received increased attention in recent years. Large-scale evaluation of programs such as the Rapid Employment and Development Initiative (READI Chicago or READI), a CVI program that combined cognitive behavioral therapy and employment, have demonstrated the efficacy of such interventions.

READI represents a concerted effort to combat gun violence by offering a combination of previously implemented evidence-based social service interventions – cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) combined with supported jobs – to young men at the highest risk of involvement in shootings across four Chicago neighborhoods. A recent study by Bhatt, Heller, Kapustin, Bertrand, and Blattman (2024)¹ tested the efficacy of READI on pre-registered violence outcomes.² Without being offered an intervention like READI Chicago, men eligible for READI Chicago, were 45 times more likely to be shot or killed than the average Chicago resident and twice as likely compared to other men of similar age groups living in their same neighborhoods.

The study finds that READI successfully identified and engaged individuals at high risk of gun violence, despite significant barriers to participation. While the program did not have a detectable impact on the overall incidence of serious violence, as measured by a standardized index of shooting and homicide victimizations, arrests, and other serious violent crimes, READI reduced arrests for shootings and homicides: for every 100 READI participants, there were 2.2 fewer shooting and homicide arrests, a 65% reduction, for those who received the program relative to their control group counterparts. Among participants referred through outreach workers—one of three referral pathways—the program led to unequivocal and substantial reductions in arrests for shootings and homicides.

To replicate and scale READI's impacts, we need to understand why it works.³ Previous research shows that employment programs on their own don't reduce violence involvement,⁴ suggesting that READI's behavioral component may be critical to its effects. However, while randomized controlled trials (RCTs) can reveal whether a program works, they are less suited to uncovering how or why it works. To address this gap, the research team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with READI participants and conducted site visits between 2017 and 2022 to observe and document different aspects of program delivery.⁵ These interviews and observations illuminate the mechanisms through which programs like READI reduce violence, offering valuable insights for policy design and implementation.

1 Monica P Bhatt, Sara B Heller, Max Kapustin, Marianne Bertrand, Christopher Blattman, Predicting and Preventing Gun Violence: An Experimental Evaluation of READI Chicago, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 139, Issue 1, February 2024

2 The pre-registered primary outcome was an index of: (i) shooting and homicide victimizations; (ii) shooting and homicide arrests; and (iii) arrests for other serious violent crimes like aggravated assault or battery, or robbery.

3 Beyond evaluation of READI, previous studies using randomized designs have shown that other behavioral science-informed community programs can significantly reduce violence involvement while improving employment and educational attainment (Heller et al. 2017; Bhatt et al. 2023; Abdul-Razzak and Hallberg 2023).

4 Ludwig, J., & Schnepel, K. (2025). Does Nothing Stop a Bullet Like a Job? The Effects of Income on Crime. *CrimRxiv*.

5 Two research teams from the Crime Lab tackled this question in two different time periods. Between August 2017 and March 2022, the team led by Monica Bhatt included Leah Luben, Brenda Benitez, Michelle Ochoa, Megan Kang and Michael Tatone. The second research team conducted interviews from June 2022 until December 2022, this was led by Kathryn Edin and Megan Kang. It included Emmanuel Hernandez, Kairvy Grewal, Chandler Hall, Gianni Pacheco, Germalysa Ferrer, Donovan Williams and Audrey Rutter.

A Qualitative Approach: Our Methods

METHODS

Researchers have developed a substantial body of evidence showing that behavioral science-informed programs can reduce violence involvement among youth⁶ and adults.^{7,8} To succeed in bringing these programs to scale, it is important to understand *how* these programs unfold and how participants respond to them. To identify these mechanisms, we conducted a qualitative analysis of participant narratives. We also aimed to identify potential secondary impacts of READI by exploring participants' own sense of READI's impact on other life domains such as work, education, or parenting, outcomes that were not measured in the RCT. We conducted immersive interviews and field observations. This report highlights key findings collected through these interviews and observations:

1. Between August 2017 and March 2022, the READI research team conducted 220 hours of field observations across all three READI sites. The research staff conducted site visits (including conversations with outreach workers and employers) to document how the program was being implemented. In the spring of 2019, we conducted 16 focus groups including over 90% of current READI staff. Staff were asked about barriers to program implementation, which READI program components they deemed essential, and the types of participants they believed were best suited for READI. In addition, we conducted immersive qualitative interviews with about 2% of the participants in the total RCT study sample (half past and half current participants; N=23), focused on capturing participants' backgrounds, their initial experience of the program, and the successes and barriers they faced to program implementation. The team also conducted a participant survey of 16% of the total study in one of the three program sites.

2. In the second half of 2022, after READI had been running for over four years, we conducted an additional 99 immersive interviews with former and current READI participants across the three program sites. These interviews explored in depth participants' lives before, during, and after the program. We asked both groups of participants about their experiences in the program. We asked former participants about how they applied the skills they learned from the program, and what barriers they faced (our interview guide is included in the appendix). We also observed 57 CBT sessions at READI program sites. Further, we developed relationships with staff at the program sites, including outreach workers. The qualitative research staff were trained to focus on their positionality, given the sensitive nature of conversations around participants' experiences in disinvested neighborhoods, and with violence and crime. They also received trauma-informed training, including sessions with therapists, to ensure sensitive conversations wouldn't retraumatize participants. Each interview started with the researcher reinforcing to themselves and the respondent that the respondents were the experts of their own experiences. Interviews typically lasted 1 to 1.5 hours, with one researcher conducting the interview while the other took detailed notes. After obtaining consent, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A codebook was developed to qualitatively code each transcript and find emerging themes (included in the appendix).

6 Abdul-Razzak, Nour, and Kelly Hallberg. (2024). Unpacking the Impacts of a Youth Behavioral Health Intervention: Experimental Evidence from Chicago. (EdWorkingPaper: 24-1054). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University

7 Heller SB, Shah AK, Guryan J, Ludwig J, Mullainathan S, Pollack HA. Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago. *Q J Econ*. 2017 Feb;132(1):1-54.

8 Blattman, Christopher, Julian C. Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan. 2017. "Reducing Crime and Violence: Experimental Evidence from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Liberia." *American Economic Review* 107 (4): 1165-1206.

Most interviews were conducted at restaurants and cafes in the neighborhoods READI served: North Lawndale, Englewood, Austin, and West Garfield Park. To recruit former participants for interviews, the team sought support from street outreach workers who had worked at READI during the early years of implementation and had maintained relationships with many of the participants over time. Once we were embedded in READI program centers, we also used snowball sampling to engage former and current participants. Each interviewee received a \$50 gift card for their time. The following tables describe the number of interviews (in the summer of 2022) conducted with program participants and the neighborhoods they came from.

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. Based on a detailed review of initial transcripts, we developed a codebook (included in the appendix) capturing predetermined and emerging themes. Each transcript was coded twice, using the software program MAXQDA to ensure consistency. We used MAXQDA's intercoder reliability tool to score the overlap between coders to ensure they were above 75%. Coders met weekly to resolve discrepancies or any coding decisions that were unclear.

Given the sensitive nature of these interviews and the high rates of violence involvement among our participants, researchers were trained in trauma-informed interviewing practices during sessions with licensed clinicians on how to identify and appropriately respond to trauma responses. We learned techniques such as regulating both our own responses and those of respondents, and safely navigating emotionally intense conversations. Researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive practices to foreground their positionality and address challenges that arose during data collection, such as interviewing someone after a recent loss or when they recounted a traumatic memory for the first time. Trauma-informed interviewing practices were essential to keeping our respondents and research team safe and collecting the highest quality data.⁹

STUDY SAMPLE

The men we interviewed were current or former participants in a large-scale RCT of READI Chicago. READI participants had high rates of violence exposure and interactions with the justice system: 35% had been previously shot and 98% had been arrested, with an average of 17 prior arrests before program referral. While 26% of Americans report experiencing physical violence in their lifetimes, at least 62% of our respondents – most still in their twenties and thirties – had already experienced it directly. Yet their exposure is not anomalous. Previous research finds that by age 20, more than half of Black residents in Chicago have witnessed a shooting.¹⁰

It is important to note that our sample is not representative of most residents in neighborhoods experiencing high rates of violence but rather reflects a subset with unusually high exposure to and participation in violence. For example, one study found that 70% of nonfatal shootings in Chicago occurred within networks comprising just 6% of the population.¹¹ While violent crimes make up less than one-third of all reported incidents (NCVS 2023), they account for the vast majority of social costs. Homicides, though under 1% of all reported crimes, are responsible for roughly 60% of crime-related social harm, most involving firearms.¹² This suggests interventions aimed at reducing violence among those with extensive histories of violence exposure could have the greatest impact on reducing the harms associated with community violence.

9 We compiled the resources for trauma-informed qualitative research practices here for public use: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16qvUfQyM7kjSx1CJ-ywTyVLxiuxut4je?usp=drive_link

10 Lanfear, Charles C., Rebecca Bucci, David S. Kirk, and Robert J. Sampson. 2023. "Inequalities in Exposure to Firearm Violence by Race, Sex, and Birth Cohort From Childhood to Age 40 Years, 1995-2021." *JAMA Network Open* 6(5):e2312465. doi: [10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.12465](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.12465).

11 Papachristos, Andrew V., Christopher Wildeman, and Elizabeth Roberto. 2015. "Tragic, but Not Random: The Social Contagion of Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries." *Social Science & Medicine* 125:139-50. doi:[10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.01.056](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.01.056).

12 Cook, Philip J., and Jens Ludwig. 2002. *Gun Violence: The Real Costs*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Table 1: Number of distinct participants interviewed during second round of interviews in 2022¹³

Program	Present	Past	Interviews
READI	40	59	99
Control	NA	NA	7
Total			106

Table 2: Number of participants interviewed in each neighborhood

Neighborhood	Interviews
Austin	12
Englewood	14
Humboldt Park	2
North Lawndale	78
Total	106

Table 3: Number of times each READI site was visited for observations

Site Visits	Observations
READI Austin	26
READI North Lawndale	18
READI Englewood	13
Total	57

¹³ We conducted interviews with 40 participants who were at READI Chicago at the time of interview. Interviews were conducted with 59 participants who had previously graduated from READI. We conducted 7 interviews with participants who did not attend READI but had either been selected for it or had gone through a similar CVI program such as Becoming a Man (BAM) or Chicago CRED.

Daily Life Before READI

A key component of the READI program was to help individuals at risk of violence involvement.

To understand how the program supported this shift, we began by exploring what daily life looked like before READI: how participants experienced their neighborhoods,¹⁴ routines, and exposures to violence while growing up. This helped us uncover how participants made sense of their surroundings and how those perceptions evolved over the course of the program.

“NORMALIZED” TO VIOLENCE

Despite coming from different neighborhoods and being different ages, one theme bound participants together: personal exposure to violence and the normalization of it. The first question we asked all respondents was “tell me the story of your life.” In response, nearly all participants recalled episodes in which they had experienced violence personally, within their families, or in their neighborhoods. Violence was experienced in several ways, such as witnessing or engaging in shootings, getting involved in physical fights, finding themselves in verbal and/or physically abusive relationships, spending time in prison, losing family members to shootings, traumatic interactions with the police, and conflict among street gangs. Participants linked constant exposure to gun violence to symptoms consistent with PTSD, deep distrust of others, and significant difficulty navigating their neighborhoods in ways that would allow them to pursue opportunity—such as attending school or securing stable work. Before joining READI, many participants were disconnected from mainstream institutions and deeply distrustful of anyone outside their immediate social circles.

We asked Calvin,¹⁵ a 25-year-old former READI participant from North Lawndale about the impact that gun violence has had on his life. He replied, “My blood brother got killed from gun violence. I got friends I lost to gun violence, like multiple. So that’s why I say I’m numb to it, it’s normal.” Like Calvin, many participants recounted a sense of “numbness” induced by traumatic experiences. They told us they believed these experiences had desensitized them to violence. Inch, a 28-year-old current READI participant from North Lawndale, told us how his response to shootings in his area has affected him. He said, “I know a lot of people who got shot too though. So after that, I just noticed it, it became normal. Me seeing that, I stopped crying about getting shot.”

The violence isn’t restricted to the streets; it entered family dynamics in ways that made participants feel unsafe in their home environments. For instance, Tony, a 41-year-old former READI participant from North Lawndale, reported that his parents didn’t set a healthy precedent for him. Tony said, “I saw my father abuse my mother daily. That was okay even though it was wrong I seen it so much it became right. But that day I asked her, I said, ‘Why are you still with him?’ And she said, ‘That’s your father and I love him.’ And people don’t understand trauma, if you don’t deal with it ..., you can bring that baggage into your adult life and that can really affect your life. ... I equated physical abuse with love. ... I was out here physically abusing someone’s sister, somebody doing it because what I watched my father do to my mother so like I said, I equated physical abuse for love. But I know now, no, you should never, for no reason have to put your hands on a woman.” In Tony’s case, love became equated with violence. Several respondents shared similar stories.

14 Data from the Chicago Police Department [indicates](#) that in Chicago, just 6 out of 77 neighborhoods accounted for one-third of its gunshot victims in 2021 despite housing less than 10% of the city’s population (Heller and Kapustin 2022). READI serves 4 of those 6 neighborhoods: West Garfield, Austin, North Lawndale and Englewood.

15 All names have been changed to protect the privacy of research subjects. In most cases, research subjects chose their pseudonyms.

● BACKGROUND IN “THE LIFE”

Many READI participants entered the program with a background in “the life,” a term they used to describe involvement in street gangs and criminal activity. For some, being in “the life” granted them the opportunity to be financially independent. TY, a 20-year-old former READI participant from North Lawndale expressed that he was “addicted” to making money selling drugs on the street. Being in “the life” gave him the opportunity to provide for himself. He said, “That drug money, it felt like it was everything. ...I ain't going to make it too far with that. But at that point, it felt good. It was coming in fast.” While participants like TY appreciated the financial independence that came with being associated with street gangs, some participants were motivated to join because they felt taken care of. Terrel, a 29-year-old current READI participant in Englewood, was drawn to his “street family” because they provided materially for him when his own family couldn't. He said, “I graduate[d] 8th grade in 2007, but it was too late for me. ... I was deep in the streets. I got shot at already. I'm selling drugs [Then my mother got killed]. Her being gone, it f****d me over. ...That's how people get initiated into gangs, like... they became my family. The streets was my family.” For Terrel, being part of “the life” made him feel supported emotionally and materially, something that his biological family did not provide.

● WITHDRAWAL FROM PUBLIC LIFE

During interviews, we asked participants to describe neighborhoods they grew up in. Participants recalled that neighborhood barbeques and other community gatherings contributed to a sense of belonging. However, they told us, in more recent years the increase in gun violence has made community members retract from public spaces. Participants expressed missing the sense of community they had growing up. CJ, 36-year-old current participant from North Lawndale remembered the many block parties while growing up, but “Everybody being a house now. You don't see people really celebrating on blocks. Like, you know how, when I was growing up, how we used to do. ... After five or six o'clock you don't see nobody on blocks no more.” Cam, 23-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, also said that people stopped having fun on their blocks: “We stopped going on the block and s**t, having fun on the block. ...And went from that to straight we popping out with guns and standing on the block and they selling drugs and s**t,” Cam said.

During interviews, participant also revealed feelings of suspicion towards people around them which resulted in them feeling isolated from people.

For instance, Tyboy, a 32-year-old former READI participant from North Lawndale, talked candidly about the profound impact of being shot, which left him with a lingering sense of paranoia. He explains how his perception of everyone around him drastically changed, leading him to isolate himself and avoid interactions with others for a significant period. He said, “I'm about to get the f**k out of the way now. And what's going on now I'm not trying to see nothing. I'm like you could literally look through my leg and look out my leg.” Mario, a 24-year-old former READI participant from North Lawndale, shared his inclination towards limiting communication with others to prevent any potential harm that may arise. He said, “Actually, I try to stay away from people because it's going to prevent me from hurting somebody if I was going to work and I got to deal with people. If I ain't go to deal with people. I'd rather stay out of the way or be unseen than be seen and hurt.”

FATHERHOOD AS AN ANCHOR

Our interview guide didn't include questions on children or fatherhood. Yet, fatherhood arose as a central theme in about 40% of the interviews. Respondents brought up their children in two contexts; either while describing their life stories or while describing the birth of a child as the moment that they decided to refrain from gang activities. Respondents described their children as motivation to work hard, think about their future and control their emotions. Fathers described how READI helped them be better fathers by teaching them how to effectively communicate with their kids, respond to stressful situations at home differently, and become motivated to keep stable regular employment in order to provide. Marcus, a 41-year-old past READI participant from North Lawndale described how meeting his son was a transformative moment, getting him to rethink his “habit” of selling drugs. “I held him, I'm like, ‘D**n. I done made a baby.’ Now, my whole life has changed. ... As he got older, it really changed me,” Marcus explained, “It changed a whole lot because I don't want my son... picking up the habit that I'm doing.”

Kanye, 24-year-old former READI participant in North Lawndale was 19 when his son was born. When asked when he started trying to keep himself away from the streets, Kanye replied, “When my son was first born. It's been about six years now.” Jayden was a 24-year-old current READI participant in Englewood. He was committed to “breaking the cycle” and being there for his son, because he knew what it was like to have an absent father in his life.

The idea of growing old and being a grandfather to his son provided Jayden with motivation to get his life in order and persist through his time incarcerated. Jayden said, “I’m going to be there for my baby, because it is nothing like growing up without a father, I didn’t have one, so I’m trying to make a big change and show my baby you going have a father, I’m going to be there for you, I’m going to be a change person, I’m going to break the cycle.”

MOTIVATED TO CHANGE

Even as we heard of respondents’ struggles with violence and poverty, almost all participants spoke about elements of life that brought joy. For some, that joy was found in fatherhood or in a romantic relationship or in repairing relationships with their family. Others found joy in a new skill they learned, or in their dreams of becoming entrepreneurs, athletes, musicians, and artists. During interviews, participants spoke at length about these dreams, including mentions of being successful in a general sense, and having a career. Often their goals weren’t clearly defined, but their belief in the possibility achieving them despite obstacles stood out. As 20-year-old TY put it, “I had to think about what I was doing. I had to think about, s**t, where do I want to see myself in five years? That’s what I kept telling myself. Do I want to [be] in jail? Or do I want to be somebody successful? I want to be somebody successful. I don’t want to be dead or in jail.”

In some cases, participants had specific educational and career goals and described specific steps they had already taken to work towards those goals. For others, the goal was to keep a job or to get a better job, revealing that participants aren’t just thinking about getting any job but are starting to think about what it means to sustain work or to move up the ladder of work through switching jobs. Five participants mentioned plans to finish high school or college. Three participants said that they wanted to get their commercial drivers’ license so that they could be truck drivers. Dreams of owning a business and establishing themselves as entrepreneurs were also common. Some had fleshed out ideas on what businesses they wanted to start: running a laundromat, being a personal trainer, designing t-shirts, and coding and designing video games.

Many participants also expressed motivation to give back to their communities through mentoring younger people, helping family members avoid their mistakes, or contributing to neighborhood improvement. These generative acts—the desire to contribute positively to one’s community—can serve as powerful motivators for change, helping individuals rebuild social bonds that violence had previously severed and providing a sense of purpose that sustains long-term transformation.¹⁶

16 Elston, Bethany, Megan Kang, Gianni Pacheco, and Kathryn Edin. Generativity as a Pathway to Desistance. Forthcoming.

Program Experiences

Before exploring mechanisms of change, this section highlights the core components of the READI Chicago curriculum as described by participants. Four elements stood out in their experiences: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) sessions, professional development classes, paid transitional work, and relationship-building within the program. READI's core programming outside of the part-time job is split into two key components: The first component included Control-Alt-Delete (CAD), which involves READI's CBT programming. The second component was professional development classes.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

READI was an 18-month long program grounded in Trauma-Informed Cognitive Behavioral techniques.¹⁷ Our documentation of the curriculum goes beyond participant reflections during interviews, we sat in on, and at times even participated in CAD sessions offered at READI. Our research team participated in class activities and observed how classes were conducted, how participants responded and what they took away from the designed curriculum. CAD sessions were divided into four levels; each participant started with the first level and proceeds to the fourth one as he progresses. The first half of the day at READI was spent attending either a CAD session or a professional development class. The CAD curriculum was delivered over one year of 90-minute group therapy sessions held three days a week, focusing on three key areas: understanding the body's stress response system, identifying personal trauma responses, and developing skills for a productive and peaceful life.

Each day in a READI classroom started with a warm-up question to spark conversation, followed by a focus on a key concept like unlearning trauma, managing anxiety, or improving communication.

Sessions included structured agendas with handouts and group activities, and participants engaged in interactive psychoeducation on culturally relevant topics aimed at those at risk of gun violence. Instructors encouraged participants to use their own experiences as material for discussion, applying trauma-informed techniques and cognitive-behavioral skills to manage stress, emotions and change. Through activities and reflection, participants integrated these skills into their lives, while also receiving professional development support for transitional jobs. Attendance was flexible, but participants were encouraged to be punctual to foster group cohesion and peer support. The classrooms resembled a school setting, with whiteboards and educational and motivational materials on the walls. However, the desks and chairs were arranged differently every day to suit the needs of the participants, most often arranged in circles. Coaches moderated the sessions and caught participants from speaking over others by reminding them, "one mic."

Discussions often touched on real-life scenarios with participants' partners and children, music, lifestyle, manhood, money, grief, and group conflict, among many other topics that the participants surfaced themselves. In 23-year-old former North Lawndale participant Junior's words, "That s**t works." Referring to CAD sessions, he said, "If I get up right now, I'll say, 'Man F, y'all' and walk out the door. That's the action. What made me think, what was my thought behind that action? And what was my belief behind my thought that makes me want to do that, you know what I'm saying? And it makes you think like that. That's why I told him, I'm like, that's one of my favorite classes because it makes you understand why we do things we do."

CAME FOR THE JOB, STAYED FOR CAD

READI's key active ingredient, according to our respondents, was the Control-Alt-Delete program. Even though the program's architects saw READI as a "rapid employment" program, 70% of respondents told our interviewers that they saw the program not primarily as a jobs program, but as an opportunity for personal growth.¹⁸

17 At the time of data collection in the summer of 2022, READI was an 18-month program grounded in Trauma-Informed Cognitive Behavioral techniques. Since then, the program has undergone significant changes, and its structure and approach may differ from what is described here.

18 This finding is based on interviews conducted with a sample of 99 READI participants between June and August 2022.

READI helped them understand how much of their decision-making in a high-stakes situation was driven by subconscious, automatic cognition. When asked to reflect on their takeaways a year out of the program, most participants focused on the skills they gained from CAD rather than the work component.

Larry, 31-year-old current participant, who was enrolled in READI at the time of his interview, first thought of the program as just a job, “At first I’m not going to lie, I had that mentality until I got to the [CAD] sessions and I was seeing like, ‘Oh this is really helping me.’” Larry said the program helped him navigate life with more awareness and control over his emotions, especially in relationships, and added, “It really helped me in my life, how to deal with my own situations in life and how to control my anger or how to present myself.” Larry described CAD as being where, “I learn something new every day... far as like, articulating the things that’s what’s going on inside of my body and how I’m feeling.” Larry appreciated how CAD encouraged reflection on negative thoughts in a way that enabled him to understand his reactions: “It’s always diving into the negativity of our thoughts. ... I’m getting a more broader understanding of it. And it’s basically think before you react.” While some parts felt like “common sense” to him, he acknowledged that the repetition helped reinforce emotional control: “Repetition is the best way to learn.” Larry noted that CAD may have contributed to better handling of conflict at home, “There would be times I’d lash out but now I just whatever. And probably having CAD sessions have helped that too.”

Jaquil, 25-year-old past participant, completed all 18 months of the program as part of one of the first READI cohorts. He went from being unhoused to working for a trucking company and living in his own apartment. That growth deepened his belief that his success helped open doors for others, “The cognitive thinking classes, all that actually helped. ...When we first started, we was the first course. So it was like they want everything. We growing us, they growing. So I understood that. We ain’t going to get as much as the next cohorts and s**t behind us going to get, but we paved the way.” He saw the importance of taking initiative, “I ain’t never really had no real job. But life-wise, looking back at, I’m not going to sell no more drugs on no block no more. Standing out on no block. I’m not doing that. Because I learned at a job, at this job program, I could do this and get some money.” Jaquil described READI as more than just a job program. For him, it was a mindset shift, “READI is a job training program that helps you get into mode of working and transitioning you into a civilized civilian, a real, productive human being.”

CAD SESSIONS GAVE SPACE TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

READI attempted to have culturally relevant curriculum which aimed to foster a space for difficult conversations, addressing issues crucial to the lives of men and their communities. In a CAD session we observed, one coach asked the group how they would react if their partner was flirting with others. Several participants initially said they would respond with physical violence, even while acknowledging their own infidelity. The female coach challenged this thinking by asking them to consider how they would feel if someone treated their daughters the same way, though participants maintained contradictory standards for their own behavior versus what they would accept for their family members.

For many of these participants, CAD sessions were the first time they could openly discuss such sensitive issues and even be challenged on their way of thinking aloud to others, which impacted not only themselves but others around them like their partners, kids, and family members. Apart from unpacking complex family dynamics, these CAD sessions also delved into conversations where participants could discuss mundane, daily challenges they experienced. For instance, we witnessed participants sharing their thoughts on difficulties they had during incarceration and how they navigated it. Some conversations also ranged from talking about accessing social resources like the pandemic stimulus checks to deliberating over the upcoming elections. Participants often validated each other’s experiences and hardships, and in doing so, discovered their shared humanity with individuals they may have previously viewed as rivals or untrustworthy neighbors.

CAD SESSIONS HELPED LEARN FROM “THE LIFE”

CAD sessions were designed to help participants reframe their street experiences by highlighting the valuable skills they developed and show how these can be applied in prosocial ways. In one session, a coach introduced a video of a Black entrepreneur who started a vending machine business. It walked viewers through the logistics of buying machines, choosing locations and managing profits. After the video, participants shared what they learned from it: one highlighted the importance of location, another emphasized the need for security. The coach then steered the conversation towards profit margins, pointing out that the same acumen used in the street applies to the vending machine business.

He prompted that everyone in the room possessed that acumen, “If you think about his profit margins of buying a can of coke wholesale for \$0.98 and selling it for \$1.29 is the same thinking as we do while we are selling on the street.” As participants nodded in agreement and shared their ‘aha’ moments, they began to see how their street skills could translate into entrepreneurship.

We observed a session focused on the core belief of respect. Several participants shared their personal definitions of respect, agreeing on a key point: self-respect precedes respect from others. One participant extended the conversation by expressing his stance on disrespect, particularly in relationships. He mentioned that if a girl called him a derogatory name (the “B” word), he would end the relationship. Most participants emphasized that they would not tolerate being called a “B” without retaliating. In response, the coach posed a question: “But if they call you a B, and you respond, knowing they will respond back—how do you de-escalate from that situation?” The group asserted that de-escalation would not be their instinctive response. Nearly all participants felt compelled to retaliate when disrespected in that way. Moments later, a participant jokingly said, “When someone brings out a pipe (handgun), though, you gotta de-escalate. Someone brings out a pipe, then you gotta be like, ‘Hey man, you’re right, I’m a B.’” This moment showed us that participants were implicitly acknowledging the conflict decision tree, where escalation feels inevitable. It was clear that while verbal retaliation was considered necessary, the presence of a weapon immediately changed the stakes, forcing de-escalation. Through CAD sessions, these moments were articulated as critical turning points, one wherein participants could interrupt patterns no longer serving them and make different choices.

● READI AS A STEPPINGSTONE OUT OF THE STREET LIFESTYLE

About 37% of the participants we interviewed shared that READI became a steppingstone which helped them navigate their way out of the street life. As we coded our transcripts qualitatively, the team only coded participants as “stepping out of *“the life”* when they explicitly described making this choice or journey themselves, not based on the researcher’s interpretation of their experiences.

As a caveat to this, participants’ experiences in gangs or a lifestyle dependent on illicit means of income was not uniform.

Bryce, a 21-year-old current participant from Englewood, for example, refers to himself before being in READI as a “street dude,” but then reflects on READI’s impact, “It gives you the want to do something different than what you’ve been doing. That’s something... There’s plenty of other ways out here to make money. So no, you don’t got to do that.” While some participants referred directly to a history in gangs or “gangbanging”, other participants commonly referred to their lifestyle before READI as getting “into trouble” or being “in the streets.”

In much the same way being “*in the life*” is not uniform, leaving or “stepping out” of “*the life*” is not always a binary experience either. However, noticeably, participants commonly spoke about READI as the turning point in their minds of when they made that personal commitment. Duke, a 20-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, captures this idea succinctly, saying in his interview, “When I went to READI. I stopped gangbanging. ...I ain’t want nothing to do with it no more. Like I really wanted to change...” Duke explained that his mindset changed to where he prioritizes himself and his future over what people still in “*the life*” expect from him.

Duke is an example of a participant who joined READI knowing that he wanted to make a change and step out of the street life. Many participants who reported this success expressed some form of already knowing that they wanted a way out and a more stable lifestyle that READI could provide. However, this was not true of all participants who reported this success. Some participants, like Big Dude, a 38-year-old current participant from Englewood, expressed hesitancy starting the program and were not actively seeking this change until they got to READI and it “grew” on them. Luther, a 26-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, reflects being surprised by his transformation, recalling, “I ain’t even thinking about no gang s**t. That s**t crazy, because it be like I was so into it. It’s like damn, for me to be just turning my back on everything and be a whole other life. Thanks to READI, thanks to just making sure I can do it.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CLASSES & WORK EXPERIENCE

While the CAD sessions may have inspired mindset shifts in several participants, it is the professional development and work experience that initially drew most participants in. Coaches at program sites revealed that the outreach strategy often entailed asking participants if they want a job.

44% of participants we interviewed stated that READI helped them with finding either a job or professional licenses, work experiences that would help them eventually find employment.¹⁹ Juan, a 28-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, said that before he started the program, he didn't feel ready for the job market. Post the program, he noted that it equipped him with skills that made him ready for a job. He said, "It kind of helped me get ready to work at life, because before, I was ready because I had a job and s**t. I had a job and stuff before, but I wasn't really ready for the job... READI Chicago got me ready. The program, the stuff I went through, it helped me. ... The steps we took every day helped our brain mentally get ready to work."

Brandon, a 29-year-old current participant from North Lawndale, explained that the program enabled people without any job histories to be exposed to job trainings. He also expressed that these skills are often not made easily accessible, but READI enables everyone to have an open conversation about it. He said, "Things can be lined up for you after you exit the program, people will put you in certain places. There are resources available as far as other things like CDL license and all this stuff that they say, per se, that is available. ... I think it's a good program most definitely, especially for people that doesn't have any type of job history, people who've never been in these type of settings and talking about stuff and opening up about maybe they have something they've been through to share."

The professional development classes were an avenue to explore different job licenses that ease their re-entry into the job market. For example, Tim, a 30-year-old current READI participant from North Lawndale, said, "I get my forklift license in about two weeks from the program. Then I'm going into the CDL class. They fund all the classes for you. And you get up to a year, up to a year in READI, so in all class are like 10 weeks, 12 weeks longer. So, I plan on taking up every trade that they offer. And because you get paid to do it."

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITH READI STAFF

A key aspect of participants' experiences at READI was the way staff made them feel seen, valued, and cared for. A total of 33 participants spoke about several instances where READI staff supported them in managing difficult situations, both circumstantial and emotional. 9 participants mentioned that READI felt like a 'family' to them, one they could reach out to in times of difficulty.²⁰

Participants felt truly cared for by the staff, even beyond the intended curriculum of READI. Bryce, a 21-year-old current READI participant from Englewood described that the financial support from READI helped him manage stress over his family finances. Moreover, staff at READI helped him reconstruct his narrative on feeling responsible for his family's finances over his own education. Bryce said, "[READI staff] helped me so much, going to school. ... I was so focused on trying to help my mama ... but I have Charles [READI outreach worker] telling me, man, you can have money every day, even if that's not enough. Not a lot, but you can get some to support and help your mama in the situation that she's in. You just used to moving house to house. He's like, stop, just sit there, and you be there [in school]."

Peter, a 33-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, explained that READI turned out to be the 'biggest push' he needed to grow into himself. "They don't even realize how much this helping me. That's why I be in here almost every day, my attendance almost perfect because I enjoy coming here. I enjoy being able to network and build relationships with people productive and they just want to see me grow or get me in a better position." Even beyond the staff at READI, several participants expressed feeling supported by outreach members at the program site. Juan, a 28-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, "...[Outreach] really taught me to communicate, and it shows me how to put trust in people."

"You may have been exposed to these things in your life, but to actually go through breathing exercises, to actually stop, pause, think, rationalize before you make a decision. This is being reintroduced to [me and] it has been enlightening and effective and it has helped me."

— Rick, 44-year-old current participant from North Lawndale

19 This finding is based on interviews conducted with a sample of 99 READI participants between June and August 2022.

20 This finding is based on interviews conducted with a sample of 99 READI participants between June and August 2022.

Put my trust in my fellow people, you know? I'll work with you, how you call it, what do I call it? Outreach help us like a lot, you know? Made sure that we can trust them, you know what I'm saying, we could trust another person that's trying to help you, you know." Participants emphasized that relationship-building is a core part of their experience in READI, extending beyond the formal curriculum. Many described how the support from staff, coaches, and outreach workers fostered a sense of trust, belonging, and personal growth, making READI feel like more than just a program, but also a community they could rely on.

CONSISTENCY ACROSS PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Even as the program offered different components, from CAD, professional development, to work experience, participants emphasized that it was the routine, day-to-day practice of these elements that made them impactful. The consistency of these elements made participants feel safer. For instance, Jason, a 24-year-old current participant from Austin, captured this when asked what part of the program mattered most to him. He pointed to the daily "grounding exercise." He said, "The most important part to me from the program is probably when we do our grounding exercise. We come together as one to communicate among each other and get our day going. ... Because I get to see where people are at, like, they say on a scale of 1 to 10 how you feeling? They just go around the circle and you say okay, you might say you're a two. ... That's low as low, so maybe I need to do something so I can uplift this brother so he can feel like I feel, like a 10." For Jason, it wasn't just the grounding exercise by itself, it was the occurrence of the activity every day that created a sense of reliance.

The structure of READI that motivated participants to show up every day and engage in classes offered a steady rhythm that many described as grounding and supportive. Tune, a 30-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, likened the READI experience to going to school, "They keeping you going. They motivating you, striving you, telling you do good in life. When we used to go there from nine o'clock, from 9:00 to 11:30, we'll have our little classes and doing work, or working on your behavior, working on this situation, working on that situation, do your homework. All type of things before we go out and start working. They're like a school, too. So, it helped me a lot." For Tune, this school-like routine offered more than skill-building, it provided structure, accountability, and a sense of forward movement. It wasn't just what participants were learning and doing, but how regularly they were doing it that made the difference.

Why READI May Work: Uncovering Mechanisms

The RCT conducted on READI shows us that the program can work, particularly for men referred by outreach workers, but the effects are variable by outcome and their pathway to programming. To understand what mechanisms were driving these effects, our interview guide was designed to ask participants to walk us through their thought process and behavior, both now and before the program. This comparison would help highlight what’s changing.

The following section identifies mechanisms that drove change in participants who experienced the program. Some of the key mechanisms identified were metacognition, wherein participants reflected an increased ability to think about their own thinking. Other mechanisms included learning how to consider alternate perspectives to de-escalate conflict. Our analysis identifies mechanisms behind how the program shaped participant behavior, shedding light on how and why certain outcomes emerged. At the same time, these mechanisms also reveal negative outcomes, suggesting that despite program’s support, participants are returning to social

environments, where they run the risk of becoming caught in the same cycle of conflict.

After interviews were conducted, we inductively developed a codebook (included in the Appendix) which was informed by themes we observed in participant takeaways. Based on the themes identified, we developed several parent codes and a decision rule for when each code should be used was fleshed out. For instance, a parent code titled ‘greater metacognition’ was used when the respondent during the interview described an awareness of their own thinking and how that led to alternate behaviors. A code titled ‘Future orientation’ was used when respondents were orientated towards long-term thinking and exemplified an intention to plan into the future. All transcripts were coded using MAXQDA, at least twice by different coders. Following this, we calculated the occurrences of each code across a sample of 99 interviews. The following table consists of the parent codes (in this case the mechanism of change) and the percentage of interviewed respondents who expressed this sentiment. A total of 99 interviews with past or current READI interviews were coded. This gives an insight into which themes were prominent over others. The most popular mechanisms were that READI helped with metacognition, work experiences/job licenses, and planning for the future.

Table 4: Top Program Mechanisms Coded in Interviews

Mechanism	Agent of Change (Component of READI program that enabled this change)	% of respondents who expressed this sentiment ²¹
Greater Metacognition	CAD ²²	63%
Workforce Skill Development	CAD and Professional Development	44%
Future Orientation & Goal Setting	CAD	39%
Option Awareness	CAD	35%
Ability to View Others’ Perspectives	CAD	34%
Changed Social Networks	CAD and Professional Development	26%
Prosocial Habit Formation	CAD and Professional Development	25%
Increased Income	Professional Development	21%

21 These findings are based on interviews conducted with a sample of 99 READI participants between June and August 2022.

22 CAD refers to Control, Alt, Delete, the CBT component of the READI Chicago program.

✓ Greater Metacognition

Perhaps the key pathway through which READI changes participants' behavior is by fostering *metacognition*, that is helping individuals better understand and manage their thoughts, feelings, and triggers. This was supported by READI's CAD sessions. More than half the respondents we interviewed (63%) indicated that the program contributed to helping them with metacognition.

“

Those that freeze, fawn, fight or flight. That stuff, that's deep. ... I never looked at my stress response like that because I grew up in the hood. ... Everything I ever went through it got a name to it.”

—Big Dude, 38-year-old current participant from North Lawndale

Changing automatic thought patterns isn't easy. It requires moving from fast, emotional reactions (System 1 thinking) to slower, more deliberate thinking (System 2 thinking).²³ At the heart of cognitive behavioral therapy is the ability to pause: to create space between stimulus and response. Recognizing that conflict doesn't demand a single reaction opens the door to safer, more intentional choices. This matters deeply in “unforgiving places,” high-risk environments where one misstep can have serious consequences.²⁴ Many READI participants arrived with only one or two practiced responses to conflict—often fight or escalate. What they hadn't learned was how to pause.

One of the most frequent mechanisms used was to ‘Pause, reflect and act’. Participants who talked about managing emotions mentioned at least one but often all components of a strategy that involved three parts: taking a deliberate pause when there is a strong emotional reaction, thinking about

the consequences of reacting out of instinct, and making a conscious change about what they wanted to do next.

For Kobe, a 24-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, the ‘deliberate pause’ was an integral part of the three-step strategy. “I always had anger problems. ... I was just like punching people. ... They taught me a lot. How to re-direct myself, just listen to see what. ... Just see what's going on before I jump,” Kobe explained. In some participants, considering and reflecting on consequences helped assist the pause.

Several participants decided to walk away from conflicting situations rather than “acting on it”, especially when it wasn't in their control to resolve the conflict. Duke, a 20-year-old past READI participant from North Lawndale mentioned, “It actually helped me work on more self-control and knowing where it's going to go. ... And if it's out of your control, just delete yourself from the situation and move on until you find something that's in your control.” About six participants mentioned ‘walking away from conflicts’ to manage triggering moments with rivals or arguments with friends or acquaintances that would become heated. Keith, a 31-year-old past READI participant from North Lawndale narrated how a conflict played out with his friend, “Then one of my friends said something and it made me mad. It pissed me off, really. ... I was fixing to say something, but I'm like ‘Man...’ I just walked off.” Keith explained that he walked off because he knew where it was going to ‘lead to’. Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, “I learned that every... action doesn't deserve an emotional reaction or ignorant rebuttal. Some things could be left before it could get blown up.”

Better understanding their own behavior and its triggers also helped READI participants depersonalize their trauma and de-blame themselves, helping them see that their responses were not unique but rooted in common human experiences. READI's sessions taught participants to recognize how emotions like anger or fear feel in the body. This technique—*affect labeling*—helps slow down reactions by reducing threat responses in the brain and boosting self-control. Naming emotions made it easier for participants to pause and choose safer responses.

23 Kahneman, Daniel, 2011. Thinking, fast and slow. Farrar, Straus and Giroux

24 Ludwig, Jens, 2025. Unforgiving Places. University of Chicago Press Economic Books

For example, Big Dude, 38-year-old current participant from READI said, “Those that freeze, fawn, fight or flight. That stuff, that’s deep. ... I never looked at my stress response like that because I grew up in the hood. ... I did that my whole life, but I never knew how to break it down. ... Everything I ever went through it got a name to it.” Jayson, 22-year-old past participant, reflected on how when he hurt others, he did not want to but did not know another way; he was in survival mode: “Deep down, that’s why I say I’m a good person within because a lot of things that I did bad was just what I thought was at, like I told you at first it was fun but then I noticed I was hurting other people. ... I did it for survival. Cause I didn’t really know no other way.”

The most common strategies participants used to deal with conflict was to either walk away from the situation or to pause while in the moment. However, a few participants mentioned using strategies that engaged the body. They used mindfulness practices to regulate difficult emotions. For instance, Tune, a 30-year-old past participant from North Lawndale said, “If I get to arguing with someone, now I count to 10 backwards in my head. Like, now I’ll go the other way. It ain’t worth it. [READI] taught me that. Always, always keep you anger in control and never let your anger get out of control.” Some participants managed difficult emotions, such as anger, through breathing techniques or meditation. Others mentioned they used music, art or journaling to regulate themselves.

Some participants learned from READI to walk away from conflict and become more present in their bodies through mindfulness and self-regulation techniques. However, for a few, the takeaway was self-isolation where they chose to withdraw instead of engaging with support systems. While self-isolation as a means to manage conflict was not a common response among respondents, two participants did express a preference for distancing themselves from others when experiencing feelings of anger, rather than engaging in potential conflicts. For example, Tatum, a 27-year-old former participant of READI, expressed his inclination to stay home when he’s experiencing emotions like anger or frustration rather than attending the program, and further pondered on the purpose of showing up with a negative attitude. Tatum said, “I always told them, ‘I’m not going to never come here if I don’t feel like working or if I’m mad or if I’m angry.’ ... I could miss a million days and still come. I’m not going to never come here with that attitude.”

✔ Future Orientation & Goal Planning

Across interviews, there were several themes displayed in the way participants thought about their future. For some respondents, thinking about the future entailed considering consequences that would be imposed on their families if they were to continue being in *“the life”*. In other instances, participants were able to zoom out of their own situation and engage with the tradeoff between short-term pleasure and long-term consequence to achieve positive outcomes. Some participants also elaborated on how READI pushed them to think about their future, while others showed intention and potential to break their current “cycles” and redirect their lives. This was identified in about 39% participants we interviewed.

In some instances, participants considered opting out of *“the life”* since they possessed awareness of its negative impacts on their family. In an interview, John, a 23-year-old past READI participant from North Lawndale called out his own behavior and asserted that he had been “selfish” about his choices behind being *“in the life”*. He said, “The first little time I ended up getting locked up, that little 18 months, that was a decent little amount of time for me. That’s almost two years. So, I kept seeing, I can’t be steady going back and forth with jail. I got a child I got to raise. ... That’s really being selfish. I’m being selfish towards him, making a decision for myself, but it’s really affecting him. ... So, I felt like I had to just get my act together.”

For several participants, the ability to think about their futures was shaped by techniques, instructors and content offered by the READI program. Junior, a 22-year-old past participant from North Lawndale recounted his journey into the READI program and how it inspired him to take his education more seriously. Post the program, he decided to complete his GED and his referral to do so was through READI. Not only did he describe his future-oriented outlook, but Junior went a step further and inculcated that change in his life. He also pointed out that READI prompted him to seriously consider thinking about the future. Before that, Junior mentioned that only getting through the end of the day was his priority, but now he has been able to position his mindset to actively think about the future.

Jaquil, a 25-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, expressed how he set goals for himself, which was something he hadn’t done before. Like other participants, by being part of READI, Jaquil was encouraged to think about the future.

Jaquil said, “Being at READI, I met people that got things going on. They just got out of jail. I’m finna start my bills. I start... doing things like goals... I never set goals before. Really, I used to do just do s**t. I’m going to give back to the hood. I graduated. I graduated. Took me 30 days to complete everything. I was on house arrest. I remember going in the crib. And I sat down on the computer every day. Got done with that s**t before court. Me doing that, I set little goals I never did before.”

📍 Option Awareness

Another mechanism that was identified across interviews was that READI fostered the development of option awareness – the ability to recognize and choose among different responses to challenging situations. About 35% participants we interviewed talked about this shift in considering different options.

“

It’s always hope. ... Just because you feel angry don’t mean that you got to do some angry things to get you in trouble. ... I have a choice.”

—CJ, 31-year-old current participant from Englewood

Many READI participants came into the program with a limited set of responses to perceived threats or disrespect, often defaulting to fighting back. These quick, reactive behaviors had been shaped by years of living in environments where danger was constant and pausing to think could be risky. In such contexts, fast, assertive responses can be adaptive. But over time, these responses can escalate interactions, especially when individuals come to perceive neutral interactions as threatening or offensive. This narrowing of response options is not about a lack of thought, but about habits formed through repeated exposure to threat and a lack of alternatives. As social psychologist Anuj Shah explains, people aren’t just “thinking fast”—they’re “thinking past,” relying on learned defaults rather than deliberate choices.

READI’s cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) sessions (what the program called CAD) aimed to interrupt this cycle.

The goal wasn’t just to teach nonviolence, it was to help participants recognize other, safer responses. Even small changes—like pausing to breathe, cry, or use a stress ball—marked the beginning of a broader shift in how participants handled conflict. By creating space between feeling and reacting, READI helped participants expand their behavioral toolkit. These changes, though small, can have a major impact in high-risk environments where one split-second decision can change everything.

CJ, 31-year-old current READI participant from Austin, reflected, “It’s always hope. ... Just because you feel angry don’t mean that you got to go do some angry things to get you in trouble. ... I have a choice.” This shift in thinking allowed him to approach disagreements with greater understanding and control, emphasizing perspective-taking and self-regulation. Similarly, King, 26, a participant from Englewood, who had just lost a close friend to gun violence, described how the program helped him process his emotions and avoid retaliatory actions. “I just wanted my get back... but that ain’t going to make me feel better... without the program, I could have reacted. ... Instead, [I] just calmed myself down and said, ‘everything going to be all right.’” This ability to pause and consider alternative responses not only prevented impulsive reactions but also reinforced a sense of agency and emotional resilience among participants.

In some instances, respondents talked about how READI coaches specifically helped them to engage in thinking about their options for responding differently or for growing mentally and emotionally. Sean, a 33-year-old current READI Englewood participant, shared how his coach helped him practice taking initiative and showing up in his groups at READI, focusing less on what other people think. He said, “READI helping me not care what other people think, but I always been like that. High school actually made me like that. Caring what people think because you around a bunch of peers?”

Big Dude, a 38-year-old current READI Englewood participant, described that READI had lots to offer and that he believed that success is about choosing from those options, “I mean, to me, that mean get what you can. Make the money. Don’t let the money make you. Get what you can out of it. You can’t with that. If you can get everything, get everything. But sometimes you can’t get everything, because sometimes what’s good for you may not be good for me. What’s good for you may not be good for you. But we both in the same boat though. ... The program got a lot to offer. It is what you want out of it.”

📍 Ability to View Others' Perspectives

READI offered a platform to men, who may have conflict with each other on the streets, to break the cycle and learn from each other. In addition, the program made them consider each other's perspectives even if they viewed the other as an opposition ('opp'). In CAD sessions, participants role-played real-life scenarios to practice stepping outside their own viewpoint and imagining what someone else might be thinking or feeling. This shift in perspective reduced misunderstandings that could lead to violence.

“

It really helps you think outside the box. Because you'll be looking at something one way but... you could be in the wrong.”

—Keith, 24-year-old current participant from North Lawndale

Narratives across interviews revealed that participants were able to view conflict and past harms with empathy for others. For respondents, one of the most cherished aspects of READI was how the program compelled them to look inwards and strive for a mindset change. They realized that those they conflicted with were also hurting, probably from the same things as them.

Prince, a 26-year-old READI participant from North Lawndale, drew attention to the impact of READI on him, “I graduated from READI. ... I feel like it worked because it's still a lot of guys that I see now that I would've never talked to on the street that I was working with. ... We are actually shaking hands, not gang banging, nothing. We look each other in the eye. And then we can turn around and walk where we are going without looking back at each other like we'll do something to each other.”

TY shared how he avoided a conflict that might have escalated in the past. He told a story about a time when he used the READI skill he calls “self-regulate”, and he noted the boundary he feels he should have around physical retaliation because of the idea that someone might be going through something that made them lash out. He said, “I ain't got no right to cause hurt to another person. ... He probably just got into it with his

wife. You don't know what's wrong.” This ability to consider alternative perspectives on a situation reduced the risk of instigating or escalating conflict.

Several respondents talked about moments with family or girlfriends where their perspective shifted when they saw the argument from the others' perspective. John, a 40-year-old current READI participant in Austin, described how his sister threatened to tell the police that he had a gun on him if he ever had one in her house while he was staying there after her daughter had found his unloaded gun in the house 17 years ago. He said, “But my sister ain't going to play. Something happened, she telling on me. ...She telling. I guess that's what stopped me. There's a lot of things. Drugs and everything. I wouldn't even bring no drugs to her house. Because she told me, she going to tell the police it was mines. I can't get mad at her. That's her house and her rules, and she got to be there for her kids.”

Keith, a 24-year-old former READI participant, grew up in a home marked by domestic violence. He remembered watching his mother “get beat on every day.” As an adult, he began to see those same patterns surface in his own relationship. During one argument with his girlfriend over how to season chicken, he started to escalate, but caught himself and instead paused. Keith recalled, “What we arguing about is really dumb. ... We end up arguing but it wasn't worth it,” he said. Drawing on strategies from CAD, Keith recalled what he'd learned: “Take 10 deep breaths, pace back and forth, or clear your mind.” He also tried to understand her point of view: “I had to think... you probably seen your mama cook something different than I seen my mama cook something different.” These tools helped him avoid repeating behaviors he had grown up witnessing. “It really helps you think outside the box,” Keith reflected, “Because you'll be looking at something one way but... you could be in the wrong.”

While several participants explained how they benefitted from perspective shifts, other participants expressed that READI did not do enough to meet participants where they were at, especially in regard to the CAD sessions. In his interview, Marco argued that READI was doing a disservice by withholding benefits from participants who didn't openly share during the morning CAD sessions, saying, “It came to the point where they were saying that ‘You can't no gift card because you ain't saying nothing, you ain't participating.’ ...They basically was holding that over people's heads.” This sentiment was shared by other participants who felt being forced to participate was doing more harm than good for them.

In his interview, CJ expressed his frustration with being asked to participate, saying, “That ain’t doing but making s**t worse because now I got to go home thinking like, ‘What the f*** is I’m stressed about?’ When I wasn’t ever stressed. Because that’s what they put in my head, stress.”

✔ Pro-Social Habit Formation

READI provided participants with a structured environment that helped them stay out of trouble by giving them something productive to focus on each day. For many, it served as a crucial alternative to the unstructured time that often led to poor decisions or negative behaviors, such as engaging in street activities or conflicts. By offering a routine that resembled real job experiences, it kept participants engaged and motivated, especially during challenging times like being on house arrest, where they might otherwise have had limited options for productive use of their time. 25% of participants we interviewed mentioned that READI was something they could look forward to, offering a positive focus amid difficult circumstances.

John, a 23-year-old past participant from North Lawndale told us that READI was something to do every day, it added structure to his day. “READI is teaching you responsibility. You had something to do every day, like a job really, even though you weren’t punching in. Matter of fact, I think we did ended up start punching in on the clock at READI, if I ain’t mistaken. But it’s just basically, you ready for a more realer job experience if you trying to work at Walmart or whatever the job may be.” For Prince, 26-year-old current participant from Austin, the structured time at READI kept him out of trouble and out of the streets, “When I was in READI, I just wanted a positive outcome. I wanted to be able to do something with my time and stay out of trouble because I found myself getting in trouble the majority of the time when I didn’t have anything to do. It caused me to lead to going out, smoking when I wasn’t supposed to, arguing with the older guys because I liked going against them because certain negative things I know they want to do...”. In the case of Mike, 33-year-old participant from Englewood, READI helped him do something productive while he was under house arrest, “...One thing I could say about the READI program is, it’s helping me to do something productive while I’m on house arrest, while I can’t move around.”

AGENT OF CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

✔ Workforce Skill Development

READI’s professional development opportunities played a crucial role in attracting participants, particularly younger men seeking job readiness and work experience. The program provided professional training and helped participants secure employment, obtain job-related licenses, and explore career pathways that might have otherwise been inaccessible due to legal barriers, lack of experience, or limited professional networks. John, a READI participant said that READI helped him get ready to find a job, “READI [is] good at grooming people who never had a job. They get you ready for that. They good at helping you get ready for a new job or whatever. That’s what I can say they really good at, prepare you.”

Devon, a 24-year-old current participant, echoed a similar sentiment, saying that READI prepared him on how to interact in a professional setting, “When you in front of important people..., you got to be professional. They teaching you stuff like that.” Tim, a 30-year-old current participant from North Lawndale, saw READI as the “best opportunity” for people who came with a background. He said, “It’s probably the biggest words you could use is it’s a great opportunity on any level. Whether you want to take up a trade, whether you need a mentor, whether you just want to talk, whether you want to work. It’s probably one of the best opportunities we got in Chicago. It’s a great opportunity, especially for people that come with a background, without a background, whatever it is. They accept you until you mess up.”

Bryce, 21-year-old current participant from Englewood, said that he wanted to develop a work ethic while he was at READI, “So that’s what I want, I want to get a work ethic out of READI I would say... it’s changed because me and Tristan had this one-on-one and I was already in the program for a month and I would miss every Thursday on purpose, just not doing nothing at home. And he told me every Thursday you missing, that’s money you missing. And he pulled out a calculator and calculated the year and if I miss every Thursday, I was going to miss two grand. So I’m like oh no, I’m not missing that no more. So, that really helped me though.” The professional development classes aimed to instill a work ethic, which would be crucial for participants to secure and sustain long-term employment. By reinforcing discipline, reliability, and workplace expectations, the program helped participants build the foundational skills necessary for stable employment.

Marco, a 30-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, described how READI helped him with impulse control and anger management, preparing him for his next job. Marco recalled a hypothetical scenario in which if an employer was combative with him, now, he felt more in control of his emotions. He said, “That’s what really helped me at READI is the morning classes. ... I needed something to fix my anger. If I go on another work site, would I tweak?” This example also illustrates that while CAD may be helping de-escalate violence, skills learned from CAD were also applied in professional environments by participants.

While some participants felt prepared to enter the workforce owing to professional development classes, there were some participants who expressed that READI was preparing them for menial work rather than professional success. For example, Bob, a 23-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, said, “It’s like you got to teach more business aspect than more than just working a job... teaching business aspect or sit down in business school or sit down and go invest their money into another business or stocks. I don’t see them doing none of that. You don’t see the Black communities get that.”

✔ Changed Social Networks

READI helped participants build valuable networks by connecting them with staff, peers, financial advisors, job mentors, and therapists who could support their employment, mental health, and personal growth. These relationships provided guidance on navigating the job market, managing finances, and addressing conflicts or emotional challenges. Many participants found the connections helpful, particularly in gaining access to job opportunities, mental health support, and resources they might not have otherwise encountered.

Across interviews, one of the more popular themes was participants feeling a sense of care from the program curriculum the staff and outreach workers. Notably, 29% of participants highlighted the staff as especially relatable, motivational, and instrumental in their progress. For some participants, staff members made them feel seen and cared for. Participants spoke about several instances where READI staff supported them in managing difficult situations, both circumstantial and emotional. Nine participants mentioned that

READI felt like a “family” to them, one they could reach out to in times of difficulty. Participants felt truly cared for by the staff, even beyond the intended curriculum of READI.

Within the sentiment of feeling cared for at READI, some participants said that they were looking for someone to feel accountable to. About one-third of the READI participants we interviewed mentioned that they felt accountable to their coaches for showing up to READI and to their own personal development. For participants who came from unstable and/or volatile home environments, having a coach look out for them or check in on their progress helped them. John, a 40-year-old participant from READI’s Austin site, described his professional development coach as “mother hen.” He said, “She call and check on us. Well, I don’t miss days, but if you miss a day, she’ll call and check on you, see what’s going on.”

While READI helped build networks that positively supported participants through staff, peers, and mentors, there were also negative influences within and outside the program. Some participants struggled with individuals who didn’t take the cognitive behavioral therapy programming seriously, or with peers who undermined their efforts, while others faced skepticism from people in the streets who didn’t believe they had truly changed. About 37% participants we interviewed reported negative people at READI. Research on gang disengagement emphasizes that successfully leaving gang life requires not only motivation to change but also the ability to navigate and ultimately extricate oneself from former criminal networks.²⁵

A prominent theme participants expressed was frustration with other READI participants who were not engaging in the program in good faith or actively making their situation more difficult. In his interview, Kanye, a 24-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, reflected on his experience going out to work sites when he shared, “It’s supposed to be a job for the positive, but the people that you give the job to are negative, so they make it negative.” He goes on to describe seeing participants sleeping, smoking, and drinking on the job. Others pointed to how participants engaged during the CAD sessions as an example of seeing cohort members not act in good faith.

25 Kang, Megan. 2025. Weaker the Gang, Harder the Exit. *Criminology* 63(4).

In his interview, Duke, a participant from North Lawndale, expressed frustration seeing participants who he believed were not in the program for the right reasons, saying, “I felt like some people were in it for the gift cards and just being there. ... I’ll say like 80% was giving their all. And there was a good 20% that always just had an attitude.”

While these were negative incidents that participants faced while at READI, some participants faced skepticism from people outside the program. They faced difficulty in convincing their rivals that their transformation post-READI was real. Kenny, a 25-year-old current participant from Austin, described the uncertainty of how others perceived him. He stated, “It’s hard because it’s always like you never know what [your rivals] look at you like. Then if they look at you like a threat, they’ll want to hurt you...But if they look at you like you’ve grown... you might get a pass. You aren’t with that stuff anymore.” Despite his commitment to change, he faces the risk of being misunderstood by rivals who may still see him as a threat.

For most participants we interviewed, READI program sites provided a safe space where they could learn, reflect, and heal together. However, not everyone felt safe at and around the READI program site. Participants perceived danger at program sites stemmed from not knowing the other members of their cohort. 15% of the participants we interviewed reported feeling physically unsafe or feared for their physical safety traveling to and from the READI site, at the READI site, or at the READI work site. In addition, 48% of respondents mentioned that navigating gang networks or territories was a constant challenge, with participants dedicated to changing their behaviors but unable to escape the environments where gangs still operated. This often meant adjusting how they moved around the neighborhood to avoid former associates or individuals who could pose a threat based on past affiliations. In addition, feeling unsafe around the READI premises emerged as a key point of feedback, with several participants noting that the threat of violence or intimidation in these areas further complicated their efforts to stay focused on their goals.

Slime, a 22-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, described the environment at READI being “wild.” “The only bad thing about it was that it was scary because you don’t know who was into it with who, who don’t know who and who looking at who the wrong way,” Slime explained. Different versions of this idea about the inherent danger in having participants from different neighborhoods was often repeated by participants.

For some, the danger was mostly anticipatory, participants feared that something could happen at any moment but did not recount specific events where disputes became violent. A 30-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, Tune, recalled feeling like “somebody could get hurt at any time,” a sentiment shared by other participants, especially those who participated in READI before increased security. However, it is important to note that some participants acknowledged that having representation from different neighborhoods or gangs was important to their healing process. They recognized that acceptance replaced their initial fear of unknown cohort members as they got to know each other and share their lived experiences. Still, others discussed understanding the trade-offs while citing it as an issue that got in the way of their experience. In his interview, a 24-year-old North Lawndale participant, Calvin said, “That’s why I say it helped, but it didn’t because at the same time. Y’all giving us life skills, y’all telling us life decisions of what to make or what to use, like body language. But we around the same people that’s trying to kill us. We around the same people that were trying to kill us, you still got to be on point. You still got to be aware of your surrounding.”

Increased Income

A significant motivator to follow through with the program was the promise of short-term, reliable income and, by taking advantage of workforce trainings and certification programs, gaining long-term financial security. When probed, participants translated this motivation into how they judged their time at READI. Derek, a 23-year-old past participant from North Lawndale, happily talked to us about a successful moving company he began after starting READI. When asked to tell us more about the cognitive-behavioral changes, however, he said he didn’t experience that transformation personally and didn’t recall the program focusing on that as much for him. Derek’s experience of the program to achieve financial security was reflected in his attitude about success in his life after READI. Many participants shared that READI was a reliable income source that did not place them in dangerous situations. Jaquil, a 25-year-old participant from North Lawndale, said, “I knew a couple people that ain’t looked back [to the streets] since READI. Like me personally, I ain’t never really had no real job. But life-wise, looking back at, I’m not going to sell any more drugs on no block no more. Standing out on no block. I’m not doing that.”

While some participants appreciated the reliable income from READI, 14% of the participants we interviewed said that READI didn't pay them enough. We heard from multiple participants who felt like their time in the READI program was not being fairly valued or compensated. This was especially a concern for READI participants who had dependents at home they needed to take care of and who felt like they could earn more money by going back to "the streets." Mario, a 24-year-old participant from North Lawndale, summarizes this concern, saying, "You get \$400, \$500 checks, that ain't enough. I have people that got kids and stuff. They're going to end up going back out on the streets and trying to do something and they're going to end up getting in trouble." Participants who reported this feedback expressed different versions of this struggle, saying that they wanted to do the right thing and transition out of *"the life,"* but had expenses they couldn't keep up with on the READI stipend.

Conclusion

As community violence intervention (CVI) programs undergo multiple iterations, each testing different combinations of services and supports, it is important to understand which program components influence outcomes, and why.

We interviewed 99 participants of READI and observed 57 days of programming between June 2022 to December 2022 to understand how respondents themselves described the key active ingredients of the program. They consistently reported that one of the key situational factors that leads people to engage in violence is people's tendency to misconstrue different aspects of interpersonal interactions. Participants described patterns of falling into a fight-or-flight mindset, interpreting perceived stressors through a reactive lens. These patterns of cognition are often adaptive to environments where deliberative thinking could be dangerous, so quick reactions serve a purpose.

Through the program's CAD sessions, participants described learning that while these habits may serve them in certain circumstances, they can also lead to trouble. Participants begin to see their own emotional patterns as malleable, recognize when their trauma was being triggered, and respond more deliberately. In addition, participants described learning to consider nonviolent alternatives in situations that had the potential of escalating into a conflict. In CAD, participants reported learning to consider consequences and pick their battles, which enabled them to decide to walk away from potential conflict. Group-based delivery was especially effective at helping participants learn to read others' emotional cues, develop empathy and better understand themselves in relation to others. These kinds of emotional regulation skills were often highlighted by individuals to be amongst the most transformative for their behaviors.

Many participants also came to understand their past behavior not simply as a personal failure or a fixed identity, but as a consequence of structural and material constraints. We noted a shift in perspective, from self-blame towards self-empathy. This created a space for compassion both for themselves and others, further reinforcing their capacity for long-term change. However, our analysis also revealed that some participants continued to face negative outcomes after program completion,

suggesting that despite individual growth, returning to the same social environments meant they remained vulnerable to being drawn back into cycles of violence.

Importantly, the fact that these changes emerged through READI suggests that changes in violence involvement can be actively supported—and even accelerated—through targeted engagement with the cognitive underpinnings of behavior. Many participants entered READI with deeply ingrained habits shaped by chronic exposure to violence and instability. They had learned to respond quickly and defensively, often seeing conflict where there was ambiguity. What the program offered was not just new tools, but a new way of thinking: one that created space between stimulus and response, enabled more deliberate choices, and fostered empathy for others and for themselves.

These shifts are not easy to achieve. They require disrupting automatic, emotionally charged reactions (System 1 thinking) and engaging slower, more reflective processes (System 2 thinking). CAD sessions made this shift possible by helping participants label their emotions, consider alternative perspectives, and question long-standing assumptions about conflict. As one participant put it, "Because you'll be looking at something one way but... you could be in the wrong." In high-stakes environments where one misstep can have lasting consequences, these kinds of mental shifts can mean the difference between escalation and walking away.

Our findings point to trauma as a persistent and significant barrier to change. Several participants reflected that their sub-conscious reactions that resulted in violent altercations were often shaped by long-standing trauma. Even through and after the READI program, participants experienced traumatic incidents outside of the program. While CBT sessions helped them name and reflect on these experiences, we also saw that some individuals continued to struggle, particularly after exiting the program and returning to unstable environments. These findings suggest that CVI programs must go beyond skill-building and also attend to participants' emotional safety in order for them to be able to engage fully in what CBT has to offer. Whether through trauma-informed care or by fostering strong and supportive relationships, programs must account for ways in which past trauma and continued trauma could block transformation.

While CAD emerged as central in catalyzing change for READI participants, our findings suggest that these mechanisms of change, such as metacognition, option awareness, emotional regulation aren't exclusive to CBT. Participants sometimes described experiencing similar shifts in cognition and behavior through other life events, including, fatherhood, incarceration or informal mentorship. These experiences, though less structured than CBT, appeared to open up reflective thinking and spark self-awareness in ways that mirror outcomes post CBT.

This could suggest that the specific configuration of READI — one which combines jobs, coaching on professional development and CBT — may not be the only pathway to achieving such changes. But it does seem to offer the safety, reliability, structure and intensity needed to engage participants. Looking ahead, future CVI programs should continue prioritizing access to job opportunities and relationship building. At the same time, participants have stated that skills like metacognition, emotional regulation, perspective taking are they are central to lasting change. Participants repeatedly emphasized that practical tools they gained — such as how to manage anger, deescalate conflict, and reflect on consequences — were just as important as job training in sustaining long-term change. Equally important was the sense that the staff cared about them as individuals.

This study is based on a selective, snowball sample of men who were connected to the READI program, which means it does not capture the full range of experiences among all participants, particularly those who were enrolled at different sites than the ones we had access to, or if they were disengaged in the program, or were never fully enrolled. While this limits the generalizability of our conclusions, our findings still offer valuable direction for future programming by highlighting which aspects of support resonated most deeply with participants.

Appendix

● INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part 1: Introduction

- A. We'd like to begin with a big question: tell me the story of your life.
- a. PAUSE. Only if necessary, additional possible prompts: "Start from the beginning" or "I want to know the whole story, but let's start with chapter 1 or as early as you can remember."
 - b. *If "story of your life" doesn't work:* Walk me through a typical weekday. What about a typical weekend? What about yesterday? Day before?

Part 2: Personal Identities

B. Family

- a. Tell me all about your family.
 - i. Probe: (for each person named). Tell me more about X.
 - ii. Probe: Tell me about things your family does together. Tell me a story about that.
 - iii. Some people tell us that when they were growing up, their family life was stable. Others tell us they experienced lots of instability. How about for you?
- b. Thinking back from when you were a child up until now, tell me about all of the adults who have been important in your life—parents, kin, a neighbor, your band teacher—anyone. (For each person named) Tell me more about X.
- c. Some people tell us that there were people they really looked up to when they were coming up. Others say they really didn't have those role models. How about for you? (For each person named): Tell me a story about you and X.

C. Neighborhood and Residential History

- a. Tell me all about the neighborhood(s) you grew up in. Let's start with the first neighborhood you remember living in. Tell me all about (neighborhood). What about the next neighborhood? Tell me all about (neighborhood).
 - i. What do you like about living here? What do wish was different?
- b. People have different things that make them feel safe. How would you define what makes you feel safe or unsafe in your neighborhood?
 - i. Probe: How has your perception of safety changed, if at all, over time?
 - ii. Probe: What would you say to someone who sees this neighborhood as dangerous?
- c. Back then, what people or places did you gravitate to? Tell me more about that. How about avoid? Tell me more about that.
 - i. Probe: Some people say they felt safer in some parts of their neighborhoods than others. How about for you. Tell me more about that.
- d. Some people say gun violence has really affected their lives, or the lives of your family or friends. Others say it hasn't really affected them or their family and friends at all. How about for you? Tell me all about the last time that happened. How about the time before that?
 - i. Probe: When thinking about how gun violence has affected their lives, or the lives of their family and friends, some people say a specific event stands out. How about for you? Tell me the whole story from start to finish.

- e. Tell me all about the people in the community who are playing a positive role in reducing gun violence? (For each person named): Tell me a story about a time where X played a positive role.
 - f. What about the opposite—the people who are playing a negative role in adding to the gun violence. (For each person named): Tell me a story about a time when X played a negative role.
- D. School**
- a. Starting with your earliest schooling experience, tell me about each of the schools you went to. (For each school): Tell me all about what kind of student you were at X school (probe for grades, awards or disciplinary actions, relationships with teachers and peers, school climate e.g., fighting)
 - i. What was the last grade you completed?
 - b. Some people tell us they were really into school. Others hated school. How about for you? Tell me a story about that.
 - i. Probe: For some people, the script really flipped at a certain point—either they liked school then hated it, or they hated school and then liked it. How about for you. Tell me more about that.
 - c. Thinking back over your whole school career, what were the highlights? Where did you shine? Tell me a story about that.
 - d. Thinking back over your whole school career, what were the low points? Where did you struggle? Tell me a story about that.
- E. Recreation**
- a. Growing up, what did you like to do for fun? Tell me a story about that.
 - b. Meaning and Identity:
 - i. Back then, what were you about? Tell me a story about that. What other stories come to mind (Probe for whether others are involved in one's "identity project," and whether it was part of a formal organization, like Junior ROTC.)
 - ii. Back then, what were you NOT about? Tell me a story about that. What other stories come to mind?
 - iii. Thinking back to that time, how did you see your future? Tell me more about that.
- F. Relationships & Networks:**
- a. Tell me all about your friends back then. Tell me a story what you would do together back then. What other stories come to mind about you and your friends back then?
 - i. If comfortable: What did it mean to be in "*the life*"/affiliated with your crew?
 - b. Back then, what people could you turn to when you—or someone you knew—needed support. Tell me a story about how X supported you back then. What other stories come to mind about people who supported you back then?
 - c. Back then, what people were a drain [or presented obstacles, or were in your way] on you when you needed support. Tell me a story about how X was a drain on you back then. What other stories come to mind about people who were a drain on you back then?
- G. Religion**
- a. Some people say they are religious or spiritual. Some say they are neither. How about for you?
 - i. If yes, probe for religious specific beliefs and practices. Tell us about your religious/spiritual journey. Tell us a story of the last time you [we are trying to get at specific stories of them engaging with their religion/spirituality]
- H. Work**
- a. Let's talk about work. Tell me about all the other jobs you've had.
 - b. People do a lot of things to make ends meet outside a regular job. What kinds of ways have you found to make ends meet: Tell me more about that. What other kinds of ways?
 - i. Probe: Some people tell us they've have to put themselves at risk to make ends meet. How about for you? Tell me a time you've had to put yourself at risk to make ends meet. What other stories come to mind?

Part 3: Cognitive Processes

- I. Prompts to get at specific events/triggers
 - a. Walk me through the last time you had an interaction that left you feeling offended/irritated/frustrated/stressed.
 - b. Put yourself in a time when you were feeling short on time, money or social support.
- J. Trigger
 - a. Walk me through what happened.
 - i. Probe: When X happened, what did you notice? *Probe for specific details that they left out to get them to slow down and go moment-by-moment* (e.g. who else was present, what time of day, where exactly it took place, what the environment was like, where you were trying to go)
 - b. At what moment did you notice yourself feeling X? *Probe for specific details about what was happening right before, during, after feeling X.*
- K. Thought Process
 - a. Tell me all about what was going through your head when that happened. What were you thinking right then?
 - b. Probe: In your view, who was responsible? Tell me more about that.
 - i. In that situation, what three words would you have used to describe that person/those people you were angry with?
- L. Reaction
 - a. How did you react? (probe for physical/emotional reactions) Had you reacted this way before?
 - i. Tell me about how you ended up responding that way.
 - ii. Probe: Tell me about all the other ways you thought about reacting?
 - iii. Probe if pre-program event: Would you now respond differently? How would you respond today?
 - iv. Probe if post-program event: Would you have done something differently in the past? How would you have responded back then?

Part 4: Program Module

- M. Perceptions of the program
 - a. Tell me the whole story of how you ended up joining READI?
 - b. Some people think of it as a work program, others with helping them get their life on track. How would you describe what READI/BAM/C2C is to someone who has never heard of it?
 - c. What are the most important aspects, in your opinion? Tell me a story about that. What's not so important? Tell me a story about that.
 - d. What kind of person do you think READI works best for? Tell me a story about that. In your view, who isn't a good fit for READI? Tell me a story about that.
 - e. What do you think READI does well? Tell me more about that. What do you wish READI did differently? Tell me more about that.
 - i. Probe: Did you ever feel like your safety was compromised by showing up to READI? Tell me more about that.
 - f. What do you/did you want out of READI?
- N. Tools of Thought
 - a. Walk me through a typical day in READI. Tell me about the lessons, activities, or skills that stuck with you from the morning (CAD) sessions. Tell me about the lessons, activities, or skills that stuck with you from the work sessions.

- i. How about the lessons, activities, and skills that didn't stick? *Probe for the part of the program in which they engaged with each lesson, activity, or skill.*
- b. Some people tell us READI was the first time they'd heard these ideas. Other people say they heard them before. How about you? Tell me a story about that. What other stories come to mind?
- c. Tell me all about all the ways you found yourself using these skills outside of the program.
 - i. Tell me the whole story about the last time you used these skills. What about the time before that?
 - ii. Tell me about the skills you don't really find yourself using outside of the program.
 - iii. Tell me the whole story about the last time you found you really weren't using those skills. What about a time before that?
- d. Have there been times when the things you learned in READI have come into conflict with your friends/family's expectations of you? Tell me about that. How did you navigate that?
- e. Some people we talk to can point to specific things that help them practice these skills outside the program. How about for you?
- f. What or who has been helpful in reinforcing these lessons since you've left the program?
- g. Some people we talk to can point to specific things that keep you from practicing these skills outside the program. How about for you?
- O. Relationships
 - a. Tell me all about the relationships you developed while in READI?
 - i. Probe about youth advocate and outreach worker
 - ii. Probe about other participants
 - iii. Probe about the coach
 - b. Some people tell us that being part of READI really shape your relationships to your friends and family outside of READI. Other people say that being part of READI really didn't change their relationships outside of READI at all. How about for you?
- P. Tell me about anything else that we missed that you feel it is important we know about in terms of the program.
- Q. *If they have participated in other programs:*
 - a. Tell me the whole story of how you ended up joining program X.
 - b. How would you describe what program X is to someone who has never heard of it?
 - c. Tell me about the activities and skills that have stuck with you from program X.
 - d. How would you compare your time at program X to your time at READI?

Part 5: Life Since the Program

"Now we're going to go back to some of the questions I asked you about your everyday life, but I want to know how, if at all, your answers are different today."

"Has X changed?" *Skip if R says no.*

- A. Relationships and Networks
 - a. Tell me who lives in with you right now? (For each person named): Tell me more about X.
 - b. Tell me all about your friends since you joined the program. Tell me a story about what you do together.
 - i. If comfortable: What does it mean to be in "*the life*" to you these days?

- c. Since you joined the program, what people could you turn to when you—or someone you knew—needed support. Tell me a story about how X supported you. What other stories come to mind about people who supported you these days?
 - d. Nowadays, what people are a drain on you when you needed support. Tell me a story about how X was a drain on you recently. What other stories come to mind about people who were a drain on you?
- B. Routines and Activities**
- a. Since being in the program, walk me through a typical weekday. What about a typical weekend?
 - b. These days, what people or places did you feel like you had to avoid? Tell me more about that.
 - c. Nowadays, what people or places did you gravitate to? Tell me more about that.
- C. Work**
- a. Tell me all about your current job/jobs.
 - i. OR, IF NOT WORKING: Tell me all about your last job since READI.
 - b. Tell me the whole story about how you found this/that job.
 - c. How are you are feeling about your job right now? Tell me more about that.
 - d. Tell me all about the kind of job you'd like to have. Tell me about what you think it would take for you to get this kind of job.
 - e. Some people say they have a main job, but a side hustle too. How about for you? Tell me all about your side hustle (probe for timing, duration).
 - i. For some people a side hustle is just a way of making money. For others, it's something more—more like a passion. How about for you?
- D. Meaning and Identity**
- a. What are you about these days? Tell me a story about that. What other stories come to mind?
 - b. What are you NOT about nowadays? Tell me a story about that. What other stories come to mind?
 - c. What about your friends now? What were they about? What were they NOT about?
 - d. How do you see success for you and the people around you? What does success mean for you?

Part 6. Looking Forward

- A.** Throughout your whole life, what are the moments that (for better or for worse) changed your life and got you to this point?
[make note if program comes up]
- B.** Tell me about where you see yourself five years from now.
 - a. Probe: What do you think you need to get there?
 - b. Tell me all about the kind of job you'd like to have. Tell me about what you think it would take for you to get this kind of job.
- C.** If you were able to have the mayor's ear, what would you tell her in terms of what would be helpful to people living in your community/your kids?

Code	Description
Mentions of inner life	Mentions of inner life, moment to moment thinking, or meta-cognitive thinking IN THE MOMENT that lead to positive outcomes
Feeling safe/secure	Opposite of survival mode
Seeing past actions differently	Respondent (R) retells a story and expresses that they think about the situation differently now versus in the past; R reflects on past affiliations/violence/criminal activities and sees the harm or negative impact or views in a different light; may be double coded with see past actions differently
Recognizing trauma/mental health issues	Awareness of trauma response or mental health issue like depression; may be double coded with negative thought pattern
Reframing a situation	R tells a story of an initial reaction/feeling/though and then a reframing of it that happened in that moment
Option awareness	R describes several ways to respond, other than quick reaction
Perspective taking	R retells a story and imagines the other person's perspective/reason for acting
Considering the consequences	R retells a story and discusses thinking about the consequences of actions before acting; if A then B
Focusing on the positive	R weighs on the one good event over the many bad ones
Role activation	R mentions understanding/acknowledging a role they hold in life as a deterrent to negative action
Accepting responsibility	Realizing that one's actions may have negatively impacted others; seeking reparations
Thinking about the future	Short vs long term thinking; if I do this now I will be happy, but I will not be happy in long term;
Systems awareness	Considerate of one's position in larger social system; relevant to street life behaviors
Metacognition / self-awareness	Use when R describes awareness of own thinking that leads to certain behaviors - like triggers
Locus of Control	Identifying that barriers to success can be overcome vs. some are intractable road-blocks
Mantra	A repeated phrase or belief that R uses to guide behavior or thinking; may act as a self-regulation tool.
Behavioral changes/skills	These will often be double coded with mentions of inner life
Avoiding negative people/places	R describes intentionally distancing from people or settings that could lead to conflict, crime, or setbacks.
Communication	R retells a story and mentions sharing their thoughts/feelings with others; or R describes how he is able to be a better listener
Uplifting others	R discusses encouraging, supporting, or motivating peers to make positive changes or avoid negative paths.
Cooling off	R retells a story and mentions stepping away from an arousing situation instead of reacting in the moment; "Don't let it get to me"; often double coded with mentions of inner life
Conflict management	Including de-escalation
Religiosity	Mentions of faith, religious belief, or spiritual practices as a source of strength, reflection, or moral guidance.
Setting boundaries	R describes creating or maintaining personal limits in relationships or behaviors to avoid harm or protect progress.

Coping skills	Strategies R uses to manage stress, emotions, or trauma; may include breathing techniques, distraction, or seeking support.
Managing emotions	Mentions of recognizing and regulating emotional responses (e.g., anger, sadness) to avoid escalation or negative outcomes.
Legacy/giving back	R expresses a desire to have a positive impact on others or leave behind something meaningful, often linked to change or growth.
Future oriented	R discusses setting goals or making decisions with future consequences or aspirations in mind.
Prioritizing fatherhood	R describes commitment to being present, responsible, or a positive influence as a father; may guide decision-making.
Negative thought patterns	That R defines as negative or coder believes to be negative; converse to mentions of inner life
Dichotomous thinking	often double coded with us against the world, but rather than us against the world this is about any type of dichotomous thinking; good or bad
Cognitive distortion	R describes recognizing seeing the world through a frame that he later corrects
Overconfident/resistant to help	Separates himself from other participants, inflated sense of self, egocentric
Feeling invincible/No consequences	Feeling/thoughts that actions or life is not consequential
Reputation management	"Make a name for myself"; acting or thinking in a way that enhances reputation for negative reasons
Distrustful of people	R describes having a hard time being around new people
Impulsivity	R mentions acting quickly, without thinking first
"Survival mode"	by ends by means necessary
Normalized to violence	Normalized to violence or feeling numb
Hurting others to relieve suffering	R says that retaliation or hurting someone else will relieve his suffering
Depression or sadness	R mentions feeling low, numb, or hopeless; may be expressed through language or tone rather than explicit naming.
"Addicted to the lifestyle"	R mentions being attracted to the material goods and fast lifestyle of the streets
Tit-for-tat thinking	R describes responding/acting in certain way for revenge or get-back
Descriptions of READI	
Positive environment	R describes READI as a safe, welcoming, or growth-supportive space.
Relatable/motivational staff	Mentions of staff who participants feel understand their experience and motivate them through authenticity or shared background.
Second chances	R expresses that READI offered an opportunity to change paths or repair past mistakes.
Steppingstone out of "the life"	R describes READI as a tool or pathway for exiting gang/criminal involvement.
Something to do/look forward to	Program provides structure or positive anticipation in daily routine.
Building network	R mentions making new positive relationships or connections through READI.
Work experience/job licenses	R mentions that READI is for them a way to gain employment experience or gain job licensing
Source of income	READI provides basic income
Being seen/cared for	R feels recognized, understood, and supported emotionally by staff or peers.
Mentors	Specific individuals at READI who provide guidance, advice, or serve as role models.
Way to support family	May be double coded with source of income

Personal development	R refers to emotional, psychological, or behavioral growth prompted by participation in READI.
Ready for READI	R reflects that they were emotionally or mentally prepared to engage with the program at the right time in life.
Family	Use when R describes READI as a “family”
Able to be open with others	Mentions of increased vulnerability, sharing emotions, or expressing thoughts in group or 1:1 settings.
Safe environment	R emphasizes feeling physically or emotionally secure within the program space.
Accountability	R feels that the program keeps them in check, holds accountable
Inviting others to join	R encourages peers to participate in READI, signaling belief in the program’s value.
READI feedback	
Not relatable	the lessons lack application to severity of real-life experiences, not tailored to R’s daily life
Broader outreach	R suggests that more people could benefit from READI, or calls for increased access or awareness.
Not relatable	Did not feel the programming was useful
Not enough money	Did not feel the weekly stipends were enough
Not right target demographic	Felt there were others who could have benefitted from the program that were not there, often higher risk individuals or younger individuals
Negative people in READI	Felt that other participants undermined R’s experience
More effective outreach workers	Desire for outreach workers with greater credibility, relatability, or connection to participants.
Participants don’t have a voice	R expresses frustration about lack of input or influence on program design or rules.
One-size-fits-all approach	R feels that programming is too generic and not tailored to individual experiences or needs.
Not following through on promises	R reports feeling let down by unmet commitments from READI staff or the program.
Too strict	R experiences program rules as overly rigid or punitive.
READI too dangerous	Concerns that participation in READI makes them vulnerable to violence due to visibility or territory issues.
Delay in payment	Waiting for checks
Financial literacy	Would like help with financial literacy
Irresponsible staff	R critiques staff for behavior perceived as unprofessional or unhelpful.
Barriers to staying on track Obstacles/Barriers to practicing skills from READI	
Navigating gang territories	Challenges R faces in physically moving across areas controlled by different gangs.
Negative people	Negative people at home or in neighborhood that get in the way of progress
Uncertainty of who has opps	R is unsure or afraid of who might see them as a target, creating constant vigilance or anxiety.
Others’ expectations of you	Pressure from peers, family, or community to act in certain ways, which may conflict with change goals.
Drug abuse	R discusses personal or environmental struggles with substance use that affect decision-making.
Joblessness/Difficulty finding a job	R expresses difficulties in finding or maintaining work after READI

Low on money	Mentions of financial strain as a barrier to stability or motivation to engage in risky behavior.
Victimization of self/loved one	R describes harm done to themselves or someone close, shaping worldview or responses.
Stained record/reputation	Awareness that criminal history or neighborhood reputation affects opportunities or how others view them.
Housing instability	Mentions of inconsistent or unsafe housing as a stressor or barrier to success.
House arrest/probation	Legal restrictions that limit mobility or ability to fully participate in opportunities.
Idle time	Too much unscheduled or unstructured time, increasing risk of engaging in negative behaviors.
Negative interactions with police	R recounts unjust or harmful encounters with law enforcement, leading to distrust or anger.
Low self esteem	Expressions of self-doubt, worthlessness, or lack of confidence.
Lack of social support	R lacks positive encouragement or help from family, friends, or mentors.
Unstable family life	R describes conflict, neglect, or lack of consistency in family relationships.
Navigating gang affiliated network	R discusses the challenge of maintaining peace or progress while surrounded by peers still in gang life.
Supports to staying on track	Things that make it easier to practice skills from READI
Relationships	Supportive personal connections (friends, partners, mentors) that help reinforce positive change.
Fatherhood	Being a parent motivates R to act differently or stay on track.
New environment	R seeks a physical or social setting that removes them from old habits or triggers.
Stable job	Employment provides structure, income, and identity that support ongoing change.
Positive People	R describes surrounding themselves with people who encourage progress or set good examples.
Reliable Income	Consistent earnings that reduce stress and make alternative paths more viable.
Turning points (good or bad)	Pivotal events or connections in “the life”-course
READI	
Prison	
Victim of violence	
Fatherhood	
Joining the streets	
Kicked out of house	
Loss of loved one(s)	
Religious conversion	
House Arrest	
Shot	
Loss of social supports	
Responses to violence	
description of event	How R described violent incident
changed how they socialize	Change who they hang out with

changed where they move	Are there places you go or don't go; (including situational awareness)
changed how they thought	R re-evaluated beliefs or mindsets as a result of experiencing or witnessing violence.
Retaliated	Chose to retaliate
Began/increased carrying gun	
Put on a front	poker face, didn't phase them
Healing/resilience	Engaged in healing or resilient practices
Numb	Feeling of numbing