

Intervention dramatically lowers violent crime arrests for at-risk teens

June 29 2016



The University of Chicago Crime Lab has studied the positive effects of Becoming a Man, a counseling/mentoring program in Chicago. Credit: University of Chicago

A school-based intervention for at-risk teenagers in Chicago significantly cuts violent crime arrests, while increasing the likelihood students graduate from high school on time, according to researchers at the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

The Crime Lab announced the findings for Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man program June 27 at the National Summit on Preventing Youth Violence in Baltimore. The results will be published in a forthcoming article in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and are discussed in a *National Bureau of Economic Research* working paper.

In a study conducted during the 2013-15 academic years, researchers found BAM reduced violent crime arrests by 50 percent, while total arrests fell by 35 percent. In a follow-up to an earlier study of BAM during the 2009-10 academic year, Crime Lab researchers found those in the program were 19 percent more likely to graduate [high school](#) on time.

The BAM program uses standard elements of cognitive behavioral therapy to help young men recognize their automatic responses and slow down their thinking in high-stakes situations. The Crime Lab's most recent evaluation of the BAM program's impact included more than 2,000 young men and was structured as a randomized controlled trial.

"The rigor of these results has helped Chicago invest new resources into BAM to help prevent youth violence and to improve school outcomes in some of the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods," said Harold Pollack, the Helen Ross Professor at the School of Social Service Administration and co-director of Crime Lab. "These results have given us a better understanding of why BAM works. They also provide a basis for evidence-based optimism for other cities that recognize it's not too late to help teens stay safe and remain engaged in school."

Crime Lab estimates BAM's benefits far outweigh the program costs, with up to \$30 in societal benefits for every \$1 invested in the program, from realized reductions in crime alone. Researchers said the economic returns of BAM may ultimately be higher because people with a high school diploma often have higher earning potential than those who drop

out.

"We applaud Youth Guidance and BAM on today's announcement of even more significant results for its participants, and are excited to see a growing movement of youth-development organizations dedicated to studying their models and ensuring they work for our kids," said Broderick Johnson, assistant to President Obama, Cabinet secretary and chair of the White House's My Brother's Keeper Task Force.

Crime Lab works with cities to design, test and grow innovative approaches to reducing crime and violence. It's part of UChicago Urban Labs, which focuses on challenges to key dimensions of urban life, including crime, education and health.

In Chicago, the BAM serves 2,751 young men in 50 Chicago schools, with a goal of reaching 3,200 youth in the coming school year. Youth participate in hourlong weekly group sessions during the regular school day and can seek out BAM counselors individually throughout the week.

"The Crime Lab study reinforces what we as practitioners deeply believe: Adolescence is a time of incredible openness—and high school is not too late to intervene in the lives of youth and have a profoundly positive impact," said Michelle Adler Morrison, chief executive officer of Youth Guidance.

The randomized controlled trial design of the Crime Lab studies enables researchers to draw causal conclusions about the effects of BAM, and so attribute changes in [youth](#) outcomes to participation in the program. For the most recent study, researchers randomly assigned male ninth- and 10th-graders to BAM study groups in nine Chicago public high schools. Youth randomly assigned to the control group received any other available school and community services and supports.

BAM has drawn the attention of civic leaders across the country. In response, Youth Guidance plans to pilot an expansion of the program outside of Chicago in the fall of 2017.

"Today's results confirm what we already know about the remarkable effects of the Becoming A Man program, and also affirm that an investment in our children's futures is the most important investment we can make in Chicago's future," Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said.

More information: Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago.

www.nber.org/papers/w21178.pdf

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Intervention dramatically lowers violent crime arrests for at-risk teens (2016, June 29)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-06-intervention-lowers-violent-crime-at-risk.html>

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