

# Randomized trial finds counseling program reduces youth violence, improves school engagement

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A new study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab, in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools and local nonprofits Youth Guidance and World Sport Chicago, provides rigorous scientific evidence that a violence reduction program succeeded in creating a sizable decline in violent crime arrests among youth who participated in group counseling and mentoring.

The [Crime Lab](#) study—by far the largest of its kind ever conducted—is unique in that it was structured like a randomized clinical trial of the sort regularly used to generate "gold standard" evidence in the medical area. Such controlled studies remain rare in the area of crime prevention, and in social policy more broadly. Detailed findings were released Friday.

The program, Becoming A Man—Sports Edition, was developed and delivered by Youth Guidance and World Sport Chicago to more than 800 boys in 18 CPS schools during the 2009-10 school year. Youth who participated in the program showed a 44 percent decrease in [violent crime](#) arrests during the intervention. Participating youth also became more engaged with school — an impact that grew even larger in the year after the program ended.

Based on the success of the study, the Crime Lab is working with the University of Chicago Urban Education Lab, Youth Guidance, World Sport Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation and other philanthropic

partners to develop a follow-up study that will provide BAM-Sports Edition along with intensive small group academic tutoring to more than 2,000 CPS students over the next three years.

University of Chicago President Robert J. Zimmer noted that the research fits into the University's larger dedication to engaging with urban challenges. "From its very beginnings, the University of Chicago has used evidence-based research to improve social conditions in Chicago and all over the world," Zimmer said. "The Crime Lab's work is an important part of the University's commitment in this regard, addressing some of the city's most pressing social issues."

In addition to its impacts on school engagement and violence involvement, the BAM-Sports Edition program also proved to be cost-effective. "The program cost around \$1,100 per participant, while its impacts on criminal behavior generated benefits to society that are valued on the order of \$3,600 to \$34,000 per participant, depending on how we measure the costs of crime," said Jens Ludwig, director of the Crime Lab and the McCormick Foundation Professor of Social Service Administration, Law and Public Policy at UChicago.

"We have data from the most rigorous possible scientific study suggesting that it is not only possible to prevent youth violence involvement through pro-social programming, but that the returns on investment are extremely high," Ludwig continued. "The benefit-cost ratios are on the order of 3:1 to 31:1." Derek Douglas, Vice President for Civic Engagement at UChicago said, "The Crime Lab is a critical part of the University's broader civic engagement. We are eager to develop partnerships that use the University's academic insights to help address the challenges that people in Chicago face. This is an example of how we can have an impact both locally and nationally, by showing how a research university can be involved in a meaningful way in the life of its community."

"The results of the Crime Lab study make it clear: We simply can't give up on our youth," said Michelle Adler Morrison, Youth Guidance CEO. "This study proves that even with so much stacked against them, when given access to an innovative program that really provides the support and guidance they need, these young men can and will succeed."

Chicago Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy praised the focus on youth violence prevention, saying, "The findings from this study are vitally important for Chicago and every other city seeking to reduce crime and violence. The best strategy is to deal with crime and violence before they happen and this study has proven that prevention is possible." Gun violence is the leading cause of death for young people in Chicago and other cities across the country. For youth of color, gun violence is responsible for more deaths than the next nine leading causes of death combined.

Police Department data show that by far the most common homicide motive in Chicago is an "altercation" that escalates into a tragedy, usually involving guns. The key idea behind BAM-Sports Edition is that correcting certain "thinking errors" can help protect young people from becoming involved in impulsive behaviors, including violence.

The program model uses group counseling and nontraditional sports activities to strengthen adolescents' social-cognitive skills – including self-regulation and impulse control, social-information processing (the ability to accurately infer the intentions of others), future orientation, personal responsibility, and conflict resolution.

The BAM-Sports Edition program was delivered in 18 CPS elementary and high schools, mainly on the city's low-income south and west sides. In the program schools, 2,740 male seventh- to tenth-graders were assigned via a fair lottery either to a program group that received BAM counseling and sports programming or to a control group that received

no extra services beyond those that CPS typically offers. More than 800 boys took part in the program group.

Compared with other students attending the same schools, study participants were identified as being at elevated risk for violence involvement or school dropout on the basis of grade point average, attendance, and other factors. More than one-third of the study youth had been arrested at some point prior to the start of the program. The average study participant had a D-plus average (a GPA of 1.73), and had missed more than six weeks of school in the year prior to the study.

Using data from CPS and the Illinois State Police, researchers tracked students' school engagement, school performance and arrests over the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years. Crime Lab researchers Sara Heller, Harold Pollack, Roseanna Ander and Ludwig compared outcomes among students invited to participate in BAM-Sports Edition with their control-group counterparts. While the researchers are continuing to collect data that will help to refine and extend the findings, the analysis revealed that BAM-Sports Edition participation:

- Reduced violent arrests by 8.1 arrests per 100 youth during the program year, a reduction of 44 percent.
- Reduced arrests for crimes categorized as "other," including vandalism, trespassing, and weapons possession, by 11.5 arrests per 100 youth during the program year, or 36 percent.
- Reduced the likelihood of attending a school inside a juvenile justice setting in the year after the program by 53 percent.

Equally important, the intervention improved school performance and engagement, measured by days present in school, grade-point average and school persistence. Importantly, these impacts on schooling outcomes lasted even after the program ended.

Although students were too young to have graduated by the end of the study period, the size of the schooling impacts imply that graduation rates might increase in the future by an additional 10 to 23 percent of the control group's graduation rate. An increase in graduation of this magnitude would be very large and important, given that high school graduation rates in the U.S. have barely changed over the past 40 years, despite the ever-increasing importance of a high school diploma for success in the job market.

"What's remarkable about the BAM-Sports Edition program is the relatively limited number of contact hours, its scalability, and the relatively low cost," said Pollack, Crime Lab co-director and the Helen Ross Professor of Social Service Administration at UChicago. On average, each program participant had about 13 contact hours with the program. Because it was developed as a manualized intervention, the program can be replicated and brought to scale fairly easily.

The BAM curriculum was originated in 2001 by Youth Guidance staff member Anthony Di Vittorio. World Sport Chicago's sports component enhances Youth Guidance's BAM program by reinforcing the positive behavioral lessons with a series of non-traditional after-school sports programs. World Sport Chicago's coaches are trained to apply the BAM principles in a context outside of mentoring sessions.

"This has been a very powerful program and one that has demonstrated that sport can play a positive role in strengthening the social and emotional skills of young men in some of our most under-resourced communities," said Scott Myers, executive director of World Sport Chicago. "We are looking forward to continuing to work with Youth Guidance and the Crime Lab to expand and further prove the value of this program."

The study team stresses that the implications of its findings extend

beyond the specific BAM-Sports Edition program. Social-cognitive skill development, mentoring, and school engagement programs may each be effective violence prevention strategies in their own right.

The United States currently spends more than \$500 billion per year on K-12 public schooling — with very little attention after the first few grades to strengthening non-academic or social-cognitive skills that appear to be extremely important for students' long-term life chances.

"These findings emphasize the potential of helping youth to develop their non-academic skills as a strategy to decrease violence," said Heller, a doctoral student at UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy Studies and lead author of the study.

The goal of the follow-up study is to explore ways of ensuring that intervention impacts persist, and to expand the focus to include academic remediation alongside development of social-cognitive skills. This expanded intervention will retain the mentoring and sports programs, and will include high-dosage daily tutoring for students in a two-to-one tutoring setting.

Provided by University of Chicago

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