

# Working on Womanhood (WOW)

Evaluation of a school-based, trauma-informed group counseling program rooted in acceptance commitment therapy, narrative therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy

## The Challenge

Young people across America are facing a surge in substance use, an acute mental health crisis, and an ongoing epidemic of gun violence. These traumas have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for Black and Latinx youth. Decades of psychology research note the harms of trauma exposure on mental health, particularly during critical periods of development such as adolescence.

As such, today's impacted young people may face long-term negative effects on their overall wellbeing, socio-emotional development, and educational achievement.

Trauma-related mental health research has traditionally focused on treatments for young men, especially in regard to gun violence prevention, even as the consequences of trauma are disproportionately borne by girls. Adolescent girls experience high rates of trauma exposure, which can lead to mental health challenges such as PTSD, anxiety and depression. However, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on how best to intervene to reduce these harms. In particular, there is a dearth of evidence about interventions designed specifically by and for Black and Latina women to reduce the detrimental effects of trauma-exposure.



A group of young women come together as part of the Working on Womanhood Program

**38%** of girls in WOW schools show signs of PTSD

**22%** decrease in PTSD symptom and severity scores after WOW participation

## What is WOW?

Since 2011, Youth Guidance's Working on Womanhood (WOW) program has delivered in-school, trauma-focused counseling and support to girls across Chicago. Informed by cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and narrative therapy, WOW clinicians work to empower young women to challenge unhelpful thoughts, resolve conflict, and build resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Through teaching and reinforcing key concepts, WOW aims to reduce post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms among adolescent girls in a culturally competent way, helping them to thrive in school and achieve their aspirations.

## The Study

In 2017, the University of Chicago Education Lab partnered with Chicago Public Schools and Youth Guidance to test WOW using a rigorous randomized controlled trial design. This study was implemented in ten neighborhood high schools citywide during SY2017-2018 and SY2018-2019 and was part of the expansion made possible by the Mayor's Mentoring Initiative. By building evidence about how we can support girls and give them tools to process and recover from trauma, we have the potential to mitigate harmful consequences like PTSD, depression, and anxiety, and subsequently improve the behavioral and life outcomes that are critical for our communities to thrive.

## What Have We Learned?

The randomized controlled trial included over 2,000 Chicago Public School girls in 9th-11th grade, 85% of whom were Black or Latina. Girls did not show outward signs of risk factors—most were coming to school regularly and maintained at least a B average. However, the study team conducted a baseline survey that found staggeringly high rates of trauma exposure—nearly a third of the participating young women had witnessed someone being violently assaulted or killed, and almost half had someone close to them die violently or suddenly. Prior research has shown violence exposure has a direct impact on student learning—according to one study, Chicago students spend roughly one week out of every month functioning at a lower cognitive level solely because of their proximity to homicides. In this study, the Education Lab found that an astonishing 38% of 9th to 11th-grade adolescent girls in study schools exhibited signs of PTSD at baseline—double the rate experienced by service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

### WOW decreases girls' PTSD, depression, and anxiety



While we did not find significant effects on our initially pre-specified outcomes—clinical threshold rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, we do find significant results on pre-specified secondary outcomes. Specifically, we found that participation in WOW causes a 22% decrease in PTSD symptom severity scores, which measures the frequency and intensity of PTSD symptoms, and a 38% decrease in scores that indicate "moderate trauma-related distress." We also found that WOW participation causes a 14% decrease in depression and a 9% decrease in anxiety.

WOW is cost-effective and scalable at a cost of roughly \$2,300 per participant.

WOW far surpasses the standard cost-effectiveness thresholds used for evaluating medical and public health interventions. This threshold indicates the WOW program is not only effective, but can be replicated at-scale within resource-challenged public schools across the country. Youth Guidance has already expanded the program from Chicago Public Schools to a number of other cities.

The WOW evaluation has generated some of the first rigorous evidence about how cities can improve mental health and life outcomes for girls, with the potential to inform policy and practice in Chicago and in other cities seeking to better support children who have been exposed to trauma. Today, WOW serves thousands of students across schools in Chicago, Waukegan, Boston, Dallas, and Kansas City.

**To learn more about this work, please contact: Dr. Monica Bhatt, Co-Principal Investigator, University of Chicago Education Lab, [mbhatt@uchicago.edu](mailto:mbhatt@uchicago.edu).**