

University of Chicago Crime and Education Labs' evaluation of Choose to Change suggests promise in improving life outcomes for Chicago's youth

Chicago, IL – Today, the University of Chicago Crime Lab and Education Lab released the preliminary results of a multi-year evaluation of the Choose to Change (C2C) program. Choose to Change: Your Mind, Your Game (C2C) — co-developed and implemented by Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc. and Children's Home & Aid — combines intensive wraparound and mentoring services that focus on addressing each young person's specific needs, with trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy that helps youth process their trauma and develop a new set of decision-making tools. Through a randomized controlled trial, researchers have found that C2C reduces violent-crime arrests by almost 50% and increases academic engagement for participating youth.

Gun violence in Chicago continues to disproportionately affect youth and young adults living in our city and our country's most historically under-resourced neighborhoods. For the children and families living in the communities most affected, consistent exposure to violence and trauma can be especially detrimental to their mental health, emotional development, and academic engagement.

In response to persistent gun violence, in 2015 the Crime Lab and Education Lab, in partnership with John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and Get IN Chicago, held a citywide call to action to address youth violence and improve educational outcomes. The goal was to solicit, fund, and carefully measure the impact of the most promising approaches to reduce gun violence in order to generate rigorous evidence to help Chicago and other cities around the country. From more than 200 applicants to this citywide call, a selection committee comprised of representatives from the civic, philanthropic, and research communities in Chicago selected C2C as the Design Competition winner — believing it to be the most promising program to help young people avoid justice system involvement and thrive in their communities.

"The keys to the success of C2C are teaching youth the cognitive behavioral skills needed to stop, think, and choose while providing a supportive mentoring relationship to practice these skills with the mentor and with other youth in the program," said Amanda Whitlock, Senior Vice President, Behavioral Health at Children's Home & Aid.

Mid-study results suggest that C2C reduces the likelihood that youth will have any contact with the juvenile justice system over the longer term, reducing the probability of any arrest by 33 percent two and a half years after the program ends.

"Typically, what we see with many evaluations of adolescent programming is that the positive benefits diminish as soon as programming ends. The fact that the impacts of C2C—reduced criminal justice system involvement and increased school engagement—last even after the program ends is very encouraging, and speaks to the ability of the program to support a safer and brighter future for young people", said Nour Abdul-Razzak, Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Crime and Education Labs and one of the lead researchers on the project.

These results are not limited to behavior change outside of school; C2C also increases school engagement, with participants attending on average an additional week and a half of school and reduces school misconduct by 32 percent in the year after the program.

“Having the Crime and Ed Lab as a partner in this project every step of the way for five years has been extremely valuable. I see them as the unsung hero in C2C because data helps affirm what works and what doesn’t,” said Chris Sutton, Program Director of Choose to Change with YAP.

Based on these promising preliminary outcomes, the City of Chicago and the Chicago Public Schools have already begun investing to expand this program to serve more young people. Today, Mayor Lightfoot announced an additional multi-year investment to expand the C2C program to offer year-round services for more than 2,000 students over the next three years.

“Our children are the future of Chicago and as a City, we have a fundamental obligation to ensure young people who are involved in gun violence have the resources and supports they need to get back on the right path, pursue their dreams and live a life free from violence,” said Mayor Lightfoot. “That is why through our landmark multi-year expansion of Choose to Change, we are not only investing in these young people, we are transforming their lives and shaping Chicago's future for the better.”

For more details on the program model and mid-study results, please see the [Research Brief](#). Final study results are forthcoming and will be available in an academic working paper by researchers Nour Abdul-Razzak and Kelly Hallberg later this year.

We are greatly appreciative of the support and close partnership with the Chicago Police Department, Chicago Public Schools, and the City of Chicago Mayor’s Office. We would like to thank the following organizations for their support of the Choose to Change program and evaluation: Get IN Chicago, the Pritzker Pucker Family Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, AT&T, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, AbbVie, and the Chicago Sports Alliance, comprised of the Chicago Bears, White Sox, Cubs, Bulls, and Blackhawks.