

READI Chicago

A Community-Based Approach to Reducing Gun Violence

The Opportunity

In 2020, Chicago's homicide rate rose by over 50%. This increase was driven entirely by gun violence, and has exacerbated the racial safety gap in Chicago. Black Chicagoans, for example, experienced more homicides per resident than any year on record. This phenomenon is not unique to Chicago. Across the country, cities like Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia are seeing gun violence rates climb to near or beyond record highs.

Typically, cities respond to increased gun violence with aggressive policing and more incarceration. However, an exclusively law enforcement response is costly to the very individuals, families and communities already bearing the brunt of gun violence itself.

READI Chicago offers a proactive, community-based alternative. READI is a violence reduction initiative that provides two years of intensive programming to men at the highest risk of gun violence involvement. A randomized controlled trial of READI Chicago is still in progress, but early results show promise. While some arrest and victimization rates show no significant change, READI participants have 79% fewer arrests for shootings and homicides than their peers.

READI's Approach

Street gun violence does not happen for a single reason. Some shootings are strategic: to defend territory, signal strength, or punish slights. Others are the opposite: rapid decisions made in heated moments that can cause trivial altercations to escalate quickly.

READI is designed to address these different causes of shootings. An 18-month supported job provides a regular paycheck and a safe way to engage in the formal labor market. It's also an incentive to engage in group-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT teaches participants to recognize tense moments where a misstep could prove fatal, and strengthens skills to make slower, more thoughtful decisions instead. The group sessions also help reshape beliefs and norms about resolving conflict. Lastly, given the many barriers these men face to participating, READI offers referrals to a range of legal, mental health, and substance abuse services as needed.

IDENTIFYING THOSE MOST AT RISK FOR GUN VIOLENCE

One of the most novel aspects of READI is how it finds and recruits the men most at risk of gun violence involvement. The program uses a three-pronged approach. First, READI receives referrals from small, community-based organizations that are experts in local conflicts. Second,

about half of the men eligible for READI are identified by a risk assessment developed using government data to predict a person's risk of becoming involved in gun violence. This enables outreach workers to proactively locate and engage people outside their social networks who might otherwise be missed. Third, READI leverages relationships with parole officers and the Cook County Jail to recruit men who might be at an inflection point in their lives as they transition from prison or jail back to their communities.

PROVIDING INTENSIVE SUPPORTS

READI provides participants with 18 months of subsidized, supported employment paired with paid, group CBT sessions and professional development classes. As participants advance through career stages and attend therapy sessions, they are offered opportunities to learn new skills and earn more money. Once they complete their 18 months of paid employment, participants are eligible for an additional six months of case management and CBT sessions to help them transition to unsubsidized employment.

Early Findings

Researchers at the University of Chicago Crime and Inclusive Economy Labs, University of Michigan, and Cornell University are currently conducting a randomized controlled trial to assess READI's effects on participants' gun violence. The study measures violence by counting the number of times men are arrested for shootings and homicides, are arrested for other types of serious violent offenses, and are victims of shootings or homicides.¹ The findings to date:

- **READI finds the men most at risk for gun violence involvement:** Of the men referred to READI, 35% had previously been shot; 98% had been arrested at least once, with an average of 17 arrests; and most lost contact with the education system by grade 10. And during the study, men in the control group (who face the same risk of gun violence but do not receive READI's services) were shot and killed 45 times more than the average Chicagoan, 11 times more than people in the same neighborhood, and 2.5 times more than other young men in the same neighborhood.
- **READI participants stay engaged:** Despite facing considerable barriers to participating, more than half of men offered READI do so, and they are highly engaged. READI participants worked 75% of the weeks available to them during in-person programming.
- **READI may reduce shootings and homicides:** Men who participated in READI—defined as showing up for at least one day—have 79% fewer arrests for shootings and homicides, a large and

statistically significant difference. There is, however, no clear or precise change in a combined measure of serious violence, because neither victimization nor other types of serious violent-crime arrests show significant changes. As the study is still underway, final results are not yet available, and these preliminary estimates will change.

Key to understanding READI's impact is the randomized control group: men facing the same high risk of gun violence who were not offered READI but could access all other services. Without the control group, we could misattribute to READI all the other things changing in these men's lives.

For example, we know that even without READI the control group were victims of shootings and homicides 45% less often in the 20 months after referral than in the 20 months beforehand. If we did not know this and saw the same decline in victimization among READI participants, we could incorrectly attribute the decline to READI and overstate its impact. By letting us measure what would have happened without READI, a randomized control group lets us isolate the effect of READI itself.

READI is one of the few community gun violence interventions to date to use a randomized control group to measure its impact.

Endnotes

- 1 To maintain research integrity, the study's authors committed to a plan for how they would analyze the data prior to analysis. In that plan, they pre-specified that the combination of these outcomes would be the primary measure of READI's effectiveness, in addition to looking at the different components separately. The research team has also committed to using standard statistical adjustments to guard against the increased risk of false positive findings that comes with testing multiple outcome measures.