

Motivation

Gun violence disproportionately affects youth and young adults living in our city and our country's most historically under-resourced neighborhoods. The fundamental disparities in basic safety that exist mean that young people growing up in some Chicago neighborhoods are exposed to gun violence at rates almost 30 times higher than their peers just a few miles — or even a few blocks — away. For the children and families living in the communities most affected, consistent exposure to violence and trauma can be detrimental to their mental health, emotional development, and academic engagement.¹ While undoing the decades of systemic disinvestment that have created inequity in opportunity will take time, in the immediate term we need to find ways to better support the young people bearing the greatest burdens of violence.

Recent research from Chicago and elsewhere suggests providing behavioral and mental health supports can help decrease violence involvement and increase academic engagement.² These programs, based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles, seek to give young people additional tools to navigate their difficult environments — return a sense of safety, slow down their decision-making processes, and increase their social-emotional skillset. Despite the promise of these approaches, there is a dearth of programming for youth who are no longer consistently attending school and those who are already interacting with the justice system.

About the Program

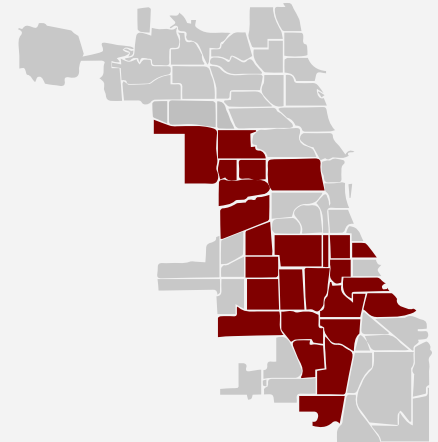
A homegrown collaboration between two local nonprofits has developed a promising solution to fill this gap in services and reduce youth violence while improving educational outcomes outside of an institutional setting. In response to a 2015 Design Competition, an initiative launched by the University of Chicago Crime Lab and Education Lab to crowdsource youth violence prevention interventions from across the city, Children's Home & Aid and Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc. created Choose to Change (C2C): Your Mind, Your Game. C2C is a six-month intervention that offers youth intensive wraparound and professional mentoring services that focus on addressing each young person's specific needs, with trauma-informed CBT that helps youth process their trauma and develop a new set of decision-making tools.

Within the C2C Intervention:

- YAP advocates are the first point of contact for the program and are persistent in their outreach. Advocates are professionally trained mentors who come from backgrounds and communities similar to those of the youth. As such, they are able to develop the **strong personal relationships** needed to engage youth in all aspects of programming. They provide **wraparound support**, which includes a broad spectrum of services, from helping youth obtain basic necessities to motivation and direction on larger goals, such as employment and college. On average, advocates spend **eight hours a week** supporting a young person.

C2C at a Glance

C2C Serves High Need Communities



Program Referral Criteria

C2C youth are **13-18** and may be actively, or at risk of becoming, gang involved.

Some may be on **juvenile probation**, previously found guilty of weapons offenses, or victims of **traumatic violence**.

C2C youth may be **disengaged in school** through chronic truancy, serious misconduct and/or frequent suspensions.

Over 600 Youth Served

Program Model

6 Months of Wraparound Support + Trauma-informed CBT

C2C provides community-based, individualized support to individuals while infusing cognitive behavioral therapy (SPARCS) to help youth process trauma and develop healthy decision-making tools.

- Over six months, clinically trained therapists from Children’s Home & Aid lead 12-16 trauma-informed **CBT sessions** called SPARCS (Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress). The therapy aims to help youth regulate their emotions and understand how past traumatic experiences or chronic stress can impact their thinking and behavior. Through exercises and conversation, youth learn to challenge unhelpful thinking, develop more resilient coping mechanisms to address stressors, and build problem-solving and communication skills.
- A key part of the program is that advocates attend the group therapy sessions to learn the CBT skills and reinforce them in their interactions with youth. This allows for **“learning by doing,”** where advocates create opportunities for youth to practice life skills taught by therapists and develop new positive habits long after the program ends.

Generating Rigorous Evidence

Since its launch in 2015 in the greater Englewood communities, C2C has served over 600 youth across the South and West Sides of Chicago. To isolate the impact of the program on young people’s outcomes, C2C partnered with the Crime Lab and Education Lab to rigorously evaluate the program’s impact on behavioral and academic outcomes through a randomized controlled trial.³

Below we share the mid-study results of C2C for the youth who received services between November 2015 and September 2018, a majority of our study sample. Although we would not expect the impact of C2C to change dramatically with the full study sample, these findings are preliminary and final outcomes from the full study sample are forthcoming in an academic working paper (Abdul-Razzak and Hallberg, 2020).⁴

Of the youth who were offered the program, 62 percent enrolled in programming and nearly all youth who enrolled completed the program.

Reducing Violence and Interaction with the Justice System

To understand how youth may be changing their behaviors and living safer lives as a result of C2C, we look at three different outcomes related to interactions with the juvenile justice system after the start of the program:

- **Violent-Crime Arrests:** Given the large human and social costs of violence, we measure whether C2C impacts the number of violent-crime arrests. At the program’s conclusion, we find C2C youth have **48 percent fewer violent-crime arrests** than their control peers.⁵ This is similar in magnitude to the impact that has been measured of other CBT-based programming in Chicago. However, C2C is rare in that these positive impacts continue to persist: one and a half years after the program ends, C2C youth have 38 percent fewer violent-crime arrests than their control peers.
- **Total Arrests:** Looking at the total number of arrests both groups accumulate from the time of the program’s start, we find some reductions among C2C youth at the program’s conclusion compared to the control group (however, this finding is not statistically significant). This difference grows over time, and at six months after the program ends, we find that C2C youth have **42 percent fewer total arrests** compared to the control group. This impact does not persist past this point.
- **Any Justice System Contact:** We also measure if C2C impacts not just the total number of arrests youths accumulate after the start of the program, but whether the program affects the likelihood that they will touch the justice system at all (i.e. have even one arrest). At the program’s conclusion, C2C youth are **39 percent less likely to have any arrest at all** compared to the control group. Once again, we see this impact persist after the program ends, with C2C youth being **33 percent less likely to have any arrest at all** compared to their control peers two and a half years after the program ends.

Improving Educational Engagement

To evaluate if C2C led to improved educational outcomes for a young person, we look at various school engagement measures including attendance, misconducts, and GPA:

- **School Attendance:** C2C youth attend an **additional seven days of school** in the year after the program’s start compared to their control peers (a 6 percent increase in attendance).
- **School Misconduct:** C2C youth have **32 percent fewer misconduct incidents** in school than their control peers in the year after the program’s start.
- **GPA:** We find no impact of C2C on GPA.

Future analyses will be able to determine the impact of C2C on longer-term outcomes like high school graduation.



Impact Evaluation

Measuring the effect on violence involvement and academic engagement through a multi-year randomized controlled trial (RCT).



Improved Engagement in School

C2C youth had higher attendance and fewer misconduct incidents compared to youth in the comparison group one year after program start.



Reduced Justice System Contact in the Long Term

Persistent impact on any justice system contact & violence reduction 2-3 years after program start.

Expansion and Future Work

These mid-study results demonstrate the potential of trauma-informed CBT, when coupled with intensive mentoring and wraparound supports, to effectively engage and support young people to reduce violence and justice system involvement while also increasing school engagement in Chicago’s most under-resourced neighborhoods. 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 in 2020. As Chicago and cities across the country are expanding these types of services for youth, our future research seeks to more precisely understand the impact of this program and to understand how and why this model works. Identifying the programs that can reduce violence, and understanding how they impact critical life outcomes, will have large returns — not just for the victims of gun violence and their families, but for the health and vitality of cities as a whole.

¹ Cloitre et al., 2009, McMahon et al, 2013; Flannery et al., 2004; Mohammad et al, 2015; Figlio, 2007; Sharkey, 2010

² Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; Heller, 2014; Heller et al., 2017; Blattman et al. 2017

³ As there are many more young people in Chicago who could potentially benefit from C2C than there were resources available, young people were entered into a lottery and randomly selected to be offered C2C (treatment group) or to be part of the control group (with access to status quo school and community supports). Researchers analyzed administrative data from Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Police Department to study the impact of C2C on academic engagement and justice system involvement between those offered C2C and the control group.

⁴ The results we present are the impacts of participation in C2C, which is known as the treatment on the treated (TOT) estimate. This estimate compares the outcomes of youth randomly assigned to either the treatment or control groups, while also taking into account that not all youth in the treatment group who were offered C2C participated in the program.

⁵ This difference is statistically significant at the .05 level which means this decline in violent-crime arrests is unlikely due to any chance variation between the two groups. All of the percent changes presented in this document are either significant at the .05 level or the .01 level suggesting a high level of confidence in the findings.

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For More Information

To learn more about this research or the Choose to Change program, please contact YAP, Children’s Home & Aid, or the Crime and Education Labs.

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