CRIME NEWS CHICAGO

Arrests, shootings plunged among those who took part in anti-violence program, even as crime spiked in city, new study finds

U of C researchers found that those who took part in READI Chicago were two-thirds less likely to be arrested for a shooting and nearly 20% less likely to be shot or killed themselves than other at-risk residents of the South and West sides.

By Andy Grimm | Apr 21, 2022, 7:23pm CDT

Bryant Robertson, with the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, stands in the computer lab at the headquarters of READI Chicago, Thursday April 14, 2022. | Tyler Pasciak LaRiviere/Sun-Time

A new study of a Chicago-based anti-violence program has provided some of the best evidence to date that there are ways to tamp down violence among members of the most endangered populations in the city without arresting them or throwing them in jail.

The last two years-plus have seen unprecedented spikes in violence in Chicago and cities across the U.S. Amid that surge, protesters took to the streets to decry the kind of aggressive policing that's long been the standard response to rising murder totals.

City leaders have poured record amounts of funding into dozens of community programs — and spent hundreds of millions on police overtime — even as shootings and killings reached near-record levels.

But the study by University of Chicago researchers found that an outreach program operating on the South and West sides is having success in reducing crime and violence among the high-risk men who participated in the program.

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He walked away from a violent life in Chicago and still got shot — but he doesn't even want to know who did it

The recently completed trial tracked some 2,500 men in Chicago's most violent neighborhoods and found that men who participated in an intensive, 18-month program

called READI Chicago were nearly two-thirds less likely to be arrested for a shooting or homicide and nearly 20% less likely to be shot or killed themselves than a similar group of men that weren't in the program. Those are all significant declines considering a third of participants had been shot at least once before enrolling, and had an average of 17 arrests on their rap sheet.

Participants were recruited by outreach workers and community members, or targeted from a list of high-risk Chicagoans generated by an algorithm that weighed their recent arrest history and violent incidents involving them or their social networks. Results were even better for the men who were referred in by outreach workers, with shooting and homicide arrests dropping nearly 80% and shootings and killings by almost half.

The test subjects all were drawn from among residents deemed most at-risk in Chicago's Austin, Englewood, North Lawndale, West Englewood and West Garfield Park neighborhoods — communities where nearly a quarter of all murders in Chicago since 2019 took place.

The READI study was a randomized trial — comparing men who enrolled in the program against a control group of men who were turned away from the program — making it the first of its kind to evaluate a large group with the same statistical rigor used to evaluate medical treatments.

"A randomized controlled trial is the gold standard for research, and these are significant results," said Roseanna Ander, executive director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, which helped develop the READI curriculum and conducted the research trial.

Chicago police respond to a shooting last October in Austin, a neighborhood targeted by READI Chicago for anti-violence interventions. Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

A lethal laboratory

The more than 800 murders in 2021 were a two-decade high for Chicago, and a 60% increase from 2019. More than 3,500 people were victims of non-fatal shootings.

The level of violence stunned Sylvester, a 36-year-old Chicago native, when he returned to to the city in 2020 after serving a 13-year prison sentence. He figured he'd soon be in the middle of combat in his West Side neighborhood. With few job prospects and a rap sheet that stretched back to his early teens, Sylvester — who asked to be identified only by his first name — expected he'd hit up old gang contacts to get back into selling drugs to make ends meet. Instead, a friend recruited him for READI.

For 18 months, Sylvester could get paid $15 an hour to participate in daily job training and counseling sessions, including cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT. The five one-hour CBT sessions each week helped rewire his thought processes and examine "risky thoughts," he said, unwinding the reflexes his years on the street had built up.

Sylvester was drawn in by the wages, but the CBT is what kept him coming back.

"I really never questioned it. You come at me, I'm gonna take it to the next level, is what I was about, same as everyone else," Sylvester said during an interview at READI's Austin headquarters. "The training gets you thinking about what you're risking, about not letting other people's negativity draw you down."

Sylvester now is working in outreach for READI and taking college courses, with plans to go into social work.

"On the street, it was all about respect," he said. "I want to be respected for doing something positive in my community, for helping people."

Hard science is hard to do

READI is funded exclusively by private donors to the tune of about $20 million per year, but Mayor Lori Lightfoot's 2022 budget includes $14.5 million for similar programs that have formed a network that covers all of the city's most violent neighborhoods.

But actual evidence that the programs have a meaningful impact is sparse, and many previous studies were frequently assailed for lacking scientific rigor. Past examinations of anti-violence programs, like the Cure Violence and CeaseFire "violence interrupter" programs that began in Chicago in the 1990s and early 2000s, also have shown ambiguous results.

Still, over the years, officials with non-violence programs have often taken credit for steep drops in neighborhood violence, only to fall silent when crime spikes again. But looking at the effect of any violence intervention on an entire neighborhood makes it difficult to prove any program's impact, said Max Kapustin, a Cornell University researcher who helped produce the READI report.

"These things are hard to measure, because they are happening in the real world and not a lab," Kapustin said. "Looking at the population that is participating in the program allows you to look at the effect of the program."

Research on violence is difficult for a variety of reasons. Funding for programs often dries up mid-study — grant cycles for many programs tended to expire in June, when violence reaches a seasonal peak. Police often ramp up activity in the same areas where anti-violence groups operate. And the data coming from the small nonprofits doing the work often isn't great — organizations typically want to spend what funding they get hiring more outreach workers or enrolling more participants, instead of someone to compile experimental data.

READI estimated that for every slot available in the program, there were 20 people in the targeted neighborhoods who were high-risk enough to be eligible. But the staff of outreach workers struggled with the notion that conducting a randomized study meant

that half of the men they recruited would be turned away in the name of science. When the clinical trial protocols were announced, outreach workers were appalled.

“We was pissed. I was pissed!” said Bryant Robertson, supervisor of READI’s outreach workers in West Garfield Park and Austin.

“It’s like you’re selling them a dream you can’t fulfill. It’s a letdown, for guys that have had a lot of disappointment in their lives.”

Model dates to 2016

READI’s model was developed during the last surge in Chicago violence, 2016, when the city logged 762 murders after nearly a decade in which the city had seldom eclipsed 500 killings.

At the time, the Sports Alliance, the philanthropic arm of each of the city’s major pro sports teams, approached the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab seeking advice on what kind of programs they could fund that might put a dent in violent crime.

“We went to the drawing board [asking], ‘What is out there other than the usual criminal justice response?’” said Christopher Blattman, a researcher and economist in U of C’s Harris Center for Public Policy, who helped design and evaluate READI. Blattman has studied programs that targeted young men for intervention in the U.S., and older men entangled in the violence and aftermath of civil war in Liberia.

The key components of READI’s program — cognitive behavioral therapy, a type of counseling focused on re-ordering participants’ thought patterns, had proved effective with school-age children and teens — and, in Blattman’s case, former child soldiers in Liberia. Studies had also long correlated employment, a benefit of READI’s job and educational training, to declines in criminal behavior.

Outreach worker Bryant Robertson (2nd from left) stands with other READI Chicago workers at the program's headquarters in Austin. Tyler Pasciak LaRiviere/Sun-Times

But there were few programs that featured both those interventions at the same time, and most target younger men and teens who were not as deeply embroiled in urban violence, Blattman said. READI was designed to target an older demographic — the average age of homicide victims in Chicago is 27 — and enroll them in a program that would pay them to attend the daily therapy and job training, supported by "relentless engagement" from staff.

"CBT and employment are different medicine for the same people ... interrupting a feud is like first aid or the emergency room, where you're patching things up in an emergency," Blattman said. "READI is like the vaccine. Before you go shoot someone, we're going to equip you with the skills to keep you from ever getting in that situation."

Growing body of evidence

In recent years more than a dozen community organizations across the city have formed a network of outreach workers that cover Chicago's most dangerous neighborhoods.

That violence in the city increased at the same time public dollars were pouring into community-based non-violence programs should not dampen interest in those approaches, said Northwestern University researcher Andrew Papachristos, who has studied the programs.

"Different approaches [to research] are seeing some of the same things, and is probably

some of the best evidence we have that these things are working," he said. "But it's new evidence, which means probably it's time to keep exploring and double down, not say it doesn't work and throw it out."

The READI experimental trial continues, and researchers will begin varying the program design to see what elements are most critical to success or to find out the right "dosage" of components like housing assistance or months of therapy, said Blattman.

"I've spent most of my professional life working with armed groups in various countries, and Chicago takes the cake in terms of, outside of active conflict zones, just for the level of risk and what people face on an everyday basis in terms of violence," Blattman said. "Whether this kind of program would work with this population remained to be seen. This is really important data."

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By Brian Sandalow | Apr 24, 2022, 12:25pm CDT

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By Tina Sfondeles | Apr 24, 2022, 12:00pm CDT

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