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Thinking slower, becoming a man

Cognitive behavioral therapy program reduces violent crime by half, increases graduation rates

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For many young men in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, it all came down to a split-second decision that abruptly changed their lives.

People often act without thinking. We constantly make quick decisions as part of our daily lives. The trait, which psychologists call automaticity, is a universal and useful feature of how individuals address problems and make decisions.



Jon Guryan

But for youth growing up in Chicago's most distressed neighborhoods, where high-stakes situations occur frequently, being aware of the dangers of automatic thinking can mean the difference between life and death.

Jonathan Guryan, a professor of human development and social policy who studies racial inequality and education, has spent years studying cognitive behavioral therapy-based programs that address impulsive, automatic responses that can potentially lead to violence.

"Automatic thinking is something everyone does and it's actually very helpful when applied to the right situation," says Guryan. "But when making the wrong decision is costly, particularly when you live in a

neighborhood with lots of violence, the value of helping a child think about the right way to respond in the right environment is very high.”

For almost a decade, Guryan has been following participants of Becoming a Man (BAM), a group cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) program offered in public middle and high schools across the city and in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. The program is provided by Chicago-based non-profit Youth Guidance.

Guryan’s research shows that BAM reduces arrests for violent crimes by half and increases high school graduation rates by almost 20 percent for Chicago Public School students who participate in the program.

Rather than focusing on education or punitive measures to deter crime, CBT-based programs like BAM offer behavioral strategies that teach youth to slow down and think before they act on something that may carry lifelong consequences. The program, now serving several thousand young men in 7th through 12th grades in Chicago schools, also employs mentorship and role-playing lessons in a group setting.



CPS students engage in B.A.M. exercises

A typical session opens with a game: One person tucks a small ball into his palm, while his partner has one minute to do whatever it takes to get it away from him.

Offentimes, the young men start wrestling, trying to pry open each other’s hands by force. Afterward, when the counselor suggests simply asking for the ball, the boys look skeptical—and then surprised—when their partners confirm that a simple request would have worked. The exercise demonstrates how easy it is to act on impulse, and the value of pausing to consider other solutions.

“Kids learn to stop and think,” says Guryan, who began working with BAM in 2013 as part of a two-year evaluation of the program.

Guryan’s research on BAM and other programs takes place at the University of Chicago Education Lab. Co-founded by Guryan in 2012, the Education Lab is a close affiliate of the University of Chicago Crime Lab. Both partner with civic and community leaders to identify, rigorously evaluate, and learn how to scale promising programs that reduce crime and improve education in urban areas.

“This work is about helping policymakers figure out how to most effectively use their limited resources and make informed decisions that could potentially help kids who are going to the schools and who live in the city,” Guryan says.



CPS students in B.A.M. session

In part due to findings from Guryan and his colleagues, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has become a BAM believer and evangelist, launching a \$36 million public-private partnership to expand BAM and similar programs across Chicago, titled the Mayor's Mentoring Initiative.

Amid heated debate about how to stem urban violence, Guryan's findings provide policymakers with compelling evidence that investing in social interventions can pay off. In fact, the success of BAM helped inspire former President Barack Obama to found My Brother's Keeper, a \$600 million initiative that aims to improve the lives of young men of color through mentorship.

"That's what 'My Brother's Keeper' is all about," Obama said in 2014. "Helping more of our young people stay on track. Providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future. Building on what works – when it works, in those critical life-changing moments."

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