READI: Connecting Chicago's Highest-Risk Youth to Transitional Jobs, Support Services, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

OVERVIEW

Program Basics

- READI provides youth at the highest levels of risk with cognitive behavioral therapy, work readiness training, paid transitional employment, and a variety of personalized supports.
- Participation in the program lasts between 12 and 18 months.

How Does READI Improve Economic Mobility?

- READI offers its participants paid transitional employment, providing them with income stability and reducing their experience of extreme poverty. Research demonstrates that income stability is a critical foundation to longer-term upward economic mobility.
- The program’s transitional employment and job placement services provide participants with work experience and training, allowing them to build skills and position themselves for higher quality employment.
- READI helps participants reduce their involvement with crime and violence, decreasing the likelihood of incarceration or re-incarceration. In preventing incarceration, READI better positions participants to earn a steady income, complete education or workforce training programs, and access good jobs.

Strength of Evidence

EVIDENCE LEVEL: PROMISING (THIRD-HIGHEST TIER)

READI has demonstrated positive preliminary results in a randomized control trial currently being conducted by UChicago Urban Labs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population</th>
<th>Program cost</th>
<th>Implementation locations</th>
<th>Dates active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity youth</td>
<td>$23,000 per participant annually</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2017 – present</td>
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</table>
READI participants are identified through three pathways—recommendations from individuals and community-based groups, referrals from partners across the justice system, and a predictive analytics tool developed by the University of Chicago's Crime Lab.

Target participants are relentlessly engaged, being contacted on average five times before agreeing to participate.

Decades of disinvestment have left Chicago's South and West Sides plagued by concentrated poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and high rates of violence. In 2016, gun violence surged to levels not seen since the 1990s. The city experienced a 58 percent increase in homicides and a 43 percent increase in non-fatal shootings. 764 people were killed, the highest total in nearly 20 years.

Research demonstrated that a relatively small number of young men in a few neighborhoods were driving a large portion of gun violence in Chicago. These men were not being reached by any existing community-based programs or services.

In Chicago, like much of the United States, the response to gun violence had focused almost entirely on law enforcement and the criminal legal system. From 2005–2009, more than $260 million was spent per year on incarcerating residents of Chicago’s five most violent neighborhoods.

In response to the surge in homicides, philanthropic and civic leaders across Chicago came together to identify and invest in evidence-based approaches to reduce gun violence, forming a funder collective known as the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities (PSPC).

PSPC, along with the Chicago Sports Alliance and JPMorgan Chase, fund the Rapid Employment and Development Initiative (READI), a program that combines several evidence-based strategies to reduce criminal behavior and violence—cognitive behavioral therapy, paid transitional employment, and a variety of personalized wraparound support services.

READI is administered by Heartland Alliance, a large anti-poverty nonprofit, and delivered by five community-based organizations. The University of Chicago Urban Labs operates as the data analysis and evaluation partner.

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OUTCOMES & EVIDENCE

- READI is currently undergoing a randomized control trial, conducted by the University of Chicago Crime Lab. Final results will be released in 2023.
- Men eligible for READI are 54 times more likely to be shot or killed than the average Chicagoan.
- 55 percent of individuals eligible for READI start programming within 20 months of being referred.
- 72 percent of READI participants who start transitional employment continue to be employed after six months. 56 percent are still employed after 12 months.

READI’S IMPLEMENTATION IN CHICAGO

The Challenge

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GUN VIOLENCE SURGES IN CHICAGO

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CIVIC LEADERS SEEK NEW STRATEGIES TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

Fall 2016

Conversations between the Chicago Sports Alliance and other Chicago philanthropic leaders spark exploration of evidence-based approaches to address the historic surge in gun violence.

READI has successfully engaged the young men at the highest risk of gun violence in Chicago and has enrolled more than 650 men from five of the city’s most challenged neighborhoods. On average, READI participants have been arrested 17 times; 48 percent have been arrested for a serious violent crime, and 34 percent have been shot.

Despite their deep levels of disconnection, READI’s participants are enrolling in high numbers and persisting through long-term programming. Take-up rates among referrals are more than twice those originally anticipated.

READI has contributed more than $20 million to community-based organizations in five of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhoods and nearly $9 million in wages and stipends directly to participants.

READI has been implemented with a randomized controlled trial built into the program model. While final results will not be published until 2023, preliminary findings indicate that men who participated in READI saw reductions in shooting and homicide victimizations and arrests.

READI's three concurrent referral pathways—individual and community-based referrals, referrals from the justice system, and the predictive analytics tool—ensures that the program can reach the most deeply disconnected young men in five of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhoods.

Access to extensive justice system data on individuals and sophisticated analysis capability enable READI to ensure that all referred participants are in fact at the highest levels of risk.

Delivering the READI model through well-established community-based partners makes engaging the hardest-to-reach young men less challenging than it would otherwise be.

Designing a highly detailed RFP ensured that prospective community-based partners clearly understood the commitment and expectations of delivering the READI model with fidelity and allowed Heartland Alliance to make highly informed decisions about which vendors to partner with.

Commitment to hiring individuals with relevant lived experience has been instrumental in building trust and authenticity in both the READI Chicago intervention and its day-to-day service delivery.

Employer partners have remained committed to program participants, even in the face of challenges.

Collaboration between the University of Chicago Crime Lab and the Social IMPACT team at Heartland Alliance has ensured the collection and analysis of data to inform real-time program improvements and program accountability.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CRIME LAB APPROACHES HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

November 2016

The two organizations begin discussions about designing a program grounded in the evidence-base of cognitive behavioral therapy and transitional employment.
TIMELINE, CONTINUED

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE LEADS EXTENSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS
December 2016–April 2017
Heartland Alliance convenes focus groups with target population and engages in discussions with community organizations, and concept for READI is developed.

RFP FOR COMMUNITY-BASED DELIVERY PARTNERS IS DESIGNED AND DISSEMINATED
March 2017
READI seeks community based-organizations that combine the right cultural competencies, technical skills, and organizational preparedness to work with young men at the highest levels of risk.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTNERS ARE SELECTED
May 2017
These groups include the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, the Lawndale Christian Legal Center, UCAN, Centers for New Horizons, North Lawndale Employment Network, and Heartland Human Care Services.

EDDIE BOCANEGRA IS HIRED TO LEAD READI CHICAGO
June 2017
Staff hiring begins, with an emphasis on finding candidates with lived experience that allows them to relate to program participants.

READI LAUNCHES PROGRAMMING
Fall–Winter 2017
READI’s first referrals come from community-based organizations. Participants are chosen through a lottery to achieve random assignment.

RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL BEGINS
March 2018
Researchers at University of Chicago’s Crime Lab lead the study, receive data regularly from community-based delivery partners and Heartland Alliance.

EARLY MILESTONES
June 2018
In its first year, READI engages 536 men, approximately 219 of whom had started CBT and transitional employment services. In its second year, the program had reaching 771 men, with 515 having started CBT and transitional employment services.

EARLY ANALYSIS OF READI RCT IS PUBLISHED
Spring 2020
Findings indicate strong preliminary results in READI reducing gun violence involvement and victimization.

THIRD-YEAR MILESTONES
June 2020
By June 2020, 1,227 men had been engaged, and 666 had started CBT and transitional employment services.

READI SERVICE MODEL EVOLVES
July 2020
Based on the first three years of learning and the impact of COVID-19, READI modifies delivery by accelerating participant exposure to CBT, expanding access to professional development opportunities, and strengthening referrals of additional community services.
**THE PROCESS**

### Confronting the Problem

- Gun violence in Chicago rises dramatically in 2016, with levels of violent crime reaching levels unseen in decades.
- In response, 50 Chicago–area foundations and funders come together to form the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities (PSPC). The collective seeks to identify and support community-led, evidence-based strategies to address gun violence that the public sector can eventually invest in and scale.
- The Chicago Sports Alliance and JPMorgan Chase join together with PSPC to invest in a range of solutions, including READI Chicago.

### Designing the Strategy

- The University of Chicago's Crime Lab drew from rigorous research on the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy and transitional employment interventions in conceptualizing a programmatic response to gun violence.
- Heartland Alliance designs the READI program model, leveraging the evidence base shared by the UChicago Crime Lab, input from individuals who had been directly impacted by gun violence, and community partners.
- Three referral processes are designed, with participants referred through community partners, justice system partners, and a predictive analytics tool developed by the UChicago Crime Lab.
- The program is structured to be administered by Heartland Alliance and delivered through community-based organizations in order to leverage pre-existing community ties and relationships, while ensuring the development and implementation of consistent practices.
- READI's funders commit to investing in a randomized controlled trial that will run alongside the program as it launches and operates.

### Allocating the Funding

- READI has been funded primarily through private philanthropy during the first three years of implementation. JPMC, PSPC and the Chicago Sports Alliance partnered with READI Chicago from the earliest days of program development and remain actively involved.
- READI has received increasing levels of funding from the City of Chicago every year but local contributions make up only a fraction of the program's total budget.
- Through June 2020, READI Chicago invested more than $20 million into community organizations to promote safety and opportunity, as well as more than $9.5 million directly to participants in the form of wages, stipends, and client supports.
To deliver the READI model via community-based partners, Heartland Alliance and the Crime Lab created a highly detailed RFP, ensuring that applicants were fully knowledgeable about the specific target population and associated risks, and prepared to deliver the evidence-based model with high fidelity.

The Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, the Lawndale Christian Legal Center, UCAN, Centers for New Horizons, North Lawndale Employment Network, and Heartland Human Care Services are the partner organizations chosen to deliver READI.

On a daily basis, partner organizations deliver CBT services, personal coaching and case management, and work readiness training, along with overseeing transitional work crews. Safety protocols are updated constantly, dictating nearly all aspects of daily programming and operations, ensuring that young men and staff are safe while participating.

Heartland Alliance serves as the employer of record for transitional jobs, ensures implementation fidelity, provides training and technical assistance to delivery partners, and coordinates partnerships across the city and with research partners at UChicago.

As the subject of a randomized controlled trial, READI collects extensive data on participant activities and outcomes. Data is collected by community partners and Heartland Alliance and shared with the University of Chicago's Crime Lab for evaluation.

Safety of participants and staff is a top priority and an ongoing focus. Since launch, the program has increased safety and security measures to incorporate metal detectors and professional security staff at programming locations.

As early data demonstrated the positive impact of CBT programming, the model shifted to deliver nearly twice the “dose” of CBT treatment to participants. Participants also now receive additional work readiness training before beginning transitional employment.

READI is experimenting with shortening the program’s duration and evaluating if similar outcomes can be generated for participants in 12 months rather than 18 months.
RESOURCES

- READI Chicago program website
- University of Chicago Urban Labs overview of READI
- Early Analysis of READI Chicago (Fall 2019)
- READI Request for Information for community-based outreach partners and transitional jobs providers
- Urban Institute: “Neighborhood Disparities in Investment Flows in Chicago”
- University of Chicago Crime Lab: "Gun Violence in Chicago, 2016"

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THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY CATALOG

This case study is part of Results for America’s Economic Mobility Catalog, a tool designed to help local government leaders identify and implement evidence-based strategies to improve economic mobility outcomes for their residents. The Economic Mobility Catalog is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

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