

PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE

Youth Guidance's "Becoming a Man"

THE CHALLENGE Preventing youth violence and improving schooling outcomes for disadvantaged youth remain two of our nation's most urgent challenges. While we have made dramatic strides in addressing many of the leading public health problems in America over the past 50 years, there remains one notable and particularly devastating exception—homicide. Homicide rates today are almost exactly what they were in 1950, or even in 1900. Nationwide, homicide is by far the leading cause of death for black males 15-24 and is responsible for more deaths than the next nine leading causes *combined*. Our progress on the high school graduation problem, which in many ways is the flip side of the violence problem, has been similarly discouraging. Graduation rates of black and Hispanic youth remain far lower than those of their white counterparts, and we have made little progress toward closing these gaps over the past 40 years. Finding approaches that work to keep kids—particularly our nation's most disadvantaged—safe and on a path to success will improve the lives of individuals and families, help communities thrive, and strengthen the economic health of our cities.

THE INTERVENTION: BECOMING A MAN (BAM) Youth Guidance's BAM program offers youth the opportunity to participate in one-hour, once-per-week group sessions held during the school day. BAM uses standard elements of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help youth to recognize their automatic responses and slow down their thinking in high-stakes situations.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab has evaluated BAM in two separate randomized controlled trials. In the 2009-10 academic year, our research team worked with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to identify 2,740 male youth at elevated risk for dropout and crime involvement in grades 7 through 10 in 18 CPS schools, and randomly assigned them to one of two conditions—BAM, or a control group receiving status quo school and community services. In 2013-14 and 2014-15, we again identified 2,064 male youth in grades 9 and 10 across 9 CPS high schools and randomly assigned them either to be offered the chance to participate in BAM or to a control condition, for two years.

THE RESULTS Our research team found participation in BAM during the first study reduced violent crime arrests for youth in the program by 45%. The program also had lasting impacts on school engagement: BAM increased on-time high school graduation rates by 19%. In the 2013-2015 study, BAM reduced violent crime arrests by 50%, and again had significant impacts on school engagement. These large behavioral responses combined with modest program costs imply benefit-cost ratios for this intervention from 5-to-1 up to 30-to-1, from the realized reduction in crime alone. Potential increases in future earnings resulting from the impacts on high school graduation may mean the return on investment is far higher.

THE HYPOTHESIS: AUTOMATICITY Previous research in psychology suggests that *automaticity* plays a large role in people's decision making (including decisions about dropping out, becoming involved with drugs or gangs, or how to respond to confrontations that could escalate into serious violence). The BAM program builds on this idea that because deliberate decision-making and conscious cognition (what psychologists call "system 2" thinking) require effort, people rely heavily on automatic responses that are adaptive to commonly encountered situations ("system 1" thinking). Problems can arise for youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods where high-stakes situations occur frequently and where being aware of the dangers of automatic thinking can mean the difference between life and death.

While our data on mechanisms of action have some limitations, we find evidence consistent with the idea that reduced automaticity helps explain program impacts. Our results suggest that it is possible to generate sizable changes in outcomes by helping youth recognize their own thinking patterns and make better decisions during high-stakes situations.

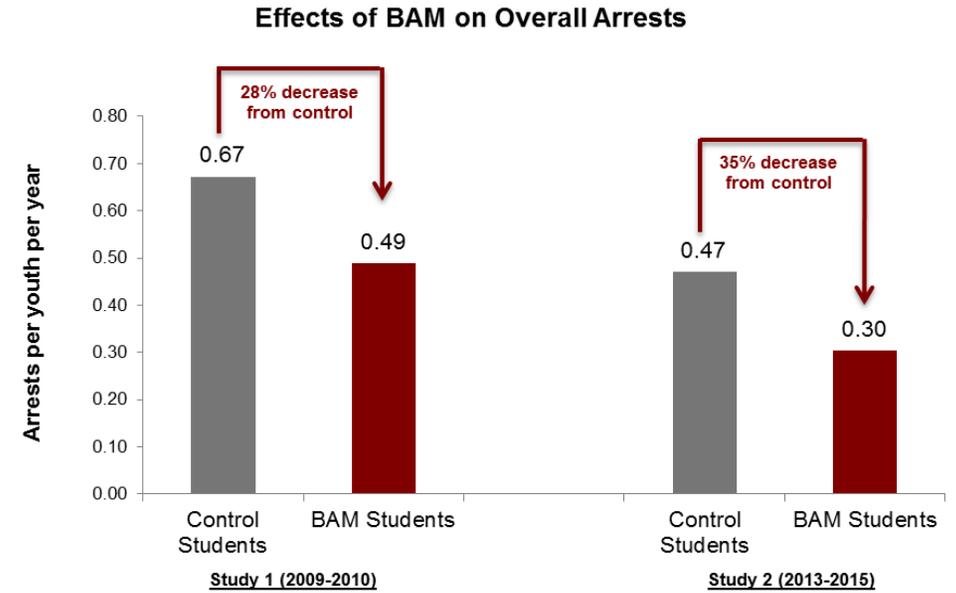
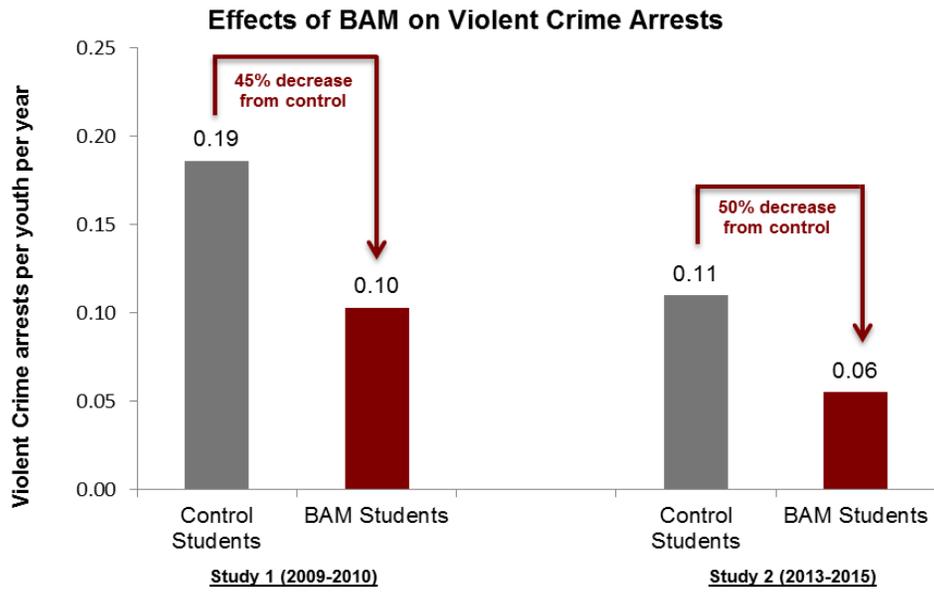
FUTURE WORK The Crime Lab is currently analyzing results from a large-scale in-person survey administered to study participants, designed to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of action driving program impacts. We will also continue to follow youth as they progress through school and into adult life, to determine the long-term academic, behavioral, and employment outcomes of this promising approach.

The empirically documented success of BAM in Chicago has led the city of Chicago and the Chicago Public Schools to invest public resources to expand this promising strategy across the city. We are excited about these preliminary results, and remain encouraged about the promise this program holds for changing the life trajectories of at-risk youth both in Chicago and throughout the U.S.

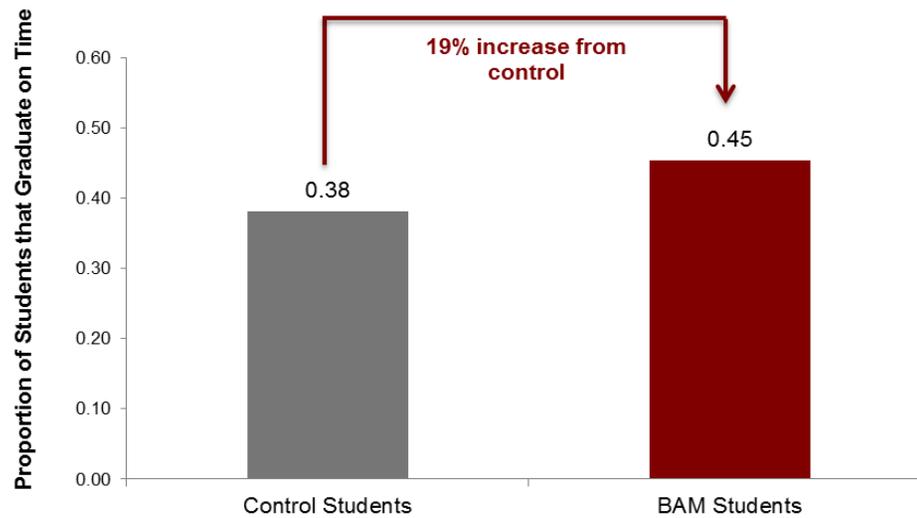
A paper presenting these results was published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in February 2017, and is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjw033>.

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Effect of BAM on On-Time Graduation Rates — Study 1



Note: Impacts are measured at the end of the program period for both studies.