



Working Together Toward Safer Communities: Reflections from **READI Chicago**

READI CHICAGO

A HEARTLAND ALLIANCE PROGRAM





Working Together Toward Safer Communities: Reflections from READI Chicago

This narrative document examines the launch and progress of READI Chicago over its first four years, and the ways lessons from this innovative response to urban violence are helping to inform violence prevention across the country. READI launched in 2017 in partnership with seven local community-based organizations: Centers for New Horizons, Cure Violence, Heartland Human Care Services, Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, Lawndale Christian Legal Center, North Lawndale Employment Network, and UCAN. By providing training and capacity building to long-standing community-based organizations with pre-existing community relationships and deep ties in their neighborhoods, READI has become a scalable model that can be replicated across the country to help build safer communities for all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTEXT: 4

PROGRAM MODEL: 6

**PARTICIPANTS, PARTNERS
& COMMUNITY:** 8

EVALUATION: 10

INSIGHTS: 12

LOOKING AHEAD: 13

“

READI cares a lot—they're always there if you need someone to talk to. I've never had an opportunity like this before.

—Jerimiah, Participant

”



READI Chicago is an innovative response to gun violence that works to decrease violence involvement, arrests, and recidivism among people at the highest risk of violence involvement. Chicago faced a sudden and unprecedented surge in gun violence in 2016—with more than 760 homicides and more than 4,000 shootings—spurring a concerted, citywide effort to curtail the crisis. Taking a public health approach to gun violence abatements is not the right word. Reduction, prevention, addressing gun violence, or just gun violence, a University of Chicago Crime Lab showed that 87% of shooting victims were men over age 18, while the majority of social services at the time was aimed at curtailing youth violence.

CONTEXT

Gun Violence in the U.S.

- **40 gun homicides** and **140 non-fatal gun injuries** per day in the U.S.
- Young Black men die from homicide at more than **20 times the rate** of their white counterparts
- Social cost of gun violence on order of **\$100 billion** per year, or **~90% of social cost of violence**

*As of 2019. Sources: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), and [American Public Health Association](#)

CONTEXT

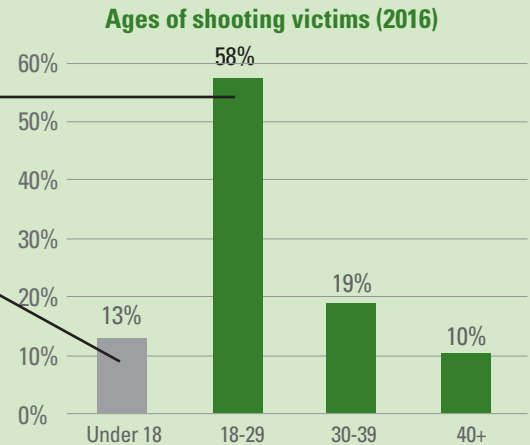
CONTEXT

Service Gap for the Majority of Shooting Victims

Many programs offered to youth

- Aftercare
- Becoming a Man (B.A.M.)
- Enlace Chicago
- Gang School Safety Team
- One Summer Chicago
- One Summer PLUS
- R.I.S.E.
- Street and School Intervention Program

But 87% of shooting victims 18+



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)

While there are very few rigorous studies about the most effective ways to reduce shootings and homicides, prior evidence suggests that combining cognitive behavioral interventions (CBI) with a paid job has the potential to reduce the risk of serious violence involvement. By offering a viable lifestyle alternative—like employment—along with the skill-building needed to de-escalate quick, automatic responses that can result in violence when there is a gun at hand.

Acting on these insights, Heartland Alliance launched the Rapid Employment and Development Initiative—READI Chicago—with guidance and support from the University of Chicago Crime Lab and Inclusive Economy Lab. The large-scale initiative provides intensive, innovative programming to adult men at the center of Chicago's violence epidemic, with support from the philanthropic sector and in partnership with community organizations already working to reduce violence.

READI relies on the commitment and expertise of community-based partners to deliver services and exemplify our values: **REAL TALK. REAL HOPE. REAL LOVE.**

- Centers for New Horizons
- Heartland Human Care Services
- Institute for Nonviolence Chicago
- North Lawndale Employment Network
- READI Englewood Outreach
- UCAN



PROGRAM MODEL

We create opportunities for safer outcomes and economic opportunity.

Through cognitive behavioral interventions, employment in paid transitional jobs, and support services, we work to help our participants stay safe, free from incarceration, and able to sustainably support themselves and their families. The 12-18-month initiative connects people most highly impacted by violence to evidence-based interventions intended to decrease violence involvement, arrests, and recidivism among adult men facing high rates of arrests and victimizations.

Outreach:

848 participants connected to programming by outreach

READI Chicago relies on the expertise of community-based practitioners and partners in the criminal justice system to identify participants. In addition, READI Chicago uses predictive analytics, in the form of the Service Provision Risk Assessment, to identify and subsequently connect individuals with outreach workers.

PROGRAM MODEL

Cognitive Behavioral Interventions:

200 hours of CBI per participant

READI Chicago infuses the principles of cognitive behavioral interventions throughout the program. Research has shown that gun violence is often the result of split-second decisions. CBT is designed to help individuals slow down their thinking and respond less automatically in stressful situations.

Paid Transitional Employment:

\$9.9 million paid to participants in wages & stipends

READI Chicago provides participants with a viable opportunity to make real change in their lives, in part by connecting them to

paid transitional employment. In addition to keeping participants safer, engaging people in paid work experience builds skills while promoting sustained economic opportunity.

Skill-Building & Support Services:

12 hours per week of professional development, plus skills-based workshops & training opportunities

READI Chicago outreach workers, coaches and work crew staff work with participants on career planning, training, and connection to other supports to help set them up for optimal and sustained success in work and in life.

Phased Program Pathway



Phase 1: Safety

A focus on front-loading CBI and skills-based workforce development helps participants build a foundation of attitudes and behaviors that promote safety throughout their engagement with the program.



Phase 2: Exploration

Through crew work, individual work assignments, and training and certification programs, participants have the opportunity to practice work skills while exploring various employment sectors.



Phase 3: Transition

As participants transition into unsubsidized employment, they work with staff to outline long-term goals and immediate action steps. Staff work closely with participants in their final months to ensure a smooth transition to unsubsidized employment.



Who We Serve:

The men READI Chicago serves come from communities that have faced decades of disinvestment and generational trauma. Since launch, READI has focused its partnership with community-based organizations that have longstanding relationships and service provision in five communities highly impacted by violence. The men READI works with are 45 times more likely to be shot or killed than the average Chicagoan, and twice as likely with men in their same neighborhood and age group.

In order to promote safer communities, READI Chicago works with our participants to address complex trauma stemming from violence, loss, incarceration, and other barriers. Despite high levels of trauma and disconnection, READI participants also

embody a critical resilience and focus on building a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities.

READI Partnerships

Community-Based Partner Organizations

READI Chicago programming is possible through a citywide collaboration of community-based partner organizations, that leverage their expertise and community relationships to provide outreach, mental health, and transitional jobs services. Our partners, who provide services in Austin, Englewood, North Lawndale, West Englewood, and West Garfield Park, include: Centers for New Horizons, Heartland Human Care Services, Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, North Lawndale Employment Network, READI Englewood Outreach, and UCAN.

PARTICIPANTS



95%

African-American



80%

Have been a victim of violence



96%

Have been arrested



61%

Have children

85%

Ages 18-32

83%

Have lost a family member to violence

64%

Have served time in prison

70%

Aspire to obtain post-high school education

Source: READI initial needs assessment, University of Chicago Crime Labs

PARTICIPANTS

Research Partners

The University of Chicago Crime Lab and Inclusive Economy Lab are rigorously evaluating READI Chicago to assess its effectiveness and impact on participants' violence involvement. In addition, Heartland Alliance's Social IMPACT Research Center is leading a formative evaluation of READI to support program implementation and continuous quality improvement. Lessons learned from READI Chicago through our research partners are helping to inform violence reduction efforts in Chicago and across the country.

Employer Partners

READI Chicago's subsidized employment enables participants to practice social and emotional skills, build job-readiness and career skills, and earn a wage. READI partners with employers in sectors ranging from community beautification

and urban agriculture to manufacturing and customer service. We work with our employer partners to understand who they will be working with and what supports they might need, and READI pays participants' wages while they receive career training and job support on their work-sites.

Community Impact

READI Chicago works with individuals and families to improve outcomes through access to mental health supports and economic opportunity. The money participants earn through their engagement in programming helps improve their own quality of life, while also contributing to the local community economy. Connection to meaningful work experience helps prepare individuals for unsubsidized employment and furthering their education while allowing participants to make a positive impact on their communities and city.

PARTICIPANTS

By The Numbers

September 2017 Launch To June 30, 2021:

- **848 participants** have been connected to READI programming
- **345,450 wage hours** worked by participants
- **4,501 training days** attended by participants
- **\$9.9 million paid to participants** in wages and stipends



“

“I’m living a whole different lifestyle now. I’ve learned a lot about coping and looking inside myself.”

—Jawanza, Participant

”



Preliminary research on the READI Program from the University of Chicago Crime Lab shows that READI works with the men most at risk for gun violence involvement, they stay engaged in the program and they have 79% fewer arrests for shootings and homicides compared with a randomized control group.

Researchers from the University of Chicago, University of Michigan, and Cornell University are evaluating READI Chicago's impact on participants' gun violence through a randomized controlled trial (RCT).

The research team is using administrative data to answer the following question: Does READI Chicago reduce participants' involvement in serious violence? This impact evaluation is supplemented by qualitative fieldwork to understand READI Chicago's impact on participants' lives, as well as their broader needs and experiences.

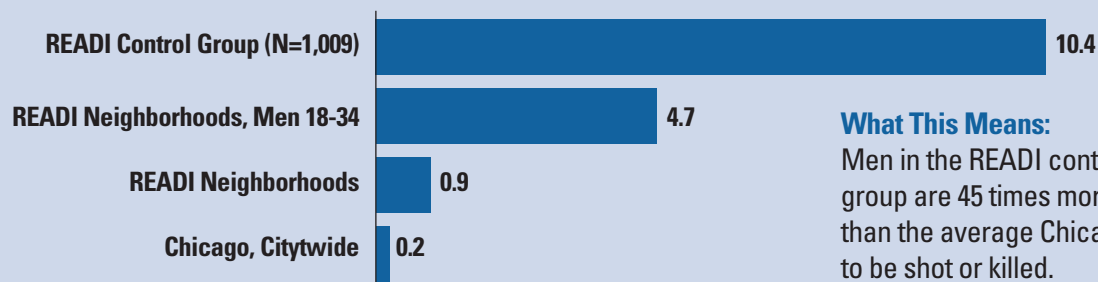
While the study is still in progress, the research team has conducted a preliminary analysis on 82% of the full study population—a total of 2,014 men for whom we can measure outcomes over a pre-specified follow-up period of 20 months. Since this is a partial sample, the following research results are still preliminary and subject to change.

The study measures violence by counting the number of times men are arrested for shootings and homicides, are arrested for other types of serious violent offenses, and are victims of shootings or homicides. The findings to date:

- READI finds the men most at risk for gun violence involvement: Of the men referred to READI, 35% had previously been shot; 98% had been arrested at least once, with an average of 17 arrests; and most lost contact with the education system by grade 10. And during the study, men in the control group (who face the same risk of gun violence but

EVALUATION

Shooting and Homicide Victimization Per 100 People Over 20 Months



What This Means:

Men in the READI control group are 45 times more likely than the average Chicagoan to be shot or killed.

EVALUATION

do not receive READI's services) were shot and killed 45 times more than the average Chicagoan, 11 times more than people in the same neighborhood, and 2.5 times more than other young men in the same neighborhood.

- READI participants stay engaged: Despite facing considerable barriers to participating, more than half of men offered READI do so, and they are highly engaged. READI participants worked 75% of the weeks available to them during in-person programming.

- READI may reduce shootings and homicides: Men who participated in READI—defined as showing up for at least one day—have 79% fewer arrests for shootings and homicides, a large and statistically significant difference. There is, however, no clear or precise change in a combined measure of serious violence, because neither victimization nor other types of serious violent crime arrests show significant changes. As the study is still underway, final results are not yet available, and these preliminary estimates will change.

These results suggest that READI may reduce involvement in lethal violence, particularly for men referred to the program by community outreach partners, and that this effect is likely driven by large and significant reductions in arrests for the most serious forms of violence, such as homicide. The research team plans to measure READI's effect on participants through July 2023, when the last participant completes a follow-up period of 40 months. The research team will continue to update the public on results on a biannual basis until a final report is released by 2024.

Our Difference

Key to understanding READI's impact is the randomized control group: men facing the same high risk of gun violence who were not offered READI but could access all other services. Without the control group, we could misattribute to READI all the other things changing in these men's lives.

For example, we know that even without READI the control group were victims of shootings and homicides 45% less often in the 20 months after referral than in the 20 months beforehand. If we did not know this and saw the same decline in victimization among READI participants, we could incorrectly attribute the decline to READI and overstate its impact. By letting us measure what would have happened without READI, a randomized control group lets us isolate the effect of READI itself.

READI is one of the few community gun violence interventions to date to use a randomized control group to measure its impact.

EVALUATION





INSIGHTS

In addition to the rigorous RCT evaluation, READI Chicago is partnering with Heartland Alliance's Social IMPACT Research Center to collect and support the use of data to help inform program decisions and understand how to address the barriers such as housing instability, legal system involvement, and obstacles to employment our participants face. Because the men READI Chicago engages have been historically disengaged from traditional social services, not much is known about those at the highest risk of violence involvement and how to serve them effectively. Access to real-time data

allows for information sharing among partners and rapid program improvement, and contributes to our understanding of violence prevention work. In collaboration with the IMPACT Research Center, READI provides ongoing technical assistance related to program data analysis to support program implementation and continuous quality improvement. Lessons learned from READI Chicago are helping to inform violence reduction efforts in Chicago and across the country, as well as other strategies to meet the complex needs of individuals who are at extreme risk of gun violence.

INSIGHTS

Health and Healing:

- Participants most often selected food as an urgent need (29%)
- Among health care needs, participants most needed support with dental care (59%)

Safety and Justice:

- Among legal needs, participants most needed support around criminal records (55%)
- More than 60% of participants face housing instability
- About 33% of participants were on parole when they joined READI
- 19% of participants entered READI with a pending felony case

Economic Opportunity:

- Participants' goals for education largely include getting their GED (73%) and attending trade school (72%)
- 61% of participants have children



LOOKING AHEAD

READI Chicago is the most ambitious effort to date to study an intensive social service effort aimed at engaging adult men who are at the highest risk for gun violence involvement. The rigorous evaluation design will provide causal evidence – the first of its kind – on whether or not this program can keep men safe from gun violence. In this way, READI Chicago has paved the way to demonstrate the power of using data to identify men at the highest risk for violence involvement, and proactively engage them in an intensive set of services that are designed to reduce their likelihood of violence involvement. Early indications are encouraging, indicating that READI reduces shootings and homicides; even while we recognize that there are a number of structural and systemic barriers to safety and opportunity in communities that are hardest hit by gun violence. READI Chicago's combination of evidence-based program components and innovative design has already yielded some valuable lessons: notably, that it is possible to identify and successfully engage very high-risk individuals who are not seeking services by appealing to their need for economic stability and their desire to work.

Several other features of READI Chicago offer valuable insights that can help inform other efforts and/or warrant further implementation and study:

Workforce Development:

READI Chicago has been an innovator in applying trauma-informed principles in employment services, educating employer partners about the impacts of trauma in the workplace, taking a harm reduction approach to substance use in workforce programming, and adopting very low-barrier “zero exclusion” policies in access to services. This has allowed READI to meet critical economic needs in communities impacted by violence, while establishing employment as a valuable component in violence prevention activities.

Violence Prevention:

READI Chicago's innovative program design has strengthened the efficacy of street outreach work by connecting traditional engagement strategies with the offer of immediate income and access to enhanced support services delivered through structured weekly programming, available for up to 12- 18 months. In addition, READI's approach to assessing risk and using data to focus services on very high-risk individuals has helped to illuminate the need for training, coaching and supports for community providers in order to meaningfully and effectively reach those most in need of connection.

LOOKING AHEAD

Mental Health Services and Behavior Change:

The practice of engaging program candidates through rapid attachment to economic supports has allowed READI Chicago to connect very high-risk individuals—who otherwise would not be willing to engage—to mental health services, ensuring that those individuals in greatest need of trauma-informed support for behavior change have access to effective, evidence-based services. In addition to high levels of trauma, participants must also grapple with a lack of accessible mental health supports in their neighborhoods. READI is attempting to rectify this by working with community-based organizations to increase training and capacity to deliver mental health supports.

Re-entry:

READI Chicago participants face high levels of justice system involvement: 96% have been arrested, and 64% have served time in prison. Through work with participants referred through the criminal justice system, READI Chicago has identified and is working to close a gap in services and supports prior to release. To that end, READI is expanding pre-release engagement in Cook County Jail and the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, and creating new ones in the Illinois Department of Corrections, so that individuals can benefit from exposure to cognitive behavioral tools, referrals to critical support services, and a relationship to program staff who will engage them in programming as soon as they are released and able to return home.

Technical Assistance and Building Capacity:

Since launch, READI Chicago has prioritized technical assistance and capacity strengthening strategies at the individual and community level. We have developed a practice-rich training, technical assistance and coaching model that provides the

types of supports needed to realize lasting performance improvements. READI has also standardized and supported the implementation of policies and procedures, as well as data sharing, to achieve stronger performance outcomes. Access to real-time data dashboards allows continuous and immediate program evaluation and improvement.

National Implications:

READI Chicago is contributing to the national landscape of violence prevention and policy through the National Coalition for Gun Violence Interventions. The group convenes partners and experts to inform national policy priorities related to community safety, re-entry, and police reform. More than 28 organizations nationally meet monthly, representing Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Madison, Seattle, Detroit, LA, New York, South Carolina, Texas, and Florida, among others.

Now entering its fifth year, READI Chicago continues to innovate and build its evidence base. It is clear that many other communities across the nation that are experiencing increased community violence can benefit from READI Chicago's lessons and experiences. Reducing gun violence will require policy change as well as fielding building within the social service sector—particularly to secure adequate funding to provide an intensive intervention like READI Chicago to every individual at significant risk of violence, and to address the structural inequities that are the root cause of community violence. We envision a future in which interventions like READI Chicago are available in cities across the country, and every person at high risk of engaging in or being a victim of gun violence has access to the cognitive tools and economic stability needed to live a safer, more prosperous life.

“

I can tell that what I'm doing right now is changing me. I can feel it every day when I wake up—I'm different, and my mind is different.

—Marcus, Participant

”



A photograph of two men in a workshop setting. The man in the foreground is wearing a red shirt, a safety harness, and safety glasses, looking down at a workbench. The man in the background is wearing a blue shirt and safety glasses, also looking down. The background is slightly blurred, showing industrial equipment and lights.

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