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Through a Child’s Eyes:
Gun Violence Among Youth in Chicago

By Melissa Anderson

According to the Chicago Tribune’s RedEye Homicide Tracker, Chicago saw 41 homicides in the first two months of 2014, 37 of which were caused by shootings. Recently, this author had the opportunity to survey ninth through twelfth grade students of Gage Park High School on their recent experiences with gun violence in Chicago. Located on the southwest side of the City, Gage Park High is surrounded by some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. The area is also very diverse. Of the 1288 students that attend this public high school, ninety-nine percent are minority students, forty-eight percent black and fifty-one percent Hispanic, and ninety-two percent are economically disadvantaged. This last figure is determined by each student’s eligibility for free or reduced-priced lunches. The students’ insightful responses to the survey provide a look into what it is like to be a young person growing up in violent pockets of Chicago.

The majority of students surveyed agreed that gun violence was a problem among youth in Chicago Public Schools. The students felt that gun violence took the lives of hundreds of innocent people a year with a special emphasis on younger children. The students recognized that a large number of young people “lose their childhood” to gun violence, no matter if they are the one shooting or the one being shot at.

Students were asked what they believed to be the root causes and effects of gun violence. When considering the causes of gun ownership, one student commented, “teenagers these days are trying to get guns from anywhere they can just to look cool among their friends.” Other students suggested that gun ownership was essential in order to feel safe in their often unsafe neighborhoods.

When questioned about the effects of gun violence on youth, students described several consequences. First, students agreed that young people involved in gun violence were more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. For example, one student commented that young people “use drugs to shield themselves from the violence.” Additionally, students speculated that exposure to gun violence may lead to a higher probability of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. One student projected that this may be attributed to the fact that gun violence causes young people to be increasingly “aware of the danger present in their environment and how soon their life could end.”

Students were further asked to address the emotional effects of losing a friend or family member to gun violence. Students indicated that “they were likely to carry guilt and go through depression” as a result of the loss, ultimately causing them to miss school and receive poor grades. One young woman who reported losing family members to gun violence expressed the pain that it had caused in her life, stating, “everyday is a challenge to continue.” Each of these effects indicates that gun violence not only afflicts those directly involved, but also indirectly affects the community at large by creating a generation of young people with severe dependency and mental health issues.
The survey further requested students to discuss their personal experiences with gun violence; their responses were insightful. One young man reflected, “I was just walking home when some teens decided to pull out a gun and start shooting on my block. I panicked and started running. While I was able to make it home untouched it made me think about how fast my life could be gone.” That same student shared his second experience with gun violence stating that it was not as frightening since at that point he had “become used to it, because gun shots were typical to be heard in the night.” The idea of a youth being desensitized to violence reflects its prevalence in the community and the sense of hopelessness many of these children face.

While some students found their experience with gun violence did not affect them, others felt that it had prevented them from feeling safe. They felt that “anyone anywhere might want to hurt them.” This made it hard to trust people and they were forced to constantly “watch [their] back.” One student blamed her experience with gun violence for causing her to be “terrified of guns.” As a result of their constant fear of danger, students speculated that young people may “turn to gang involvement” in order to feel safe from gun violence. This demonstrates that young people in violent areas may not see gangs as a source of violence but instead as a place of refuge where they are protected against outside threats.

When asked about the legal consequences of gun violence, students were able to identify both punitive and rehabilitative solutions. The majority of students agreed that those who engage in gun violence should be put in jail. Students recognized that while jail time does not address the problem directly, it is important inasmuch as it “support’s society’s need for safety.” These students suggested that incarceration serves not only to take violent offenders off the streets, but it also serves the dual purpose of forcing the individual to “think about what they did” and help them “learn from their mistakes.” The students thought that programs offered inside jail should be corrective and focus on determining “why the individual decided to shoot people” and on “how we can make that person better” in order to prevent future violence.

Students conceded that while incarceration was an appropriate response, it might not fully correct the problem since many people “come out [of jail] and do the same things.” Therefore, students suggested more rehabilitative solutions that could be used in addition to imprisonment. These solutions would serve the interests of both the violent individual and the victim’s family. For example, students thought that the offender should have to apologize to the victim or his or her family. This outward display of remorse would help the family to cope with the loss of their loved one. Additionally, students suggested that offenders be required to do community service. They acknowledged that requiring individuals to work off their debt to society not only saves the community from the huge expense of incarceration, but it also instills a sense of responsibility on the offender.

While the problem of youth violence is often addressed after-the-fact, preventative measures may be more successful at lowering the risk of involvement in violence. Students reflected on programs currently in effect that lower rates of gun violence among youth. In general, they pointed to various after school and summer programs, which keep students safe while not in school. Namely, the class credited
programs like Becoming a Man and CeaseFire with reducing violent behavior among youth.

Students identified the Becoming a Man program as one that addressed dropout rates and violence prevention for at-risk male students in grades seven through twelve, offering both in-school programming and after-school sports. CeaseFire, another anti-violence program, is the local branch of the national initiative Cure Violence and sends former gang members into targeted neighborhoods to defuse conflicts before they erupt into violence.

In addition, students cite the not-for-profit organization After School Matters (ASM) as yet another solution for lowering violence. ASM offers Chicago high-school students activities in the areas of art, science, sports, technology, and communications. One student found that ASM helped reduce violence by “engag[ing] students in fun activities to pass the time.”

While such extra-curricular programs help lower violence in Chicago communities, students recognize that there is only so much these programs can do. One student noted that while after-school activities can keep people busy for a while, there is still plenty of time for violent activities.

When asked how their school could help lower violence rates, students suggested implementing open gyms after school and adding more after-school sport programs to help get out aggression. In addition, they thought that increased parental involvement was important in lowering the risk of violence. They surmised that if the school implemented a program to educate parents about gun violence then parents would be better equipped to keep their children out of harm’s way.

While extracurricular programs may assist to reduce gun violence after school, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have already taken measures to keep students safe during the school day. For example, CPS has launched the Safe Passage Program to increase children’s safety as they come and go from school each day. As a part of this program, CPS has adult volunteers who monitor the paths that many students take to school. In addition to Safe Passage, schools are equipped with entryway metal detectors and security guards. As a result of these measures, students reported feeling safer in school, despite the staggering level of violence in the surrounding community.

When asked about whether or not they felt that gun violence contributed to high drop out rates, the students overwhelmingly said no. Between 1999 and 2011, thirty-eight percent of CPS students dropped out without graduating. Students credited other factors for the high drop out rates such as familial responsibilities. For example, many students have to provide childcare for younger siblings or are pressured to get a full-time job to help provide financially for their families. One student explained that even though many parents work two jobs, it typically was still not enough, so the pressure would be placed on students to drop out and help support their families.

Along with familial responsibilities, students believed that the local culture was to blame for the high dropout rates. “When you look around at the people who surround our blocks and neighborhoods, it’s usually drug dealers and people smoking blunts, which really [takes] a toll on the mindset of the urban youth.” This same student went on to explain, “When most of the kids on your block don’t graduate you think, how could I?
You begin to develop the same mindset where an education comes second and money is above everything.” Another student thought that dropout rates while not an effect of gun violence, was a cause of it and argued that after students drop out they have nothing else to do so they start “gang banging and selling drugs,” which in turn leads to gun violence.

While gun violence is a problem among Chicago youth, there is hope. In 2013, violent crime in the City was at a nearly 30-year low. However, given that half of Chicago’s murder victims are between the ages of ten and twenty-five, much must be done to specifically target and reduce violence occurring among school-aged children.

Sources:
Opposing Viewpoints:
Criminal Statutes of Limitations in Childhood Sexual Abuse Cases

By Victoria Carmona Fehr

The statute of limitations for childhood sexual abuse allegations prescribes a set length of time in which criminal charges can be brought against a defendant. This time frame may begin to run following the commission of the crime or when the crime was discovered, depending on the jurisdiction. Much controversy surrounds whether or not there should be limitations to the length of time within which charges can be brought and what the extent of such limitations should be. Nationally, there is still no consensus as to the ideal limitation period or applicable exceptions. At issue is the relative importance of a defendant's right to be free from stale claims, juxtaposed with the victim's right to seek redress.

In comparison to many other states’ criminal statutes, Illinois favors fewer restrictions with regard to the statute of limitations for child sex abuse. In 1986, Illinois extended the statute of limitations for child victims of sex crimes to one year after attaining the age of majority, eighteen; meaning, a case could be charged at any time before the victim turned nineteen, even if the abuse occurred years before.

Originally, this change first extended only to cases in which the victim and offender were family members, but the statute was soon modified to include all child victims, regardless of whether or not there was a familial relationship. The statute was further clarified to include that when the victim is a minor, the statute of limitations would not expire sooner than three years after the commission of the offense.

In 2000, this one-year limitations period was changed to ten years, extending cases of criminal sexual assault, aggravated criminal sexual assault, predatory criminal sexual assault of a child, or aggravated criminal sexual abuse until the victim’s 28th birthday. In 2002 an additional reporting requirement was removed, which had been required if the victim was not a family member. The law was changed in 2003 yet again, and this time it extended the limitation to twenty years, allowing for prosecution to occur up until the victim turns thirty-eight years old.

In Favor of No or Few Limitations

For statute of limitations purposes with regard to child sexual abuse in Illinois and some jurisdictions, the period in which prosecution must occur is measured from the time the crime is committed, not when it is discovered. Other jurisdictions follow a different type of statute, where “[u]nder the continuing crime theory the statute of limitations does not begin to run until every element of the crime is completed.” Several jurisdictions have applied the discovery rule to the prosecutions of child sexual abuse cases on the basis that there exists “a breach of fiduciary obligation between the victim and accused.” Under the theory of the discovery rule, the limitation period does not begin to run until the plaintiff discovered or in the exercise of diligence should have discovered all of the facts essential to the cause of action.
However, the discovery rule “should be adopted only when the risk of stale claims is outweighed by the unfairness of precluding justified causes of action.” Some states, including Alabama, Kentucky, and Rhode Island have no statute of limitations with concern to felonious child sexual abuse offenses—prosecution may thus be brought at any time. Other states are still silent on the issue, implying that prosecution may commence at any time. The underlying rationale for not providing a limitation to prosecution for certain crimes is that the interest of the state in prosecuting those crimes outweighs the benefits derived from the implementation of a limitation period.

Part of the reasoning for extending or eliminating the statute of limitations is that victims may be too young at the time of the abuse to report it, and often do not report the abuse until after a statute has run out. Proponents of eliminating the statute of limitations include many victims and their families, victim’s rights groups, and some prosecutors. In general, the trend of the legislature has also been in favor of eliminating limitations or extending the time frame for reporting, in large part due to societal upset in response to high-profile cases of abuse.

The trauma of sexual abuse may also leave victims suppressing their memory, where the statute of limitations “may have lapsed by the time the abuse comes to light.” Those against imposing limitations often cite medical studies on memory loss, a common feature to psychological trauma, which may prevent a victim from remembering the abuse until later in life - thus preventing more timely legal action from taking place. As a result, victims can be left without a remedy, and without a sense of justice.

Courts have recognized a State's interest in “safeguarding the physical and psychological well-being of a minor” as a compelling interest. In addition, “the high rate of recidivism among child abusers further enhances the position that there should be no statute of limitations for this offense.” Some jurisdictions, such as Minnesota, have begun to implement the delayed discovery rule. This rule of law suspends the statute of limitations for a child sex abuse cause of action until the time when the victim recognizes that the abuse caused his or her injuries.

In Favor of Limitations

The opportunity for legal redress varies in direct proportion to the length and accrual date of the limitations period. Statutes of limitations safeguard the accused against stale claims by discouraging victims from sleeping on their rights. Statutes of limitations are imposed in both civil and criminal actions to assist the courts in their pursuit of the truth by barring stale claims and to protect potential defendants from the protracted fear of litigation. Proponents of such limitations include many judges, defense attorneys, and legislators. Some prosecutors may be in favor of limitations, especially in cases where a significant time lapse between the alleged crime and the charges has eroded the availability and reliability of evidence. Defense attorneys favor limitations for similar reasons, where those accused are likely unable to mount a substantive defense when time has substantially limited the availability of evidence.

In defining the parameters of limitations, jurisdictions should take into consideration several factors, including: 1) questioning whether relevant evidence will become stale, lost, or destroyed; 2) recognizing the need for judicial economy; 3) addressing “the possibility of continuing ‘blackmail’ by potential plaintiffs”; 4)
determining whether there will be an unfairness to potential defendants who may be required to defend themselves long after the alleged act; and 5) acknowledging the need for “self-reformation by potential defendants.”

In the context of child sexual abuse the state is powerless to prosecute the offender until the state is informed of the offense. The statute of limitations serves in large part to limit the circumstances under which guilt can be found and is intended to preserve the accuracy and basic integrity of the adjudicatory process in criminal proceedings. The statute of limitations serves as a buffer, preventing the expenditure of judicial resources where logically, evidentiary items such as testimony and documents, have disappeared, grown stale, or been destroyed and can no longer perform the necessary evidentiary function.

Those accused of a crime hold vested rights as part of our judicial system. This analysis of “substantive vested rights” is important to understanding the time-barred approach with concern to statutory limitations to prosecution. For example, in Alaska, the Court of Appeals held that a criminal statute of limitations vests a substantive right in the defendant and that statute of limitations were procedural and could not be extended.

When jurisdictions do change existing statutes of limitations, this frequently creates an agonizing dilemma for the judiciary in applying the revised limitations period, especially where the legislature fails to expressly dictate its intentions as to the revised statute's application. Even with changes to the statute of limitations, offenses whose prosecution was time-barred at the time of the law's enactment are unconstitutional ex post facto. The legislation may run afoul of constitutional ex post facto prohibitions when applied in accordance with legislative dictates.

**Conclusion**

The range in the length of the statutory limitation periods illustrates the different mode of evaluation of the individual factors utilized by various state legislatures. Some states have rationalized the statute of limitations based on the type of offense, with a longer limitation period for a more serious offense and a shorter limitation period for a lesser offense. In either case, limitations on prosecutions must strike an even balance between the respective rights of the alleged victim and the accused in child sexual assault cases. Although most victims, their families, and law enforcement argue for no limitations, proponents for each argument both in favor and against may be part of the legislature, attorneys, and judges who remain split on balancing the victim’s rights with a fair justice system.

Despite what any viewpoint on the limitations and time restraints of prosecuting child sexual abuse may offer, all can agree that such abuse hurts our children and our society. A balance must be found to assist victims of abuse, as well as ensure a fair system of justice. If we could prevent the abuse of children, we would have no need for a discussion on such limitations.

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Interview With:
Frank Perez, National Director of Cure Violence

By Maureen Mullen

Mr. Frank Perez serves as the National Program Director for Cure Violence, an anti-violence program that reduces gun crime. Formerly known as CeaseFire Inc., Cure Violence approaches street violence with a unique strategy, employing community outreach workers and violence interrupters from the most dangerous areas of a city to intercede in potentially-violent situations and counsel at-risk individuals. This “boots on the ground” strategy is a method associated with disease control and it is Cure Violence’s position that, similar to an infectious disease, gun violence is a public health issue that can be reduced by changing behavioral norms using disease control methods. A 2009 case study by Northwestern University found that neighborhoods with a Cure Violence presence experienced a reduction in shootings by as much as forty percent.

Q: What is Cure Violence and its mission?

Dr. Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist, founded our organization after having spent many years of his life fighting health epidemics in Africa. Upon returning to the United States, Dr. Slutkin looked at violence in our country through a different lens, believing that violence should be treated just as we would any other disease in any part of the world, because violence mimics a disease. It is within certain areas, has certain hotspots, and is passed on from one person to another. There is certain high-risk behavior that makes a person more prone to violence, just as certain high-risk behavior makes a person more prone to contracting a disease. The Cure Violence model approaches violence as if it is a disease.

Our mission is simple: to stop the shootings and the killings, period. Our pilot program took place in 2000 in the West Garfield Park neighborhood, where it achieved a sixty-seven percent drop in shootings and killings that year. Since then, Cure Violence has expanded and is presently active in eighteen Chicago communities, an additional seven communities in the state of Illinois, fifteen United States cities, and has international partners in countries across the globe.

Q: How does the model work?

The model is strictly aimed at reducing shootings and killings by targeting a narrow population of people who are causing most of the violence in these troubled areas. There are five main components to our model:

1) Boots on the Ground

We have outreach workers and violence interrupters who live in and are from these communities. They have a vested interest in their community and they want things to change. Outreach workers work with at-risk individuals over long-term periods supporting them as mentors and counselors. Also involved in the community are violence interrupters who work as mediators and are trained in conflict mediation techniques so that they can intercede before a situation becomes violent.

2) Community Mobilization
We are trying to change community attitudes around violence such that communities refuse to accept violence as the norm. It is good, old-fashioned community organizing. If enough people in a community speak out and challenge the violent norms of their neighborhood, a new normal can be possible. That new normal is simple: violence is not a normal way to live. We achieve this group of voices demanding a new normal through the third component of our program, public education.

3) Public Education

Public education works. Our public education campaign bombards the community with positive messages that violence is not normal. Through public service announcements, billboards, bumper stickers, and t-shirts, we spread the message that violence is not an acceptable way to live. Our message to folks is that they do not have to accept fear and violence as normal in their community.

Cure Violence also has a partnership with local hospitals. In Chicago, there are Cure Violence workers who are notified when gunshot victims arrive at local emergency rooms. At the hospital, we talk to victims and their families, and we encourage them not to retaliate once they have recuperated and are discharged from the hospital. Innocent people do get shot, certainly, but the bulk of the people arriving at trauma units with gunshot wounds are usually involved in some type of high-risk behavior. Because many gunshot victims are perpetrators of violence after they leave the hospital, they are an ideal population for Cure Violence to target with our anti-violence message.

4) Faith Community

In many of the neighborhoods where we work, one of the last institutions left are the churches. We need to organize those churches so that they too are helping to fight violence and help change the community mentality. If every church could adopt one high-risk individual and provide them with a part-time job, or even provide emotional support, we think that may make a big difference.

5) Law Enforcement

We are not an extension of law enforcement. We do not share information with law enforcement but it is instrumental to our model because they give us basic background information about certain neighborhoods, such as where the hotspots are, what the violence is traditionally related to, the perimeters of a neighborhood, etc. We use this information properly determine where to invest our resources.

Q: How does violence impact a community?

Violence is a devastating problem. It affects everything else in a community. Businesses flee from high-crime neighborhoods, taking jobs with them. Education suffers. Violence impacts school attendance and academic performance. Children cannot concentrate on schoolwork or sometimes cannot even attend because they are afraid of traveling to and from school. It affects health issues for adults and children. I talk to health departments all the time about violence, because many parents who live in areas with frequent gun crime, do not let their children outside to run and play for fear that they might get shot. Kids who grow up in those areas are not exercising like they should. The stress of living in a violent neighborhood likely has an impact on adults as well. Many of these communities are disproportionately affected with high blood
pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol problems. So it is clear that violence goes hand-in-hand with public health challenges.

**Q: Tell me about Cure Violence’s normative and behavioral work?**

Unfortunately, violence has become accepted as normal in many of these communities. People grow up around it, and in some areas their parents and grandparents grew up around it. It is what they know as normal. But Cure Violence works to change that. We teach people that violence is not a normal way to live. Deeply impoverished communities abound across the globe, and in many of them, folks simply are not killing each other the way Americans are.

**Q: Violence is an incredibly complex issue. Why should a solution start by targeting violence rather than underlying causes such as poverty and marginalization?**

There are many underlying socio-economic and psychological reasons why a person may turn to violence. And of course, our campaign is just one part of the larger effort to reduce violence. So many institutions do a variety of great work in these communities and we need them to keep it up. We work in concert with social services, non-profits, and law enforcement to improve safety in a community.

In a way, this is a “which came first, the chicken or the egg” type of dilemma. If we can reduce shootings and killings, so many aspects of a community have the chance to improve. Businesses are not going to come back to an area that is being devastated by violence. We have to do something about the violence. We have to deal with a person’s violent behavior before we can help them in other areas of their life.

Sometimes people ask us why we do not focus on preventing younger children from becoming violent, and why we focus instead on those children and adults who are already violent. Many folks think that they are a lost cause. The fact of the matter is, that many younger children who are not yet violent are looking up to these older individuals. We have all heard the phrase “children see, children do.” We need to change what children are seeing. If we can change those current violent individuals, we believe this change will stop a cycle of violence. We believe the next generation will have a better chance for a constructive life if we can change the present generation.

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Interview with Frank Perez, National Director, Cure Violence, in Chicago, Ill. (Mar. 3, 2014).

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Spotlight On: 
Parents for Megan’s Law

By Elizabeth Nunez

According to Parents for Megan’s Law, “one in three girls and one in six boys” under the age of eighteen is sexually abused. Parents for Megan’s Law is a not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to fighting this frightening statistic that shows the prevalence of child sexual abuse in today’s society. Laura Ahearn, a certified social worker, created the organization because she was frustrated by the tremendous difficulty she underwent when attempting to get information about Megan’s Law. The organization is based in New York and is committed to informing victims of their rights and helping victims obtain compensation for the criminal wrongdoings that they have suffered. One of the ways that Parents for Megan’s Law carries out its mission is by working to prevent and treat victims of child sexual abuse and rape.

Parents for Megan’s Law runs several local and national programs to meet its goals. At the local level in New York, the organization provides counseling through a twenty-four-hour hotline for victims of sexual abuse and refers callers to local law enforcement when necessary.

The organization also helps victims in Suffolk County recuperate compensation for expenses or losses caused by violent crimes such as robbery, assault, domestic violence, kidnapping and sexual assault through the Suffolk County Crime Victims Center. According to Ahearn, who serves as the executive director of Parents for Megan’s Law, the majority of victims are not even aware of this right. Ahearn states, “most people don’t know that if you are a victim of a violent crime, you are entitled to services and crime victim compensation.” The center in Suffolk County also helps victims file claims for compensation in New York to recuperate for property damages, injuries, and death.

The organization is also committed to victim advocacy through supporting local New York victims of sexual abuse and violent crimes with members of the organization accompanying victims to courtrooms and medical appointments for support. The organization operates a community support program through its Megan’s Law Helpline, which provides the public with information about registered sex offenders in their neighborhood.

In addition, Parents for Megan’s Law is dedicated to educating local communities about sexual abuse prevention. For example, staff from the organization visit elementary and high schools in the area and teach about child and teen sexual abuse and rape prevention. Members of the organization also engage in educating other programs and businesses about adult sexual abuse prevention. Furthermore, Parents for Megan’s Law provides instruction to government agencies on the appropriate uses of sex offender registries.

Currently, Parents for Megan’s Law offers members of the community in both Suffolk County and Nassau County the chance to report complaints about sex offender registration violations. The organization sends complaints to local law enforcement
officials, who have been very successful in handling issues when they arise. For example, one anonymous tip led to the arrest of a registered sex offender who was in contact with children in violation of his probation. After an investigation, the individual was sentenced to four years in prison.

Parents for Megan’s Law’s most recent work in the New York community is commendable: Nassau County recently hired Parents for Megan’s Law as a private consultant to assist with monitoring registered sex offenders, “including tracking their posts on social media and creating a smartphone app that the public can use to report potential violations such as new allegations of abuse.” This is not the first time Parents for Megan’s Law has teamed up with a New York county. In fact, the Suffolk County Crime Victims Center is one of the organization’s programs that offers victims of violent crimes information and referrals for help and support.

On the national level, Parents for Megan’s Law is committed to helping victims of sexual abuse and other violent crimes. The organization conducts national surveys of law enforcement officials in every state that maintains a sex offender registry. Through these surveys, Parents for Megan’s Law evaluates the application and enforcement of notification laws and sex offender registries throughout the country. The organization’s child pornography and child sex tourism reporting center accepts and transfers all anonymous reports of child pornography and trafficking websites to police agencies in order to effectively address the problem. Parents for Megan’s Law has also helped create uniformity in sex predator offender registration and notification laws in every state by lobbying through its policy and legislative support program. The organization’s surveys have even been used by the United States Justice Department. In addition, Parents for Megan’s Law operates a national Megan’s Law helpline that helps victims get referrals for services and law enforcement and also helps keep the community informed about sex offender registries by answering questions. Additionally, members of the public can register online for the organization’s newsletter that it publishes through its website to educate the public about preventing sexual abuse.

The advocacy and support that Parents for Megan’s Law provides, both locally and nationally, has helped countless victims of child sexual abuse understand their rights and stand up for themselves, and will only continue to do so as the organization’s programs evolve and expand.

Sources:
Statistically Speaking: 
Evaluation of the Becoming a Man (B.A.M.) Program in Chicago

By Meryl Prochaska

Studies have found that children living with chronic stress, including stress related to exposure to violence in their community, experience challenges with developing non-cognitive or “social cognitive skills.” The study’s authors explain that these skills include self-regulation, reasoning, impulse control, and conflict resolution, and are also correlated with educational outcomes and future criminal and violent behavior. Accordingly, as the authors of this study note, many programs focus on developing these social cognitive skills in early childhood. Despite the focus on early childhood interventions, researchers from the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab recently provided data to show that non-cognitive skills can also be taught to youth in later childhood. The Crime Lab evaluated the Becoming a Man (B.A.M.©) -Sports Edition (“BAM”) program, an intervention that aims to teach and help develop social cognitive skills in middle school and high-school aged children.

BAM was developed by Youth Guidance and World-Sports Chicago, both non-profit organizations in Chicago. Youth Guidance explains that BAM was developed based on research that demonstrates a relationship between youth homicides and children’s impulsive behavior and on the theory that social cognitive skills are related to success in school, employment, and in avoiding criminal behavior. Accordingly, Youth Guidance and the study’s authors discuss that BAM focuses on helping youth develop the “social cognitive skills” described above, including: emotional regulation, interpersonal problem solving, conflict management, control of stress response, coping skills, goal setting and attainment, ability to evaluate consequences, and the ability to create solutions to problems. To do this, the BAM program provides in school and after school programs that focus on developing these skills. Specifically, the authors provide that the in-school intervention includes group counseling and mentoring sessions that teach a skill each session through various teaching methods, and students are assigned a homework assignment to practice a skill learned in the session. In the after-school program, through activities such as wrestling, martial arts, archery, weightlifting, and handball, the program helps children work on the behavioral skills in a different “non-traditional after-school sports program” context. According to Youth Guidance, BAM is currently working with more than 1,500 male youth in about 40 schools in Chicago.

In 2009, through the “Chicago Initiative to Reduce Gun Violence among School-Age Youth,” the University of Chicago Crime Lab selected the BAM program as a gun violence prevention intervention for the Crime Lab to evaluate. Importantly, because of the lack of “rigorous” studies evaluating violence prevention interventions, the study’s authors note that there is little known about what interventions are effective in reducing violence in the communities. Accordingly, the Crime Lab initiative evaluated BAM using a randomized-control study and indicated that they designed their evaluation like a clinical study conducted in medicine, which the authors note, is rare in crime prevention interventions. In addition, the Crime Lab initiative explained that it also aimed to address
the fact that gun violence is responsible for more deaths of African American men ages fifteen to twenty-four than the next nine leading causes of death combined.

In the evaluation year, BAM was offered to male youth between the 7th and 10th grades at eighteen Chicago Public Schools located in low-income communities where, the authors explain, youth violence and economic pressures are prevalent. Additionally, the authors note, eligibility for the study was determined by whether a student was considered “medium risk,” which included students who both had already demonstrated a deficiency in social cognitive skills and who were also likely to attend school. The study identified 2470 male youth at the eighteen Chicago Public Schools. In each of the eighteen schools, these male youth were randomly assigned to either the control group or one of the intervention groups, which included only the in-school intervention, only the after-school intervention, or combination of both. Notably, the authors discuss, in the year prior to the intervention the average child study participant missed six weeks of school, the average grade point average was a D plus, and one third of the participating students had a prior arrest, which demonstrates the challenges experienced by these children prior to the program year.

To evaluate the BAM program, the authors explain that they used administrative records from Chicago Public Schools and juvenile and adult justice system records from the Illinois State Police. The author’s explain that their results showed that BAM “significantly increased school engagement and performance by 0.14 standard deviations during the program year” and even continued to improve in the follow up year by increasing school engagement and performance by 0.19 standard deviations, which correlates to a ten to twenty-three percent graduation rate increase.

Additionally, the authors found that during the year in which the BAM program was evaluated, violent crimes arrests were reduced by forty-four percent. Further, the program reduced weapons crime and vandalism by thirty-six percent.

Despite significantly reducing crime in the program year, in the year after the program, unlike school engagement outcomes, the intervention did not have a statistically significant effect on reducing violent crime arrests. However, the authors discuss, because the intervention had the effect of reducing violent crime arrests during the program year, in the year after the program, the youth participant’s likelihood of being detained and attending school in a juvenile detention center was reduced by fifty-three percent. The authors note that this finding could be due to the fact that when a child is arrested, authorities may look at previous arrests when deciding if the child should be detained.

Further, the authors explain that the successful outcomes are also significant considering the low-cost of the intervention. Specifically, the cost of BAM was $1100 per student. In estimating that the program could increase graduation rates from ten to twenty-three percent, the authors found that this could benefit society in the amount of $49,000 to 119,000 per student participant, which the authors explain would come from an increase in participants’ lifetime earnings and tax payments and decreased use of public benefits. Additionally, BAM’s cost benefits that came from reducing crime were also significant. According to the Crime Lab, gun violence includes significant direct and indirect costs to society, including the fact that every crime-related gunshot wound costs
society one million dollars. Accordingly, the authors explain that during the BAM evaluation year, the effect that BAM has during the program year on reducing violence and criminal behavior provides cost benefits to society from about $3600 to $34,000 per student participant.

Despite these successful outcomes, the authors discuss limitations with their findings. First, because the study was not conducted long enough to measure actual graduation rates of the student participants, the authors had to estimate BAM’s effect on graduation rates by using pre-existing data from prior studies conducted in Chicago Public Schools that studied the relationship between children’s early school outcomes and engagement measures with graduation rates. Additionally, the authors still seek to investigate “program fade out” and understanding why the effects of the program significantly continued in the follow up year for engagement in school but not for violent behavior.

Despite these limitations, however, the authors describe that this evaluation demonstrated that this low cost program, which focused on developing and improving social cognitive skills, and where students had a “limited number of contact hours” in the program year, had significant outcomes in school engagement and in reducing violent crime arrests in the intervention year. Thus, the authors concluded that this study shows that there may be significant benefits to society from focusing on programs that help develop and improve social cognitive skills of adolescent youth.

Further, because of the positive findings from the BAM program evaluation, the Crime Lab and University of Chicago Urban Education Institute Lab developed an intervention that combined the BAM program with the MATCH Education program, a tutoring program developed in Boston. In the 2012–2013 school year, the Crime Lab and Urban Education Institute Lab conducted a randomized controlled study of the combined interventions. The results of this study were recently published as a working paper in the National Bureau of Economic Research. Notably, the Crime Lab describes that their evaluation of the combined program found that after only six months of the program, participants math test scores improved in an amount that would have been an average of about three years of schooling, decreased the number of failed courses, increased the rate of school attendance, and increased the participants likelihood to be “on track” to graduate. As a result of this successful pilot implementation and results, a large-scale implementation began in August 2013 in twenty-one Chicago Public School high schools. Further, Mayor Emanuel recently announced an award of two million dollars to the BAM program in an effort to offer the program to more students in Chicago.

In conclusion, the Crime Lab’s BAM evaluation, the authors, and the BAM and Match Education programs have ultimately demonstrated through their randomized control studies that implementing and providing resources for programs like BAM and MATCH Education for older children can have a significant impact on both individual children as well as society.

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Around the World:
A Comparison of Approaches to Gun Homicides in the United States and Japan

By Shay Raoofi

The United States has experienced youth gun violence throughout the country: from Newtown, Connecticut to Blacksburg, Virginia, all the way to Aurora, Colorado. Death tolls have ranged from zero to beyond thirty-three in some cases. In 2008, the United States grieved 11,101 total firearm homicides while Japan faced only 11. The discrepancy in these numbers not only raises concern, but also many questions. This reality leads us to wonder what the United States is doing wrong and what Japan is doing right.

In the United States, the rates of death for children and teens resulting from gun violence significantly overwhelm the total amount of deaths among all citizens of Japan. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, in 2008, there were 2,947 children and teens killed by gunfire in the United States. This number would have increased to 20,596 had it accounted for non-fatal gun injuries of the same demographic. Nevertheless, the annual firearm homicide rate in 2008 for all ages in Japan must increase by 267.9 times to match the annual firearm homicide rate in 2008 for children and teens in the United States. The 2008 statistics further provide that the gun homicide rate in the United States for teens and young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 was 42.7 times higher than the combined rate for other nations.

Each nation tackles the issue of gun homicides using varying methodologies. When compared, the most basic ways the United States and Japan have differed in their approaches is in how each nation has addressed gun ownership and accessibility. These are the two underlying causes of youth gun violence. The United States, for one, has pursued a variety of indirect tactics to curb youth gun violence by highlighting social, psychological, and economic factors, whereas Japan has directly fixated on limiting accessibility to guns altogether. The United States utilizes a public health approach, which does not take concern with the individual person, but rather focuses on different conditions and problems that affect health. Under this method, the objective is to maximize the benefit to the largest number of individuals as possible. The United States’ public health approach to violence is premised on the idea that by preventing health problems, better care and safety will be extended to the entire population as a result.

In particular, the public health approach entails ten scientifically credible violence prevention strategies that communities should pursue to reduce the amount of violence in communities. These include: (i) increasing safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and/or caretakers; (ii) reducing the availability and misuse of alcohol; (iii) lessening the access to lethal means, such as guns, knives, and pesticides (often used to commit suicide); (iv) improving life skills and enhancing opportunities for children and youth; (v) promoting gender equality and empowering women; (vi) changing cultural norms that support violence; (vii) refining criminal justice systems; (viii) improving social welfare systems; (ix) relieving social distance between conflicting groups; and (x) reducing economic inequality and concentrated poverty.
In contrast to the United States’ tactic, Japan addresses the issue of gun violence by imposing the tightest regulation on the accessibility of guns in the industrialized world. The only permissible ownership of guns in Japan is for the purpose of sporting and hunting. As such, Japanese citizens can only legally buy and use shotguns and air rifles. Moreover, Japan has a rigorous process for legally buying and using guns, including requirements to: (i) attend an all-day class and pass a written exam that is only offered once each month; (ii) take and pass an additional shooting range class; (iii) pass a mental health and drug test at the hospital and file such records with the appropriate police authority; (iv) pass a thorough background check for any criminal record or association with criminal or extremist groups; (v) provide competent police authority with documentation on the specific location of the gun in your home, as well the ammunition, which must be stored and locked separately; (vi) allow competent police authority to inspect the gun once per year; and (vii) re-take the initial class and written exam every three years.

The history behind these different approaches to addressing gun violence can be traced back to each country’s principal intention in drafting their laws. In the United States, gun laws began with the Second Amendment to the Constitution, affirming the “right of the people to keep and bear arms” and eligibility derived from there. In essence, relevant laws in the United States are designed to enshrine access to guns. In Japan, however, the first law to address gun possession was enacted in 1958 providing that, “no person shall possess a firearm or firearms or a sword or swords” and identified limited exceptions thereafter. Thus, Japan starts with the forbiddance of guns, rather than the right to bear arms.

The question to address is whether strict levels of gun access are directly correlated with gun homicide rates. While the distinct laws and vast variances in the gun homicide rates between the United States and Japan may seemingly provide a clear-cut answer, there are many cultural differences that must be taken into consideration. For instance, the Japanese police maintain a close and extensive relationship with the members of their community through police outposts called “koban.” In contrast, as a product of cultural norms, American police often distance themselves from the community. In fact, typical behavior of Japanese police, such as regular visits to residents’ homes to obtain a periodic update on their household, would be considered an intrusion for many Americans. Another cultural difference is that the Japanese are more tolerant of their country’s broad search and seizure polices, a subject that is continually at issue and powerfully resisted in the United States.

As a consequence, children and teens in the United States are more often exposed to fatal episodes of gun violence than the children and teens in Japan. Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund, calculated that between 1979 and 2009, 119,079 children and teens fell victim to fatal episodes of gun violence in the United States. This figure represents more children and youth deaths than deaths resulting from the deadliest wars: World War I (53,402); the war in Vietnam (47,434); the Korean War (33,739); and the war in Iraq (3517). Edelman is confident that the high rates of death are attributable to the moral code of the United States and asserts that, “[t]his slaughter of innocents happens because we protect guns, before children and
other human beings[,]” as the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution clearly provides.

Despite there being a variety of differing reasons for each countries’ approach to gun violence, Japan continues to focus on the enactment of direct, strict laws on accessing guns, whereas the United States emphasizes adjustments to cultural norms and surrounding environments. Moreover, in the past decade, the United States has relaxed legislation on gun control, providing state and national laws that allow a “right to carry” weapons in public places and notorious “stand your ground” defenses that justify individuals’ possession of firearms.

Ultimately, the strict access to guns cannot reasonably be said to be the sole cause of the immense difference in gun homicide rates. Rather, given the unique cultures of each country, the variance is attributable to a variety of factors. As such, the time has come for a legislative change in the United States; the statistics are enough to prove the lack of effect of our current regulation on gun control.

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