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Anti-Violence Program Targets Chicago Boys

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University researchers and community groups in Chicago are joining forces in a school-based program aimed at reducing violence and improving academic outcomes for young men, while providing researchers an opportunity to find out if such anti-violence programs are effective.

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The initiative, dubbed Becoming a Man—Sports Edition, brings together interventions designed by **Youth Guidance**, a social-service organization that works extensively in the Chicago schools, and **World Sport Chicago**, a nonprofit organization built out of Chicago's unsuccessful bid to host the 2016 Olympic games.

The program, announced Wednesday, will run for 27 weeks for more than 500 students in 15 Chicago elementary and high schools.

Violence among Chicago's adolescents gained national attention this fall, after the beating death of high school student Derrion Albert was videotaped and shown nationwide. The outcry led President Barack Obama to send U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder to the Windy City last month to encourage a national dialogue about youth violence. (**"Outcry Against Violence,"** Oct. 14, 2009.)

The University of Chicago **Crime Lab**, which is evaluating the new initiative, selected the program from among 30 applicants. If the approach is found to be effective and cost efficient, crime-lab researchers hope the interventions can serve as models for anti-violence programs elsewhere.

"Boys are much more likely than girls to be victims or perpetrators of violent crime," said Harold Pollack, a professor of social-service administration and a co-director of the crime lab, which secured $1 million in funding from both public and private sources for the initiative. "We felt there was an especially great need to address these issues among the boys. We felt this particular program was very well designed to meet the needs of boys in a way that would make a difference."

Regulating Emotions

The **Becoming a Man** program, run by Youth Guidance and already in use in a handful of Chicago schools, uses cognitive-behavior therapy to counsel students on how to avoid conflicts through regulation of their emotions and the development of healthy social skills.

Students spend an hour a week out of class in the program, where they work in groups on challenges and learn how to take ownership for their actions, said Tony DiVittorio, a Youth Guidance counselor and the founder of Becoming a Man.

To remain in the program, students are held accountable for demonstrating progress, whether emotionally, academically, or otherwise.

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"It's very challenging," Mr. DiVittorio said. "You have to make changes if you are a student who is failing classes or getting suspensions. You are challenged to look at how you are living your life."

Scott Myers, the executive director of World Sport Chicago, said the program's sports coaches have received some training in the methods used by Becoming a Man, or BAM, so they can reinforce what is being learned in the counseling sessions. The two groups' working together makes sense, Mr. Myers said, because the lessons learned in sports complement Youth Guidance's work.

The after-school sports programs—to include archery, boxing, rugby, and weight lifting—were intentionally chosen because urban students aren't traditionally experienced with them.

"We hope they will learn self-discipline, respect for their opponent, respect for the rules of the games, and learn that hard work and controlling their emotions can lead to success," Mr. Myers said. "When you sit down and look at how BAM tries to teach things such as self-control and respect, those are many of the same things that sport teaches. We saw it as a way of mutually reinforcing the same values and sport as a hook to encourage kids and keep them in the program."

According to an analysis published this year by the crime lab, young black males are most likely to be perpetrators or victims of gun violence in Chicago.

Researchers say despite the many millions that the country has spent on anti-violence measures over the decades, very little is known about what is effective. Mr. Pollack said crime-lab researchers would continue to study the students after this school year, looking to see what outcomes the interventions help achieve.

"We are hoping to see less involvement in the criminal-justice system, and also some improvement in school issues such as attendance and discipline," he said. "It is a relatively modest intervention, but we think it will be helpful and reduce some of the problems that are concerning in this population."

Mr. Myers said he is hopeful the initiative will help develop best practices that other cities can also use.

"One of the things we hope to accomplish through this program is to define the impact and the linkage that sports can have on social behavior," he said.

Based on the progress he has seen in students who have gone through the BAM program, Mr. DiVittorio believes the character and values training has paid off.

"The students have to buy into these values, understand them, internalize them, and implement them," he said. "This is a character-education program that helps students understand they have choices and to make the optimal choices. Over time, I believe it helps prevent students from getting to the point where they are picking up the gun."

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