THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
CRIME LAB
Urban Labs

Reducing Gun Violence,
Advancing Justice

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Back to Our Future (B2OF) Policy Brief

Supporting Youth Safety and Education Re-Engagement

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⊙ THE OPPORTUNITY

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 25,000 school-aged youth in Chicago had left high school without a diploma.[1] COVID-19 worsened this crisis of disconnection. In the 2020-2021 school year alone, an additional 16,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students became inactive. Student inactivity is alarming not only because schooling increases civic participation, strengthens the labor market, and improves health outcomes but also because not completing high school increases the likelihood of young people's involvement in gun violence.[2]

In Chicago, the connection between disengagement from school and gun violence is clear: **more than 90% of school-aged victims of gun violence were inactive at the time of their victimization.**[3]

Existing violence prevention programs for youth have focused on those who still have some connection to school. Consequently, young people disconnected from school have historically been out of reach of crucial services and support.

No American city to date has prioritized figuring out how to properly re-engage and meet the needs of inactive youth. Chicago is trying to change that.

A youth development coach works with a B2OF participant. Photo by Breakthrough.

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Back to Our Future (B2OF) is a state-funded, district-led, evidence-informed effort to re-engage disconnected students at an elevated risk for gun violence involvement. In May 2022, Governor Pritzker and the City of Chicago Mayor's Office announced an $18 million investment to support the B2OF pilot program, aiming to re-engage 1,000 disconnected young people in school. To implement B2OF, CPS partners with three community-based organizations: Breakthrough, UCAN, and Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab partnered with CPS throughout the pilot year of B2OF, which concluded in May 2023. In addition to analyzing referral, consent, and participation data, the Crime Lab provided implementation support to UCAN, YAP, and Breakthrough staff and conducted focus groups to understand how youth experienced the program.

In this brief, we describe B2OF's first year of implementation, focusing on the following questions:

- Were program providers able to **identify** youth who met the criteria for the target population?

- Were program providers able to **engage** identified youth in programming?

- For youth who participated in B2OF, **what was their experience** in the program?

We found that B2OF successfully identified eligible youth but saw low rates of youth participation levels in services, particularly in academic and mental health programming. Our analysis suggests that the program could improve how it provides services to youth. Specifically, personalizing services to support the specific needs of B2OF youth is critical for youth participation and program take-up.
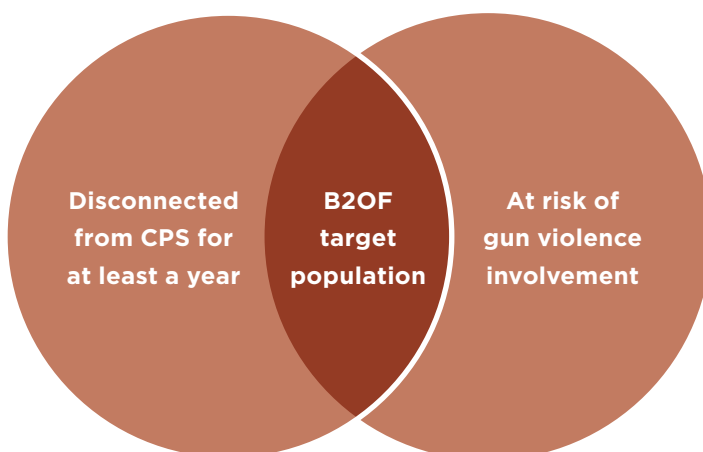
◉ THE APPROACH

Program Overview

Goal

The primary goal of B2OF is to provide eligible youth with intensive support to reduce the likelihood that they will be involved in gun violence and increase the likelihood that they will re-engage with school.

Figure 1: Back To Our Future target population

Target Population

B2OF focuses on reaching young people aged 14-21 in 15 community areas on the South and West Sides of Chicago who have been disconnected from school for at least a year and are at high risk of being involved with gun violence.

Eligible participants are identified through one of four pathways:

1. **Partner referrals** from community organizations,

2. **Institutional referrals** from city agencies and other institutions such as Cook County Juvenile Probation, Cook County State's Attorney's Office,

3. **Community-based organization (CBO) reverse referrals** from internal staff, and

4. **Data driven referrals** that leverage administrative data from CPS to identify youth who may be likely to engage in gun violence and be inactive in school.

Outreach

Phase 1

Once youth are referred to the program, Breakthrough, UCAN, and YAP (CBOs) are expected to complete a minimum of two phone calls and two home visits to engage the young person. For institutional and partner referrals, CBOs work with the referring agencies to facilitate a warm handoff to the CBO.

Program Services (Phases 2 and 3)

Phase 2

Upon choosing to participate in B2OF, youth receive 12 months of programming that begins with a 12-week period of paid, intensive services in the following five program areas:

1. Soft skills training

2. Community building

3. Mental health interventions, including trauma-informed cognitive behavioral interventions (CBI)

4. Mentorship and family supports

5. Academic credit recovery

During Phase 2 of programming, youth are expected to create a plan to return to an education program that best meets their post-secondary goals and individualized needs. Education pathways include enrolling in a CPS traditional high school, enrolling in a CPS Options school, or enrolling in a General Educational Development (GED) program through Chicago City Colleges.

B2OF participants engage in programming. Photo by Breakthrough.

Phase 3

Once participants complete the 12-week intensive programming, B2OF aims to provide individualized follow-up services and mentorship to help stabilize newly re-enrolled participants within their education completion pathway. After 12 months of B2OF programming, youth receive light-touch, ongoing support services and case management to guide them to high school graduation or completion and successful transition into their chosen post-secondary pathway.

**Figure 2: B2OF participants' program journey, as initially designed**

OUTREACH
Phase 1: Months 1-2

INTENSIVE PAID PROGRAMMING
Phase 2: Months 2-6

RECONNECTION
Phase 3: Months 6-12

Four complementary referral pathways

Relentless engagement and outreach to locate and consent youth

Academic & Credit Recovery

Community Building

Soft Skills Training

20 hours of paid programming a week

Mental Health & Cognitive Behavioral Interventions

Mentoring & Family Supports

CPS school or GED program enrollment and persistence

Ongoing B2OF program supports

• Case management
• Mentoring
• Mental health
• Academics

Identifying Youth

The use of multiple referral pathways helped identify more youth for B2OF eligibility by providing greater coverage for CPS to identify potential participants compared to a single referral source. The majority of referrals (79%) were CPS data driven referrals, followed by CBO reverse referrals (12%), partner referrals (6%), and institutional referrals (3%).

Based on demographic characteristics prior to referral, youth referred to B2OF partners meet the stated eligibility criteria. The vast majority (87%) of referrals were inactive in school at the time of referral, and almost half (41%) had been inactive for longer than 18 months. Among referred youth, 46% had been previously arrested, and 23% had specialized education needs. The average young person referred to B2OF was 19 years old, and roughly two-thirds were Black. These characteristics are mostly aligned with the referral criteria outlined in the program design, indicating that the referral pathways can effectively identify youth in the target population for B2OF.
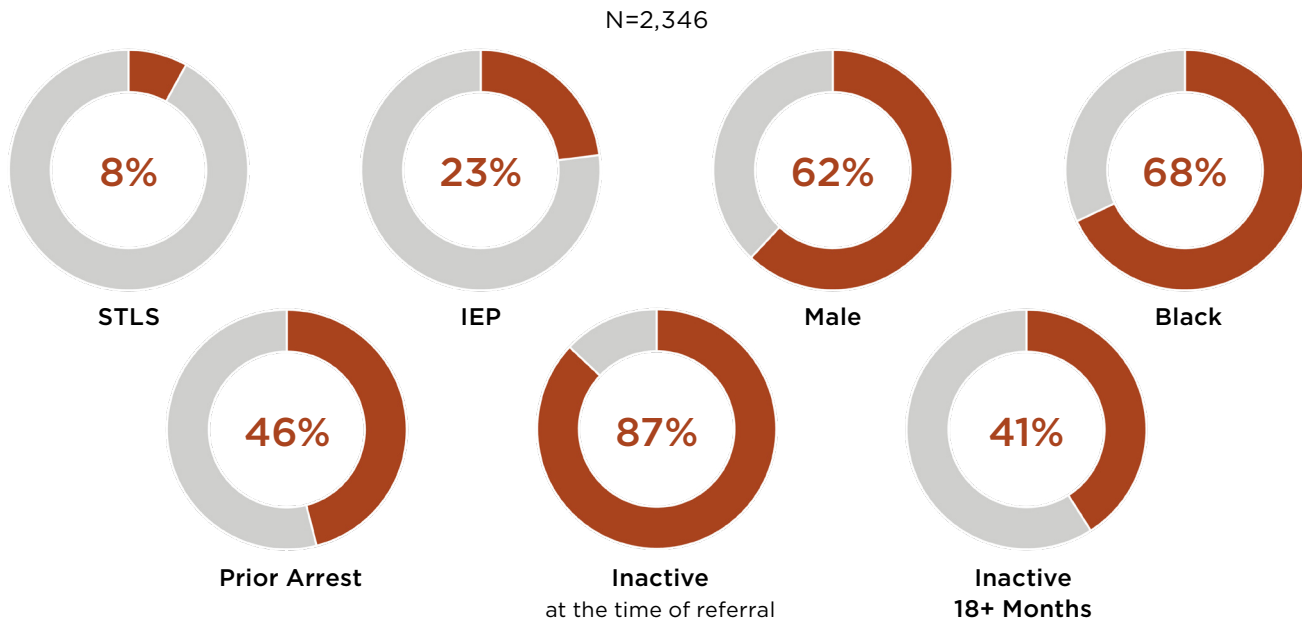
Figure 3: Multiple referral pathways are key for identifying eligible youth

N=2,346

- CPS Data Driven Referral
- Partner Referral
- CBO Reverse Referral
- Institutional Referral
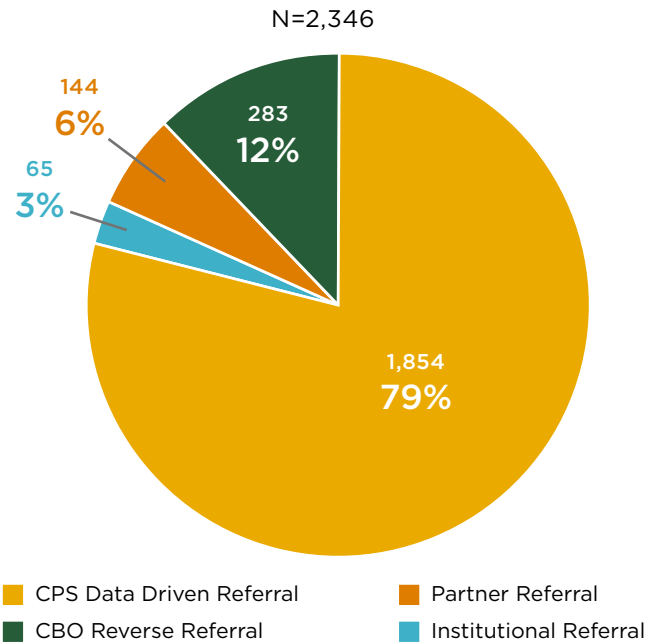
Data Source: Chicago Public Schools
Note: Figure 3 shows the total number of referrals into B2OF through May 31, 2023. Referral pathways are based on the information provided by CPS regarding the pathway each youth was referred through.

Figure 4: Characteristics of youth referred to B2OF

N=2,346

8% STLS

23% IEP

62% Male

68% Black

46% Prior Arrest

87% Inactive at the time of referral

41% Inactive 18+ Months

Data Source: Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Police Department
Note: If a youth does not appear in the SY 2022-23 administrative data, as could be the case for inactive youth, information from the most recent attribute file that student appears in is used. Using attribute files from earlier years may lead to undercounts for non-fixed characteristics like students in temporary living situations (STLS) and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if the student's lived experience is different than last seen in the data. The denominator for STLS, IEP, Male, Black, Inactive, and Inactive 18+ Months is 2,346. The denominator for prior arrest is 2,329, which is the number of youth who we have a referral date for. Inactive status is generated using CPS enrollment files sent directly to us on June 29, 2023. Justice involvement is generated using CPD arrest records from 1999 – April 2023.

Because the four referral pathways are able to identify youth who meet B2OF eligibility, we then wanted to understand the extent to which B2OF engaged referred youth. We define engagement as program take-up where participants consent to the program. The overall consent rate for the program across the four referral pathways is 19%, which suggests about 1 in 5 referred youth are consenting to participate **The consent rate varied greatly depending on the referral pathway.** Data driven referrals had the lowest consent rate at around 5%, meaning only 1 in 20 referred youth consented to programming. On the other hand, roughly 9 out of every 10 CBO reverse referrals led to youth consenting to participate in B2OF. Partner and institutional referrals saw similar rates to each other, with around half of referred youth consenting to programming. **Despite data driven referrals being the pathway most likely to refer eligible students, their low consent rate means that CBO referrals bring almost three times as many youth to the program.**

The differences in consent rates between data driven and CBO reverse referrals reflect findings from a similar program, READI Chicago.

These patterns suggest that relationships and touchpoints between referred youth and service providers are likely important factors for youth when deciding whether to participate in the program.

A B2OF participant works on credit recovery. Photo by Breakthrough.

The low consent rate of data driven referrals, particularly when compared to the effectiveness of the other referral pathways, highlights how important it is for CBOs to proactively and creatively reach out to eligible youth at risk of gun violence who are outside their networks (and their partners' networks).

Figure 5: Program participation consent rates, by referral type   N=2,346

Consent Rates by Referral Types

91% consented — **Reverse Referrals** referrals that are given to CPS for consideration directly from a B2OF partner organization (UCAN, YAP, or Breakthrough).

51% consented — **Institutional Referrals** referrals submitted through juvenile probation, SAO, public defenders office, and others.

44% consented — **Partner Referrals** these are referrals that come from community stakeholders (schools, community organizations other than the B2OF CBOs, community members, parents, etc.

5% consented — **Data Driven Referrals** these referrals are provided by CPS using CPS' student information systems such as ASPEN.

Data Source: Chicago Public Schools
Note: Figure 5 shows the consent rates by referral types as of May 31, 2023. Youth are classified as Consented on the basis of the program status field in the referred tracker received from CPS. Additionally, we assume that all youth that are in the programming data have consented into the program and mark them accordingly. CPS reviews all youth for eligibility prior to admission into the program.

We found that B2OF participants attended, on average, nearly seven hours of programming per week, which is less than 50% of the 20 hours set as the program target. However, the average participation in services increased over time to about nine hours as of May 2023. Across the five service areas (mentoring, community building, academic and credit recovery, mental health, and soft skills), we saw considerable variation in actual versus target hours. Specifically, we observe that the average B2OF participant received low dosage in **academic credit and recovery (0.8 received of 3-hour target)** and **mental health (0.5 received of 3-hour target)** programming.

In the first year, the three CBOs varied significantly in the specific types of programming they offered. Logically, each may have prioritized its own normal set of services. We see in the dosage rates that these packages may not be best suited for the B2OF population, who face significant barriers to re-engagement. We further discuss challenges students face with regard to academic and mental health programming.
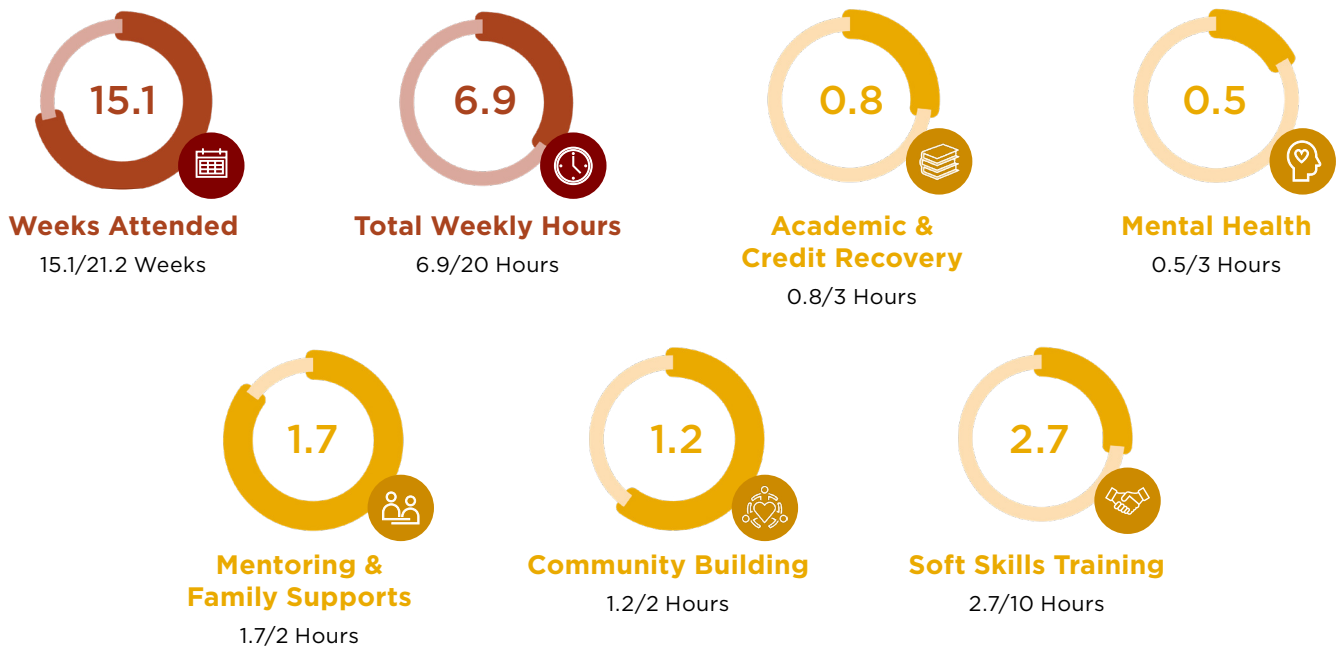
Academic and Credit Recovery

B2OF participants have varied academic levels and needs—some are just a few credits away from graduating while others struggle to read. In the first year, program partners relied on technology to deliver tailored educational support because individual instruction was just not feasible. However, we saw that students, particularly those who were furthest behind, were unlikely to engage with classes and even less likely to complete them.

Mental Health

Young people in the B2OF target population often experience strong stigma around going to therapy and may have experienced significant trauma that makes them wary of new adults. Several focus group participants shared that they fear for their safety when in group sessions with other young people who may be involved in gun violence. However, many participants reported that mental health programming was the component of B2OF they most enjoyed once they built a trusting relationship with providers.

Figure 6: Average participants' B2OF experience over the last year

15.1
Weeks Attended
15.1/21.2 Weeks

6.9
Total Weekly Hours
6.9/20 Hours

0.8
Academic & Credit Recovery
0.8/3 Hours

0.5
Mental Health
0.5/3 Hours

1.7
Mentoring & Family Supports
1.7/2 Hours

1.2
Community Building
1.2/2 Hours

2.7
Soft Skills Training
2.7/10 Hours

Data Source: Chicago Public Schools

Note: This figure presents the average experience of participants who attended at least one day of programming (see Programming Sample in Data Sources for details). We consider a participant as available for programming during the week if it was the first week they started programming or any week after. A participant attended in a given week if they logged any programming hours. Average hours are calculated across all available weeks, including weeks that participants did not attend any programming. Hours are showing relative to the target hours originally set for each program area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

B2OF represents a groundbreaking initiative aimed at re-engaging disconnected students who face an elevated predicted risk of gun violence involvement. Our analysis from B2OF's pilot year underscores the program's capacity to effectively identify the target population. However, there is room for improvement in effectively providing services to participants.

It is clear that existing systems delivering status quo services have not been able to provide enough support to the target demographic of a program like B2OF. We have seen from the first year of implementation that conventional outreach methods, such as phone calls and home visits, are ineffective for this population. To increase consent rates for the target demographic, CBOs must have the opportunity to explore innovative strategies and practices.

Our primary programmatic recommendation for the second year of B2OF is to adapt the academic and mental health programming to appropriately address the unique needs of this population. Personalizing services is incredibly important for both youth participation and program take-up. Prior research from the University of Chicago Education Lab, the Crime Lab's sister lab, shows that not every young person faces the same challenges as their classmates. The unique set of challenges they face include housing instability, violent crime victimization, and 8th grade Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) test scores in the bottom quartile, all of which may necessitate differently targeted services.

It is important to note that programs like B2OF must complement, not replace, efforts to reduce these high rates of adverse student experiences in the first place.

While the use of technology led to low rates of engagement in the pilot year, prior Education Lab research with Saga Tech shows that strategically combining educational technology with a tutor can help students stay engaged and learn more than using technology alone. Alternating online learning with in-person tutoring can help students at different academic levels receive more individualized instruction without incurring the costs of a full-time teaching staff.

Finally, research indicates that cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBI) may be one of the most important parts of programming for improving student outcomes. In the past, Crime Lab research has found that students engage most when they have a strong personal connection to the adult delivering CBI. These mentorship relationships help youth get more out of sessions and motivate them to attend. A non-clinical form of CBI delivered by a mentor may help engage youth who have preexisting negative views toward therapy. We recommend that implementation partners modify their CBI curriculum to appropriately address the unique circumstances of B2OF participants.

CONCLUSION

B2OF offers an unprecedented opportunity to address the decades of underinvestment in Black and Brown communities, which has led to the program's target population facing significant barriers to high school graduation, post-secondary success, and safety. While we have made significant strides in the first year of implementation, much work remains to better engage and serve the young people currently underserved by existing systems.

Overcoming these barriers to successful implementation requires **creativity**, **a deep understanding of youth experiences**, and a **commitment among all partners to continuous improvement.**

ENDNOTES

1. Approximately 25,000 students who began ninth grade in CPS from SY2012-2015 did not graduate. Read more here.
2. Oreopoulos, Philip, and Kjell G. Salvanes. 2011. "Priceless: The Nonpecuniary Benefits of Schooling." Journal of Economic Perspectives, 25 (1): 159-84.
3. University of Chicago Crime Lab analysis of Chicago Police Department and Chicago Public Schools data as of end-of-year 2021.

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