

Not All Poor Youth are Violent

Chronicle of Social Change

July 19, 2018 Dr. Toni Irving

You wouldn't bring in a brain surgeon to treat a head cold, nor would you make a nutritionist singularly responsible for someone with a heart condition. And yet our approach to addressing youth violence in the city too often provides generic and isolated responses where tailored and collaborative ones would be more effective.

Investments aimed at violence prevention efforts are spread across youth development programs that serve low-income youth who, while in need of robust programs and supports to fulfill their potential, are not at risk for gun violence. Using such a general approach means that when everyone is a priority, no one is a priority.

Interestingly, Yale sociologist Andrew Papachristos found that the majority of nonfatal gunshot episodes in Chicago from 2006 to 2014 were attributable to less than 5 percent of the city's population. From a variety of inputs, the number of youth we need to impact to significantly reduce violence is achievable. There is no question that this acutely high risk group is often harder to reach and harder to engage – and that's exactly why they require our focus.

Our current crisis in Chicago — and in other cities where youth violence is an issue — necessitates concentrating our anti-violence efforts where we have clear indicators as to the youth most at risk for violent behavior. It is the best approach for achieving timely and sustainable impact on a large scale.

A recent [study](#) of youth entering juvenile probation, conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and commissioned by Get IN Chicago, focused on identifying characteristics of youth involved in firearms violence while on probation to better inform service provision.

The study noted patterns that divided probation youth into subclasses based on previous involvement with the justice system. A youth's class profile emerged as the most accurate correlation with future involvement in gun violence, with, not surprisingly, the class described as "Chronic, Violent Offenses" demonstrating the highest level of risk.

What are the key characteristics of this class? These youth have experienced many prior arrests before probation, they are more likely to have a history of abuse or neglect, and they are less likely to be engaged in school. In addition, the youth in this class are far more likely to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for cognitive impairment or emotional/behavioral disorders on record from when they were in school. This correlation between special education needs and criminalization alone warrants deeper attention as we concentrate our resources.

These findings are likely applicable across communities, provide practical guidance for both public agencies and nonprofit service providers. Balancing caseloads in the juvenile justice system to consider these risk levels improves the likelihood that the youth most acutely at risk for future violence are receiving the appropriately intensive services and follow-up to improve their outcomes. Similarly, understanding these risk factors (but not relying on them exclusively) can and should inform the level of case management and access to services provided in juvenile justice, education and community settings.

Coordinated violence prevention should prioritize youth with multiple offenses, or students with cognitive impairments and/or behavioral disorders. These efforts should begin with an individualized treatment plan. When we put more of our concerted effort on acutely high-risk youth, reducing youth violence in Chicago and other cities will be a goal well within reach.