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## ***Spotlight On: Chicago Resources Aimed at the Intervention of Youth Gang Activity and Alternatives to Juvenile Delinquency***

*By Thomas Goodwyn*

Chicago has long been known for its rampant gang activity. From Al Capone during the Prohibition Era to gang-controlled Cabrini Green to the hundreds of different gangs in present-day Chicago. The gangs have affected everyone affiliated with Chicago, particularly those who live in the neighborhoods where their presence is most prevalent. Children and adolescents growing up around gang violence become accustomed to the violence and often have come to think that it is a normal part of life. While the number of juvenile arrests has decreased from 31,931 in 2000 to 22,877 in 2012, it is unclear how many of those individuals were gang-affiliated. However, these statistics can give hope to and are rewarding for all activists trying to better the lives of the underserved youth in Chicago. Although there has been improvement, their fight is not close to being over.

Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel launched the Safer Chicago Plan, which addresses the risk factors and root causes of youth violence. The Mayor's Commission for a Safer Chicago (the "Commission") involves over 130 staff members ranging from youth and their parents to community and faith leaders to practitioners and subject-matter experts. Their research has led to recommendations in five areas: youth employment, health and healing, creating restorative school communities, safety and justice, and safe spaces and activities. This article will briefly introduce and discuss each area of the Commission's plan. Although this plan is specific to Chicago, all can learn from the Commission's extensive research and recommendations and adapt the plan for different cities and communities across the country.

Keeping youth active outside of school has long been proved as a major deterrent and goal of activists for preventing the spread of gang influence on adolescents. Providing jobs not only takes young people off the streets and limits the amount of exposure to antagonizing older gang members, it also puts money in their pockets and prepares them for future employment. One Summer Chicago is a collaborative effort among city, county, state, and business and foundation communities and has provided 22,500 summer jobs for disadvantaged youth since 2011, leading to a drop of forty-three percent in violent crime arrests for all participants. The organization also provides mentoring and social-emotional learning aimed at teaching youth to understand and manage cognitive behaviors that may affect their employability. The Commission wants to continue building on the success of One Summer Chicago by offering year-round, diverse opportunities for more participants to give them the proper skills for further education or unsubsidized, private-sector employment.

For those that are too young to be employed or when employment opportunities are limited, the Commission has developed afterschool programs and activities as well as built, maintained, and improved safe, recreational facilities for all ages. The Commission has built, refurbished, and will continue to build and improve parks and playgrounds around the city. The goal is for no child to live further than a ten-minute walk from the nearest park or playground. The Commission has also expanded numerous different

programs that provide learning experiences for Chicago youth. The main goal is to provide fun activities for children and teenagers and ensure safe travel.

The Commission has also developed techniques to keep children and adolescents in school so that they can earn their high school diplomas. Through its "Restorative Practices" approach to discipline, the numbers of suspensions, referrals for expulsion, and in-school arrests have each dropped an average of thirty-five percent in the past three school years by reforming the student code of conduct. Some schools still have zero-tolerance policies, but Chicago Public Schools has updated its disciplinary policy to encourage individual schools to engage all parties in a discussion to help determine the root of the problem and a collective solution. Local colleges, including the University of Chicago, have piloted tutor programs where participants who were once failing math are now excelling, leading to a drop of sixty-seven percent in their misconduct rate. Programs like *Becoming a Man* and *Working on Womanhood* are leaders in non-academic interventions that work to strengthen participants' social and emotional behavioral issues. Youth Guidance hosts and develops these gender-specific, weekly sessions for troubled teens by focusing on developing a specific skill through recreational activities, stories, role-playing and group exercises. Youth Guidance has seen arrests reduced and future graduation rates increased among participants. For dropouts, Chicago has created re-engagement centers and non-traditional learning environments to get these students back in school. The Commission plans to build on these successful programs to reach and engage more students in 2015.

Not only is the Commission striving to prevent the influence gangs have over Chicago youth, it also develops programs and devices to rehabilitate those affected by violence. Exposure to violence can cause cognitive and emotional impairments. Numerous organizations including Illinois Accountable Care Entities Response Collaborative, Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, and Strengthening Chicago's Youth, among others, have come together to educate teachers, parents, and others interested in how to detect and what to do when an adolescent is dealing with social and emotional impairments. The Commission plans to have healthcare providers incorporate these same procedures with their standard evaluations of young patients. Chicago has also received a federal grant to form and maintain an immediate homicide response unit that supports victims' families and friends and facilitates ongoing services.

Chicago has made major changes to its juvenile delinquency procedures within the past ten years. Studies have found that therapeutic intervention involving counseling and skills training, as opposed to harsher punitive punishments, reduces youth recidivism. Through programs like the Juvenile Intervention Support Center and Restoring Individuals Through Supportive Environments, Chicago has seen its youth crime rate drop especially among juvenile delinquents. The Commission hopes and expects those numbers to decrease even more as juvenile diversion programs continue to reach more and more adolescents. Just this past year, Mayor Emanuel worked with the Illinois Congress to pass a statute requiring the Illinois State Police to automatically expunge all juvenile arrest records that were never formally charged on an annual basis. Over 15,000 arrested juveniles will have their 2014 arrest records expunged because of this new law.

This will help thousands of Chicago youth have a more-successful adulthood by not having these specific blemishes on their records that could have serious consequences for housing, financial aid, and college admissions.

While some call for a bigger police force and harsher penalties, the Commission has taken a holistic approach. Arresting and jailing those accused of crimes may be an immediate solution, whereas the organizations working together as part of the Commission's plan have shown some short-term success, the true rewards have yet to materialize. Through education and addressing the roots of the crime problem such as cognitive issues, the goal is to have long-lasting effects for generations to come. As disadvantaged children of today have more opportunities to succeed than their parents did, they will be in better positions to take care of and be positive role models for their children. The Mayor's Commission for a Safer Chicago has seen some short-term successes, and there is hope and promise that one day Chicago will be able to remove the stigma of being a dangerous place, and other communities and cities can model their plans off of Chicago's successes and failures.

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