Crime and Violence Prevention

Outline of short presentation to ICJIA, July 22, 2013

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1. Two challenges to effective crime and violence prevention:
    a. What to do?
    b. Targeting: With whom to do it, and when?
2. What to do?
    a. One thing social science has made clear is that it is difficult to change human behavior; most social policy interventions we try don't work
    b. Growing body of research from psychology and behavioral economics suggests that lots of human behavior driven by what Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman calls "automatic" decision-making system, which we all rely on every day to a great extent because more reflective, deliberative decision-making system is more effortful (and so mentally costly). Most social policy interventions try to change behavior by appealing to the more effortful, deliberative system; this theory could explain why we don't see bigger effects.
    c. The center I help direct, the University of Chicago Crime Lab, has been doing some large-scale randomized controlled trials in Chicago to test this hypothesis and found encouraging results from interventions that try to address automatic behavior
    d. One example is the Becoming a Man (BAM) program, developed by Youth Guidance; relatively low-cost intervention for disadvantaged male youth, one year of programming found to reduce violent-crime arrests by 44%
3. Targeting: With whom to do it, and when?
    a. We are operating in an environment in which government budgets are highly constrained (likely to be the "new normal" for foreseeable future); so we can't just saturate the environment with endless amounts of prevention activity for everyone
    b. How do we prioritize and target prevention resources?
    c. One of most famous findings in criminology is that 6% of each birth cohort does 60-70% of all the violent crime
    d. Very hard to figure out who is in this highest-risk 6% when kids are ages 3 or 4. What we wind up mostly doing at such young ages is what public health researchers call "primary prevention," that is, spread prevention resources pretty thinly across everyone
    e. But becomes much easier to identify that 6% as people age into adolescence, b/c they start to self-identify through their behavior; this allows us to better target prevention dollars and do what public health researchers call "secondary prevention"
    f. It's possible we might not be doing enough right now in the secondary prevention area (compared to either primary prevention or re-entry programming), to do this well requires having a coordinated administrative data infrastructure in place to be able to identify young people as they start onto the earliest stages of behavioral trajectories that may lead to the most socially costly forms of crime and violence
    g. ICJIA seems perfectly (and perhaps uniquely) positioned to support that effort