

A juvenile detention center in Chicago introduced Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to the youth in its facility, which proved to dramatically reduce a young person's chance of being readmitted after their release from detention. Following this success, ideas42 and the University of Chicago Crime Lab developed a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Curriculum and User's Manual in order to share this evidence-based approach with those who work with at-risk youth nationwide. Awarded the 2016 Service and Advocacy for Youth Award by the National Partnership for Juvenile Services, the curriculum has the potential to impact young lives across the country.

Summary

The incarceration rate in the United States has increased dramatically since the 1970's, sparking growing concerns about both the financial costs and human harms associated with having such a large portion of the population behind bars—and one that is disproportionately made up of members of racial and ethnic minority groups from low-income communities. And incarcerating more people has not put a stop to high rates of crime, including serious violent crime, within so many of these same disadvantaged, segregated neighborhoods from which the detention population is largely drawn.

The challenge to find ways of reducing detention rates without increasing crime—or better yet, find strategies that minimize both criminal activity and the prison population—has prompted leaders in criminal justice to take a closer look at promising social programs and behavioral solutions. ideas42 and the University of Chicago Crime Lab worked with the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) to evaluate their highly-effective Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) program to determine whether and how it could be used to successfully improve the lives of young people who have been exposed to the criminal justice system.

Why We Turned to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

When the University of Chicago Crime Lab visited the JTDC for a conversation about improving the lives of young people in Chicago, a staff member and facilitator made a telling statement: “If I could give [residents] back just ten minutes of their lives, most of them wouldn't be here.”

This observation was the first clue that decision-making is at the heart of the problem—and perhaps also is the key to a solution.

Research in behavioral science shows that all people make decisions in two ways: automatically and deliberately. Both have value, but automatic responses that are very useful in familiar or repeated situations can lead people astray in new or misread situations.

CBT teaches young people to pause and reflect in situations where they would otherwise act automatically. It guides them to slow down their thinking processes, eliminates some biases built into their quick thinking strategies, and shifts their decision-making in certain contexts toward a more calculated manner of thinking. CBT, in effect, gives back to youth those few minutes the staff member alluded to—*before* a quick decision can strap them with lifelong consequences.

Highlights

- ▶ Decision-making happens either automatically or deliberately
- ▶ For juvenile offenders, automatic responses often lead to undesirable outcomes or consequences in new or unfamiliar situations
- ▶ CBT helps identify and change automatic responses

Evaluating Results from Varied Programs

While CBT is used widely by practitioners and has successfully changed many lives, programs being implemented across the country vary so much that it is difficult to know which elements and methods are most effective. From the content and focus of the curriculum to the way it is delivered, programs that utilize CBT vary in countless ways. To achieve the ultimate goal of preventing crime and detention at large scale, ideas42 and the University of Chicago Crime Lab needed an understanding of what the most critical elements of CBT are.

The Crime Lab led randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in Chicago and found sizable behavior change across all of the CBT interventions they evaluated. In the three evaluations of CBT programs the Crime Lab found evidence that helping at-risk teens slow down and change their decision-making processes could drastically reduce violence involvement, and significantly improve graduation rates. The first study, of a program called Becoming a Man (BAM), developed by the Chicago-area non-profit Youth Guidance, decreased violent-crime arrests by 45 percent. A second two-year study of BAM found a 50 percent reduction in violent-crime arrests, and that program participants were 10 percent more likely to graduate from high school on-time than peers who did not participate. The third study tested a different CBT curriculum (the one that is the starting point of this *CBT 2.0 Curriculum*) that was delivered to high-risk youth while they were incarcerated in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. This program reduced the rate of readmission to the facility by 21 percent over 18 months.

Over the past several years, we have explored how CBT programming accomplishes remarkable success in preventing conflicts and violence that often result from automatic decision-making. Through our research we learned more about the “active ingredients” behind the success of CBT programs. We also conducted research to identify unwritten “tricks of the trade” facilitators improvise in practice to enhance their effectiveness when delivering these programs. We then built on these findings using what we know from behavioral science to create the *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 2.0 Curriculum* and *User’s Manual*.

Creating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 2.0

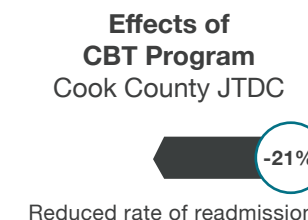
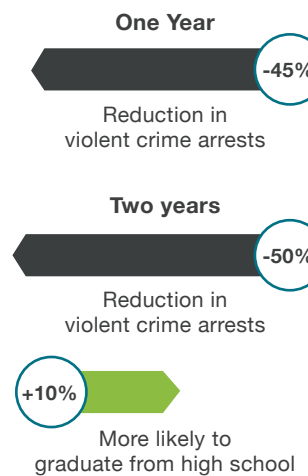
Based on extensive research, we created the *CBT 2.0 Curriculum*. CBT 2.0 is a “starter pack” of lessons and exercises that employ the “active ingredients” of CBT. The original curriculum on which it is based was developed by Dr. Bernie Glos and his associates from the DuPage County, Illinois Juvenile Detention Center, and evaluated by The Crime Lab at the Cook County JTDC from 2009-2011. We selected lessons and activities from seven CBT workbooks the JTDC staff used.

Through focus groups with the JTDC staff, we developed an understanding of the most important parts of the curriculum and the key strategies for delivering it. Our findings suggest that the crucial, active ingredients in CBT that help young people recognize and change their behavior are:

Highlights

- ▶ CBT is varied in its implementation, but can create remarkable outcomes and success
- ▶ Examining and testing successful CBT programs shed light on which elements are most effective, putting a new framework within reach

Results of CBT Program Becoming a Man (BAM)



- Getting youth to realize how often they act without thinking.
- Helping youth recognize the key high-stakes situations in which their current set of automatic responses can get them into trouble. CBT emphasizes that people themselves play a role in interpreting the world.
- Leading youth to either become more reflective in high-stakes situations or develop different automatic responses.

The curriculum consists of many specific lessons that facilitators can use to achieve these outcomes. The lessons help youth identify their attitudes and beliefs and understand how those can in turn shape their automatic responses in low and high-stake situations. For example, one lesson that helps young people recognize their thinking patterns teaches “self-talk,” or what you say to yourself automatically in reaction to different situations. While people tend to believe they see things as they are and then tell themselves how to respond, instead people play a role in constructing the reality they see. That is, CBT teaches people that they have a choice in how they interpret situations, and also a choice in their own responses, particularly in high-risk scenarios.

Another tool that helps youth think about the role they play in interpreting the world is the “camera view” technique. It poses the question, “What would a camera see?” as a framework for helping young people step back and view a situation from a different perspective. This provides an opportunity to reflect on how their thoughts are connected to their responses, helping young people de-bias their thinking and consider another perspective before acting.

Critical to instilling the most important active ingredients of CBT, these exercises are a sampling of what the curriculum offers to help youth take control of their own decision-making.

Highlights

- People play a role in the reality they see or narrative constructed
- People have a choice in how to interpret and respond to situations
- CBT helps people recognize thought patterns that influence their actions

A Guide to Delivery: The User’s Manual

Replicating effective CBT programs requires an understanding not just of the best “active ingredients” for youth in detention, but also how to deliver them. Along with the *CBT 2.0 Curriculum*, we created an accompanying *User’s Manual*. This is a critical piece of the material because it highlights insights about effective and engaging delivery of the curriculum based on conversations with JTDC staff and implementers of other evidence-based CBT curricula.

We discovered that staff members emphasized these key elements when working with youth in their CBT groups, but also extended the same lens outside group sessions, using it in all their daily interactions with the young people in their care. They made it a point to talk to the young people about the big and the small decisions they were making every day and show them how to look at situations through the lens of CBT. The JTDC staff was continually connecting real-life situations to the larger goals of CBT.

In addition, the staff repeatedly mentioned that they often improvise and pick and choose specific elements from the curricular materials, adapting themes to real life situations youths in their group had encountered. In a sense, what they delivered was *based* on the curriculum, but was not a rote implementation of it.

Highlights

- Staff used the curriculum and activities as a guide while improvising and adapting lessons to better serve their specific population
- Similarly, providers who implement this curriculum should adapt materials to best fit the local context and needs of the participating population

Spreading Insights

Given how effective these programs are, we believe expanding their use can achieve tremendous social good. Collecting the most effective elements of CBT into a [curriculum](#) and pairing them with a helpful [User's Manual](#) (both available to download on ideas42's website) makes insights that help young people regain control of their own decision-making—and keep themselves from cycling back into the criminal justice system—accessible to people who work with at-risk youth nationwide.