

# What Works to Reduce Violent Crime

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**JUSTICE**  
TECH LAB

# What works to reduce violent crime?

- Today I'll tell you about several strategies backed by rigorous research evidence
  - What makes research “rigorous”?
    - A **good control group** that tells us what would have happened without the intervention
    - Economists look for “natural experiments” when randomized trials aren't possible
      - For example: staggered rollouts of programs across groups or states, age or risk score cutoffs, waitlists for program participation, arbitrary assignment to judges or case workers
- What about programs that aren't (yet) supported by research evidence?
  - There are lots of other things we can (and should!) try
    - But keep in mind: **Lots of well-meaning policies don't work in practice**
      - Some even backfire!
    - We should:
      - Be humble about how difficult it is to solve complex social problems
      - Carefully evaluate what we try to make sure we're moving in the right direction

# Increasing the probability of getting caught

- One reason we punish people for crime is to deter future crime
  - People respond to incentives, so increasing the expected cost of committing crime should reduce criminal behavior
  - Two ways to make criminal behavior more costly:
    - (a) Increase length of sentence
    - (b) Increase probability of getting caught



- It turns out that (a) doesn't work!
  - Would-be offenders don't think very far into the future, so adding years to a potential sentence doesn't change behavior today
  - **We don't get much deterrent effect from longer sentences**
- But (b) works very well!
  - Increasing the probability of getting caught increases short-term consequences
  - This has a dramatic effect on violent crime

# How to increase the probability of getting caught: Hire more police

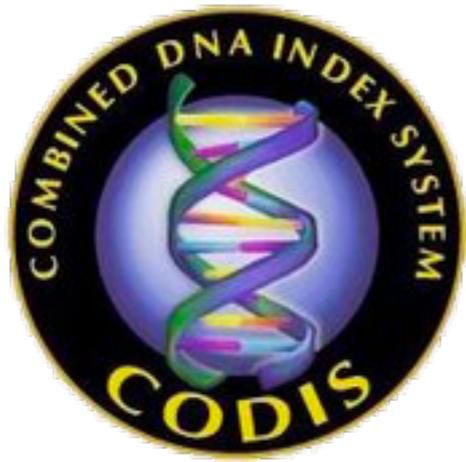
- There is lots of strong evidence that **increasing police presence reduces violent crime**, particularly homicide
  - Having more police around increases the probability that people will get caught when they commit crime
  - Hiring more police is therefore an excellent strategy to reduce violence
- Big caveat:
  - Increasing police presence can also have social costs
    - Unnecessary arrests, use of force
- We need **more and better** policing
  - How do we achieve the benefits of policing, with fewer costs?
  - Some options: Better training, greater accountability
    - This is the research & policy frontier! Happy to talk more about this in Q&A



# How to increase the probability of getting caught: Technology

- Many high-tech tools can increase detection — this deters crime
- Two examples:

- **DNA databases**



- Adding people to law enforcement DNA databases allows them to be matched to DNA from crime scenes where they might not otherwise have been a suspect
- This increases the probability they'll get caught
- Evidence from the US & Denmark:
  - Adding people charged with felony crimes reduced future charges by over 40%
  - Effects driven by young adults (under 25)

- **Cameras**



- Cameras in public places increase the likelihood that offenders will be identified
- Even if not monitored in real time
- Evidence from Sweden, Colombia, Uruguay: Cameras reduce robbery and other violent crime

# Leniency toward first-time (nonviolent) offenders

- We used to think that severe punishment for minor offenses would deter crime
  - “Broken windows” policing
- Recent evidence shows this isn’t true
  - **First-time offenders are at a fork in the road**
    - We can pull them into the CJ system, or send them on their way
    - It turns out that erring toward leniency at this stage reduces future crime



# Leniency toward first-time (nonviolent) offenders

- **Nonviolent misdemeanors:**

- Evidence from Suffolk County, MA (Boston):
  - Dropping charges at arraignment hearing reduces future charges by over 50% (including for violent crimes)
  - Effects driven by first-time defendants

- **Nonviolent felonies**

- Evidence from Harris County, TX (Houston):
  - Deferred adjudications (dropping charges after a probationary period) reduces future convictions by 48-66% (including for violent crimes)
  - Also increases future employment & earnings over subsequent 10 years
  - Effects driven by first-time felony defendants
- Giving people a second chance to avoid a first conviction has big public safety benefits

# Access to mental health care

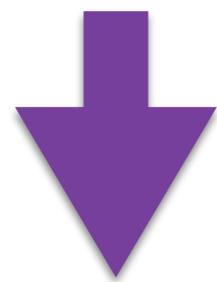
- 44% of jail inmates and 37% of prison inmates have a history of mental health problems
  - This can lead to self-medication (alcohol & drugs)
  - 42% of jail inmates and 47% of prison inmates met criteria for drug dependence
- Increasing access to mental health care prevents violent crime:
  - **In several states:** Expanding Medicaid to include low-income, childless adults reduces violent crime by 5-6%
    - Increases access to mental health care and substance use treatment
  - **In several states:** Each additional substance use treatment center that opens in a county reduces homicide by 0.2%
  - **South Carolina:** Removing young adults from Medicaid at age 19 increases likelihood of incarceration in the next two years by 15%
    - Effects are driven by those with mental health histories, and are larger for those who used Medicaid to access medication related to mental health treatment
  - **Missouri:** Connecting those with mental health needs to local health care services (very light touch intervention!) reduced future arrests by 16%

# Summer jobs for teens

- Lots of evidence that Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) reduce violent crime
  - Provides a part-time, minimum wage job during the summer months
  - These programs are often capacity-constrained, so jobs are allocated by a fair lottery
    - This enables **randomized controlled trials!**
    - Research shows the offer of a summer job has the following effects:

## Chicago

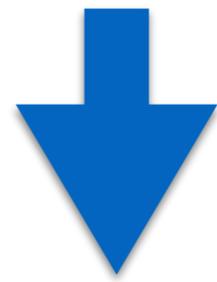
Violent  
crime arrests



**33-42%**

## Boston

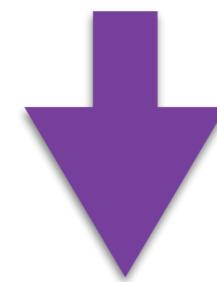
Violent  
crime arrests



**37%**

## NYC

Deaths (mostly  
homicide)



**18%**

# Summer jobs for teens

- Why do summer jobs this work?
  - It's not just giving teens something to do during the summer — effects last long after summer jobs end
  - Mechanisms seems to be some combo of:
    - Giving teens a glimpse of a different path, giving them something different to aspire to
    - Supervisors serve as informal mentors who help teens learn how to interact with adults, handle workplace disagreements, etc.
      - Could spill over into other interactions at school & in the world

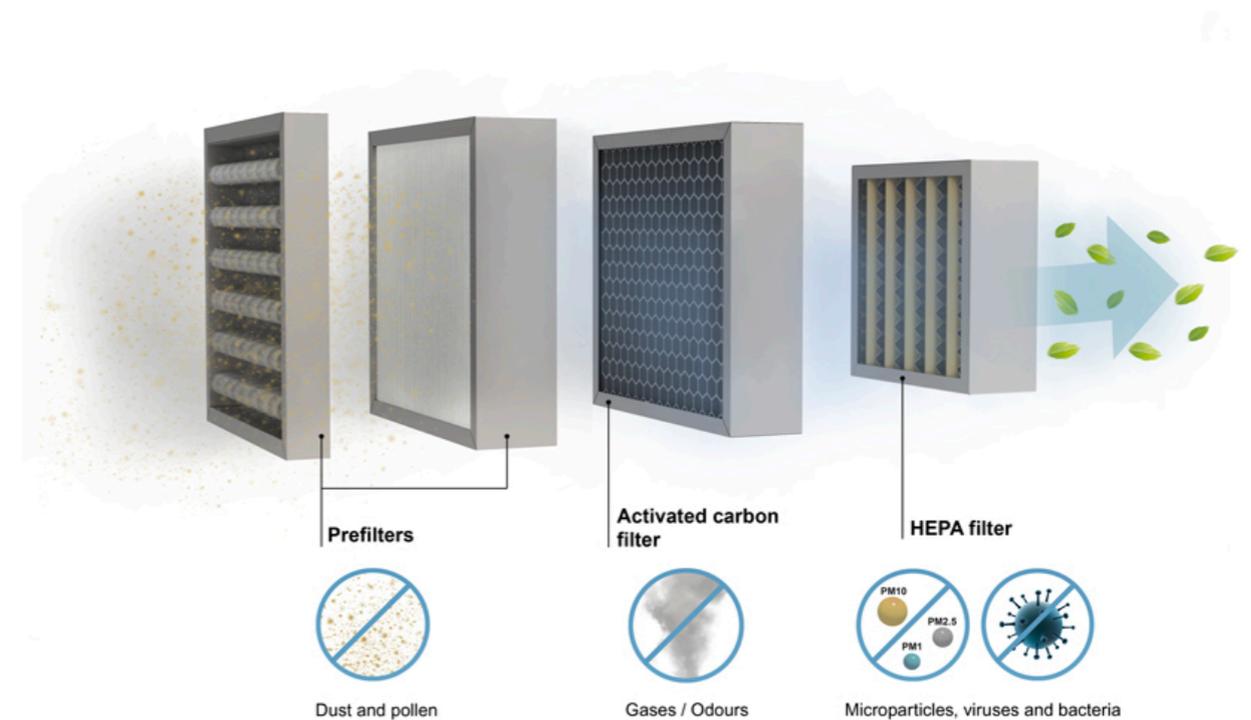


# Public assistance

- Public assistance for adults can prevent a first offense and reduce recidivism
  - Access to food stamps reduces recidivism
  - Access to housing reduces future criminal charges (especially among those with prior criminal justice involvement)
  - Access to welfare/SSI for young adults reduces future criminal charges
- Effects are typically larger for income-generating crimes, including robbery
- Felony convictions often bar people from receiving public assistance
  - This is counterproductive!
- **Public assistance also has long-term & intergenerational benefits**
  - Implementation of Head Start reduced CJ involvement of next generation (kids of those who received Head Start)
  - Access to food stamps in early childhood reduces CJ involvement later in life
  - Improving healthcare & nutrition appears to be particularly beneficial

# Reducing exposure to air pollution

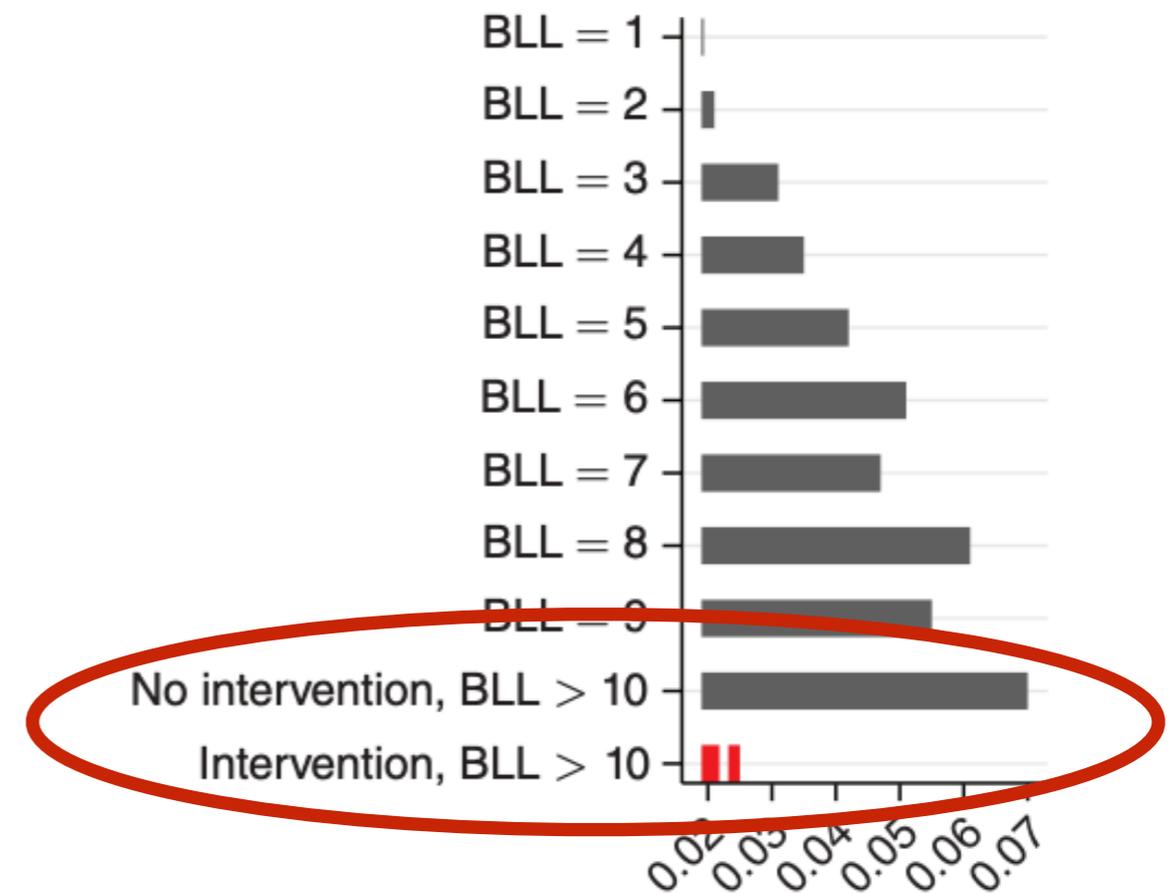
- Exposure to air pollution increases violent crime **in real time**
  - When wind blows car exhaust from highways in one direction versus another, violent crime goes up by 1.9% in the neighborhood on the downwind side
- Reducing exposure to air pollution can thus have big violence-reduction benefits
  - Examples:
    - Install high-quality HEPA filters in schools and other public buildings
    - Make such filters affordable and easily available for private homes



# Reducing and addressing lead exposure

- Exposure to lead in early childhood increases violence later (as teens/young adults)
  - Reducing lead in soil, housing, and water pipes prevents this
    - Big, future public safety benefits
- **For kids already exposed:** CDC-recommended intervention for young children with high blood-lead-levels reduces the likelihood of a future violent crime arrest by over 60%
  - Intervention includes a caseworker, nutrition advice (consuming calcium can help block lead absorption), and sometimes lead abatement (e.g. replacement of windows)

Panel F. Violent crime



# Investing in infrastructure

- Street lighting reduces street crime like robbery
  - Better lighting can make it easier for potential victims to avoid danger
  - Better lighting also increases the probability that an offender will be identified and caught, thus deterring crime



- Exposure to heat increases violence
  - Make sure air conditioning is available and functioning on hot days

- Greening vacant lots can reduce local street crime
  - Planting more trees, and turning vacant lots into parks, has crime-reduction benefits
  - May work partly by increasing foot traffic in the area, improving air quality, and reducing temperatures



Thank you!

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