

Today's Urban Landscape

The world is facing the highest rate of urbanization in human history. By 2050, the global urban population will nearly double to 6.4 billion. This unprecedented growth in the global urban population creates incredible opportunities but also intensifies the most difficult problems cities face, such as concentrated poverty, crime, poor-quality schooling and health care, and pollution.

The University of Chicago founded Urban Labs to help address these challenges. Urban Labs partners with cities to identify and test the policies and programs with the greatest potential to improve human lives at scale. Urban Labs' evidence-based approach gives policymakers and practitioners the knowledge they need to effectively and cost-efficiently improve urban life.

Our Approach

UChicago Urban Labs utilizes rigorous scientific methods and analysis to assess the impact of policies and programs with potential to generate large-scale social change. Specifically, Urban Labs:



Identifies promising solutions to urban challenges.

Finding solutions to the world's most significant urban challenges requires close collaboration with those most familiar with the unique issues and opportunities their cities face. Urban Labs partners with public and nonprofit organizations to identify policies and programs with high potential to affect large-scale social change. One of Urban Labs' primary approaches to identifying these programs is its Innovation Challenge, a competition that invites citizens and organizations from across sectors to submit comprehensive proposals for addressing the major challenges facing their communities.



Tests the most promising urban policies and programs.

There is no shortage of urban policy innovation, but there is a dire lack of evidence about which policies and programs work to improve human lives, and why. Urban Labs uses rigorous scientific methods like randomized controlled trials and machine learning to test different approaches to improving urban life and predict who will benefit most from them. We then share the evidence with our civic partners to help them prioritize scarce resources and invest in the policies and programs that will achieve the greatest social good per dollar spent.



Scale Up the most effective and cost-efficient policies and programs.

Urban Labs' goal is social impact. Labs works with civic and community partners in Chicago and around the world to help them scale-up the most effective and cost-efficient approaches to improving human lives. Private and philanthropic funds support much of Urban Labs' initial discovery and evaluation work, which generates evidence that policymakers can use to channel significant public resources toward scaling-up proven policies and programs.

Urban Labs utilizes this approach across five labs that tackle urban challenges in the **crime, education, energy & environment, health, and poverty** domains.

Examples of Impact

Crime Lab

The Crime Lab has closely studied the Chicago nonprofit Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man (B.A.M.) program and found results that suggest it is possible to dramatically and cost-effectively reduce violence by helping kids make better judgments and decisions. Evidence suggests that lethal violence is often the result of impulsive or automatic behavior. B.A.M. helps youth slow down and respond more reflectively rather than reflexively in high-stakes situations. Our randomized controlled trials find that B.A.M. cuts violent crime arrests among youth in half and boosts the high school graduation rate of participants by nearly 20 percent. The program and our rigorous evidence of effectiveness were key inspirations for President Obama's 2014 announcement of his My Brother's Keeper initiative to improve the lives of young men of color in America. The city of Chicago is also now scaling B.A.M. as part of its anti-violence strategy.

Education Lab

The Education Lab shows it is possible to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged youth. Some have argued that improving the academic skills of children in poverty is too difficult and costly once they reach adolescence. Very few interventions, however, have targeted a key barrier to adolescents' school success: "mismatch" between what regular classrooms deliver and the needs of youth, particularly those who are far behind grade level. Our research has shown that high-intensity, individualized math tutoring can substantially improve outcomes for at-risk youth by helping students catch back up to grade level so they can re-engage with regular classroom instruction. Students who participated in this tutoring program in Chicago gained one to two additional years of math knowledge in a year, equivalent to reducing the black-white achievement gap by roughly a third. This evidence has led Chicago and New York City to invest public resources into bringing this promising intervention to thousands of young people.

Energy & Environment Lab

The Energy & Environment Lab conducted a large-scale study in Gujarat, one of India's most industrialized and polluted states. The study examined how auditors were hired and compensated and found that simple, low-cost changes in the design of the auditing program—including random assignment of auditors to firms—led to a 28 percent decrease in pollution. As a result of the study, the government is phasing in a new regulatory approach across Gujarat.

Health Lab

The Health Lab is in the midst of a large-scale study designed to test whether people at high risk for hospitalization receive improved care, attain better health outcomes, and face lower costs when they receive care from the same doctor in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Initial findings suggest the approach causes dramatic decreases in costs and significant improvements in health outcomes. The Health Lab is in discussions with partners nationwide about plans to scale this approach.

Poverty Lab

The Poverty Lab is currently studying Chicago's youth summer jobs program. The program aims to reduce crime through part-time work and mentoring for Chicago's most at-risk youth. The Poverty Lab's randomized trial showed that the program reduced violence among participants by 43 percent. Beyond the remarkable result, these effects had unusual staying power—with continued violence reduction more than a year after the program ended. This evidence helped the city of Chicago raise \$10 million in private funding to triple the size of the program over three years. Together with an affiliate in Philadelphia, the Poverty Lab is also working to understand the program's key mechanisms to create the most successful blueprint for further scale up nationwide.

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The world is facing the highest rate of urbanization in human history. By 2050, the global urban population will nearly double to 6.4 billion. This unprecedented growth creates incredible opportunities but also intensifies the most difficult problems cities face. This is especially true of crime and violence, which plague cities' most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations and can prevent the growth of vibrant and diverse urban communities.

Improving the safety and vitality of our communities will require identifying and rigorously evaluating programs and policies designed to reduce crime levels.

About Urban Labs

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About the Crime Lab

Scientific research has dramatically changed our understanding of what drives human behavior and what types of social conditions are the most important risk or protective factors for violence involvement. The Crime Lab uses insights from basic science to help government agencies and nonprofit organizations develop and rigorously test innovative approaches to reducing crime and violence. We also combine lessons from randomized experiments with machine learning and predictive analytics to help better understand who benefits most from policy interventions and why as a way to improve targeting and ensure successful scale-up.

Examples of Impact

Becoming A Man

Lethal violence is often a result not of a carefully premeditated act, but rather impulsive or automatic responses to situations in the heat of the moment. Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man (B.A.M.) program is designed to help at-risk youth slow down and make better judgments and decisions when faced with these situations. The program's key ingredient—cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)—is designed to reduce common judgment and decision-making problems related to automatic behavior and biased beliefs. The Crime Lab's randomized controlled trials have found that B.A.M. cuts violent crime arrests among youth in half and boosts the high school graduation rates of participants by nearly 20 percent. The program and our rigorous evidence of effectiveness were key inspirations for President Obama's 2014 announcement of his My Brother's Keeper initiative to improve the lives of young men of color in America. The city of Chicago is also now scaling B.A.M. as part of its anti-violence strategy.

Reducing Recidivism in Juvenile Detention

Research has shown that most "criminal careers" begin and end in adolescence, when offending rates are highest. Large social cost savings would be possible if we could find strategies to reduce recidivism among youth; unfortunately, such proven strategies are rare. A Crime Lab study in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) suggests a promising approach to reducing recidivism among at-risk youth. Our researchers rigorously evaluated a program that, like Becoming a Man, was designed to reduce the sort of impulsive, automatic decisions that can get people in trouble. This approach, also based on cognitive behavioral therapy, showed JTDC residents how their thoughts lead to actions, helped them change the type of thinking that can lead to actions they want to avoid, and also helped them break the link between thinking patterns and those behaviors. Our study showed that youth who were randomly assigned to the intervention were less likely to return to the JTDC within a year or 18 months. We estimate that for every dollar the JTDC spent, there were between four and eight dollars of benefits to society in the form of reduced costs of incarcerating youth alone. That doesn't include the benefits of reduced crime. These findings are helping to reshape policymakers' views about what drives much of the youth violence on the streets of Chicago and how best to prevent it.

Multi-City Gun Markets Project

Gun violence plagues urban areas around the country and has a disproportionate and regressive impact on cities' most racially and economically segregated communities. Homicide is the leading cause of death for black males 15-24, responsible for more deaths than the nine other leading causes combined. The economic impacts of violence are also wide reaching, pushing out residents and businesses that help neighborhoods thrive. Yet despite the scope of this problem, little is known about the underground markets that put guns in the hands of those who commit crimes. Our researchers are currently conducting an ambitious study to better understand how illegal guns change hands, how they are kept, and how they are used. This effort—which includes affiliate research on both coasts in addition to in Chicago—involves offender interviews, trace-data analysis, and in-depth machine learning examination of social networks. By providing law enforcement with new insight into how illegal gun markets operate, the Crime Lab is helping to bring policy and practice shifts that may reduce the human toll of gun violence in the U.S.

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About the Education Lab

The Education Lab was launched with the goal of generating knowledge to help improve educational outcomes for children growing up in some of the most distressed urban neighborhoods in Chicago, across the country, and around the world. While there is broad agreement about the urgency, importance, and difficulty of improving schooling outcomes for disadvantaged urban youth, the solution to this problem is far from clear. The Education Lab uses scientific methods like randomized controlled trials and predictive analytics to study promising programs and policies. Education Lab research provides feedback to help communities and leaders best invest scarce resources in effective and cost-efficient programs that can change students' lives.

Examples of Impact

Intensive Tutoring

Most attempts to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged adolescents have yielded disappointing results. This has led some to argue that improving the academic skills of children in poverty is too difficult and costly once they reach adolescence. Recent Education Lab research has shown that this conclusion is premature. Very few interventions have targeted a key barrier to school success: “mismatch” between what is being taught and the academic level of youth, particularly those far behind grade level. In partnership with SAGA Innovations and the Chicago Public Schools, the Education Lab has shown that providing individualized tutoring for an hour a day during the regular school day can substantially improve outcomes for youth. Students who participated in this tutoring program gained one to two additional years of math knowledge in a single year, equivalent to reducing the black-white achievement gap by roughly a third. This evidence has led Chicago and New York to invest public resources to bring this promising intervention to thousands of young people.

Helping Community College Students Graduate

Community colleges have become powerful vehicles for social mobility in the U.S. and are particularly important for populations that face challenges in the labor market: first-generation and low-income students are much more likely to enroll in community colleges than in four-year institutions. Deeply discouraging, though, is that only one in four community college students will graduate within three years. While local and national leaders, recognizing the promise of community colleges, have worked to increase enrollments in these two-year programs, little is known about how to ensure that these students eventually graduate. The Education Lab and the UChicago Poverty Lab have launched a study to address this challenge with an evaluation of a Chicago program called One Million Degrees (OMD). OMD seeks to improve graduation rates and prepare students for success in the modern labor market. The Education Lab and the Poverty Lab are currently evaluating OMD’s efficacy, as well as which components of the program are most important. Understanding this will give policymakers and practitioners across the nation tools to effectively guide as many community college students as possible toward graduation and future success.

Online Educational Enhancement Program

The youth most likely to commit violent crimes are also those that our traditional education system, focused on increasing average performance, is least well positioned to serve. These young people are often years behind in school and the same social and emotional problems that put them at risk for criminal involvement are also barriers to success in traditional classrooms. Further, once they fall into the juvenile justice system, these young people start cycling in and out of institutional settings, making continuity in education an acute challenge. Online courses, designed particularly for corrections settings, may provide a viable alternative to this inconsistent educational experience. The Education Lab is partnering with the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) to test the effectiveness of an innovative virtual schooling program in fostering the skills and motivation of youth detained in juvenile correctional facilities.

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The world is facing the highest rate of urbanization in human history. By 2050, the global urban population will nearly double to 6.4 billion. Cities already consume a majority of the world's energy—for the buildings where we live and work, the cars and buses we use to get around, and the industrial facilities that produce our goods. While urban areas are engines of innovation, they are also home to severe air and water pollution. One million premature deaths are linked to urban air pollution each year, and cities generate 75 percent of global carbon emissions. Improving our environment will require identifying and rigorously evaluating policies and programs designed to reduce energy consumption and pollution.

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About the Energy & Environment Lab

The Energy & Environment Lab aims to unlock the full potential of modern cities by finding cost-effective solutions to the greatest energy and environmental challenges. We do this by working in the places where progress will have the greatest impact, and then replicating those solutions in cities around the world. Our research agenda includes ways to improve energy and water conservation, boost access to clean and reliable energy, mitigate and adapt to climate change, and reduce pollution. Energy and Environment Lab researchers tackle these challenges by using insights from behavioral science, as well as regulatory and pricing levers, and working hand-in-hand with policymakers to test which methods work. This approach gives policymakers the evidence they need to create cost-effective solutions to our world's most important energy and environmental challenges.

Examples of Impact

Helping Low-Income Families Save On Their Energy Bills

High energy costs can contribute to the cycle of debt that plagues many disadvantaged households. In Cook County, low-income households spend, on average, 18 percent of their gross income on home energy costs. To confront this challenge, the Energy & Environment Lab is partnering with ComEd and Elevate Energy—winners of the 2015 Urban Labs Innovation Challenge—on a new initiative, called ComEd Simple Savings. Leveraging smart meter technology, this initiative will assist households in managing energy costs, and will produce insights for improved energy programs that serve low income households.

Removing Conflict-Of-Interest To Improve The Environment In Gujarat, India

Despite stringent environmental standards, Gujarat is one of India's most polluted states. For years, third-party auditors reported that factories were within the state standards. At the time, auditors were hired and compensated directly by factories, creating a powerful incentive for them to protect those factories. Neither the Gujarat environmental regulators nor the auditors themselves thought the status quo was producing accurate information about pollution. As a result, regulators were unwilling to take action based on audit reports. UChicago researchers tested a series of reforms that incentivized truthful reporting, including randomly assigning auditors to industrial plants and having their work double-checked for accuracy. The reforms led to more accurate reports, and reduced pollution by 28 percent. The Gujarat government has since adopted these reforms.

Local Innovation for a Better Environment

Urbanization is a key driver of economic prosperity around the world. Yet cities like Delhi, India, that are engines of innovation and growth, are also home to formidable energy and environment-related challenges—including having some of the worst air pollution in the world. Together with the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago's India team (EPIC-India) and the Delhi government, the Energy & Environment Lab held an Innovation Challenge to crowdsource new ideas to cut pollution in India's capital city. After a nearly year-long search and more than 250 submissions, three winning ideas were identified and will receive more than \$300,000 altogether to implement their projects. The three winning ideas are:

- **Chakr Innovation Pvt. Ltd.**, which will pilot their device that captures pollution from diesel engines and converts it to black ink and paints
- **Climate Foundation and Tide Technocrats Pvt. Ltd.**, which will prevent pollution from rice straw burning by turning it into biochar; and
- **Mahila Housing SEWA Trust**, which will deploy cool roofing solutions in Delhi slums to conserve energy and improve quality of life

The winners will now work with the Energy & Environment Lab, EPIC-India, and the Delhi government to implement and test their ideas to cut pollution in Delhi. The Urban Labs Innovation Challenge: Delhi is a project of the Tata Centre of Development which is supported by Tata Trusts.

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About the Health Lab

The crushing cost of health care for individuals and government, and evidence that many vulnerable populations are particularly underserved creates an urgent imperative to improve health care in the United States. The Health Lab was launched to use rigorous scientific research to address the far-reaching impact of poor public health and soaring health care costs in cities. While new resources have been made available by the Affordable Care Act, we still need to understand how they can best be used by policymakers and practitioners, especially to serve populations with little or no access to care: the homeless, the elderly and people in the criminal justice system. Health Lab researchers work in close collaboration with communities, nonprofits, and governments to identify the best policies and programs to improve access to effective, affordable care. This strategy helps ensure that tight city budgets are focused on efficiently and cost-effectively improving the health of not just the fortunate few, but of as many people as possible.

Examples of Impact

Comprehensive Care Physician Program

Typically, hospitalized patients are seen by hospitalists while primary care doctors provide general outpatient medical care in clinics. Unfortunately this lack of continuity in care does not always bring optimal outcomes, particularly for some of the most vulnerable patients. The Health Lab is conducting a large-scale study to test whether people at high risk for hospitalization have improved care, attain better health outcomes, and face lower costs when they receive care from the same doctor in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Preliminary findings suggest the approach causes dramatic decreases in costs and significant improvements in health outcomes. The Health Lab is in discussions with prospective partners nationwide about plans to scale this approach.

Supportive Release Center

Mental health in the nation's jail and prison systems is a persistent and difficult challenge. The National Alliance on Mental Illness estimates that between 25 and 40 percent of all Americans with mental illness will be jailed or incarcerated in their lifetimes. This fact is especially powerful at Chicago's Cook County Jail, where it is estimated that on any given day, up to one in three inmates suffers from mental illness. The Health Lab, in partnership with Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC), Heartland Health Outreach, and the Cook County Sheriff's Office, is helping to design and create a "Supportive Release Center" (SRC). The SRC hopes to help individuals with mental illness transition to services in their communities following their release from the Cook County Jail. Scheduled to open in the fall of 2016, the SRC will offer a brief, overnight stay and linkages to community support services to detainees released from the jail who have a history of mental illness and behavioral health issues. The SRC will work to stabilize individuals as they leave the jail in hopes of improving health outcomes and decreasing recidivism. To test outcomes, the Health Lab will conduct a rigorous, randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of the center on health and criminal justice outcomes.

Westside Narcotics Diversion And Treatment Initiative

Police officers and criminal justice leaders on Chicago's West Side have long known that some of the people they see on the streets and in the courts are addicted to narcotics, and are buying drugs or even selling them to support their addiction. A research collaboration between the Crime Lab and Health Lab, the Westside Narcotics Diversion and Treatment Initiative is an effort to pilot and evaluate a new diversion and treatment program in Chicago police districts 10, 11, and 15. Partnering on this work are the Chicago Police Department (CPD), the Chicago High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, and three service providers (Heartland Health Outreach, Thresholds, and Haymarket Center). Under CPD's current Westside Complex Narcotics Initiative, undercover officers conduct two- to four-week investigations to identify individuals involved in drug trafficking. Instead of arrest and prosecution, eligible individuals will have the opportunity to engage in treatment for narcotics addiction with select service providers. The Health & Crime Lab plan to conduct a rigorous, randomized controlled trial to study the program's impacts on individual recidivism rates and health outcomes.

Chicago Children's Advocacy Center

In the U.S., 1 in 7 girls and 1 in 25 boys report being sexually abused before age 18, and experts estimate that much more abuse goes unreported. Child victims of sexual abuse are at increased risk for a variety of mental and physical health issues. But comprehensive mental health services can help mitigate those risks. In partnership with Chicago Children's Advocacy Center (CCAC), a local nonprofit that provides evidence-based mental health services for children who have been sexually abused, the Health Lab will evaluate the effectiveness of CCAC's comprehensive services. The Health Lab will partner with CCAC and the Chicago Department of Public Health to analyze data that CCAC collects about children who either receive services or are identified as needing services as part of their normal operations. This study will target an existing literature gap by directly evaluating mental health treatment for child sexual abuse victims as it relates to longer-term outcomes like academic performance and future involvement in the criminal justice system.

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About the Poverty Lab

The Poverty Lab was founded to apply rigorous scientific research to the ongoing challenge of urban poverty and economic inequality. Despite the fact that nearly 80 percent of all goods and services produced worldwide come from cities, many urban residents struggle to support themselves and their families. In Chicago alone, over a half a million people live in poverty. Using rigorous methods such as randomized controlled trials and predictive analytics, the Poverty Lab works with communities, nonprofits, and government agencies to discover the best policies and programs to alleviate economic hardship for the most disadvantaged. Ultimately, this will help ensure that scarce resources are spent on the most efficient and cost-effective poverty reduction interventions and can reach and help the most people possible.

Examples of Impact

Transforming Impossible Into Possible

The Chicago Jobs Council, in partnership with Loyola University Chicago, will be launching a workforce development program called Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) for the long-term unemployed. TIP was developed by Dr. Phillip Hong at Loyola after he and many workforce development professionals realized that more practice interviews might not be enough to overcome the larger barriers to employment experienced by those living in poverty.

The program is based on group social work practice and aims to help long-term unemployed adults identify personal barriers that have prevented them from achieving success in the job market and works to inspire and build the confidence necessary to overcome these challenges. A winner of a \$500,000 grant from Urban Labs' inaugural Innovation Challenge in Chicago, TIP will be rigorously evaluated using a randomized controlled trial by the Poverty Lab. The results of this study will improve understanding of the effectiveness of this new approach to helping struggling people find the inspiration and grit to re-enter and stick in the job market.

After School Matters

Poverty Lab is partnering with After School Matters (ASM) to study the impact of out-of-school programming on the educational and criminal justice outcomes for some of Chicago's most at-risk youth. Last year, ASM served over 15,000 teens at 73 Chicago high schools and over 270 community-based sites throughout the city making it one of the largest youth service providers on the city's south and west sides. Despite their huge reach, young men—who are at elevated risk of violence involvement and victimization—are underrepresented in their programming. In fact, only 40 percent of participants in programming are men and ASM wants to find new avenues to increase that number. Poverty Lab will help identify the most powerful approaches to reaching this high-risk group. It will also work to identify which programming has the greatest impact for youth and help ASM target programs to the age groups, genders, and even communities that could benefit from them most. By studying ways to improve the participation rates of young men who are at the greatest risk of experiencing violence, this research could help ASM and other providers of promising youth violence prevention programming better engage youth and begin to address the trauma experienced every day in disadvantaged communities across Chicago and in other cities.

OneGoal

Poverty Lab will work with OneGoal, a Chicago non-profit that provides support to students from underperforming CPS high schools as they apply to college and transition to postsecondary education. Specifically, OneGoal pairs 25 to 30 high school juniors within a school with driven teachers who help them prepare for college, coach them through the testing and application process, and support them during their first year. Preliminary evidence suggests that OneGoal has a positive impact on enrollment and retention in college. Beginning in the 2016-17 school year, OneGoal will experiment with a new model that expands their program to 100 to 125 students per school in four different sites. Poverty Lab will conduct a rigorous social science evaluation to assess the impact of quadrupling the number of students served in each school. The Lab will also study the impact of the program's traditional model using a randomized controlled trial at 30 of the 70 high schools where OneGoal operates. Both studies hope to better understand how to expand the benefits of OneGoal to as many young people in a school as possible. Educational success is a long-term determinant of a variety of positive life outcomes, and through this partnership Poverty Lab hopes to help young people in Chicago and beyond build better futures for themselves.