



Early Evidence from the Chicago Safe Passage Program

F. Chris Curran, University of Florida

Students attending schools in urban areas are often at a heightened risk of experiencing violence or criminal activity on their way to and from school. If rationale is needed to work to prevent children from exposure to violence — research suggests that encountering such crime, particularly violent crime, outside of school can have significant impacts on students' academic performance — though protecting children from exposure from crime seems to justify itself.

The Chicago Context

In the city of Chicago, such a risk is particularly pronounced as the city consistently ranks among the nation's highest in rates of homicide and other criminal activity.

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the individual stories of students impacted by violence on the way to and from school. For example, in 2009, Chicago Public Schools honors student Derrion Albert tragically lost his life in an act of violence after being caught in a fight between two groups of students on his way home from school.

Consequently, when CPS planned the closure of nearly fifty schools in a consolidation effort prior to the 2013-14 school year, concerns about the safety of students as they travelled to new schools were at the forefront of policymakers and the public's minds.

The Chicago Safe Passage Program

Given these concerns, CPS initiated a large-scale expansion of the Safe Passage program which had previously been implemented at only a handful of schools. Safe Passage is a coordinated effort between schools, law enforcement, and communities to provide safe routes to and from school for students. The primary component of the program is the placement of adult monitors on designated "Safe Passage" routes around schools during both morning and afternoon commute times. These monitors serve as guardians with the goal of providing safe routes to and from school, and, in doing so, theoretically may reduce crime around schools.

At the time of the 2013-14 expansion, CPS hired and placed around 600 Safe Passage workers across the city at over fifty designated schools. Since then, the program has continued to expand, currently involving over a thousand employees spread across nearly 160 schools. As a result of the scale, the program is expensive, with the weekly cost of wages alone totaling around a quarter of a million dollars.

Policymakers in Chicago have partially justified the program through claims that Safe Passage reduces crime. This claim, however, had not been empirically examined by researchers until recently. In a new study, I

leveraged longitudinal, geo-coded crime data to test these policymakers' claims by examining the impact of Safe Passage on reported crime.

Does the Chicago Safe Passage Program Reduce Reported Crime Around Schools?

Key findings of my recent study include the following:

- *Safe Passage may reduce reported crime on designated routes relative to nearby streets.* Estimates in the study suggest that Safe Passage may decrease reported crime by 5 to 17% relative to streets two blocks away, estimates that are smaller in magnitude than reductions suggested by the school district in the past. The biggest reductions in crime were apparent for crimes occurring outside during school hours.
- *Reductions in crime were also apparent on Safe Passage routes during weekend times as well, suggesting that some of the effect was not attributable directly to the presence of Safe Passage workers.* It is possible that the Safe Passage designations deterred crime from the designated routes even in the absence of the workers or that other aspects of the Safe Passage intervention, such as efforts to address signs of disrepair along routes, may have impacted crime rates. Alternatively, however, this result could also point to some of the effect being attributable to changing patterns in crime that might have occurred regardless of the Safe Passage intervention.
- *Despite some evidence that specific routes may be safer, Safe Passage did not necessarily decrease general levels of reported crime around participating schools.* Following the 2013 consolidation of schools in Chicago, participation in the Safe Passage program did not predict lower crime rates in the quarter mile around schools. It is possible that any decreases in crime from Safe Passage were offset by increases in crime attributable to changing patterns of student attendance at remaining schools.

Is the Safe Passage Program a Worthwhile Investment?

If more serious crimes are deterred, Safe Passage's financial cost may be justified by crime reduction. Based on conservative estimates from my study, back of the envelope calculations suggest that each crime prevented by the Safe Passage program would need to save approximately \$23,000 dollars to justify the program's cost. While this may seem high, crime is expensive to society. The estimated costs of crimes like murder, rape, sexual assault, and robbery are all generally estimated as exceeding the threshold estimated in this study, so it is plausible that Safe Passage could be economically justified through crime reduction.

That said, the value of the program may depend as much on non-crime outcomes as it does on any reductions in crime. The purpose of the Safe Passage program was not explicitly to reduce reported crime. Rather, the program sought to increase students' safety as they commute to and from school. Therefore, future evaluations of the program should consider the impact on students' feelings of safety, attendance, and academic achievement. Positive impacts on these academic outcomes could further justify the program's cost.

In sum, the Chicago Safe Passage program may be contributing to reductions in crime on designated routes, though past estimates from the school district as to the magnitude of these reductions may be oversold. The findings of this study provide the first empirical evidence on the program's impacts, but much remains to be

done, particularly exploring impacts on students' academic outcomes.

Read more in F. Chris Curran, "Does the Chicago Safe Passage Program Reduce Reported Crime Around Elementary Schools? Evidence from Longitudinal, Geocoded Crime Data," *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, (2018).