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Couple Wins Award for Proposed Pilot to Reduce Youth Crime in Baltimore City

Researchers seek to bring evidence-based model for reducing youth crime to Baltimore

BALTIMORE - Today, the Abell Foundation awarded its 2017 Abell Award in Urban Policy to George Zuo and Dr. Stephanie Zuo for their paper, [Juvenile Crime and the Heat of the Moment: A Proposal to Pilot Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Interventions to Reduce Youth Crime and Recidivism in Baltimore City](#). George Zuo is a doctoral candidate in economics at the University of Maryland, College Park. His wife, Stephanie, graduated from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in 2017, and is a first-year resident at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine/Montefiore Medical Center Obstetrics and Gynecology program.

High rates of youth crime and recidivism plague Baltimore City, despite years of efforts to reduce both. City agencies and local practitioners have dedicated resources to solving this problem, but rates of youth violence and recidivism have remained fairly consistent over the last five years. Currently, Baltimore youth are nearly 50 percent more likely to recidivate than the average Maryland juvenile. The Zuos have witnessed the effects of this violence first hand - Stephanie as a medical student in the hospital and George as a volunteer in the community. They feel it is time to try a new solution.

In their paper, the Zuos propose piloting cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) with youth offenders and those at risk of committing violence, working with the Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center and select Baltimore City Public Schools that rank in the lowest five percent for reading and mathematics scores. CBT is a psychotherapy treatment that has been used for years to treat mental health disorders by helping people adjust negative thinking to respond to situations in more appropriate ways. More recently, cities like Chicago have had success using CBT as one strategy to address youth violence.

For many young people, one bad decision in "the heat of the moment" traps them in a cycle of violence and incarceration for life. In their proposal, the Zuos asked, "what if we could break this cycle?" Their paper shows how Chicago has used CBT to reduce youth crime and recidivism in select neighborhoods since 2010. Working with young men in schools and in juvenile detention, Chicago was able to reduce youth crime and repeat offenses among program participants by teaching them strategies to recognize and regulate negative and violent behavior. The in-school program, Becoming a Man, saw total arrests fall by 28 percent and graduation rates increase by 12 percent among participants in the first year.

The Zuos believe these proven, cost-effective interventions would work in Baltimore City as an additional strategy to combat youth crime, specifically violent crime. By providing training and compensation to teachers and juvenile justice staff, Baltimore could leverage existing resources to adapt and implement the evidence-based programs.

"We are extremely grateful to the Abell Foundation for the opportunity to share our research and experience," said George Zuo. "It was exciting to be able to combine our individual career paths with our personal passion to provide all youth with equal opportunities for academic and social achievement."

The Abell Award in Urban Policy is given annually to students who author the most compelling paper that analyzes a serious policy problem facing the city of Baltimore and proposes feasible solutions. Sponsored by the Abell Foundation and the Johns Hopkins Institute for Health and Social Policy, the contest is intended to encourage fresh thinking about the challenges facing Baltimore City and is open to all full-time students attending college or graduate school in Baltimore City. An independent selection committee reviews the submissions and decides on the allocation of the \$5,000 award.

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The Abell Foundation is dedicated to the enhancement of the quality of life in Maryland, with a particular focus on Baltimore City. The Foundation places a strong emphasis on opening the doors of opportunity to the disenfranchised, believing that no community can thrive if those who live on the margins of it are not included.

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