

2013, Vol. 7, No. 1

**JOURNAL OF
KNOWLEDGE
AND BEST PRACTICES
IN JUVENILE JUSTICE &
PSYCHOLOGY**

**Prairie View A&M University
College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology
Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center**

© 2013 College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology, Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center, Prairie View A&M University.
All rights reserved.

The College of Juvenile Justice and Psychology at Prairie View A&M University invites papers for publication in the Journal of Knowledge and Best Practices in Juvenile Justice & Psychology. The journal seeks relevant application research for the academic and practitioner communities of juvenile justice, psychology, and criminal justice. The editorial staff is soliciting both qualitative and quantitative articles on juvenile justice policy, delinquency prevention, treatment, and evaluation. The journal is published in hard copy and electronically. All articles submitted for review should be sent electronically to the senior editor gsosho@pvamu.edu. The articles should follow the APA style and be typed in 12 point font. All inquires and submissions should be directed to the senior editor.

All submissions must be done electronically and manuscripts will be promptly refereed. Reviewing will be double-blind. In submitting manuscripts, authors acknowledge that no paper will be submitted to another journal during the review period.

For publication in Journal of Knowledge and Best Practices in Juvenile Justice & Psychology:

- ♦ Manuscripts must follow the APA style (as outlined in the latest edition of Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.)
- ♦ The title of all papers should be centered and typed in caps on the first page with 12 point font.
- ♦ The title page must include the name, affiliation, title/academic rank, phone number, and the email address of the author(s).
- ♦ Submission of an electronic copy in MS Word as an attachment to co-editor: gsosho@pvamu.edu maximum of 25 pages with references and tables. The submission must be entirely original.
- ♦ All papers must be typed, double-spaced, on regular 8.5" x 11" paper, and fully justified with margins set to 1-inch top, bottom, left, and right with 12 point font.
- ♦ Acknowledgment should be placed before references. Manuscripts that meet the above requirements will be published in the forthcoming volume of *The Journal of Knowledge and Best Practices in Juvenile Justice & Psychology*.

Editor-in-Chief

Tamara L. Brown, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology
Executive Director, Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center
Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, TX 77446
Phone: (936) 261-5205

Senior Editor

Gbolahan S. Osho, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology
Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, TX 77446
Phone: (936) 261-5236

Journal of Knowledge and Best Practices in Juvenile Justice and Psychology

Editor-in-Chief

Tamara L. Brown, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology
Executive Director, Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center
Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas

Senior Editors

Gbolahan S. Osho, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, College of Juvenile Justice & Psychology
Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas

Editorial Advisory Board

Erin Espinosa, *University of Texas, Austin, Texas*
Delores James-Brown, *John Jay College, New York, New York*
Ihekwoaba Onwudiwe, *Texas Southern University, Houston, Texas*
Susan Ritter, *University of Texas, Brownsville, Texas*
Barbara Scobey, *Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, Austin, Texas*
Alejandro del Carmen, *University of Texas, Arlington, Texas*
Kathryn Sellers, *Kaplan University, Boca Raton, Florida*
Donna M. Vandiver, *Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas*
Scott H. Belshaw, *University of North Texas, Denton, Texas*

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Violence Free Zone in Milwaukee Public Schools: A Research Note

Byron R. Johnson
Baylor University

Andrew Gluck, Patricia Vazquez, and William Wubbenhorst
ICF International

The Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) is a youth mentoring program designed to address behaviors that result in truancies, suspensions, violent and nonviolent incidents, involvement in drugs and gangs, and poor academic performance in public middle and high schools. This study employed a quasi-experimental evaluation design, using data from VFZ students in Custer High School as the treatment group and all students at non-VFZ schools in Milwaukee as the control group from academic years 2006 to 2010. The purpose of the study is to assess the efficacy of the Violence Free Zone in providing mentoring services to high-risk, underserved youth within Milwaukee Public Schools. We find preliminary evidence that the Violence Free Zone reduces truancy and suspensions of the target population as well as improving schools' climate, more generally.

Keywords: youth mentoring, truancy, violence prevention, youth violence, Violence-Free Zone

We also know that in too many American schools there is a lawlessness where there should be learning...Make no mistake, this is a threat not to our classroom, but to America's public school system and, indeed, to the strength and vitality of our nation.

(President Bill Clinton, cited in Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999, p. 4)

Background

The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE) coordinates the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative through local organizations in several U.S. cities. The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE) was founded in 1981 by former civil rights activist and life-long community organizer Robert Woodson, Sr. The three founding principles established by Woodson to govern and direct CNE, which still serve as the guideposts for the organization 27 years later, are:

Byron R. Johnson, Baylor University; Andrew Gluck, Patricia Vazquez, and William Wubbenhorst, ICF International.

We would like to acknowledge the assistance offered to us through the staff at the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, the Milwaukee Public Schools Research Office, and the Runnin' Rebels. Support for this research was provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), U.S. Department of Justice (CFDA Number: 16.726). The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of OJJDP.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Byron R. Johnson, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences; Director, Program on Prosocial Behavior, Baylor University, One Bear Place, 97236, Waco, TX 76798. Phone: 254-710-7555. E-mail: BRJ@baylor.edu

(1) Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution; (2) The principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems; and (3) Value-generating and faith-based programs and groups are uniquely qualified to address the problems of poverty. At the core of CNE's philosophy and approach is a recognition that effective, community-based programs originate in those same communities, and not necessarily from ivory towers or subject matter experts who often have very little practical or first-hand knowledge of these communities. The Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative originated very much along these same lines, as community members worked closely with school safety officers, parents and local police to implement the program.

The thinking and approach of the VFZ initiative, a violence prevention and reduction program located within middle and high schools, was developed and formulated outside of the public school environment. Woodson first applied his knowledge on addressing youth violence and gang-related issues in January of 1997 at Benning Terrace, a public housing development in Washington, DC, where youth violence had led to more than 50 youth deaths within a short period and had culminated in the shooting death of a 12-year-old boy.

Woodson and CNE helped to design a peace agreement between the warring youth factions, while helping to bring life skills, job training and job placement services for youth seeking to avoid a lifestyle typified by drug use and crime. The peace accord was possible because of CNE's openness to recognize and learn from the skills and abilities of existing community organizations and leaders in addressing particular

community problems. One of the key lessons that emerged from these efforts was an understanding of how much influence these violent youth leaders had on young people within these disadvantaged neighborhoods. Unfortunately, in Benning Terrace these youth leaders used their influence negatively to control - and terrorize - the community. However, after CNE's intervention, these same youth leaders instead used their influence to turn the community in a positive direction as they became involved as, for example, coaches of athletic teams, and as they sought to motivate younger kids to exhibit good behavior and complete their school work. Woodson and CNE saw how youth leaders could be effective in influencing younger peers and used this insight to create what would later become a central piece of the VFZ Initiative.

VFZ uses school-based mentors, called "youth advisors" to model and encourage positive behaviors among high-risk youth. VFZ recruits youth advisors who can relate to young people and who have come from circumstances and backgrounds similar to those of the students. The youth advisors monitor, counsel, and mediate on behalf of students within the VFZ program as well as assist with school-wide monitoring (i.e., walking the hallways, being there when students come to school, etc.) and informal mentoring activities for the entire school population. All of these efforts are done in coordination with school officials and representatives.

How the Violence-Free Zone Initiative Works: The 10% Rule

One of the central challenges to public schools is the disruption of the educational environment and educational process (Gladden, 2002). Often a product of neighborhood rivalries or gang-related conflicts occurring during school time, these disruptions cause instability within the school and create an environment that stifles rather than promotes positive learning experiences. What Woodson and his colleagues learned from their previous experiences working with gangs and violent youth was the importance of identifying and reaching out to the leaders of these gangs. According to Kwame Johnson, former national coordinator of the VFZ programs for CNE, this dynamic had direct relevance for working within the high school environment:

If you have a high school of 1,000 or more kids, there are usually about 10% of those kids responsible for most of the incidents and disruptions occurring within the school. About 10% of these kids, in turn, are the leaders that orchestrate much of the disruptions, usually in the form of one gang acting out on another gang. Much of the VFZ strategy boils down to first identifying, and second, trying to develop relationships with these 10 or so leaders. So, the 10% rule is really about the 10% of kids causing the disruption at school, and then drilling down to the 10% of those that are really the driving force behind those conflicts. By engaging and redirecting these leaders, we have seen significant reductions in incidents, particularly gang-related incidents, in the schools where the VFZ initiative is operating (Johnson and Wubbenhorst, 2010, p. 5).

The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors, who are generally mature young adults from the same neighborhoods as the students in the schools they serve. These

Youth Advisors command trust and respect because they have faced and overcome the same challenges these youth are facing. They serve several roles, including: hall monitors, mentors, counselors, mediators, role models, and 'peace-makers' when conflicts flare up in the school. The Youth Advisors also act as additional "sets of eyes" to ward off negative behaviors as they also observe students' behavior outside the building on the school campus. Woodson (1998) describes the type of people sought out to serve this Youth Advisor role as 'community healers,' or 'grassroots Josephs,' the latter in reference to the biblical character and the trials he endured, as well as his subsequent transformation as a leader in the service of Pharaoh and helping Egypt during a time of famine. As Woodson explains:

Grassroots Josephs may not have degrees and certifications on their walls, but they do have this - the powerful, uncontested testimonies of people whose lives have been salvaged through their work. The undeniable fact that lives have been transformed through the work of modern-day Josephs must be appreciated even by observers who may be skeptical about their approach (Woodson, 1998, p. 76).

Previous VFZ Evaluation Efforts

Local public school administrators with the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) have praised the initiative's work, and the Department of Justice's National Gang Center endorses the VFZ initiative as a promising program structure (OJJDP, 2012). This evaluation builds on previous research on the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative in Milwaukee and Richmond. These earlier studies (Johnson and Wubbenhorst 2009; 2010a; 2010b) examined the VFZ program by comparing school-wide trends for variables such as school-wide violent/non-violent incidents, suspensions, and school climate at the seven Milwaukee schools and one Richmond high school with VFZ programs. As of 2013, the VFZ Initiative is in nine of Milwaukee's fourteen public high schools. The results of this research suggest the VFZ program was successful in mitigating violence within those schools. In contrast to the earlier research, which examined trends in the number of incidents, suspensions and GPA for high schools with the VFZ program, the current study examines the impact of the VFZ program specifically on youths directly receiving mentoring services from the VFZ via Youth Advisors at one of the VFZ high schools, Custer High School. This research also draws from data provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS) research division, but with a primary focus on pre- and post- trends for those youth enrolled as mentees through VFZ, hereinafter referred to as VFZ caseload youth.

The original evaluation indicated positive overall trends for students in the VFZ schools in comparison to those in MPS high schools without VFZ, in areas such as, lower number of overall incidents, suspensions and improved student responses on school climate surveys. In contrast, the current study is designed to isolate the specific impact of VFZ on the students receiving formal mentoring services, not only in terms of incidents and behaviors but also in terms of grade point average, truancy, and graduation rates. Future research will attempt to

determine how much of the school-wide VFZ benefits observed in both studies are a result of the Youth Advisors formal mentoring activities and how much is attributable to the mentors' more generalized, school-wide efforts (e.g., greeting students, walking the hallways and cafeteria, etc.). Indeed, Youth Advisors make every effort to build positive and sustainable relationships with students and to avoid negatively labeling students, something research has identified as problematic (Greene, 2005; Kaplan and Johnson, 1991).

Literature Review

School-based violence is clearly not a new problem, but has come to be more widely recognized as a significant problem as a result of the unprecedented press coverage surrounding the Columbine shootings in April of 1999. Tragedies like Columbine have caused educators to consider ways to address violence in our schools. School administrators obviously recognize that disruptive behavior interferes with teaching. The deleterious consequences of school violence are many and include:

- ♦ weakening the ability of students to focus on academic pursuits;
- ♦ subverting the academic purposes of schooling by causing students to skip classes or to avoid school;
- ♦ precipitating such internal problems as depression and social anxiety
- ♦ causing fear among teachers and other school staff;
- ♦ increased aggression and carrying of weapons;
- ♦ acceptance of violence as a reasonable form of conflict resolution.

Reducing school violence, therefore, remains a major concern of educators, parents, and policy makers. Consequently, an essential aspect of school violence prevention is the identification and implementation of interventions and strategies designed to prevent or reduce minor as well as more serious forms of violence in schools. Moreover, we know that students who feel connected to their school are also more likely to have better academic achievement, including higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and stay in school longer (Resnick et al., 1997).

However, administrators and teachers are already under growing pressure to improve test scores, as well as meet other protocols and guidelines that make it increasingly difficult to manage all these demands, while also facing significant budgetary restrictions. Consequently, according to Greene (2005), educators too often adopt ineffective "quick-fix" solutions to stem violence in their schools including: suspension or expelling of large numbers of disruptive students, electronic security measures, or a single limited psychosocial program.

Walker (1995) identified several major issues contributing to violence-poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, easy to access weapons, inadequate or abusive parents, and exposure to violence in the media. He claims that most tactics implemented in schools to deal with the violence issue are one-dimensional (such as removing the child from the classroom upon the incidence of a violent act). These tactics are

effective in protecting students at the moment, but do nothing to deter them from continuing on with criminal careers. Walker suggests schools should implement peer conflict-resolution programs and student training in empathy, cooperation, and perspective-taking. Though formal research on such efforts is limited, he believes data is beginning to accumulate suggesting peer education improves school climate, increases self-esteem and confidence, and encourages students to have more personal responsibility.

After tracking an increase in youth gun violence since the mid-1980s, as well as increasing gun traffic in schools, Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga (1996) put forward a prevention model to target the illicit market of guns as the primary issue needing to be addressed. In Boston, like other major urban centers, gun acquisition is a problem for youth, not primarily because of drug trafficking, but because of fear, for self-defense. Since 1995, the Boston Gun Project has met biweekly to study the violence dynamic in treatment areas and to monitor gun purchase and robbery. The Gun Project was deemed successful enough to expand to many different jurisdictions across the country (Braga, et al., 2008).

The "Bruno Effect" was a low cost initiative that utilized the notion of an Adult Protective Shield. Members of the Jamaican Constabulary Force were trained in how to be community-oriented actors within schools. They were to act as "Gentle Warriors," carrying the weight of the law outside of the school doors but acting as peacemakers-positive, rather than strictly punitive-authority figures. They were each affiliated with a particular school. Because most problems arose during classes, when students often roamed the hallways, the Warriors would patrol the hallways to enforce attendance. The Bruno Effect had four stages: (a) Address one disciplinary issue, like tucking in shirts; (b) Establish a clubhouse for formal meetings on violence prevention and life skills, followed by recreational sports. The students who attended were called the Honor Group and worked to help the leader; (c) Weapons confiscation; (d) Work with parents as an outreach specialist to ensure the prevention learning went home as well.

According to Sacco and Twemlo (1997), the results of the program were a decrease in sexual harassment, a major increase in classroom attendance, and a decrease of frequency of school violence. Due to funding restrictions, the program was cut and violence returned to previous levels.

Bucher and Manning (2005) state that most of the anti-violence programs implemented in schools after Columbine have since faded out or have been abandoned. The ones that remain are basic ordinances of ID badges and visitor policies, and these are insufficient. At their best, they keep guns away, but students still need to feel "emotionally and intellectually safe." The authors cite a need to increase student-teacher cooperation and a common "conflict management language." There needs to be a sense of community and a positive process-based model, rather than a negative/problem-centered model focused on metal detectors and surveillance cameras. The authors call for a stronger support system and counseling opportunities to help students grow in emotional literacy. They recommend setting up teachers as role models for warmth and embrace in the face of diversity.

In a study of nine ‘atypical’ schools - those that are low in violence yet situated in high violence areas, Astor, Benbenishty, and Estrada (2009) find that the most important variable in safe schools is the leadership of the principal. The principal buffers the school from outside violence by establishing a healthy culture in the building with a strong sense of authority and control. In times of transition, from one principal to the next, there is typically a culture shift or an increase in violence. Furthermore, the authors report that school cultures and expectations for behavior must be adjusted for the age of the student and the broader cultural context.

Wilson and Lipsey (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 219 studies on reducing school violence. All school ages were included in the studies Wilson and Lipsey reviewed, from pre-school through high school, and the average age was around 10. In general, schools that were studied were selected because of some environmental or neighborhood risk, such as poverty or high crime rates. Importantly, most of these 219 studies were conducted mainly for research purposes with high levels of researcher involvement (research and demonstration programs), and nearly two-thirds of the programs were less than 20 weeks in duration, and almost 40% suffered from implementation problems.

In addition, the studies included in the Wilson and Lipsey meta-analysis evaluated violence intervention programs delivered: (a) in classroom settings, (b) to select students due to the presence of some risk factor, or (c) to students placed within special classrooms because of some behavioral concern. Consequently, though there exists a number of different programs to prevent school violence, there are few evaluations of school-wide violence reduction programs like the Violence Free Zone.

Study Design and Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental evaluation design, using data from VFZ students in Custer High School as the treatment group and all students at non-VFZ schools in Milwaukee as the control group from academic years 2006 to 2010. We selected the Milwaukee VFZ program at Custer High School for this study because it was one of the original, and therefore most established, VFZ programs. Also, CNE’s community partner, Runnin’ Rebels, was able to provide the information on Custer’s VFZ caseload youth that we needed for our data request to MPS.

The three main research questions for the current evaluation are:

1. How do the improvements in behavioral outcomes already shown at the school-level compare to changes in behavioral outcomes specifically for the VFZ caseload youth?
2. Are there academic outcome improvements for the VFZ caseload youth trended over time extending from pre-VFZ involvement to graduation?
3. How do the positive behavioral changes in VFZ caseload youth, and the presence of Youth Advisors in the school, affect overall school climate?

The research team requested data from MPS for all students and the VFZ cohort at Custer High School. The VFZ administrators sent the MPS Data Center a list of ID numbers for all students enrolled in the VFZ program at Custer High School from academic year 2007 through 2010. The data included the individual students’ grade levels, disciplinary incidents, GPA, graduations and expulsions, and other details such as types of disciplinary action (e.g., suspensions). MPS coded all data with identification numbers to protect students’ anonymity. The data provided by Runnin’ Rebels included the date each student enrolled in the VFZ program.

The current study captured variables associated with a VFZ cohort of students before and after enrollment in the program and, in some instances, as compared to the entire school. We also examined climate survey trends for Custer High School from academic year 2005-06 (a year before VFZ began at Custer High School) and academic year 2010-11.

The team sought to answer the following research questions during Year 2:

- Does VFZ membership impact VFZ students’ disciplinary incident rates?
- Does VFZ membership influence students’ GPA?
- Does VFZ membership impact graduation rates?
- For each question, what is the context of school variables during the study period (2006 - 2011)?

The following sections describe the methodology used to address these questions.

Changes in Key Variables for Pre- and Post-VFZ Students

The evaluation team was interested in the potential effect of the VFZ program on incidents for VFZ students both before and after their enrollment in the VFZ program.

1. MPS provided a list of incidents by month for all VFZ students which, depending on when the student was enrolled in VFZ, represented incidents occurring before and after their enrollment in the program.
2. Student incidents were separated into two groups: (a) those that occurred on or *before* the month and year they began the VFZ program; and (b) those that occurred the month and year after they joined the VFZ program.
3. The number of months pre-VFZ was determined by counting from the month/year when the student was first involved in an incident to the month/year when they enrolled in VFZ (excluding July and August);
4. For students that reported no incidents prior to VFZ, we referred to the MPS Evolved Demographics file and looked at the earliest “SYS_BEGIN_DATE” date for an approximation of when the student began at Custer High School, and then counted the number of months to when they enrolled in the VFZ program;
5. We wanted at least 2 months of pre-VFZ data, therefore we did not include any VFZ students for which there were not at least 2 months of time between when they entered Custer and when they enrolled in VFZ. We also did not include any VFZ students for which there were not at least 2 months of time in school post-VFZ (i.e., we required at least 2 months of post-VFZ data).

6. Once we defined the sample group, we were able to analyze changes in variables such as average GPA and discipline incidents. Because we have paired samples of pre- and post-VFZ program data, we were able to compare the change in outcomes for students before and after their participation in the VFZ program.

We used t-test/null hypothesis analyses to determine whether the average pre- and post-VFZ samples were statistically different from each other. The paired t-test examines whether the mean of the differences (effect of VFZ program) is discernible from zero (no effect). The null hypothesis is that the population mean of individual differences of paired observations is 0. Therefore, if the null hypothesis is rejected, there must be a significant difference (VFZ program effect) between the two samples (pre and post outcomes).

School Level Variables

MPS tracks variables such as GPA and disciplinary incidents at the school and population subset level. We relied on these reports for summary data, but supplemented these data with additional MPS and VFZ data, detailed at the student level, and coded to protect individual student identities (The annual reports, each summarizing data for three school years, are posted online at www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/acctrep/rc11.html).

Table 1.
Incidents/Month (Pre- and Post-VFZ intervention)

Variable	# of Observations	Average # of Incidents/Month	Standard Error	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval
Pre-VFZ Incidents/Month	90	1.200	.0951	.9023	1.011 - 1.389
Post-VFZ Incidents/Month	90	.677	.0751	.7128	.528 - .8277
% Reduction in Incident/Month		44%	.0832	.7897	.357 - .688

As shown in Table 1, VFZ students averaged 1.2 incidents per student prior to participating in the VFZ program, whereas after being in the VFZ program longer than 2 months, these averages drop by about 44% to around .68 incidents per student. These data provide initial evidence that the VFZ program reduces disciplinary incidents effectively.

Suspension Days and Changes in Discipline Method

It is reasonable to expect a reduction in suspensions to correlate with reduced numbers of incidents or with lower levels of incident severity. However, as shown in Table 2, the 79% reduction in suspension days/month exceeded the 44% reduction in incidents/month. This result may point to the VFZ's role not only in reducing the occurrence of disruptive incidents in school, but also in changing the manner in which the school chooses to discipline for those incidents that do occur. VFZ advisors may intervene on the students' behalf for a reduction in severity of punishment, such as proposing alternatives to suspension. This may produce positive outcomes to the extent that students miss fewer school days as a result of alternatives to suspension made possible by the VFZ program.

Findings

VFZ Students Pre- and Post-VFZ and Compared to School Level

Disciplinary Incidents

We examined disciplinary incidents for students from school years 2006-07 through 2010-11. MPS categorizes incidents by type to include: assault; battery; bullying; chronic disruption or violation of school rules; disorderly conduct; false fire alarms; fighting; gambling; inappropriate personal property; intent to distribute, use of, or possession of drugs, alcohol or medications; leaving classroom without permission; loitering; possession of stolen property; possession/use of weapon; refusal to work or follow instructions; repeated classroom disruption; tardiness; truancy; and verbal abuse.

We had complete data for 90 VFZ student records, which we examined using the previously described methodology, comparing average discipline incidents before and after the students joined VFZ. Table 1 includes summary statistics of two variables (Pre-VFZ Incidents/Month, Post-VFZ Incidents/Month) and then indicates results of the paired t-test using the differences of matched pairs.

Table 2 shows summary statistics of two variables (Pre-VFZ Suspension day/Month, Post-VFZ Suspension Days/Month) and then the results of the paired t-test using the differences of matched pairs.

The monthly post-VFZ mean of .12 is smaller than the .60 suspension days/month students received before joining the VFZ program, resulting in a 79% reduction in suspension days/month. There are two potential explanations for this reduction, one which pertains to the reduction in incidents themselves, and the other from changes in discipline actions based on the presence of the VFZ program.

Attendance

Data on attendance for VFZ students pre- and post-VFZ were somewhat contradictory and did not reveal any significant improvement or decline (data on attendance are not significant and not presented here, but are available upon request). This may be a result of how some teachers captured data on attendance, as some entries were coded as "absent" in one database and coded as "tardy" elsewhere.

Table 2.
Average Suspension Days/Month (Pre- and Post-VFZ intervention)

Variable	# of Observations	Average # of Suspension Days/Month	Standard Error	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval
Pre-VFZ Incidents/Month	75	.600	.0571	.495	.486 - .713
Post-VFZ Incidents/Month	75	.124	.020	.175	.083 - .164
% Reduction in Incident/Month		79%	.055	.473	.366 - .585

Truancy

We isolated truancy incidents from total incidents, utilizing the same pre-/post-analysis described earlier (i.e., examining VFZ students with at least 2 months pre-VFZ and post-VFZ). Table 3 presents summary statistics of two variables (Pre-VFZ Truancies/Month, Post-VFZ Truancies/Month) and shows the results of the paired t-test using the differences of matched pairs.

The average number of truancy incidents/month for VFZ students decreased by 23% from pre-VFZ levels. Given that almost half (48%) of VFZ youth had at least one truancy incident, this represents 162 fewer days lost from school per year. Furthermore, since the punishment for truancy was suspension in most instances (92%), the reduction in truancy incidents contributes to an additional of 149 fewer schools days lost per year. These data suggest a total projected increase of 311 school days per year correlated with VFZ intervention.

Table 3.
Average Truancy Incidents/Month (Pre- and Post-VFZ intervention)

Variable	# of Observations	Average # of Incidents/Month	Standard Error	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval
Pre-VFZ Suspension Days/Month	34	.13	.0667	.389	.145 - .417
Post-VFZ Suspension Days/Month	34	.10	.0355	.207	.088 - .233
% Reduction in Suspension Days/Month	--	23%	.0779	.454	-.038 - 0.278

Changes in Grade Point Average (GPA)

To determine the possible impact of the VFZ mentoring on academic performance, we compared the GPA of VFZ students prior to enrollment and six months after enrolling in the pro-

gram. Table 4 shows that GPA for VFZ students rose by 9.3%. This is a particularly impressive finding, given the fact that Youth Advisors do not provide tutoring to youth on their VFZ caseload.

Table 4.
Average GPA (Pre- and Post-VFZ intervention)

Variable	# of Observations	Average # of Incidents/Month	Standard Error	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval
Pre-VFZ Suspension Days/Month	124	1.62	.074	.824	1.47 - 1.765
Post-VFZ Suspension Days/Month	124	1.77	.070	.777	1.63 - 1.90
% Reduction in Suspension Days/Month	--	9.2%	.040	.435	(-2.24) - (-.070)

High School Graduation and College

Notwithstanding the significance of the findings listed above, the ability to successfully graduate from high school is perhaps the most important success indicator of all. Here the impact of the VFZ program is especially significant. This particular graduation rate is determined by the percentage of 12th grade students that graduate (i.e., total 12th graders less those

students that did not complete but are still registered with MPS and those students that have withdrawn from MPS). Table 5 shows the comparative graduation rates for the VFZ caseload in contrast to other 12th graders at Custer. The VFZ caseload 12th graders graduation rates are 24% higher than those for the whole Custer population

Table 5.
High School Graduate and College (Pre- and Post-VFZ intervention)

School Year	VFZ Graduates	VFZ Withdrawn/ Registered	VFZ Graduation Rate	Custer Graduates	Custer Withdrawn/ Registered	Custer Graduation Rate
2007-08	10	3	77%	141	56	72%
2008-09	17	1	94%	128	39	77%
2009-10	33	1	97%	128	45	74%
3-year average	60	5	92%	397	140	74%

In addition, the 2011-12 VFZ graduating class was significantly more likely to pursue college as compared to the state average. Of the 41 VFZ graduates, 28 (78%) are planning on going to college and 23 (64%) have already received acceptance letters. These percentages are significantly higher than the estimated 59% of high school graduates in Wisconsin that go directly from high school to college. In addition, 12 of the VFZ graduates have declared majors including biology, arts/graphics, medicine, culinary arts, cosmetology, accounting, and liberal arts. Two of those not attending college have jobs and another is joining the National Guard. Therefore as of August 2012, VFZ was aware of all but five graduates' occupational or educational plans.

Custer High School Climate Survey trends

MPS administers an annual 36 question school climate survey to high school students between October and December of each year. The survey elicits students' opinions anonymously about their school's rigor, safety, governance, and environment. Table 6 shows a subset from that questionnaire that correlates with aspects of school climate that the VFZ might be expected to influence positively.

Table 6.
MPS Climate Survey Questions

Category	Question
Atmosphere/ Environment	"My school has a friendly and welcoming atmosphere."
	"My school building has a positive atmosphere for learning."
	"Students at my school focus on learning."
Safety	"My school makes sure that students are safe and orderly while outside on school grounds."
	"The halls, bathrooms, cafeteria and other common areas in my school are safe and orderly."
Orderliness/ Adherence to Rules	"When students at my school break the rules, staff members help them improve their behavior."
	"The staff at my school enforces the rules."

We compared the trends in climate survey responses for Custer High School students with those for MPS high school students overall, as shown in Figure 1. We found that overall climate scores for MPS student respondents improved in all three domains (i.e., school atmosphere, orderliness of schools, and safety of schools) from academic years 2005-06 to 2009-10. The climate survey was not administered at Custer high school during AY 2006-07. However, it also shows significantly higher increases for Custer High School during that same time period.

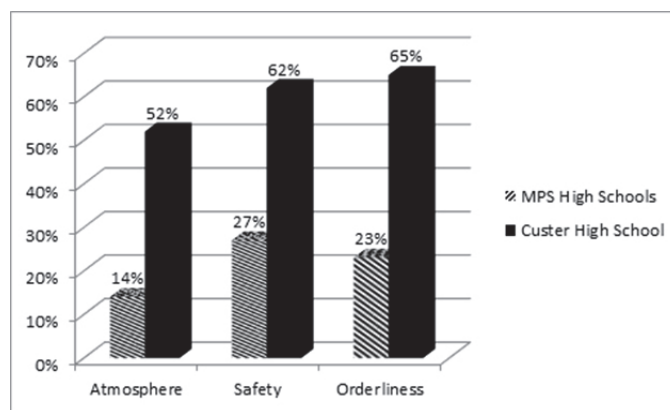


Figure 1. Improvements in School Climate Survey Responses from High School Students: AY 2005-06 to AY 2009-10

Implications of Findings

The research team is encouraged by the Year 2 results. Although data on attendance was incomplete, the other findings suggest that the VFZ has positively impacted disciplinary incidents (including truancy incidents), suspensions, GPA, and has potentially affected the number of 12th graders that graduate and pursue college.

School authorities have discretion about implementing specific disciplinary remedies within certain MPS guidelines (see Parent/Student Handbook on Rights, Responsibilities and Discipline. MPS Division of Communications and Public Affairs. Milwaukee, WI). The VFZ mediates with authorities on students' behalf in some cases of disciplinary incidents. VFZ Youth Advisors also consult with the individual students in an effort to reduce negative behaviors. The number of discipline days a student receives may reflect this mediation, indicate a less severe offense, or be a result of variation in administrative

styles. Apart from how authorities make their judgments, fewer discipline days mean less time spent away from school for the offending student. The effect of this on the student as well as the school body may be positive if the student also decreases his or her disruptive behavior. Our study documents that the average number of discipline incidents/month for VFZ members decreased by approximately 44% after VFZ membership. This preliminary finding is a compelling and positive indicator for the school as well as the VFZ students.

A decrease over time in average suspension days is also a positive indicator for the students, especially when co-occurring with a declining trend in average incidents. The study found that as a group, the VFZ students received about 79% percent fewer suspension days after participating in the VFZ program. This dramatic decrease in suspension days reflects well upon the efforts by the MPS to revise and improve upon their suspension policies and practices.

The combined effect of higher GPAs and fewer incidents and, consequently more days in school, may have also contributed to the comparatively higher rates by which VFZ 12th graders graduate in comparison to Custer students overall. For the 2011-12 school year, most of the VFZ seniors (87.8%) graduated with their class and most of those graduates (78%) plan to go to college. This class is the first to graduate with students who could have potentially been VFZ members during their entire educational experience at Custer High School.

Although the attendance data was inconclusive, we did find decreases in truancy rates for VFZ students as compared to before they enrolled in the VFZ program. Besides being an indicator of poor student performance, high levels of chronic truancy are often associated with increases in off-campus delinquencies (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2001). Therefore, the indication that shows VFZ affiliation may lead to fewer truancy incidents could affect not only the entire school but also the local community. The decline in truancy days and associated decline in suspension days not only mean more time spent in school for the VFZ students but also may be a contributing factor associated with lower crime rates. Many classic and contemporary studies link increasing crime and deviant behavior with increasing opportunities to commit crime (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; LaGrange and Silverman 1999; Longshore 1998). Stated differently, more time in school reduces the chances that youth will have additional free time and thus the opportunity to be involved in criminal or delinquent acts. The research team plans to investigate this further by requesting relevant summary data from police authorities in Year 3.

The climate survey analysis was the one piece of our evaluation that focused on changes in school-wide indicators. While MPS high schools are improving on climate surveys overall, the dramatic increases in student responses to positive statements about the school environment, safety and orderliness suggest the affirmative impact of the VFZ's presence, beyond the mentoring services provided to VFZ caseload youth. We will continue to closely monitor these improvements in school climate in VFZ schools, and examine what other research literature points to in terms of the benefits to student learning.

A summary of the Year 2 findings is as follows:

- ♦ The study compared the average number of discipline incidents for a group of students at least 2 months before they joined VFZ and after they were in VFZ at least 2 months and found an approximately 44% reduction in monthly disciplinary incidents for students compared to the pre-VFZ rate.
- ♦ As a group, the VFZ students received about 79% percent fewer suspension days after participating in the VFZ program, as compared to suspensions before joining the program.
- ♦ Data on attendance for VFZ students pre- and post-VFZ did not reveal any significant improvement or decline. This may be a result of how various authorities captured data on attendance, as some entries were coded as "absent" in one database and coded as "tardy" elsewhere.
- ♦ The study did find decreases in truancy for VFZ students. The average number of trancies/month decreased by 23% after enrollment in VFZ, resulting in an estimated increase of over 300 days, from reduced trancies and reduced suspension for truancy.
- ♦ The study compared the pre- and post-VFZ students' GPAs, and found that GPA increased by an average of 9.2%. This finding is particularly significant, given the fact that VFZ Youth Advisors do not provide their mentees with any academic counseling.
- ♦ 94% of 12th graders enrolled in VFZ graduated high school between academic years 2007-08 and 2009-10, as compared to only 76% for 12th graders at Custer High School overall. Furthermore, 78% of VFZ High School Graduates in academic year 2010-11 applied for college (64% of those VFZ Custer Graduates have already been accepted), as compared to the estimated statewide rate of only 58% if high school graduates in Wisconsin that go directly into college (This data was not available for VFZ graduates from Custer for academic years 2007-08 through 2009-10).

In an effort to capture how the contribution of VFZ youth advisors extends beyond the 'caseload' of youth they formally mentor, the research team examined student climate surveys at Custer high school between AYs 2005 and 2010, and found significant improvements in several areas. Although climate survey scores improved across all MPs high schools, the percentage increase in positive student responses at Custer (Positive responses were defined as the percentage of students that Strongly Agreed/Agreed with positive statements (i.e., "My school has a friendly and welcoming atmosphere") were significantly higher than MPS as a whole on questions pertaining to: (a) overall school atmosphere/environment (52% vs. 14%), (b) orderliness/adherence to rules (65% vs. 23%), and (c) safety (62% vs. 27%).

Summary and Conclusion

It is not necessarily easy to pinpoint the specific interventions that are clearly significant in reducing school violence. Most of the research reviewed in this study offer multi-variable plans with several different strategies being implemented at once, making it difficult to discern what is effective and what is not. Indeed, the evaluations summarized earlier indicate that when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of youth violence

reduction programs, scholars tend to be more comfortable suggesting that strategies to date “show promise.”

Across the literature a repeated refrain is that we rely too heavily on reactive programs and need to focus on preventative strategies to make real progress in reducing the culture of school violence. One common suggestion is setting firm leadership in place, like a strong principal or another respected figure responsible for superintending student behavior. Another is strengthening the relationships among students and faculty members. There is also a consensus that problem-based/punitive approaches are less effective than positive-process models that develop healthy communities and teach students “emotional literacy.”

According to Jenkins (1995), decreasing levels of school commitment correlate with increasing rates of school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. Moreover, an increase in students’ commitment to their school may mediate many of the risk factors for school delinquency associated with personal background, family involvement, and academic ability. Stated differently, changing the culture of the school may not only help to prevent delinquency, but creates an environment where students can flourish academically. Preliminary evidence suggests that the Violence Free Zone is a new initiative that may help schools build such an environment. The next step in the VFZ program evaluation effort will involve expanding this approach to all of the VFZ schools in Milwaukee, along with one of the VFZ schools located in Richmond, VA (The other VFZ High School in Richmond has not been in place long enough for us to include in this evaluation).

The overall results of the Year 2 research show a correlation between VFZ membership and improved student performance. One puzzling aspect of these findings is that the improved VFZ student performance should also correlate with improved performance at the school level and this is not always the case. One might make the argument that since VFZ targets many of the most at-risk students within the most at-risk schools, variables such as discipline incidents would be even worse if not for VFZ’s presence. However, this is an unverifiable assumption. Therefore, the research team looks forward to the broader and more detailed information it will gain from data collected in Year 3 of this evaluation.

References

- Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., & Estrada, J. (2009). School violence and theoretically atypical schools: The principal’s centrality in orchestrating safe schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, *46*, 423-461.
- Astor, R., Meyer, H., & Behre, W. (1999). “Unowned places and times: Maps and interviews about violence in high schools,” *American Educational Research Journal* *36*: 3-42.
- Ayers, W., Ayers, R., & Dohm, B. (2001). Introduction: Resisting zero tolerance. In W. Ayers, B. Dohm, & R. Ayers (Eds.), *Zero tolerance: Resisting the drive for punishment in our schools*. New York: New Press.
- Barber, B. K., Olsen, J. A. (1997). “Socialization in context: connection, regulation, and autonomy in the family, school and neighborhood, and with peers.” *Journal of Adolescent Research* *12*(2):287-315.
- Battin-Pearson, S., Newcomb, M.D., Abbot, R.D., Hill, K.G., Catalano, R.F., & Hawkins, J. D. (2000). “Predictors of early high school dropout: a test of five theories.” *Journal of Educational Psychology* *92*(3):568-582.
- Braga, A. A., Pierce, G. L., McDevitt J., Bond, B. J., & Cronin S. (2008). “The Strategic Prevention of Gun Violence Among Gang-Involved Offenders.” *Justice Quarterly*, *25*, 132-162.
- Bucher, K. T., & Manning, M. L. (2005). *Creating Safe Schools. Clearing House*, *79* (1), 55-60.
- Cloward, R. A. & Ohlin, L. E. (1960). *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. NY: The Free Press.
- Gladden, R. M. (2002). “Reducing School Violence: Strengthening Student Programs and Addressing the Role of School Organizations,” *Review of Research in Education* *26*: 263-299.
- Greene, M. B. (2005). “Reducing violence and aggression in schools,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* *6*: 236-253.
- Jenkins, P. H. (1995). “School Delinquency and School Commitment,” *Sociology of Education* *68* (3): 221-239.
- Johnson, B. R., & Wubbenhorst, W. (2009) *Milwaukee Violence-Free Zone Initiative*; Program on Prosocial Behavior, Baylor University, Waco, TX.
- Johnson, B. R. & Wubbenhorst, W. (2010). *Tracking the Milwaukee Violence Free Zone Initiative*. Program on Prosocial Behavior, Baylor University. Waco, TX.
- Kaplan, H., & Johnson, R. (1991). “Negative social sanctions and juvenile delinquency: Effects of labeling in a model of deviant behavior,” *Social Science Quarterly* *72*: 98-122.
- Kennedy, D., Piehl, A., & Braga, A. (1996). “Youth Violence in Boston: Gun Markets, Serious Youth Offenders, and a Use-Reduction Strategy.” *Law and Contemporary Problems*, *59*: 147-196.
- Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health* *74*(7):262-273.
- LaGrange, T. C. & Silverman, R. A. (1999). “Low Self-Control and Opportunity: Testing the General Theory of Crime as an Explanation for Differences in Delinquency,” *Criminology* *37*: 41-72.
- Longshore, D. (1998). “Self-Control and Criminal Opportunity: A Prospective Test of the General Theory of Crime,” *Social Problems* *45*:102-113.
- National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. (1999). *Violence-Free Zone Initiatives*. Washington, DC: National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.
- OJJDP. (2012). *Strategic Planning Tool: Violence-Free Zones*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved August 1, 2012 from <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT/Programs/130>.
- Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P.S., Blum, R.W., Bauman, K.E., Harris, K.M., Jones, J., et al. (1997). “Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health,” *JAMA* *278*(10):823-832.
- Rosenfeld, L.B., Richman, J.M., Bowen, G.L. (1998). “Low social support among at-risk Adolescents,” *Social Work in Education* *20*:245-260.
- Sacco, F. & Twemlow, S. (1997). “School Violence Reduction: A Model Jamaican Secondary School Program.” *Community Mental Health Journal* *33*(3):229-34.

- Truancy Reduction: Keeping Kids in School; OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin; September 2001.
- Walker, D. (1995) *Violence in Schools: How To Build a Prevention Program from the Ground Up*. OSSC. Bulletin Series. Eugene, Oregon: Oregon School Study Council, January 58 pages.
- Whitted, K. S. & Dupper, D. R. (2005). "Best Practices for Preventing or Reducing Bullying in Schools," *Children & Schools* 27:167-175.
- Wilson, S. J. & Lipsey, M. W. (2005). The Effectiveness of School-Based Violence Prevention Programs for Reducing Disruptive and Aggressive Behavior. Revised Report for the National Institute of Justice School Violence Prevention Research Planning Meeting (May 2005).
- Woodson, Sr., Robert (1998). *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today's Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods*; p. 76, the Free Press; 1998.