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Tracking the Milwaukee Violence Free Zone Initiative



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TRACKING THE MILWAUKEE VIOLENCE FREE ZONE INITIATIVE

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Background

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 28 years later, are:

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. As Woodson explained:

The successful programs and interventions that I've discovered over the years were not from people within civil rights groups, government bureaucracies or higher education institutions, but were people that are working quietly within these communities. Some of these people were in poverty but not of it, while others were once of poverty – meaning they were former criminals and/or drug addicts – but had transformed their lives and now serve as role models for others in the community. In a sense, much of what we do at CNE is simply to find these organic leaders and support and help grow their work.

Working closely with school safety officers and local police, the origins of the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative followed very much along these lines as well.

The Violence-Free Zone Initiative – Its Origins

The thinking and approach of the VFZ initiative, which is a youth-violence prevention and reduction program located within middle or high schools, was actually developed and formulated outside of the public school environment. Woodson already had a great deal of knowledge about gang behavior and youth violence from his days studying and working with the House of Umoja, a FBCO (Faith-based or community organization) based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as well as other community-based organizations. Woodson applied his knowledge on addressing youth violence and gang-related issues back 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 in recent years, culminating with the shooting death of a 12-year old boy.

Woodson and CNE helped to craft a peace agreement between the warring youth factions and helped bring life skills, job training and job placement services for youth seeking an alternative to their drug- and crime-filled lifestyle. This peace accord was possible as a result of CNE's openness to learn from and collaborate with the skills and abilities of community organizations and leaders in addressing particular community problems and issues. One of the key things that emerged from these efforts was the knowledge of how much influence these violent youth leaders had on young people in their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, in Benning Terrace, they used it negatively to control –and terrorize –the community. However, after CNE's intervention, these same youth leaders used their power to turn the community in a positive direction as they became coaches of athletic teams and motivated younger kids to have good behavior and complete their school work. Woodson and CNE saw how youth leaders influenced their younger peers and used this insight in creating what later became the role of Youth Advisor within the VFZ Initiative (as will be described later).

A key contributor to the development of the VFZ initiative was Omar Jahwar, who worked with the youth population as a prison gang specialist in a Dallas prison. In 1996, Jahwar invited Woodson to speak to the youth he was working with at the prison. Woodson was so impressed with Jahwar's approach and connection to these youth that he encouraged and

supported him in starting a community-based organization, named Vision Regeneration, Inc., to serve as a partner with CNE on violence prevention activities within the community.

The general premise for Woodson was to convince Jahwar they should work ‘upstream’ with youth not yet imprisoned but at-risk of becoming so. Jahwar began by working in the neighborhood surrounding Madison high school in Dallas, Texas. In the spring of 1999, the school’s principal, Robert Ward, had expelled 50 youths from the school for disruptive behavior. Jahwar, with private funding obtained through CNE, provided summer jobs for these youths, both in an effort to make connections with these youth and also as a way to get rival gang members to begin talking to one another.

Before the beginning of school that next fall, Jahwar met with Ward, both to discuss the future of the expelled youths, and to offer a proposal to help the principal deal with the overall issue of violence in the high school. As Jahwar described the meeting:

During the summer, we had built some momentum in terms of building relationships with the kids and getting them to at least talk to one another. We asked the principal to accept these kids back, and we would assume the responsibility for their behavior and bring it under control.

The principal took Jahwar up on his offer, providing Vision Regeneration with space within the school and \$100,000 for one semester to hire six youth advisors, whose job was to establish and grow their relationship with a select number of the youth who previously were the cause of much of the school violence. However, they were sure to also add youth who demonstrated more exemplary behavior and academic performance to their caseload, so as not to ‘brand’ their effort as only being about working with delinquents.

By the fall of 2000, the principal saw dramatic improvements in the safety and overall atmosphere to the school, and offered a strong recommendation to the Dallas superintendent of schools, who made Vision Regeneration a listed vendor. Currently this program, subsequently dubbed the Violence-Free Zone (VFZ), currently receives \$500,000 annually for its work in 14 Dallas middle and high schools.

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 resulting from instability within the school, often a product of neighborhood rivalries or gang-related conflicts occurring during school time. What Jahwar and Woodson had both learned from their previous experiences working with gangs and violent youth was the importance of identifying and reaching out to the leaders. Kwame Johnson, national coordinator of the VFZ programs for CNE, described how this dynamic translated into 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 re-directing these leaders, we have seen significant reductions in incidents, particularly gang-related incidents, in the schools where the VFZ initiative is operating.

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, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school.

Woodson 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, uncontestable 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.¹

Methodological Approach

In order to gain a more complete understanding and assessment of the effectiveness of the Milwaukee VFZ, we completed a case study based upon in-depth interviews with: 1) key staff from CNE and the VFZ, 2) members of the Latino Community Center, 3) leaders from the Running Rebels Community Organization, 4) select officials from the Milwaukee Public Schools, 5) representatives of the foundations funding the VFZ Initiative in Milwaukee, and 6) others with knowledge of the VFZ Initiative in Milwaukee. These face-to-face interviews were transcribed and excerpts appear throughout this case study.

We also analyzed data provided to us by the Milwaukee Public Schools. This data includes results from an annual student climate survey, which elicits student views on the degree of safety, order, and adherence to rules they experience in their current school. Additionally, we assess data, also provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools, on total suspensions, suspension rates, and the number of violent and non-violent incidents. Finally, we present initial findings on the impact of the VFZ, in cost-benefit terms, by examining reductions in auto thefts near VFZ schools (in excess of citywide reductions on car thefts). In combination, these in-depth interviews and data from the Milwaukee Public Schools capture critical qualitative and quantitative insights into the preliminary results of this intervention designed to reduce youth violence.

It is equally important to note that this case study on the VFZ in Milwaukee schools does not employ an experimental research design with random assignment of students into experimental and control groups. We are fully aware that randomized research designs provide a much more rigorous and preferred approach when it comes to evaluating the merits of various program interventions. Unfortunately, major impact studies employing such stringent rigor are quite rare due to significant costs, time, and

¹ Woodson, Sr., Robert; *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today's Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods*; P. 76, the Free Press; 1998.

resources necessary to complete them. The current research, however, is quite useful in providing early insights into the functioning and results of the VFZ in Milwaukee public schools. Indeed, this case study represents a potential first step in determining the feasibility of pursuing a longitudinal and randomized impact study.

Findings

The VFZ Initiative in Milwaukee has its roots in a 1993 request to CNE from the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation, with which Woodson and CNE had collaborated and had received funding from since 1986, asked CNE to help it identify faith-based and community organizations (FBCOs) as a part of a civic-focused initiative the foundation was launching. Over the years, CNE provided training and technical assistance to many faith-based and community groups in Milwaukee's central city. One group CNE met in 2003 was the Latino Community Center (LCC), located on the south side of Milwaukee, was already doing work with the local high school to help them with gang-related incidents within the school.

As Woodson explained:

The Latino Community Center had already negotiated an agreement with the South Division High School to have some of their youth staff in the building when we discovered them. That helped us to know that we were already on the same page with the Center and so, with the initial support of the Bradley and other local foundations, we decided to launch the VFZ program in Milwaukee.

Beginning in September of 2005, CNE and LCC formed a partnership to implement the VFZ initiative in South Division High School, which had been plagued with escalating youth violence and gang-related conflicts in recent years. The first year of VFZ was funded entirely with private foundation dollars, through a consortium of local foundations coordinated through the Bradley Foundation. CNE deliberately follows this approach of using initial private funding when beginning the VFZ initiative, so it can demonstrate actual results before approaching public agencies for funding. This harkens back to one of CNE's founding principles -- *The principles of the market economy should be applied to the solution of societal problems* -- with the program outcomes representing the 'goods' provided through the VFZ Initiative. As Woodson explained:

We don't even approach the school or other public agency for funding until we can show the impact and cost savings associated with reducing suspensions and gang-related incidents within the schools. We feel this is central to the integrity of our organization and the community partners to sell our program on results.

In the past year, for example, confidence in the model made it possible in Richmond, Virginia, for the Police Department to actually take the lead in raising support for the VFZ there.

CNE and Community Partnering

CNE is very particular when selecting a local community partner FBCO with which to entrust the operational responsibilities for the VFZ initiative. Another of CNE's founding principles -- *Those suffering from the problem must be involved in the creation and implementation of the solution* – is also represented in the process by which CNE identifies, or sometime creates, the local community partners that assume the responsibility for implementing the VFZ Initiative. As Woodson explained:

When we come into a city looking for the right community partner, I generally start networking through any contacts – family, friends, and colleagues – about community-serving organizations already working with youth. We will also walk into barber shops and local restaurants to find out where people go to get help in times of trouble. This searching mostly takes place through informal community networks, among people who 'know each other', and generally not through public social service agencies or local elected officials.

Sometimes the search process yields organizations such as the LCC in Milwaukee with whom CNE partners (or 'buys') to implement the VFZ Initiative. At other times, CNE's search efforts produces individuals, such as with Omar Jahwar in Dallas, where CNE literally helps to build (or 'create') the partner organization to implement the program. In either instance, CNE provides technical assistance (i.e., capacity-building organizational and financial management, resource development and staff training) to assure that the organization is able to implement and sustain the VFZ initiative in that city.

CNE's high standards for its local partners are not indicative of a typical corporate franchise mentality, where one size fits all. On the contrary, the Center's approach to partnering with, or helping to create, its community VFZ partners also reflects a degree of humility within

the CNE organizational culture by providing guidance, but delegating practically all of the operational decision-making for a local VFZ site to these partners. Furthermore, these local partners are the ones knowledgeable on how to *adapt* the principles for the VFZ to work within their particular context, with CNE serving as enablers and facilitators of these organizations' implementation of the CNE vision and model.

Typically, CNE identifies only one community partner per VFZ site, through which all Youth Advisors are recruited, trained and monitored. However, given the scope of VFZ Milwaukee, which is currently in eight high schools and growing to as many as 20 in the coming years, and the distinct demographics between the primarily Latino South side and the primarily African-American North side of the city, CNE chose two community partners: the Latino Community Center (LCC) on the southern side and Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO) on the Northern side.

Latino Community Center

The Latino Community Center is only an eight-year old organization, but has made rapid strides over the past five years to establish itself as a key resource for its community, particularly the youth. What Woodson and CNE found particularly noteworthy of the LCC, aside from its initial outreach to the local South Division High School prior to VFZ, was its direct effort to expand outreach into the community by having its staff simply 'walk the streets' two days out of each week. LCC staff members simply walk up to youth and adults, introduce themselves, and listen to them about the challenges and issues they see their community facing. They have also developed strong relationships with the pastors of local churches, who often join them on these community walks.

LCC's success, both through this outreach as well as from its programming in response to those needs, bore strong resemblance to CNE's early violence intervention work at Benning Terrace in Washington DC, whereby faction leaders were identified, engaged and re-directed from criminal activities towards more positively-focused career development and community services. In fact, LCC's success in addressing youth violence and gang-related incidents in the

community naturally led them to seek out a relationship with the local high school, where gang-related incidents were on the rise. As Jorge Perez, interim director for the LCC, explained:

As we were succeeding in addressing gang-related conflicts in the community, we noticed that these problems were continuing and growing in the local high school. That was a little frustrating for us, because we weren't in the schools and didn't have any continuity with the kids during that time. This is a real problem at South Division, where there are eight gangs represented in the student body, all in close contact with one another. By getting into the schools, we were able to maintain our connection, relationship and most importantly the accountability with the kids, because now they see us and have to deal with us all day.

Initially, the principal at South Division would have only brought LCC into the schools in response to gang-related incidents, such as fights and other disruptions. However, after a student was stabbed to death during school in September of 2005, the principal agreed to give LCC an ongoing presence in the school, laying the groundwork for the VFZ program, which officially began in September of 2005. After one year of the VFZ Initiative the safety at the high school improved significantly and the school subsequently received an award as one of the safest schools among MPS' twenty high schools.² CNE then took these and other positive outcomes to a meeting brokered by the Bradley Foundation with William Andrekopoulos, the superintendent of the Milwaukee Public School System. The superintendent was so impressed, within three months of that first meeting he provided funding through the school system to expand VFZ to five additional high schools, beginning in September of 2007. As Andrekopoulos explained:

We are expanding the Violence Free Zone Initiative because it works. This pilot program, using community engagement and the support of key community organizations, has proven to be a pro-active way to support the needs of young people in lieu of having them get trapped in the criminal justice system.

LCC managed the Violence-Free Zone in two of the first six schools, which included South Division, while CNE's other community partner, the Running Rebels, assumed management of the other four.³

² Excluding charter schools.

³ In January, 2008, MPS added a seventh school, Madison, and in September, 2009, an eighth, Bradley Tech, both of which were assigned to LCC for management of the VFZ.

Running Rebels Community Organization

Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO), originally named for its athletic programs in track and field, was founded in 1980 with the mission of providing high-risk youth on the north side of Milwaukee with athletic, academic, life skills, and career training services. One of the strengths of the RRCO was their strong working relationship with the courts for youth in the community. As with LCC, RRCO was always looking for opportunities to collaborate with government agencies.

As Dawn Barnett, executive director for RRCO, explained:

We are always working hard to develop good working relationships with the courts, the police, and other public agencies that deal with our kids. We felt the lack of continuity and connection we had with the schools, so we welcomed the opportunity to work with the schools, and place staff within the schools, which is what VFZ allows us to do. Being a partner with CNE on the Violence-Free Zone initiative also helps to legitimize the role of our organization with these youth and in the community.

RRCO has also seen improvements in working relationships with the police and district attorney's office in terms of a greater openness to community input provided through their organization. However, similar to LCC, RRCO was frustrated by the lack of continuity and connection with the local high schools. Even though the local high school, Marshall, had implemented a school safety improvement program in 2005, there was no community participation, oversight or liaison associated with the program.

The Foundation Community

The other distinctive feature of VFZ Milwaukee as a public-nonprofit-private collaboration is the active support it has received from the foundation community, led by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation, which had funded CNE initiatives in Washington DC and elsewhere as far back as 1986, coordinated with other foundations in Milwaukee to support the VFZ entirely during its pilot implementation in South Division High School. The consortium continues to provide more than a third of the program's overall operating budget. The foundation was also instrumental in getting Milwaukee Public Schools, specifically the school superintendent, to sit down at the table with CNE to negotiate

and implement the VFZ. The foundation leaders were the ones who initially introduced Woodson and CNE to Victor Barnett of the Running Rebels.

Dan Schmidt, Vice-President for Programs at the Bradley Foundation, described the critical role Woodson and CNE played in getting the MPS to buy into the program:

CNE played an essential role in bringing VFZ about. Although their partner organizations were already skilled and knowledgeable to do the work, it was Woodson and CNE's credentials, particularly their experience in engaging school systems. What made these negotiations particularly successful, however, was that they not only gained access to the schools for the VFZ staff, but also got them to invest financially in the operations of the program.

Milwaukee Public Schools – Differences You Can Measure

In the years preceding the arrival of the VFZ initiative, many Milwaukee observers believed the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS) represented one of the most troubled school districts in the state, with the dubious distinction of having the highest school suspension rate in the nation. In 2008, MPS had received grant funding from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant program from the United States Department of Justice, which it used to cover some of their investment in the VFZ program.

The impact of the VFZ Initiative can be measured from both a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. Qualitatively, principals and other school officials have observed positive changes in the school environment with the presence of the VFZ Youth Advisors in the schools. As Mark Kuxhause, principal for the South Division High School, explained:

The climate of the school has definitely changed over the past two years. The VFZ complements the efforts of the school faculty and is an instrumental component to the other services offered at South Division.

The Youth Advisors represent a critical support system for teachers, who can spend less time simply trying to maintain order and more time providing educational instruction. As Gregory Y. Ogunbouwale, principal of the High School of Expeditionary Learning, described:

Having the extra bodies in school has been very helpful in providing support to safety assistants, administration, and general school staff in the school. The ability of the Violence-Free Zone team to build relationships with our youth has allowed them to obtain information and to notify staff of altercations before they happen: conduct effective mediations, and assist in crisis prevention. It is very helpful to use the Violence-Free Zone staff to get to the bottom of situations before they escalate to violent incidents. In addition, they communicate and work well with the safety assistants...

Finally, the Youth Advisors bring with them an inherent level of cultural competency, insofar as they live in the community and lived through much of the challenges the youth face, which impact how school staff interacts with students during school.

Youth Advisors

The Youth Advisors are the cornerstone of the VFZ program model. These staff, who are typically between the ages of 19 and 30, all come from, and continue to live in, the same neighborhoods as the students, and most have struggled with the same issues, such as gang-related crime and substance abuse. They are employed by CNE’s community partner organization(s) within the city where VFZ is operating. Table 1 below shows some of the contrasts in the work and mind-set of these youth advisors, as compared with school social worker and counselor staff.

Table 1: Youth Advisors and Social Workers/Counselors

	Youth Advisors	Social Workers/Counselors
<i>They generally relate to students as...</i>	Friends	Clients
<i>Make themselves available to students...</i>	24/7	9 to 5
<i>The daily work activities are...</i>	Driven by student needs	Generally pre-determined through position descriptions
<i>Skills and knowledge primarily based on...</i>	Similar background and experiences/struggles as faced by students	Professional licensure/ certification

A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor

The VFZ model is simple, but the work is not easy. Figure 1 below outlines what a typical day for a Youth Advisor involves.

Figure 1: A Day in the Life of a Youth Advisor

1. ***Walking the Streets*** – The youth advisors walk around within about 1,000 feet outside the school before the day begins. The advisors encourage students towards school and pick up information on any brewing gang conflicts, touching base with any police officers in the immediate vicinity;
2. ***Greeting the Students*** as they come in to school, offering any support they can to school security personnel, making themselves visible and available to any students that may have issues from home or for other reasons;
3. ***Tardy Hall*** – For students arriving late to school, youth advisors meet with youth that are chronically late to find out why the student is continually tardy. Sometimes, advisors will also put calls to home for late or absent students to identify issues affecting their attendance;
4. ***Walking the Halls*** – Between classes youth advisors walk around the halls, redirecting students, maintaining a presence/ keeping radar up for any possible individual ‘beefs’, neighborhood rivalries, or gang-related conflicts, and touching base with teachers on any behavior issues in the classroom;
5. ***Lunchtime*** – A critical relationship-building opportunity for the youth advisors with the students, building trust and maintaining visibility;
6. ***Mediation*** – As scheduled throughout the day, participate in teacher-student, parent-student, and student-student mediation to surface and resolve issues causing disruption within the school and classes.

In addition to these services supporting the whole school, each Youth Advisor also carries a case load of anywhere between 10-25 students, many of whom are referrals from either the principal, teachers, or counselors. However, the Youth Advisors also seek out other students who may not have behavioral issues, but instead are clearly academic and/or social leaders in the school. This type of diversification of caseload also counteracts any stigma for a youth assigned to a Youth Advisor as solely because of delinquency and issues associated with high-risk youth.

Assessing Data from the Milwaukee Public Schools

The impact the VFZ initiative has had within and around the schools is not only descriptive, but is captured through changes in data and outcomes from the Milwaukee Public School System and the Milwaukee Police Department. In the long run, the VFZ initiative in Milwaukee hopes to see improvements in academic performance resulting from a safer, more orderly school environment. In the near term, however, the VFZ is demonstrating its impact in terms of:

1. Reductions in the number of violent and non-violent incidents reported in high schools with the VFZ program;
2. Decreases in both suspension rates and the overall number of suspension days reported by high schools with VFZ programs; and
3. An improved climate within the schools, as measured by improvements in student perceptions of the school's safety, order, and overall environment (as reported through an annual student climate survey).

About the Schools

For purposes of this case study evaluation, we examined seven of the eight high schools⁴ with current and active VFZ programs in the Milwaukee Public School system⁵. As shown in Table 2 below, VFZ was implemented as early as September of 2005 (in South Division) to as recently as September of 2009 (Vincent). The Pre-VFZ column indicates the year prior to VFZ implementation for that particular school, as a means of comparison to the Post-VFZ column, which is 2009 for the climate surveys⁶, and academic year (AY) 2008-09 for the data on suspensions and violent/non-violent incidents.

⁴ The VFZ in Vincent High School, implemented in September of 2009, is too recent for including in our evaluation.

⁵ This excludes VFZ programs in schools that are being phased down and are scheduled to be closed down completely by the end of the 2009-10 academic school year.

⁶ The MPS climate survey is implemented between October 1st and December 22nd each year.

Table 2: VFZ Program Sites and Starts

Name of School	VFZ Start Date	Pre-VFZ (suspensions &incidents)	Post-VFZ (suspension &incidents)	Pre-VFZ (climate survey)	Post-VFZ (climate survey)
South Division	September 2005	AY 2004-05	AY 2008-09	2004	2008
Bay View	September 2007	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	2006	2008
Custer	September 2007	AT 2006-07	AY 2008-09	2006	2008
WHS of Law, Education and Public Services	September 2007	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	2006	2008
WHS of Expeditionary Learning	September 2007	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	2006	2008
Madison University	January 2008	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	2007	2008
Bradley Tech	September 2008	AY 2007-08	AY 2008-09	2007	N/A ⁷
Vincent	September 2009	AY 2008-09	N/A	N/A	N/A

Reductions in Violent/Non-violent incidents

The most immediate impact of the VFZ program is measured by the reductions in the number of violent and non-violent incidents for VFZ high schools, as compared with MPS high schools as a whole. Table 3 below shows that violent and non-violent incidents at MPS high schools as a whole both increased by 15% between academic years 2006-07 and 2008-09. In contrast, the number of violent incidents actually decreased by 11% from pre-VFZ levels, while non-violent incidents decreased by 21%.

Table 3: Number of Violent/Non-violent Incidents Reported by School

School Cohort	# of Violent incidents			# of Non-violent incidents		
	<i>Pre-VFZ</i>	<i>Post-VFZ</i>	<i>% increase (decrease)</i>	<i>Pre-VFZ</i>	<i>Post-VFZ</i>	<i>% increase (decrease)</i>
VFZ High Schools	2,330	2,065	(11%)	34,223	26,870	(21%)
	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	% increase (decrease)	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	% increase (decrease)
MPS High Schools	5,261	6,054	15%	56,804	65,430	15%

⁷ The VFZ in Bradley Tech, implemented in September of 2008, is too recent for including in our evaluation of results from the student climate survey.

[Suspensions and Suspension Rate](#)

VFZ also impacts suspensions and suspension rates. Table 4 below shows that while the suspension rate for MPS as a whole increased by 4% between 2006 and 2008, suspension rates for the VFZ schools decreased by 7% from pre-VFZ to post-VFZ, making the VFZ school suspension changes over three times (3.6) better than for the district as a whole. Even more dramatic was the decrease in overall number of suspensions between academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09. For MPS as a whole, the number of suspensions decreased by 9.9% (excluding VFZ schools), while VFZ school suspension dropped a stunning 29.6% from pre-VFZ levels, a decrease of more than two times (2.28) the reduction for MPS schools (excluding the VFZ schools).

Table 4. Suspension Rates

School Cohort	Suspension Rates		
	<i>Pre-VFZ</i>	<i>Post-VFZ</i>	<i>% increase (decrease)</i>
VFZ Schools	41%	38%	(7%)
	AY 2006-07	AY 2008-09	
MPS District-wide	36%	37%	4%
	Total # of Suspensions		
	AY 2007-08	AY 2008-09	<i>% increase (decrease)</i>
VFZ Schools	23,666	16,662	(29.6%)
MPS District-wide (excluding VFZ schools)	64,393	58,572	(9.0%)

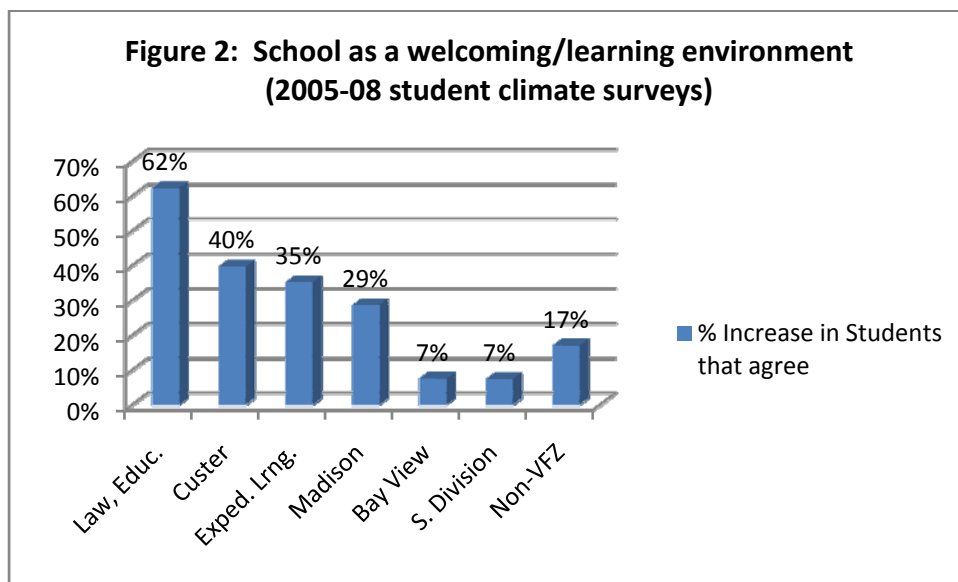
[Improvements in Student Climate Survey Results](#)

Increasing emphasis has recently been placed on student responses to school climate surveys as an important indicator of the quality of a school’s outcomes. MPS administers an annual, 36-questions survey to high school students between October and December of each year. The following analysis is based on a selection of eight of these questions that most strongly correlate to the impact that the VFZ program expects to make on the school environment. Table 5 combines these questions according to three different categories: Atmosphere/Environment, Safety, and Orderliness/Adherence to Rules.

Table 5: 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 classrooms are safe and orderly.”
	“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	“The staff at my school enforces the rules.”
	“When students at my school break the rules, staff members help them improve their behavior.”

The findings in Figures 2-4 below show the percentage increase in students at a particular school that agree or strongly agree with the statements in Table 5, as compared with the comparable rate for students attending non-VFZ high schools between 2005 and 2008. As shown in Figure 2 below, the increase in the proportion of students agreeing with statements pertaining the school atmosphere and environment at four of the six schools⁸ was more than 50% over the increase for non-VFZ schools. For VFZ schools as a whole, the increase was 20%.⁹



⁸ Bradley Tech was excluded from this analysis, since it was only implemented in September of 2008.

⁹ The overall VFZ average increase is a weighted average, based upon the enrollment level at each school.

Figure 3 below tracks changes in student’s perceptions of the safety of the school: in the classroom, hallways and public areas, and the school grounds. Four of the six VFZ schools reported increases of at least 50% above the increases in non-VFZ schools. Overall, the average percentage increase for VFZ schools was 31%.

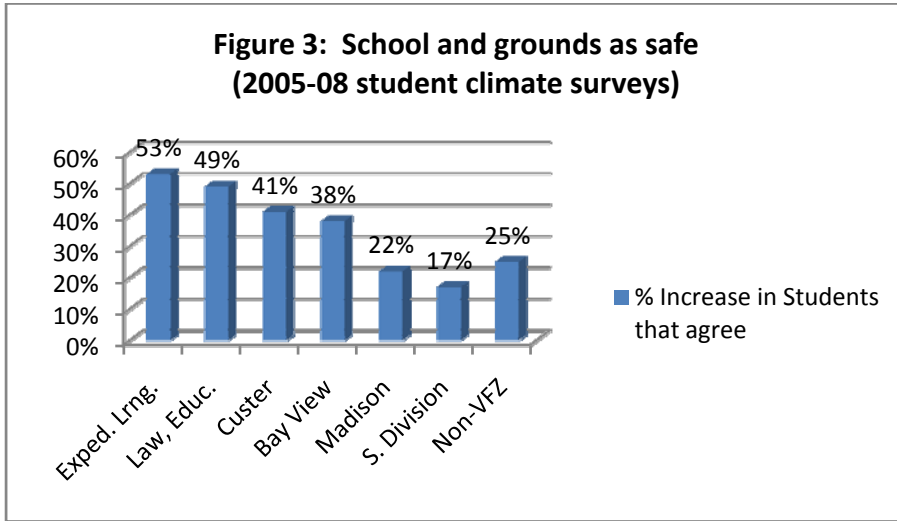
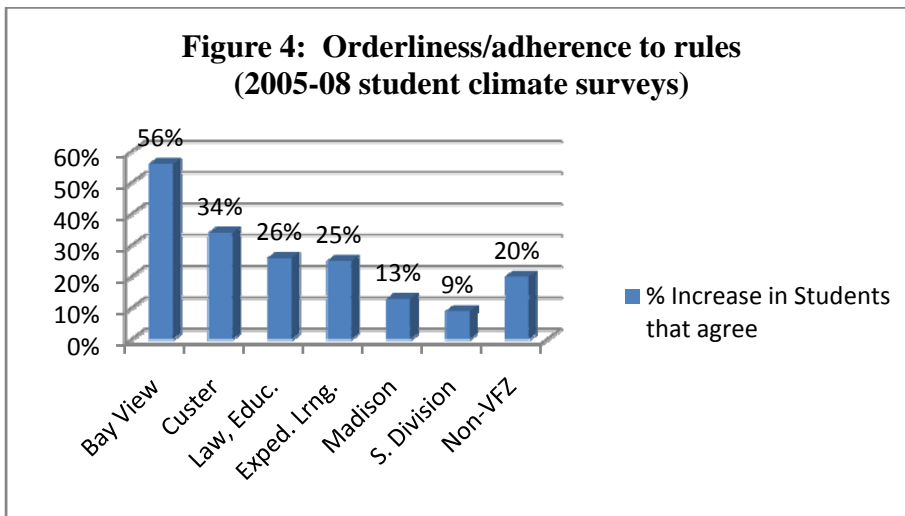


Figure 4 below shows the increase in the percentage of students who agree that the general orderliness and adherence to rules, at least as it relates to the questions in Table 5 above, from before VFZ implementation to post-VFZ implementation. Four of the six VFZ schools showed improvements of 5 percentage points or more, with increases as high as 56% among student respondents AT Bay View High School. Overall, VFZ schools improved by 26%, as compared to 20% among students at non-VFZ schools from 2005 to 2008.



The Impact of the VFZ program beyond the school grounds

One of the most important findings on the impact of the VFZ program, and one to which a dollar value can be attached, is not based on data and outcomes from the schools, but instead concerns data on auto thefts, provided by the Milwaukee Police Department for the communities immediately surrounding the schools with a VFZ program. Table 6 below shows the changes in the number of auto thefts within 1,000 feet of schools that launched VFZ programs on or before November 2007.

As shown in the table, auto thefts decreased by 25% between academic years 2006-07 (i.e., pre-VFZ) and 2007-08 (i.e., post-VFZ), the most recent data provided by the Milwaukee Police Department. In comparison, the citywide reduction in auto thefts during this same time period decreased by only 6%. Given the fact that the Milwaukee Police Department did not indicate that any special efforts were in place in these specific areas to reduce auto thefts, it is a reasonable assumption that the work of the Youth Advisors with students *within* the school also influenced their behavior and decision-making *outside* of the school.

**Table 6: Auto thefts within 1,000 feet of VFZ schools
(AY 2006-07 and AY 2007-08)**

Name of School	Academic School Year 2006-07	Academic School Year 2007-08	% Decrease
South Division	52	39	25%
Bay View	5	2	60%
Custer	28	14	50%
Marshall ¹⁰	30	32	7%
Washington	35	26	26%
Totals	150	113	25%

¹⁰ VFZ ceased to operate in Marshall as of June of 2009.

Putting a value on impact

As shown in Table 6, there was a 25% decrease in motor vehicle thefts near VFZ schools, as compared to the citywide decrease of 6% during the same time period.¹¹ Assuming the projected decrease in auto thefts within 1,000 feet of these high schools would have only been 9 (a 6% reduction from the 150 auto thefts during AY 2006-07), one can argue, all things being equal, there was an additional (i.e., ‘unexplained’) reduction of 28 auto thefts (37 actual less the 9 projected reduction). The average value of a stolen car, according to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Data Report, is \$6,751. This puts the total value of ‘cars not stolen’ at \$189,028 (the 28 additional reduction in motor vehicle thefts times \$6,751 per motor vehicle. Although the VFZ was not established for the purpose of reducing auto thefts, this preliminary finding represents a potential byproduct with monetary value, or benefit, attributable to the work of the Youth Advisors with students at these schools.

This initial finding regarding auto theft reductions might also tell us more about the manner in which the VFZ program may be impacting the youths with whom they work. Stated differently, it is possible that VFZ staff, through the Youth Advisor’s relationship the youth (particularly the caseload youth), may be influencing the decision-making processes that previously lead to perpetrating crimes such as motor vehicle thefts.

Conclusion

The Violence Free Zone initiative is a youth-violence prevention and reduction program located within select middle and high schools across the United States. The VFZ model entails recruiting and training Youth Advisors from the same neighborhoods as the students in the schools they serve. These Youth Advisors serve several roles, including: hall monitors, mentors, counselors, role models, and ‘peace-makers’ when conflicts flare up in the school. The VFZ was first implemented in a Milwaukee high school in September of 2005, and is now active in eight schools.

Interviews with Milwaukee school officials, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders indicate widespread agreement regarding the linkages between the implementation of the VFZ

¹¹ As reported by the FBI Uniform Crime Data Report.

initiative and improvements in a host of areas. Student climate surveys generally confirm that perceived improvements concerning the overall learning atmosphere/environment, safety, and general orderliness within the VFZ schools exceeded those of Milwaukee's other high schools. In-depth interviews with teachers and administrators support these findings. Indeed, school officials we interviewed were remarkably enthusiastic at the preliminary results of the VFZ in Milwaukee.

An examination of data provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools tend to point to significant improvements in VFZ schools that are measurable over time. In general, pre- and post measures document that VFZ schools tend to have fewer reports of violent and non-violent incidents, lower suspension rates, and significantly lower suspensions in general. Furthermore, VFZ demonstrated impacts beyond the school grounds, in terms of higher than average reductions in auto thefts within 1,000 feet of VFZ schools.

About the Authors

Byron R. Johnson is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) as well as director of the Program on Prosocial Behavior, both at Baylor University. He is a Senior Fellow at the Witherspoon Institute (Princeton), and Senior Research Scholar at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research (San Francisco). He is chief advisor for the Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Peking University (Beijing). Before joining the faculty at Baylor University, Johnson directed research centers at Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Johnson is currently conducting a series of empirical studies on the role of religion in prosocial youth behavior and is a member of the Coordinating Council for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He is recognized as a leading authority on the scientific study of religion, the efficacy of faith-based organizations, domestic violence, and criminal justice. Recent publications have examined the impact of faith-based programs on recidivism reduction and prisoner reentry. Along with other ISR colleagues he is completing a series of empirical studies on the religious landscape of China. Professor Johnson is also collaborating with other scholars on several studies of religious intolerance and tolerance in America. Johnson is currently partnering working with the Gallup Organization on a global study addressing religion and spirituality in the world. He has published more than hundred journal articles and book chapters, as well as several books and many research monographs. Johnson's research has been used in consultation with the Department of Justice, Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and the National Institutes of Health.

William Wubbenhorst is Research Fellow at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion and Program on Prosocial Behavior. He serves as a project manager for the Faith Service Forum and is the lead subject matter expert within ICF Macro, ICF International company, in the area of faith-based and community initiatives and the establishment partnerships with government at the local, state and federal level. Mr. Wubbenhorst is currently working as FBCO liaison for a Pathways out of Poverty project funded through the US Department of Labor. Previously, he served as project director for training and technical assistance for the US Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) for Promoting Responsible Fatherhood. Prior to that, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked on behalf of the US Department of Labor (DOL) and the Corporation for National and Community Service's Americorps*VISTA program on projects related to those agencies' faith-based and community initiatives. For DOL, this work entails supporting the Department's efforts to develop local partnerships between workforce development boards and faith-based and community organizations to better serve hard-to-reach populations with training and employment services. The work for Americorps*VISTA involves an evaluation of the number and types of faith-based and community organization partners, along with selected profiles of model programs, particularly in the area of mentoring children of prisoners. Additionally, Mr. Wubbenhorst worked for 8 years in Massachusetts state government. He has published a number of articles pertaining to Charitable Choice and the Faith-Based/Community Initiative and served as an independent research consultant for the Center for Public Justice, conducting research on Charitable Choice and other related faith-based initiatives.



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