



## WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

“The whole community needs to come together to fight violence.”

—Youth at DSN Learning Center

The Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) was initiated to empower the community’s perspective on youth violence in Boston by creating a framework for developing intervention strategies that lead to real change. Since 2008, YVSP has been using a community-based approach coupled with systems dynamics modeling to create a virtual laboratory to model youth violence intervention strategies. Our goal is to help develop the capacity for deep and honest dialogue among a wide range of people to collaborate toward a shared goal of reducing youth violence in our neighborhoods.

This article describes how the model is being used in various settings, and what different folks are learning from the discourse so far. In addition, the story of the YVSP process is further told in three related articles:

- **The Youth Violence Systems Project: A Community-Based Framework of Understanding Youth Violence in Boston** gives an overview of the community-based process that is at the heart of YVSP. It also gives a brief introduction to the content covered in more depth in the other three articles.
- **The YVSP Strategy Lab** describes YVSP’s system dynamics model in detail, including an introduction to the key systems concepts for understanding the model.
- **The Reason Why We Haven’t Solved the Gang Violence Problem** discusses how the YVSP team solicited the input of gang members in the design process, and describes the findings and insights gained.

The power of the YVSP model to provide a shared framework of understanding and a shared language for communication about youth violence is becoming clearer and clearer. Organizations not only are gaining a deeper understanding of how their own work serves to reduce youth violence, but they can easily appreciate the approach taken by another group from their own or a different neighborhood when it’s demonstrated through the model and talked about in its now-familiar terms. These groups can then celebrate the value of their combined efforts and take a larger, systemic view that shows how they can partner together to better serve youth as well as communicate more broadly about what works for their communities. Even as these organizations are coming together with each other, they already want to take the model further and include more people in the conversation: particularly government leaders, law enforcement, and funding organizations.



## Community Forum: Organizations Learning Together

One place that really demonstrated the emerging power of the model for communication and shared understanding was the YVSP Community Forum that took place in December 2010. There were almost 70 people there representing around 20 organizations. These participants were from many different Boston neighborhoods including Uphams Corner, Bowdoin/Geneva, Grove Hall, Dudley, and other areas historically associated with high occurrence of youth violence. They were a diverse group with respect to age, race, and experience. If you heard the group talking together about their efforts to reduce youth violence and to promote peace, you would think they had always talked together in these ways. There were common terms in use throughout and a clear facility with the model. The surprise is that this common language and shared framework are new. They came about through the hard work of these same communities' members and others from their neighborhoods to build that framework together. We are seeing the payoff of all that hard work now as people are better able to communicate effectively about youth violence and work together toward improving all our neighborhoods. The more the model is used and refined, the more the momentum builds for it to be an effective framework and tool for dialog, collaborative decision making, and thoughtful action.

“And I think that this is what [the forum] is about... about each of us saying that we all have a vested interest in peace and transforming our communities and helping each other and not being about just ‘me, myself, and I’ but ‘us and we.’”

—Manny Tikili, Emcee, Community Forum

Everyone at the forum enjoyed themselves and were moved by the stories of the presenters and engaged by the “what next?” dialog of the Q&A time. For those who have been involved in the Project since the early days, it was amazing to see that the things that had been envisioned—the shared framework and common language of the model—were really happening. People were able to come together around their common concerns, speak in a shared language, and still preserve their unique roles and neighborhood-specific views. They were able to think together in a systemic way.

Toward the beginning of the meeting there were small ad hoc groups drawing and writing together about what peace means to them. One of the themes across the groups was “unity.” The forum itself was a picture of this unity where, with all these different groups working each in their own way in their own neighborhoods, there was the power to unite around the overarching vision of peace in all of our communities.

## Learning Centers and Youth Worker Trainings: Who is using the model?

The excitement of the forum was that it was a place where groups were talking and thinking together about what will best serve us across the board and how we can each play our part. The main portion of the evening was presentations by representatives of Project RIGHT, the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's, and Bridging the Gap (Salvation Army).

Through these presentations we got a glimpse of the many ways the model is being used by different organizations.

Several organizations have convened Learning Centers where they are using the model to deepen their understanding of their own organizational mission and their influence on reducing youth violence.

### *Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's*

The Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's (a partner organization that also participated in the Bowdoin/Geneva Design Team) has hosted two types of Learning Centers. In the summer, the Teen Center's youth met to learn about the model, youth violence in general, and the possibilities of reducing youth violence within their own community. One very revealing observation at this meeting was the youth's perception of the key purpose of law enforcement as "reducing high-risk interactions," over the traditional role of "clearing the streets."



In addition to this summer meeting of youth, the Teen Center's youth workers met during the fall as a Learning Center. After getting a handle on the framework and the model, they were able to go deeper into an analysis of their own programs and their influence at various points along the slippery slope. They presented their analysis at the Community Forum and ran a demo where they pulled the switches for "reduce recidivism," "stay off the edge," "reduce organized gang violence," and "reduce addiction to violence." They chose these four switches as being representative of the influence of their current programming. They also have clarified their focus on younger, easier-to-reach members of their community to prevent their entrance into gang activities. Through the use of the model the Teen Center was not only able to understand better what their own work is, but also to demonstrate it clearly to others familiar with the model.

*"We have some talented members of our community. Instead of them having an outlet to express everything that they are able to, they're going out and doing violent things. Instead, if we can get them into the Teen Center or different programs that are all here today then we can advocate for peace instead of continue to fall into this cycle of violence."*

*—Presenter, St. Peter's Teen Center, Community Forum*

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### *Project RIGHT*

Peer leaders and outreach workers from Project RIGHT (PRI), a YVSP partner since the Grove Hall Design Team, met together as a Learning Center during the fall of 2010. During those sessions they learned about systems thinking and the YVSP model. They were able to connect

“And with this software, you could spend more time trying to actually do work rather than trying to figure stuff out that you think will work and then you put out there in the streets that don’t work, but with this it’s giving you a simulation... it shows you if you start here, this is the results... if you start with the gang leaders, these are the results you get.”

—Kevin Thomas, outreach worker

this learning with an extensive survey of youth in the Grove Hall area that they had conducted during the summer. The survey was a collaborative effort designed by PRI, Boston TenPoint Coalition, and other community partners to interview “disconnected youth”—youth aged 18-24 who are not working or in school—about topics like education, court involvement, and community involvement.

At the Community Forum, the team from PRI presented their survey findings and synthesized the findings with the YVSP model. Through their learning in the summer and fall, they chose to target “early retirement” of gang leaders on the assumption that if the leaders left the gang, so would the other members. They pulled that switch

in their demo along with “reduce less-organized gang recruiting,” since the gangs in their area tend to be less-organized and as the leaders move on, recruitment declines.

### *Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative*

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) has been a community partner from the earliest Design Team and throughout the Project. In the summer of 2010, they created a Learning Center with a dozen youth and four adults as a part of GOTCHA (Get Off the Corner Hanging Around). For the first five meetings, the youth were trained on systems thinking and then worked—or as they reported it, “played”—extensively with the Model itself. In their sixth week, they turned around and taught what they’d been learning to the DSNI staff. As DSNI Board member Paul Bothwell talked about this teaching time, he said, “That was beautiful—seeing the youth teaching these other folk about understanding, using [the model] and about long-term consequences.”



“Everyone approaches violence differently, and you have to take action, and you have to have different intervention skills and strategies.”

—DSNI youth (learning center)

Time and time again, we see young people really taking to systems concepts and the model quite easily. It seems mostly to serve the purpose of giving language to things that they already know intuitively. The DSNI youth really grasped how this model works, and they left their time with several key realizations: that youth violence can be changed, that working in isolation may not help (or may even hurt) the situation, and that coordinating efforts can make a real difference. At the Community Forum, a young woman named Jessica reflected that from this time of working with the model, she had “learned the different ways that violence affects people in the community, and there are different

solutions to handling violence.” She also learned about “long-term effects” and realized “how bad the community trauma is.”

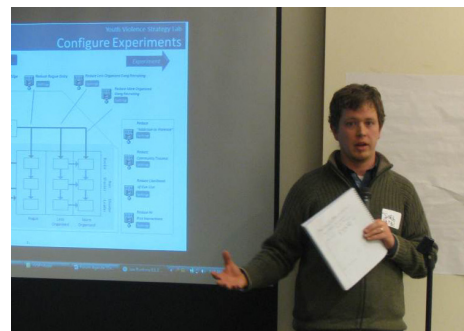
Jessica also commented that these youth have continued to engage in “positive activities.” She said, “We partake in the Dudley youth council where we host radio shows and we talk about topics such as education, school closing, violence... things that matter most to the youth.”

### *Others using the model*

The goal of this phase of the Project is to broaden the base of users of the model. The location-based Learning Centers are one way that broadening is happening. neXus Boston is already a learning community of local youth workers. They are using the model now to train youth workers and facilitate a role-based Learning Center for these workers. There are also other interested individuals and agencies receiving training during this phase.

#### *Joel Furrow, Bridging the Gap*

Joel Furrow of Bridging the Gap (Salvation Army) is one of the youth workers trained through neXus Boston. He presented at the Community Forum about how he has already been able to use the model in framing his work with court-referred youth. They target these areas: “stay off the edge,” “reduce recidivism,” “reducing the likelihood of gun use,” and “stay uninvolved.” He mentioned the immense value of the model in helping them to plan, to communicate with others in their organization, and, beyond just their program, to find the most strategic ways to collaborate in working toward peace together. Like many others present at the forum, he also expressed the encouragement of seeing so many people gathered together around a common goal of peace.



“We have our own opinions and our own ideas about what needs to happen in order for [peace] to take place, and this model is a framework...It gives us ways to communicate that we’re not stepping on each other’s toes.”

—Joel Furrow, *Bridging the Gap*, Community Forum



#### *Tina Chery, Louis D. Brown Peace Institute*

Tina Chery, founder of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute (named in honor of her own son who was killed because of gang violence), has been involved with the development of the model by participating in both the psychology team and by gathering the group of mothers of killed youth who contributed their views to the model. She spoke at the forum about her desire for training on the model because she sees the value of it to contribute both to the internal workings of her organization and to inspire the overall collaboration of many organizations working together for

peace. She specifically encouraged those in attendance at the forum to “stay committed” for the long term.

“I believe this system that’s here can give us what it is that we’re looking for if we truly stay committed to it and if we move away from self and just ‘my program, my program, my youth, my quarter, my block.’ It’s about peace.”

—Tina Chery, *Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, Community Forum*

### Sharing the model more broadly

People are excited about the model and about its power to inform decision making on multiple levels: individual, organizational, community, and policy. Speaking to that last level, one of the DSNI youth who had been a part of the original Design Team spoke up during the Q&A time at the Community Forum and asked if we could have a future forum and “invite the governor or the mayor to actually play with [the model].” Her comment sparked several other comments about broadening the conversation to include others like police or funders, too. The various responses agreed with her thinking and were along the lines of getting the word out to others who are interested and have influence over the system and the resources available to those doing the front-line work at whatever point along the “slippery slope.” In particular, there was interest in being able to articulate clearly the associated costs of intervention at various points.

This Project has been characterized by a thoughtful, deliberate process, and this stage will be no different. We are aware of the potential of this tool to inform a community-centered process and empower community members to strategize about ways to achieve a long-term reduction in violence. On the other hand, it could be taken and misused in an ultimately divisive and counterproductive way. We will therefore keep to the same types of thoughtful processes we’ve used all along to accomplish the purpose of sharing the model more broadly so that its essential orientation toward learning, sharing, and collaboration is not lost.

“We are all in this together.”

—Manny Tikili, *Emcee, Community Forum*