

Lords and Commons Think Tank

Youth Violence and Knife Crime

Developing Evidence Based Policy and Practice

Think Tank Online Programme: **TUESDAY JUNE 29th, 2021**

**Event organised by the Centre for Forensic and Family Psychology,
School of Medicine, University of Nottingham
and
Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group
(Chaired by Rt Hon. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP)**

Alive to the World Programme and Project Alcatraz, Venezuela

Christine de Marcellus Vollmer

I am honoured to be included in this important event, coming from so far away, in Venezuela.

The distressing problem which occupies us has a *cause*, which we have detected, and a solution, which **works**. Precious boys (and even some lovely girls) are being *lost* to despair, misery and disorientation as they are sucked into violent crime, joining gangs, called ‘bandas’ or ‘maras’ in Latin America. It’s horrible.

The problem is anthropological, because boys, bereft of a father figure, are prone to a sense of rejection, anger and have no sense of belonging. The gangs and their leaders give them the sense of belonging, the male figure they need in adolescence. It also gives them the challenge to prove their manhood. This is anthropological.

We are tackling this problem preventively, with a fully structured and scaffolded programme for schools which is *very* effective, especially when started early enough. We apply a curriculum called Alive to the World, involving a weekly class at each level through childhood and adolescence. It engages them in an exciting, continuous story of a group of kids like themselves, who face all the archetypal

existential situations of growing up in a difficult world. Anthropologically-based and using the windows of opportunity that brain science has identified, it offers them, year by year, the **knowledge**, the **motivation** and the **skills** to navigate situations, harnessing the universal values, which all admire: courage, loyalty, generosity, trustworthiness, tenacity, etc. The story also offers boys and girls a variety of credible role models that they lack, they crave, and that they quickly adopt as their own. The desire for credible role models seems to be in-born.

Over the last 20 years, Alive to the World has proven to eliminate school violence, quite quickly and to diminish, often to zero, teen pregnancies and dropping-out, as the programme gradually fulfills their innate longing to be good people with a sense of significance.

This programme has been successfully adopted in a number of countries. In Peru for instance, an organization called Coprodeli has applied it since the year 2000. They have 10,000 kids in schools in the most violent parts of Peru, near the gaols, and in the port and all sorts of difficult places and they have reached zero pregnancies in a country where teen pregnancies are 14-18% per year! This is because the girls and the boys are discovering other reasons to live. We are perfecting at this moment our record-keeping in Venezuela and finding that more and more schools that apply Alive to the World are reporting no violence and many fewer or no pregnancies after a couple of years of use.

An interesting and fairly recent case has been a high school of 1000 kids in Sabaneta, a violent slum in Aragua, which is the most violent state in Venezuela. This school was slated to be shut down after the school year due to uncontrollable violence (mainly towards the teachers). But thanks to being included in an experiment funded by the EU, within months, Alive to the World had inspired the young toughs to become the leaders of reform! Quite amazing!

They began by turning a rubbish area into a space for football. Then they moved on to painting over the graffiti, and then forming the “Protection Committee” for the school, followed by the girls forming the “Protocol Committee,” to make the school really elegant. Some time later, the education authorities of that state told me that this school is now considered the model school for the state.

The young people learn to live the 6 virtues that positive psychology has shown to lead to success in life, no matter the socio-economic or racial extraction of the student. The innate neurological need for significance so well described by Viktor

Frankl recognizes, and seizes upon, the positive logic of virtue and the Golden Rule....if it is properly presented.

Our son Alberto and his Project Alcatraz works with **Reparative Justice** since 2003. This involves youth from age 15, *already* entangled in serious crime: robbery, murder, kidnapping and drug traffic. He uses Rugby, tough love, community work, and our values education.

85% of his young criminals are sons of absent fathers and 90% are dropouts. Only 21% have suffered physical abuse. Most started criminal activity between 12 to 14, the age of puberty when a father-figure is most important for a boy. 20% of these begin living with a girl at this age as well. They are lonely; they want to 'belong'.

The self-control required by Rugby, the sense of belonging, and the leadership of the coaches and former Alcatrazes, work miracles on 70% of these; they enter the work force and found families. There is now even a preventive Alcatraz Rugby Club for 8-14 year-olds, for younger brothers and neighbors of the ex-gangmembers. There are now Alcatraz teams, professionally coached, in 30 Prisons. So, it is working

Dr. Patrick Fagan has documented the undeniable statistics of the USA that prove that the root cause of juvenile crime, addictions, pregnancy, and poverty is, in 86-88%, **father absence**.

We must, and we *can*, teach today's boys to be strong, responsible, loving fathers and empower girls to expect, and exact, those characteristics in the boys with whom they will bond.

The escalating phenomenon of fatherless boys, driven by the culture to find male role models in these gangs, venting their anger in violent crime, has a **solution**. It is to give them the knowledge, motivation, and skills to channel their energies toward the success they feel is denied them, a success respectful of their real human potential.

Thank you!