

Crime Prevention - Pushing the Envelope

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A world without crime.

A world without poverty.

A world where you can control your own life.

A world in which ethics are guided by moral principles based on reason and respect for others, rather than by dogmatic rules.

Rules often determined by those in power and that often exclude:

Someone poor.

Someone uneducated.

Someone, "not like me".

Utopia?

Humanists do not expect to build a Utopia, but slowly and steadily to remove injustice and reduce poverty and divisiveness. To create this type of world here in our nation citizens must be enabled to actively participate in the decision-making process. From within communities to the national Constitution. The decisions made need to be more appropriate to our own needs, the needs of the country and the greater world.

We, the Trinidad and Tobago Humanist Association, are not proselytising but simply articulating our voice. We invite you to explore a different approach to create solutions to the challenges facing our country.

Humanism is not a belief system. It doesn't tell you what's good for you. It doesn't give you a ready-made answer. What it does do is offer a process to guide you in considering particular situations, in taking responsibility and in determining, yourself, what's right for you.

What is this process? We have a rational philosophy based on the dignity of human beings, informed by science and motivated by hope and compassion. Humanism promotes the understanding of life and reality through critical and free inquiry. It enables us to seek truth through scientific reasoning and rational thinking. When making errors our experience, reasoning and empathy will demand us to correct these errors. However, humanism does not focus on the individual to the exclusion and detriment of the society in which we live. While we hold freedom, individual choice and human rights in high regard our actions must not be at the expense of other human beings. This is exactly what crime does.

What then is the humanist perspective on crime?

Because humanists tackle moral problems rationally we analyse crime through a lens that considers the evidence available while affirming the dignity of each human being. It is in this way that we come to an understanding of society and make decisions with compassion. Criminals are human beings. They are fathers who have been abused and now, in turn, sexually abuse their sons and daughters. They are husbands who commit illegal activities to provide for their families. They are the young boys whose need for food, shelter, status and a father-figure led them to cross our TV screens in 1990 with their arms up high. These criminals, reacting to environmental cues, are products of our society and in order to reduce crime people need to be convinced that they may live to reap rewards. Rewards that include access to education that can facilitate the generation of a reasonable income and access to decent health services.

In our newspapers and our conversations reference is made to “bad cops”. There is a perception that police are involved in kidnappings, running drugs, murders and corruption. Does the evidence from the Commissioner of Police and the Police Complaints Authority support this perception? How many in the police force have been charged and convicted in the courts? What happened to the member of the police service who allegedly shot Galene Bonadie dead in 2004. She was a mother who was standing in the road, maybe protesting, in her community. How many police have been charged within the service and found guilty? We humanists wonder whether the authorities in this country have understood that crime is influenced by consequence and that corruption influences both crime and consequence negatively. In a society where corruption and crime apparently bear minimum consequence and crime is considered worthwhile, the negative spiral will only resonate and nothing will change for the good.

Humanists take the view that scientific reasoning should be applied to the investigation of these issues and the implementation of appropriate actions should follow. The humanist thought encompasses the attitude that police found guilty as charged, through the internal process, should be dealt with in a manner befitting the transgression. We see that a rational approach needs to be taken towards the police service. This might include the implementation of recommendations of previous investigative reports into the police service and a focus on recruitment and training.

This brings us to further questions that emerge from embracing a humanist approach to crime. Is this data reliable? Is the Police Commissioner able to act transparently and does the Police Complaints Authority act independently? Are procedures in place to minimize the possibility of a subjective approach to decision-making? If such checks and balances are not in place then it is indeed essential to establish the systems required. As regards transparency tell us Minister of National Security “What has happened to the items of Akiel Chamber’s clothing

that might have produced evidence on the identification of his killers?” Tell us, “Why was the anal swab taken from Akiel’s body during the post mortem destroyed by the Forensic Science Centre prior to completion of the case?”

The humanist approach to solving crime goes beyond a focus on criminal assaults to treat the underlying causes. In this country the courts are clogged with small-time marijuana users who have limited options and law enforcement officials are distracted from pursuing violent criminals. Humanists would view the decriminalisation of marijuana as a way to reduce the marginalisation of young men on the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder and provide them with more appropriate education opportunities. Opportunities that include drug education that emphasises science over scare tactics. Evidence shows there are more and larger seizures of illegal drugs, more people are using drugs and the health and social cost of drug taking is rising. In 1995 an editorial in the British Medical Journal referred to:

One survey in Britain that showed the proportion of young people who had been offered drugs rose from 2% in 1969 to 41% in 1994

The monthly prevalence of cannabis use among Dutch high school students is around 5.4% compared with 29% in the United States.

This further illustrates the failure of the current prohibitionist policies. Yet governments in Trinidad and Tobago continue to follow prohibitionist drug policies.

Humanists regard crime as a symptom rather than a root cause and we advocate the use of scientific method in the identification and confirmation of the causes of crime in Trinidad and Tobago. Humanism takes the view that the identification of the root causes or factors that contribute to crime is required. In Trinidad and Tobago qualitative data shows cases where children are sexually abused by their mothers’ partners. Too often abuse continues because a mother is financially dependent on her partner. In other countries research shows a positive correlation between crime and inadequate housing, deficient educational opportunities and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. What is the situation in Trinidad and Tobago?

Empiricism is central to humanist conviction and a humanist approach to crime would consider information gathering as an essential first step. Such data presents the opportunity to link particular interventions with changes in the incidence of crime or its underlying causes. Thus providing the means for monitoring and evaluation, which are an integral part of the checks and balances of the system.

Humanists are of the opinion that people are capable of living lives brimming with meaning and fulfillment if they so choose independent from any dogmatic assumptions. We are also convinced that people, rather prefer such a life than a life of crime. To attain this scenario it is

necessary to create a particular context in which our citizens' best qualities can develop which humanists hope to foster through humanist principles. In such a Trinidad and Tobago prevention would be given priority over prosecution, drug addiction would be treated as a disease, while education would be flexible and appropriate to the range of needs of our young citizens. Decreases in addiction would free up funds spent on interdiction.

Humanistic education emphasises two things often overlooked in educational systems including our own:

- Enabling the individual to take more responsibility to guide him- or herself towards a personally-defined goal of success, and
- Enabling the individual to cope or control his or her emotions in a proper way, which is important in personal and social life.

These two skills are closely intertwined and give rise to objectives that could:

- Promote independence and interdependence
- Develop the ability to implement what is learned
- Not numb but encourage creativity and curiosity in the surrounding world to develop a wholly integrated person.

Incorporating these components into the education system could assist children through difficult circumstances like cognitive difficulties and slow learning, thus allowing all to become self-sustaining and productive members of our country. Humanists propose that the inclusion of social and life skills development into the curriculum, amongst other topics, with “good touch” and “bad touch” might contribute to increasing a child’s ability to stop an abuser themselves or to alert help.

Our association acknowledges that there cannot be a cure or solution for crime, but we recognise that the reduction and management of crime is a reasonable aspiration. With this in mind, our conventional reliance on merely tackling criminal activity must be considered as superficial and not seriously addressing the factors and conditions that contribute to criminal activity. The failure of our very institutions to produce constructive individuals needs to be closely examined in the evaluation of the causes of crime. This illustrates the necessity to review the effectiveness of our social underpinnings. We advocate alternatives to our traditionally limited approaches in developing a framework that is supportive of greater expressiveness, creativity, resourcefulness, and productivity of all citizens.

In conclusion, humanist principles provide a framework that can enable all citizens to come



together regardless of their “creed and race” backgrounds to address the issues that affect us all in our country. Prevention is better than prosecution but both are central to the humanist view to reducing crime in Trinidad and Tobago.

Please, Minister of National Security adopt the humanist perspective and facilitate justice for Akiel Chambers. Show some compassion and respect for the dignity of Akiel’s family and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago by telling us what further investigation has taken place since the matter was referred back to the police by the coroner? Then, Mr. Minister, take a deep breath, shrug off all dogmatic rules and logically assess the evidence available on the various options for cannabis legislation:

- Total prohibition
- Prohibition with civil penalties
- Partial prohibition
- Regulation of the production, distribution, and sale of cannabis
- Free availability

By all means see drug use in moral terms but address the issue with logical evidence and compassion with the aim of reducing any adverse health effects of marijuana and the larger problems that stem from its criminalisation.