



**AVP**  
Ireland

# Impact Report

Summary



## Contact details

Alternative to Violence Project Ireland  
Quaker House - Stocking Lane - Rathfarnham - Dublin 16  
[www.avpireland.ie](http://www.avpireland.ie) 085 151 2582

# Presentation

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) offers unique training, both in the way it is organised and delivered, and by way of programme content. During a workshop up to twenty participants and facilitators sit in a circle conversing, engaging in collaborative activities, participating in role-plays, and trying to find within themselves the skills and power to resolve potentially violent situations non-violently, and to live a more peaceful life. There is no hierarchy within the AVP organisation, therefore, during workshops there are no teachers present in the room, every voice is considered equal and listened to. All participants and facilitators are volunteers and, for the duration of the workshops, the prison is left on the other side of the door.

This is the summary of AVP Impact Report. The full report is worth reading and available on our website: [www.avpireland.ie](http://www.avpireland.ie)

AVP started in New York in the mid-1970s and was brought to Ireland in the mid-1990s. Since then, the programme has been active within the Irish prison system and, up to now, there has been no formal academic evaluation of its impact or outcomes in Ireland. We hope this Report addresses this deficit.

AVP workshop facilitators have a strong conviction that the programme has a positive impact on participants. Facilitators are witnesses to the impact that AVP has on their own lives. The training they receive can lead to changes in their own behaviour and can empower them to lead a more peaceful life. Furthermore, weekend after weekend facilitators witness the differences in participants' attitudes and mindset from the start of workshops on Fridays to the end of workshops on Sunday evenings.

This Impact Report aims to demonstrate how AVP helps participants to find non-violent ways to deal with conflict and empowers them to make constructive, positive and lasting change in their lives.

Our thanks to all the AVP volunteers and participants over the years. A special word of thanks to those who helped compose and fund this report and in particular the St Stephens Green Trust. It is hoped and expected that the Impact Report will empower and enthuse a new generation of volunteers and participants

The Working Committee and Board of Directors

# The research

This Report was commissioned by AVP Ireland to research the impact that AVP workshops have had in Irish prisons for the period 2014-2016. It was written by Pyers Walsh with the support of Dorothee Potter-Daniau, Simone Gerlings and Claire De Jong. The research for this Impact Report was collected in three ways.

1.

The first, desk-based stage involved sourcing, reading and analysing international studies on AVP. Research articles from the UK, New Zealand, South Africa and the US were consulted to determine the effectiveness of AVP in the context of conflict resolution. During this literature review six key themes were identified in relation to AVP and why it is successful at enabling participants to resolve conflict without resorting to violence. These themes are:

- AVP builds self-esteem/worth
- AVP develops real trust within the group
- AVP develops more effective communication and enhances social skills such as listening, assertiveness and empathy
- The central importance of experiential nature of AVP workshops
- AVP improves problem-solving skills
- The importance of 'Transforming Power'. This is the power, available to us all, to transform what might be a violent or destructive situation into a non-violent one.

2.

The second stage of this research project involved collecting primary qualitative data via semi-structured interviews with AVP facilitators in the community and in Wheatfield Place of Detention.

During the interviews the following major themes emerged and some of them were already identified in the literature review.

AVP is seen as a **force for good** in prisons. It helps to build **commonality, community** and **trust** which can provide an important support structure and can increase **safety** in prisons. Participants felt their **communication** and **problem-solving** skills had improved. The **experiential** nature of the workshops was seen as positive with the 'peer led' structure of AVP considered as central to this.

Participants reported having used violence in the past due to low levels of self-worth and that AVP has helped them to rebuild their **self-esteem**.

The core notion of **Transforming Power** was presented as important to help change the perception of oneself, getting rid of the 'hard man' stigma" (AVP Facilitator, 2016) and improving the dynamic with prison staff.

During the interviews it was apparent that the interviewees felt there should be **more AVP workshops in Irish prisons**. It was also suggested that **IPS Officers** participate in AVP workshops in order to gain a better understanding of violence, its causes, consequences and possible cures.

3.

The third stage of data collection for this Report has been gathered by way of evaluation questionnaires distributed at the end of each AVP prison workshop.

The themes which emerged from the questionnaires concurred with those in the international literature and in the interview findings. These individual questionnaires emphasised the notion of **personal growth**. This contrasted well with the interview questions which were more focused on the wider topic of prison life. Noteworthy too is how often workshop participants mentioned **anger** and how many identified and experienced, often for the first time, that they can learn to control it (anger). The AVP team acknowledges that any process of change is complex and multi-faceted and that, for any change to occur, individuals must first change their mind-set. **Awareness** is often the first and most important step for participants in changing their mind-set and their ways.

## Conclusion

The evidence uncovered in this Report demonstrates that when people engage with a programme such as AVP, violence can be better understood and transformed. The research findings in this Report can be divided into micro and macro levels. Firstly, AVP cultivates, encourages and supports the participants who attend the workshops on an individual micro level. This is facilitated by improving communication skills, developing self-esteem and fostering new and create ways of solving problems. Secondly, AVP attempts to tackle the issue of violence on a wider community-based macro scale. AVP endeavours to build a sense of community and to increase the notions of safety, trust and empathy within the prison population and the wider prison community, including among prison-based staff who benefit if the prison community is stronger and more cohesive.

A number of areas identified within this Report require further research and analysis. The relationship between recidivism and attendance at AVP workshops is certainly worthy of more scrutiny and could not be adequately tackled given the nature and scope of this Report. The statistics on the relationship between AVP and violent incidents is an area that also requires more data and further analysis. It was noted by a prison-based facilitator that levels of indiscipline and violence after participants attend AVP workshops were lower, but the evidence was anecdotal and certainly worthy of further and rigorous investigation.

In 2012 the European Union passed *Directive 2012/29/EU* which established minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime. It would, therefore, be beneficial if current offenders were given the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to engage in victim-offender reconciliation and further restorative justice practices. It is hoped that AVP would be placed at the heart of such prison and community-based practices.



“The prison is locked out, and you see not the person that they’re in prison for, but the real human being sitting there and that’s what AVP does”.

(AVP Facilitator, 2016)