

# The Miami Herald

## Preventing Violence In Our Schools And Communities

*By Wifredo Ferrer and Keith Fletcher  
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Those of us in law enforcement play an important role in reducing crime and protecting our community, and those of us in nonprofit educational work play a similar role in preventing crime by keeping kids on track to graduate.

When we combine our efforts, we can make a bigger impact than we can by simply working alone.

In 2011, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida (USAO) created the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) to combat violent crime, gang activity and firearms offenses that plague many of our local communities.

For the VRP, the USAO has partnered with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, nonprofit and private entities, faith-based organizations, community leaders and educational institutions to break the cycle of violence.

Now, the USAO is joining forces with City Year Miami, the Miami branch of the national, education-focused nonprofit, to add momentum to the prevention of violence in our schools and community.

Low literacy levels strongly correlate with poverty, crime and unemployment.

As part of the VRP's Pre-K Reading Program, members of the USAO staff, federal and local law enforcement officers/agents, employees of the law firm Jones Day and other community volunteers go to schools in select violence-plagued communities once a month and read to 900 pre-kindergarten and elementary school students.

Following every reading session, volunteers give the children books to take home. Since 2014, the program has given out more than 11,000 books; sadly, for many of the children, this is the first and only book they have ever owned. Now, through this new partnership, City Year Miami will be committing its entire professional staff team to adopting a number of schools for the reading program and sponsoring the books at one school.

The goals of the reading program are to instill in the students excitement for reading, provide mentorship, prevent academic failure and derail the school-to-prison pipeline. The reading program has expanded to 21 schools throughout the Southern District of Florida, including Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, and St. Lucie counties.

Partnerships such as the VRP generate tremendous power by collectively building safer, stronger, more cohesive communities. While teachers are crucial agents of change, called upon to help mold the minds and lives of our children, the task of educating, protecting and mentoring our youth cannot fall upon the shoulders of one person, organization or entity.

In this regard, partnerships like the one forged between the U.S. Attorney's Office and City Year Miami are critical in making this a community-wide effort that will continue to have a real impact on our children and the community at large.

Within a landscape far too often riddled with violence, loss and grief, we are compelled to create positive interactions and to become powerful storytellers for a future full of possibility that many of these young children cannot yet see.

We invite you to join forces with the USAO, City Year Miami and other partners on our VRP team, so that together we can have a direct, positive impact on the lives of our local students.

Financial investment matters, but getting involved, reading to children and helping them envision a better tomorrow — that's transformational and it's how we begin to chip away, child by child, household by household, community by community, at the stigma of low expectations and the lack of options that often lead to future violence.

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