

An option that saves lives

A program to prevent young people from leaving school uses the police and the community as partners to eradicate the seeds of crime.

When the dismissal bell rings at Ines Maria Mendoza School in Caimito, 52 intermediate students inch toward a policeman driving a bus.

Not that they are in trouble. Instead, they are embarking on a journey that takes just minutes to nearby Centro Sor Isolina Ferré, where Officer Paul Dumeng is leading an effort to keep them interested in school and off the streets where violence takes the life of relatives and acquaintances.

"Here, more or less, each have had a family member killed. They are afraid," said Dumeng.

To avoid this, Centro Sor Isolina Ferré, with the help of the school and community-identified children who may be at risk of leaving school to participate in the Koban Program, funded by the Eisenhower Foundation, and taking its name from the community police stations in Japan.

Dumeng, whom young people call "Michael" or simply "police", visits daily during school lunch to talk with the boys, see how they are, talk to their teachers and to confirm that they return to their classrooms at the end of recess.

Criminologist Dora Nevares noted that there is a direct relationship between not finishing school and criminal behavior, and recalled a telling statistic: in 2004, "all young people who were in penal institutions (Puerto Rico), as minors, were dropouts".

Therefore, the center presented to the foundation, headquartered in Washington, D.C., a proposal to extend its allocation of funds for the current edition of Koban - which started in January 2010 - two years more.

This is the third generation Koban in Caimito, and Dumeng has been here since the initial program in the 1990s, one that was a pioneer on the island and where Carlos Avila, now a volunteer at the center, was a participant.

"There were temptations in the community and pressures, which at any given time could derail us," said Ávila, 29, who earned a BA in Social Science and currently works at the Land Registry.

"In our community there are parallel lives, and you have the opportunity to choose..." This is a life choice. "This kind of experience can deliver them from certain death", said Ávila, who through the years has seen classmates die as part of the wave of violence that envelops the neighborhood.

Ávila, moved by the centers familiarity and fraternal greetings to share with "Michael" confirms earlier assurances: "to the police that I do not know is a security police officer, a policeman who supports your studies, supports the school and the community".

Avila moved by the centers familiarity and fraternal greetings to share with "Michael", confirms that "the policeman is not just a security officer, but also a police officer who, supports the school and in the community. "

In addition to the support of Dumeng, whom the children call at any time to discuss their problems or to talk about a particular situation in the family or neighborhood, the Koban program includes tutoring services, art classes and workshops to enhance self-esteem offered by five other workers and volunteers of Centro..

Diana Trujillo, who is in eighth grade and has been linked to the center since she was small, is well aware that, if you are not in the Koban Program, the priorities in your life would be different.