



Mongrel Mob welcomes John Wareham  
Gang headquarters, New Zealand, 2022

# How to Win the War on Gangs

**John Wareham:** *Advice to Mongrel Mob Kingdom*

**M**Y LIFE IN MANHATTAN TOOK A SUDDEN TURN. For eighteen years, as chief of my own human resources firm, I'd coached corporate chiefs and their teams. Now, out of the blue, I was invited to create and teach, one day a week, an inmate class on New York's notorious Rikers Island, the world's largest penal colony.

I entered my first Rikers class like the Man from Mars. The first thing I noted was the color of the inmates. Only three of thirty-six were White. The others were mostly African-American with a sprinkling of Hispanic. Yikes! Something was surely wrong with this picture. I also soon discovered that a depressing eighty-percent of inmates who graduated that program were rearrested and returned to Rikers within sixty days of their release. Yikes again. I figured that unless I could find a way to create a program to dramatically reduce that staggering recidivism rate, I should return to the planet of my financially rewarding corporate clients.

In fact, I stayed on for twenty years, and wound up dedicating more than half my time to teaching and developing my prison class, always as an unpaid volunteer. To be honest, my reward was a never ending learning curve. And, as you might imagine, I wound up with unique wealth of knowledge at both ends of the social spectrum. Specifically I learned at Rikers that:

- Virtually everyone who showed up in my class was intelligent, keen to learn, and outwardly rebellious and opinionated, but in fact, inquiring and open-minded;



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**John Wareham** is chief executive of The Eagles Circle Foundation, Inc., a non-profit corporation serving the underprivileged, at-risk youth, and re-entering ex-prisoners. John has created and led symposia for senior executives in most major world cities, as well as rehabilitation and development programs in New York's toughest prisons, and in New Zealand at Paremoremo maximum security correctional facility. After residing in New York for thirty-eight years, John and his wife Margaret now split their time between the USA and New Zealand.

- racism, injustice and institutional bias were pervasive;
- Malcolm X was right when he said, “if you’re a black man living in America, and you’re not angry, you don’t understand what’s happening;”
- most of my class had been incarcerated either as a result of doing drugs or of, one way or another, dealing drugs;
- But these guys did not have a drug *problem*—they had a drug *solution*.

I also figured that there had to be a way to help them sidestep these social quicksands, win the respect they’d been denied, and create the decent, productive lives they yearned for.

## **Making Sense of Things**

Happily I already knew that change is a *process*. And that it happens when we truly understand our particular predicament and can begin to see a way out of it. The predicament of Rikers inmates was not that they were incarcerated. Their predicament was that they kept coming back to jail—the *syndrome of serial incarceration*.

I knew that finger-pointing, pontificating officials never reformed me. And since these guys in my class were serial offenders, it wasn’t working for them, either.

What *does* work, are new ideas that we can process. First, we need to recognize the mistaken beliefs that result in serial incarceration. Then, without too much effort, we can choose to embrace the liberating beliefs that end that syndrome.

As the Man from Mars, I knew that in this situation, I was the student and the inmates were my teachers. So I decided to bring to the table a set of big and often contentious ideas for discussion, express no personal view, and merely keep the conversations respectful and focused. We did this via discussion papers, public speaking and parliamentary debating, creating poetry, and seeing and discussing movies.

Happily it worked. Lives were changed, and with two graduates of my class, Kenny Johnson and Joe Roberts, we formed the Eagles Foundation to help at-risk youth. Very soon, I successfully advocated for both Kenny and Joe to be appointed to paid, full time jobs teaching Rikers inmates. As African-Americans with serious prior rap-sheets, the Eagles principles they shared won immediate and lasting respect, and changed countless inmate lives.

A decade later, after creating, with the unstinting help of Rikers inmates, our Eagles program, I was invited to teach mostly murderers and violent

felons in Upstate New York maximum-security prisons. This proved an even greater learning experience. So much so that during my ten year stint there, the recidivism rate for Eagles graduates fell into the low single digits.

If you'd like to know exactly what were the series of big ideas that resulted in this happy outcome, check out our Pulitzer Prize nominated podcast series *The Breakout Plan*, which now has listeners worldwide in more than 400 cities. Right now, however, let me share the first of two brief stories that affected every inmate of every stripe, colour and creed—and which might just change your lives, too.

## **The King of the World and the Man in the Cask**

Back in 300 BC, having conquered known world, Alexander the Great sent for the philosopher and former slave Diogenes, who having renounced material possessions, and, at that time clad in rags, lived in a barrel in Athens Greece.

Unimpressed, Diogenes replied, “If that fellow has a mind to be acquainted with me, let him come hither, for I shall always think Athens as far distance from Macedon as Macedon is from Athens.”

So Alexander the Great made that trek. Together with his entourage, they surrounded Diogenes as he lay in his open barrel. “I am Alexander the Great, conqueror and now King of the world,” said Alexander to Diogenes. “Your reputation is well known to me and I greatly admire your philosophies. And so, I have come to grant you anything you desire, anything at all.”

Diogenes reply was one for the ages: “Could you kindly stand out of my sunlight.”

Amazed by a response that he'd heard no citizen anywhere ever utter, Alexander drew a deep breath and asked, “Wherever are you from?”

Another answer for the ages: “I am a citizen of the world.”

Alexander slowly shook his head from side to side. “Were I not Alexander,” he said, admiringly, “I would be Diogenes.”

“And were I not Diogenes,” said the near-naked philosopher, “I too would wish to be Diogenes.”

Historians agree that Diogenes was the first person to coin the term ‘citizen of the



world.’ It is a big idea that has turned out to be profoundly true. The study of genetics has now confirmed that we humans all have the same genetic makeup. No matter our country, creed, color or culture, we are, first and foremost, all humans and, as such, all global citizens entitled to enjoy decent lives as equals on the planet we share. Alas, as we shall soon see, ignorance—often willful—of these facts is the core reason that most prison programs fail.

## Cosmopolitanism

Happily, in this 22nd century the legacy of Diogenes has overtaken most of the free world. Global citizenship is the heart and soul of ‘cosmopolitanism’, a term coined by renowned, Ghanaian raised, Cambridge educated Princeton professor Anthony Appiah. In three words, cosmopolitanism is *universality plus difference*.

To be a cosmopolitan is to recognize that we are, *first and foremost*, all citizens of the cosmos. *After* that we’re shaped by our culture and our geography.

Sure, it’s natural to revere our personal cultural inheritance. But we must respect the beliefs and values of other cultures, too. Everybody matters.

But, as Professor Appiah notes:—

*just as there are lots of values and beliefs that can and must be local, there are some values that should be universal.*

So toleration requires a concept of the *in-tolerable*.

And that in turn sharply limits the scope of our tolerance.

Conversations across boundaries can be delightful or vexing. But what they mainly are, though, is inevitable.

We enter every conversation – whether with neighbors or with strangers – without a promise of final agreement. So we must feel free to respectfully engage our intelligence and curiosity and open our ears as we seek truth and common ground.

Alas, when it comes to prison reform, this is not easy.

## Why Prison Programs Fail

All over the world, prison rehabilitation is a political hot potato. That’s because, in most countries, including New Zealand, retribution trumps rehabilitation:



- *Conservative politicians favour outsourcing prisons to private corporations.* Alas, these are run for profit, so ‘return on investment’ is speedily maximized by operating prisons as warehouses for human cargo. The net result is that ex-offenders are delivered back into their communities, angrier than before, but with improved criminal skills.
- *Progressives are caught in a similar bind.* They cannot afford to be seen as soft on crime, yet they want to be perceived

as rehabilitating inmates and reducing crime. *But*, alas, they fall prey—in both the USA and New Zealand—to fallacies you’ll recognize in this parable of the golden eagle:-

A man found an eagle’s egg and put in the nest of a backyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

He thought he was a backyard chicken, so all his life the eagle did what the backyard chickens did.

He clucked and cackled and scratched the earth for worms and insects. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

The old eagle looked up in awe. “Who is that?” he asked.

“That’s the eagle, the king of the birds,” said his neighbor. “He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth—we’re chickens.”

And so the eagle lived and died a chicken.

This story resonated with every inmate of every ethnicity. It shows why Diogenes defined himself a ‘citizen of the world.’ And it perfectly pinpoints the need to shun labels and define one’s own identity. It shows that:

- if we’re *unaware* of the fallacy of a label, we fall into wrong-headed ideas about why that label should be applied, and to whom;
- if we *accept* a label, it shapes our thoughts about how to behave;
- and, crucially, the label affects the way other people view and treat us.

All of which leads to Corrections Department labels that create and reinforce the syndrome of serial incarceration, beginning with the label of race.

- o Essentially this says, “too many people ‘of color’ are incarcerated.” And now a further race-based assumption follows: “Folks like this don’t think like other humans, so they need to be isolated from everyone else and given their own special programs.”
- o Well, sure, prison programs absolutely must address issues of ‘race’ and institutional bias. But, keep in mind, in point of fact, the prison population—of every hue and ethnicity—is comprised of dispirited strugglers and stragglers from the lowest socioeconomic rung. *They’re mostly in prison because of need, not color or race.*

It is, of course, intrinsically racist to suggest that innate human differences determine different cultural outcomes; it is demeaning to suggest recidivism will decline if a particular group is segregated from the rest of the prison population; and it is xenophobic to suggest that the cure for criminal behavior is to teach any particular ethnicity to see themselves as better or worse than any other. That notion leads to racial segregation within prisons; the imagined solution of ‘apartheid’ teaching programs.

*This is a particular issue in New Zealand, where misguided but well-intentioned prison reformers point to the fact that 4000 or so Maori reside in Kiwi prisons, and a further 2500 are shackled in their homes by electronic GPS bracelets. But, on the bright side, that total of 6500 represents less than one percent (.7%) of the total Maori population of 875,000.*

- o To put it another way, the other 99.3% of Maori—868,420 people—are law-abiding, caring Kiwi citizens of the world.
- o Yes, of course, Kiwi citizens of European origin have a lower rate of incarceration. But surely that’s because they hail from a higher socioeconomic status; *they are infinitely less needy.*

*So, again; forget about applying racial labels to our citizens. Instead let’s address the economic plight of all our neediest residents, of every ethnicity, creed, color or culture.*

Time and again, Rikers taught me that every prisoner acquires a new respect for himself the moment he realizes that first and foremost he is a citizen of the world and the cosmos. His *behavior* may have let him down, so he’ll need to adjust that. But his *heart* is still intact; innately, he is still a decent human citizen and entitled to treat himself as such—even if the culture around him has social policies stuck in the dark ages.

## HOW TO WIN THE WAR ON GANGS

I'm told that believing a rise in addiction and gang membership represents a crisis, the New Zealand Police have announced a 'War on Gangs'.

In fact, 'gang-member' is just another label. The idea is that all gang members are criminals who traffic in drugs. And, that being so, it's quite okay, desirable in fact, to declare war on them. *In fact, most gang members join for protection, not to wallop someone.*

Yes of course, some gangs—notably the new 501s—are essentially vicious criminal enterprises serving overseas overlords. And, yes, every violent criminal deserves swift, robust justice followed by serious rehabilitation—as, indeed, to great effect, happened with the many formerly brutal felons who graduated our Eagles max-security New York classes.

But to my mind, these days a Mongrel Mob tattoo is akin to a Rotary badge: a signifier for like-minded citizens banding together to serve the community, because they enjoy the kinship, and get some economic advantages.

The key difference is that gang-members hail from the neediest citizens, for too many of whom mere survival involves banding together to use and market self-soothing substances that happen to be illegal.

Well, yes, of course, the law should be upheld—or overturned. Look closely, and we see that *most drug use is a symptom, not a cause*. Addiction typically springs from a journey of attempted self-soothing embarked upon by those very same lost souls depressed by their inability to escape the lowest socioeconomic rung.

Again, we need to remind ourselves that any lasting remedy for such sufferers begins with understanding the psychological and sociological forces that lead to needy self-soothing and mindless serial incarceration—and then, with open eyes, seeing a viable path to creating a whole new trouble-free life.

### The Immediate Opportunity

But let's get back to the New Zealand Police Department perception of a 'crisis'. It takes the two Japanese symbols for *danger* and *opportunity* to spell out that word:.

So let's agree that right now, although you may be in some danger from the police, you're also looking at a very real opportunity.

As mentioned, the Eagles program, developed over twenty years, is cogent and credible, doable and indelible, and has dramatically reduced recidivism rates. So we think we can also help your prison-prone members to reduce the rate of serial incarceration and become productive citizens of the world, and help you persevere enhancing your reputation and winning respect for your patch—so that, when your members arrive on the scene, both the police the public breathe a sigh of relief, and whisper, “thank goodness for the Mongrel Mob”.

I'd invite you to begin by becoming cosmopolitans. But, as by now you surely know, you already are. So let's start by running a joint Eagles/Mongrel Mob Weekend Retreat. The core of that would be a set of discussion papers focused upon self-understanding, where we as individuals fit into our increasingly complex worlds, and how we might make this nation of ours an even better place. No subject would be off-limits. Open-minded discussion of thorny issues would be embedded by seeing and discussing relevant movies, and by public speaking and parliamentary debating. I have faith in your communication skills so we'd also like to help field a Mongrel Mob parliamentary debating team, first to contest a team from Waikato University, then to enter the New Zealand national debating arena.

As a next step, it should not be unduly daunting to help you generate a practical entrepreneurial program to help you create manage a reliable legitimate income stream.

In fact your leadership is strong, your followers are keen, and the gang structure is akin to that of a lean corporate team. By, say, renting a truck, your members could enter any number of legitimate businesses.

Bear in mind, too, that in the USA Eagles graduates like Kenny and Joe were appointed to well-paid full-time teaching roles for at-risk youth and prison inmates—hence our mantra, ‘it takes an ex-offender to render an offender an ex.’

Unfortunately, here in New Zealand, upon release former prisoners who've ‘seen the light’ are not allowed to return prison to share what they've learned. So, effectively, the sad and crazy fact is that most incarcerated inmate counselors are dedicated criminals who specialize in teaching crooked behavior. But, that will surely change. And if when it does, the opportunity to become a certified Eagles instructor and teach Eagles prison programs would open up for each and every one of you.



## A Final Thought and a Modest Proposal

Right now, upon release from prison, anxious, angry, unchanged former inmates are effectively pushed off a cliff to a waiting ambulance attended by ingenuous parole officers.

This is madness. So based upon the 20 years of experience in United States prisons that resulted in a single digit recidivism rate here's a modest proposal:-

1. *Make our prisons government owned enterprises and discard the warehousing model.* Storing and punishing human animals is at best a short term route to immediate profit. In the long term, it merely produces more criminals.

2. *Treat prisons as income streams not cost centers.* Recognize that the full cost to society of incarceration includes a massive but invisible item; lost tax revenue.

3. *Change the mission to the creation of productive, tax-paying citizens.* This suggestion is anathema to old-guard law-and-order zealots, who prefer punishment to rehabilitation. But let's face facts: most inmates will be released back into society, so this is the outcome we'd all like—right?

4. *Acknowledge and address the social roots of criminal behavior.* Criminality mostly springs from social or family breakdowns that lead to lack of education, unresolved traumas and ill-treated mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and self-esteem issues—so we need to be treating those issues by making prisons authentic rehabilitation centers.

5. *Change the prison environment.* Vengeful conditions are counterproductive. The most effective form of correction is to treat people as adult human beings. So create facilities that reproduce the atmosphere of colleges and convalescent homes. Pay inmates for routine prison labor, but charge them for gym and sports facilities, and television, sound systems, mini-refrigerators, and let them dress to their own style.

6. *Change the job-specification for corrections officers.* Train them to be coaches and rehabilitators not just armed, intimidating security guards. Rid them of batons, handcuffs, tasers or pepper-spray. And let them share the same dining facility as the inmates.

7. *Impart liberating life-changing ideas.* Knowledge is the primary key to authentic long-term change (and the crucial first step of the Eagles Foundation Taking Wings program). Implant the big concepts that underlie the mostly invisible social and individual forces that create 'the syndrome of serial incarceration.' This is not a university degree program. This kind

of knowledge is accessible and memorable and imparting it takes weeks or months not years.

8. *Imbue returning inmates with skills they can market.* The demand for unskilled labour is effectively exhausted. Ideally, in the new economy entrants need to be capable of creating an income stream, not just hoping to find a job. To do this, they need to re-enter with a marketable skill and entrepreneurial know-how.

9. *Treat offenders and ex-offenders as assets not liabilities.* The untapped talent of prison inmates is astonishing. They are an effectively free source of teaching personnel. The best prison teachers are hard-nosed ex-offenders who have been liberated intellectually and emotionally. So embrace that Eagles mantra, 'It takes an ex-offender to render an offender an ex.'

10. *Increase the return on investment by changing the prison reward system.* Benchmark success in terms of taxes paid by returning ex-offenders, and award bonuses to all prison personnel, including inmate teaching staff, in terms of their success in creating tax-paying citizens.

**All of the above can be achieved at minimal cost.** It would just take a new way of seeing things. We already own the prisons, and they are crammed to the bars with raw talent and potential teachers with a deep yearning to change the world. I know that because I recruited so many of them to join me as unpaid volunteers working with ex-offenders. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming, and they're still out there changing lives. For the doubters out there, I should add, that these suggestions have already been incorporated, with great success, in places like Scandinavia and Portugal. So why not in every country that claims to be enlightened? **But, we can't do everything at once.** So I invite you to help us do at least *something* at once. Come join us, and advocate a pilot Eagles program for thirty or so of lost Kiwi souls currently languishing in prison cells.

## Crazy for Conspiracies

Excerpt from a poem by former cat-burglar and founding Eagle Kenny Johnson, delivered at a protest on the steps of the New York State Capitol building, shortly before Kenny's untimely passing from a heart attack.

**Y**ou might not agree with me,  
say I'm crazy for conspiracies,  
but if education's the key  
to what a person needs to be,  
why aren't we building schools  
instead of penitentiaries?  
Yeah—those concrete cookers breeding villains;  
kids come home with stigmatism,  
short on skills and stoicism,  
left to cope, with little hope,  
and in their palms a wad of rope  
to hang themselves,  
as tucked into society's unforgiving shelves  
shamed and lost and left to delve  
into what they know best  
—and you or I could guess, more or less—  
what that might be;  
drugs and crime and the old paradigm,  
of doing time to end up doing more time.  
*And if you can't see that, you have to be blind.*



Kenny Johnson

*'Transformational—stunning and engaging; the solid experiential and evidential based material should shake many of both sides of the fence to the core.'*  
 Tony Taylor, Professor of Psychology,  
 Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

JOHN WAREHAM



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