

## **JMS Reports: Youth Violence**

# Now adults, youth violence survivors strive to make sure their experiences aren't repeated

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**By Jennifer Bowman**

An average of 16 people between the ages of 10 and 24 were murdered everyday in 2007, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Johanna Orozco was almost one of them.

That same year, her abusive teenage boyfriend shot her in the face after she accused him of raping her. She was 17 years old at the time.

She spent the next six weeks recovering in a hospital, where her doctors had to build her a new jaw out of a piece of bone from her leg.

But her recovery didn't stop there. She needed to make sure no one else had to experience the same kind of horrific event.

Now, Orozco is making efforts to educate young people to prevent others from becoming victims. She is not alone. Other adults who were once involved in youth violence have stepped up to serve as a voice and a mentor.

No longer is the high school experience just about puberty, dance formals and teenage crushes. To many, it's about coping with dysfunctional families, juggling the temptations of drug and alcohol use or living with poverty in their communities – dealing with real-life issues that often lead to youth violence.

But even young people without the common risk factors can fall into youth violence, said Emilio Ulloa, professor of psychology at San Diego State University.

“Yes, there are risk factors for victimization,” he said, “but the fact is that the phenomenon cuts across many social and economic categories.”

For Eric King, even a tight-knit family couldn't hide the attractiveness of street life.

“When it came to getting money or taking the easy out, I ended up turning to gangs

because I saw these guys with the money and the cars, not knowing that someone had to go through something to have those things,” he said.



Eric King, a one-time gang member with southeastern San Diego's Skyline gang, continues to live in his childhood neighborhood as a youth mentor.

**BY THE NUMBERS:**

- Homicide was the second leading cause of death in 2010 for young people between 10 and 24 years old, according to the CDC.
- Eighty-six percent of the victims were male. Eighty-four percent were killed with a firearm.
- Homicide is the leading cause for blacks and the second leading cause for Hispanics.

Gang activity has long been an issue in King's neighborhood in southeastern San Diego. There, rival neighborhoods have labeled themselves with colors and have plagued their communities with the not-so-flattering reputation of being ridden by gang violence. Members of the Skyline gang wear red; Lincoln Park wears green.

The neighborhoods are so plagued by gang violence that a popular intersection in the community has been popularly nicknamed the “Four Corners of Death.”

Because many community members are deeply involved, gang life is often ingrained in families and children are quickly inducted into the culture at an early age.

“Just knowing [gang members] affects you,” King said. “It gives them the chance to say something to you.”

In 2007, 28 San Diegans were killed in a gang-related murder. Most of them were under 30 years old – and some were under the age of 18.

Homicide is the second leading cause of death for people between 10 and 24 years old, according to the CDC.

While there has been a drop in the number of homicides in San Diego County, other crimes haven’t seen the same effect. There continue to be hikes in the number of gang-related assaults and car thefts. Meanwhile, the cost of incarcerating a gang member in California is about \$43,000 a year.



Southeastern San Diego have long been plagued by an unfavorable reputation — its neighborhoods are best known for its active gang culture and violent crimes.

But for those seeking to get out of the gang life, it is possible, said King. He

knows from experience.

“Gangs nowadays, it’s not the same like it used to be,” he said. “It’s not like, unless you die out you can’t get out. For me, I just changed my life and changed my movements. And people respect that.”

King continues to live in his Skyline neighborhood and is now a youth mentor. To stop gang violence, the entire community — including residents of neighborhoods not usually afflicted by gang violence — needs to get involved, he said.

“Everyone should do what they can when we have a problem,” said King. “We all have to live in the same world.”

### **Puppy love gone wrong: Dating violence affects one-tenth of US high school students**

Orozco’s attacker, Juan Ruiz, pleaded guilty in 2007. He is currently serving a 27-year prison sentence without eligibility for parole. He was 17 years old when he was convicted.

The couple weren’t dating during the time of the attack. Orozco had broken up with him a short time before in hopes of it being their final breakup.

#### **BY THE NUMBERS:**

- Nearly 10 percent of high school students report being hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their significant other in any given year, according to the CDC.
- An estimated 20 to 25 percent of college women in the US have experience an attempted or completed rate during their college career.

“The most dangerous time, the point at which a person is at highest risk for death or serious harm, is immediately after choosing to leave an abusive relationship,” Ulloa said.

Now 23, Orozco works as a teen educator at the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center in Ohio. She has played an instrumental role in getting two Ohio laws passed which aim to put a stop to domestic violence among teenagers.

She has [moved on from the attack](#) – in fact, she has been busily planning her wedding. It's a long way from the days when her attacker told her no one would want her.

But it wasn't easy, she said. After her attack, Orozco said she struggled with her self-esteem and was single for three years until she met her fiancé.

"What I did was, I set high standards for myself," she said. "And I wasn't going to settle for less."

"I feel that every woman deserves that feeling," Orozco said. "There is no greater feeling than to love yourself for who you are. We all can have that. We just need to stay strong and think positive. It isn't always easy but in time it all gets better."

On every anniversary of the attack, Orozco celebrates it as a "rebirth day," she said.

"It is a day of survival and it has made me the person I am today, thanks to God," said Orozco. "I do have my days when I get flashbacks or nightmares, but I have many family and friends that are always there for me."

Having people close to you is a part of stopping youth violence, experts say.

"Prevention is the key," Ulloa said. "And the key to prevention is a multi-level, multi-method approach that is comprehensive and involves teens, parents, teachers, and other school officials."

Other experts suggest strong collaboration between high-level leadership and the community to help prevent gang violence.

"San Diego is a caring community," said Lynn Sharpe-Underwood, executive director of the city's commission on gang prevention and intervention. "Many folks come together to respond to the concerns about our work on the issues of gang prevention and have indicated various ways that they care about all the youth in our community."

"Neighborhoods are part of San Diego. What impacts any neighborhood affects

us in our community.”

What may be most key, however, is caring – and making young people are aware of that.

“There is a bright and happy life ahead of them,” said Orozco. “My advice is not to be afraid to speak out and get help. They are not alone. There are people who care and want to help them through their situation.”

-This link from "JMS Reports" is linked to the SDSU Youth Violence Research Lab  
<http://jmsreports.org/2012/05/07/now-adults-youth-violence-survivors-strive-to-make-sure-their-experiences-arent-repeated/>