

Why they did it

Youths doing time for gang violence talk about their paths and what might prevent other kids from following in their footsteps

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Luis is a gang-involved youth serving a five-year and 10 month sentence for an armed robbery he committed when he was 16 years old.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Portland is about to enter a second consecutive summer filled with what's predicted to be a record-breaking level of gang shootings, homicides and violence.

The gunmen are getting younger and younger, and the violence increasingly senseless, according to those who work with current and formerly incarcerated gang members in the Portland-metro area.

Media reports related to gang violence often highlight the perspectives of victims' families, the police and those trying to find a pathway to the end of a problem that's only been ramping up in recent years, with each shooting making way for retaliation.

The perspective of those who pull the trigger is seldom explored.

Who are they? What happened to them before they found themselves with a weapon in hand, not caring about the consequences of taking another human being's life?

Street Roots sat down with young adults serving lengthy sentences in Oregon Youth Authority correctional facilities for crimes ranging from armed robbery to murder, and asked them these questions. All the youths are either gang members or deeply gang-involved.

It is not our intention to glamorize this violence, to ignore the victims and their grieving families, or to excuse the actions taken by the perpetrators interviewed for this story. It is simply an attempt to understand how they got here, and what could have been done to stop it.

These are their stories, in their words.

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ON CHILDHOOD

LUIS AGE 23

We met with Luis at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn, where he is serving a five-year, 10-month sentence for second-degree armed robbery. Luis is not his real name. Luis' parents and many of his older relatives were gang members, but he said he never officially joined a gang himself.

"I was born at OHSU hospital, on the hill. I have a young mom. She was 15 when she had me. She moved to California, so my grandma raised me."

Luis's grandmother was first-generation American of Mexican descent. He said living with her had its ups and downs.

"She was old school – I mean not like strict, but she tried to give me the best life she could, and I respect her for it, but it just wasn't for me.

"She's a woman, not a male figure, but I figured it out. I grew up fast. Just because of the environment I was in family-wise. My dad went to prison when I was 6, and a lot of my uncles and everyone got locked up when I was young, for gang stuff."

Luis said he looked up to an uncle who was in his life until he was about 9 years old, but now that uncle is serving a 21-year prison sentence.

Luis was moved around frequently throughout his childhood. Sometimes he stayed with his mother after she moved back from California, other times, with his aunt, but usually his grandmother. He often switched schools either because he moved or because he

was expelled for fighting. It wasn't until after he was incarcerated that he took any interest in school.

When Luis was in fifth grade, his dad got out of prison, and he went to live with him for a couple of years.

"He was in and out of prison a lot. He's from California, South Central and San Fernando Valley.

"Growing up, my dad would tell me, 'You got to be a man. You gotta do stuff on your own. You can't depend on grandma.' I looked up to him, so I thought, 'Yeah, you're right.' Anything he said I took to heart. It was my dad."

TREI HERNANDEZ AGE 21

We also met with Trei at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility. He came to the interview sporting a fresh black eye. It was from a gang fight, he said. He is a member of the Gangster Disciples.

"I grew up pretty much all over the place, from Texas to Oregon and California, born in Oregon at Emanuel hospital. (Northeast Seventh and Dekum was where I went to elementary school.

"It wasn't the best childhood, you know, I didn't – how do I say this? It wasn't like we went without, but we didn't have enough to survive. We had to get it how we lived.

"I grew up with my mom. My pops died at a young age, so he was never in my life. I was 5 (when he died), but he was in and out. I got tons-of siblings from his side, so you can only imagine what that means: He was a

Harry Bradshaw is a probation and parole officer with Oregon Youth Authority who has supervised gang members post incarceration for more than two decades.

"I have youth that have kids, and you see stuff that they post online where they have them all dressed down in the gang colors throwing up gang signs."

He said breaking that generational cycle is a real challenge.

"I've been around long enough now, where I have kids of kids I had when I started that are coming onto probation, and it's really sad to see that."

player! He had all the ladies. He was a good dude though.

"My mom worked at Jack in the Crack (he laughs), Jack in the Box, here in Portland, right off MLK and Lombard. She worked there for a long time, secured herself a little manager position, but that still wasn't enough. We had a lot of kids living at the crib. Me and like 12 other kids, all my little cousins and uncles and aunties, it was a pretty big house.

"I was the man of the house. I was paying bills since the age of 14. Oldest out of all my siblings. It wasn't like I had to do this; it was an option, but I wanted to because it was my mom. I loved my mom to death.

"She took care of us, she fed us, she

knew how to cook her ass off, she'd breathe, eat, shit, sleep, work – that's all she did."

He said he never connected with any of his teachers.

"I never gave them that satisfaction. Never cared for school. Why be in school when I can be making money? Even as a very little kid, mama had to pick me up from the principal's office. I was seeking attention. I was a bad kid."

JOSEFINA AGE 20

Josefina is serving her sentence at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany, an all-girls facility. She joined a gang shortly before her arrest and had been gang-involved for some time leading up to it.

"I was born and raised in Northeast Portland. My family – we're kind of tight, but we weren't really close. It was the struggles we went through growing up – we came together.

"We'd be homeless for a couple weeks at a time. We usually got kicked out because my brother would throw parties at the house or terrorize the neighbors. We'd live in our van or live with friends, but it wasn't for that long, but long enough to know how it feels to be homeless. Or my mom wouldn't have enough money for the bills and our water would get shut off – or our electricity. Stuff like that, and living in Northeast Portland growing up, there was a lot of gang violence, especially in the area

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