

Violence debilitates a community's social fabric and growth, and those most deeply affected by it must be empowered to uproot it. In 2015, the Santa Maria Valley experienced a spike in homicides, with 5 of the 13 being teenagers, a problematic trend that has sparked community dialogue and reaction in recent years.

The latest attempt to address youth violence includes the creation of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety. Although the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury commends the creation of the Task Force, it noted that the process "perpetuated Santa Maria's characteristic of division amongst occupations, societal classes and ethnicities," particularly illustrated in the absence of the very at-risk youth and families which they sought to assist from the start. These findings do not point the finger at a lack of concern from individual decision makers, rather fault the systemic failures of racial and economic disparity that have historically plagued our region. Without active efforts to intentionally incorporate the perspectives and recommendations of Santa Maria youth, efforts from local policymakers will fall short of achieving systemic solutions.

CAUSE, Just Communities and Future Leaders of America, local youth empowerment groups, organized a youth-led town hall on October 12th to have those on the front line of the violence be the ones discussing and deciding what solutions they need in their community. This report is an overview of the findings from the youth town hall.



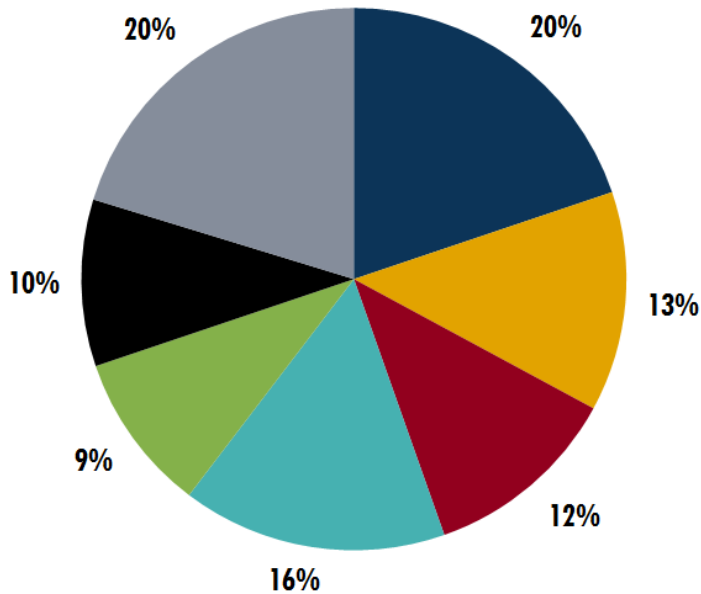
## Youth Town Hall Format

- Approximately 100 youth attended the town hall, with dozens of parents and adults observing from the back.
- The planning, organization, facilitation, and entertainment was entirely led by youth.
- After participants signed in, youth began with a creative word-cloud exercise to discuss both the challenges faced by youth in Santa Maria and the most promising positive aspects of their community
- Youth then organized into different tables for small group discussions, in two phases: The first focused on problems facing local youth, the second focused on solutions.
- Each table of youth then reported back their discussions and findings to the larger audience.
- Afterwards, youth voted with dot stickers for the solutions they believed would make the biggest impact. In addition, they filled out a survey about their top solutions and priorities.
- After a dinner of *tortas* and *aguas frescas*, the program ended with an interactive raffle of various prizes, music and dancing.
- An engaging, participatory, and fun process envisioned, organized and led by youth was critical to successfully bringing the youth perspective to a process that had lacked youth participation.

# What do Youth Want?

In a survey following the town hall, youth were asked to circle 3 top priorities from the following 7 choices:

### Votes for Top 3 Priorities in Town Hall Survey



## The 7 Solutions Surveyed

### Healthy Families (20%)

Services to address mental health, trauma, and family issues facing youth.

### Safe Streets, Transit & Parks (13%)

Making our city safe for young people to move around and hang out.

### Police & Probation (12%)

Improving relationships and trust between the criminal justice system and youth.

### Youth Programs and Facilities (16%)

Offering more positive opportunities and spaces for young people to grow.

### Leadership Opportunities (9%)

Increasing youth voice and participation in decision making.

### Career Pathways (10%)

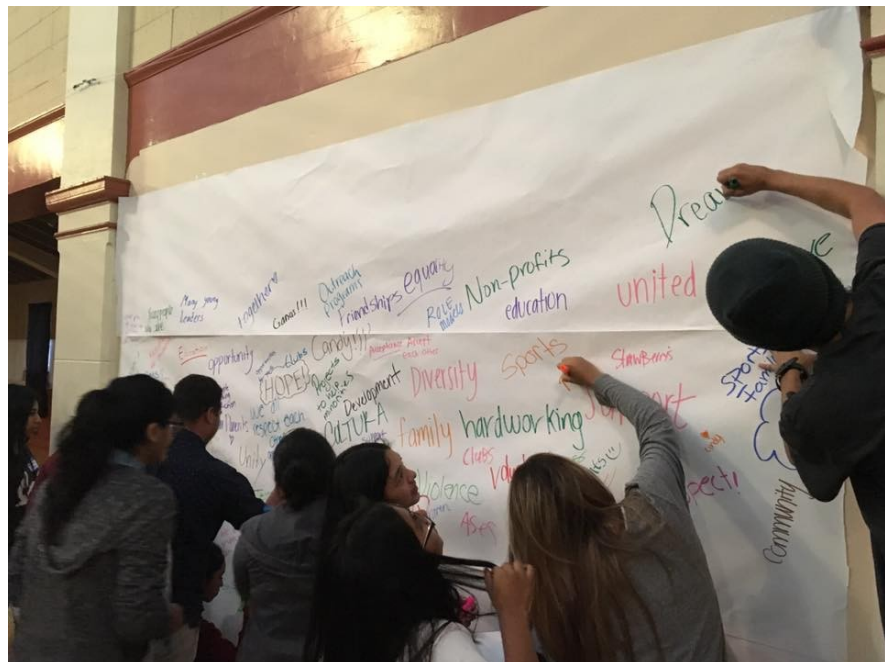
Connecting young people with job training, internships, and mentorship opportunities.

### Improving our Schools (20%)

Creating a safe and healthy school environment where everyone feels they belong.

## Youth prioritize interventions in families and schools first, community environment second, leadership opportunities third

- The top priorities for youth were supporting healthy family dynamics and improving schools. 20% of votes pointed to the need for programs addressing mental health and trauma within families as one of their top three priorities in the survey. 20% pointed to the need to create a safer and healthier school environment. Given that youth spend most of their time at home and in school, it should come as no surprise that interventions in families and schools are their highest priority.
- The middle tier of priorities for youth was focused on improving their surrounding community. 16% of votes went towards having more programs and facilities available for youth to engage in positive opportunities, 13% for the importance of creating a safer environment throughout the city including parks and streets, and 12% for police and probation working to improve their trust and relationships with local youth.
- The lower priorities for youth were focused on building their career and leadership opportunities. 10% of votes pointed to the need to connect young people with job training, internships and mentorship opportunities, while 9% pointed to increasing civic leadership opportunities for youth to engage in decisionmaking in Santa Maria.





# Who are the Youth?

## Age:

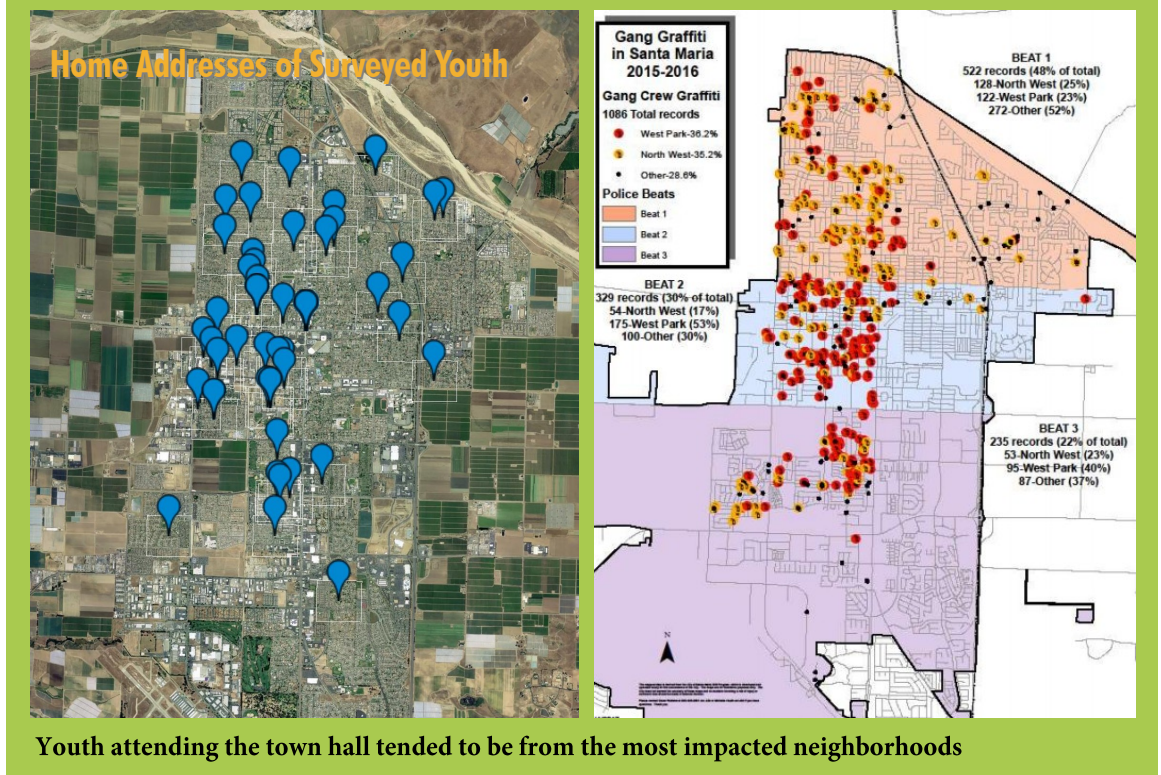
Ages reported on the survey ranged from 9 to 25.  
71% of responses were between 13-17 years old  
Average age was 16

## Gender

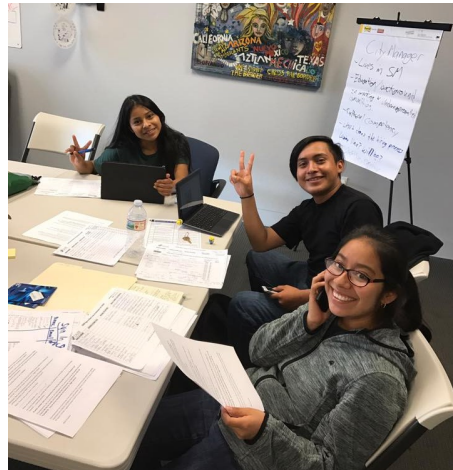
69% identified as female  
31% identified as male  
1% gave no response

## Race/Ethnicity:

82% identified as some variation of Latino, Chicano, Hispanic, or Mexican  
13% gave no response or simply wrote "human"  
3% Mixed-race  
1% African-American  
1% Asian  
1% Mixteco



Training for youth town hall facilitators



Spreading the word about the town hall



Youth leading town hall small-group discussions

**"Increase mental health support and empower Latinx youth so that they do not turn to gangs/drugs/alcohol"**  
-Lupita, 16

**"Better training for police"**  
-Sonia, 20

**"Creating a sports center for youth to lose focus from the "bad" habits, creating cultural centers to encourage the pride of one's culture"**  
-Monse, 17

**"Adults should listen to you and take our ideas into consideration"**  
-Melissa, 12

**"Workshops to inform parents and students on pregnancy prevention, there are resources that we do not know about that we should be informed about"**  
-Jenny, 14

**"Have better support systems, encourage students to get through their education"**  
-Hugo, 19

# Strategies to Help Empower Youth and Their Families in Santa Maria Valley

## Recommendations based on notes from town hall discussion groups and survey results:

### Encouraging healthy and supportive families

Many youth said that neglect and emotional/physical abuse is far too prevalent among their peers and families. They felt that young people don't know where to turn in these situations or where to seek help, with scarce resources available to break cycles of abuse and violence and to heal from traumatic childhood experiences. Recommendations included:

1. **Funding local nonprofits to provide mental and emotional health services** such as support groups for physical and emotional abuse, one-to-one and group therapy, youth peer support groups, men's support groups, and culturally-competent family therapy.
2. **Providing more city-sponsored family activities** such as movies and concerts in the park, cooking and gardening classes, and Mexican holiday celebrations to bring families together.

### Keeping students in an engaging school environment

Town hall participants emphasized a disconnect between immigrant families and the education system due to Santa Maria's socioeconomic and ethnic divisions, with teachers and counselors often struggling to communicate with parents and relate to students. Many youth said they feel lost in the education system, with their parents unable to provide guidance and counselors too understaffed and overworked to help them. Some of their top recommendations included:

1. **Partnering with school districts to increase and improve counseling services** by hiring more bilingual and culturally-competent counselors who can provide both personal/mental health and academic/career counseling.
2. **Making the school environment more welcoming** by improving the nutritional quality of school meals, allowing gender-neutral bathrooms, and less discriminatory and punitive dress codes.
3. More comprehensive sex education and resources like campus childcare to **prevent dropouts due to teen pregnancy**.

### Improving relationships with police and probation

Many youth in the town hall expressed feelings of fear regarding local police and law enforcement. There was a sense among many youth that they are sometimes racially profiled by police officers and that law enforcement can sometimes abuse its power. This hurts the ability of law enforcement to gain the critical trust of young people needed to effectively keep them safe. Top rated recommendations included:

1. Providing regular **community-based policing trainings for the police department** on how to avoid discrimination/bias/racial profiling, how to be culturally competent in interacting with the immigrant community, and how to nonviolently de-escalate a problem through communication.
2. Cities, schools and other public agencies passing resolutions or sending a public message to parents/residents that they are **not connected to immigration enforcement**.

### Encourage positive activities through youth programs

Many town hall participants felt that young people often go down the wrong path and engage in dangerous activity because they lack access to positive alternatives and opportunities. They emphasized the need for places where youth can find themselves, connect with their passions, and see a positive path for their future. Some of these ideas included:

1. A **sports complex to provide recreational facilities**, including partnerships with Hancock College to allow students in kinesiology or other related programs to volunteer there.
2. An **arts/cultural building offering programs** for youth who are less interested in athletics, including art, music and cultural activities, science and learning based activities, social activities like youth dances and public mural projects.
3. **More street lights** and bike lanes to make it easier for youth to go out safely in their own communities.

### Access to leadership opportunities and civic engagement

Many youth in the town hall felt that their peers are not exposed to leadership opportunities and are disconnected from the resources available in the community. From a young age, they often felt like their voices and lives were unimportant to decision makers. Recommendations to open leadership opportunities to youth included:

1. Creating a **youth council to advise the city council on youth issues** and include appointed youth representatives on city commissions such as parks and recreation, planning commission, etc.
2. Holding **regular youth town halls and cafecitos** with the mayor, city councilmembers and other local officials.