

The Killing Years: Live chat with Eric Velasco

11:06

2010

Eric Velasco:

Hi. I'm Eric Velasco, a reporter for The Birmingham News, ready to discuss our two-day package, The Killing Years.

Please remember this is a moderated chat, so your questions won't automatically pop up when you send them. We do this for clarity, keeping the questions and answers together.

Thanks for your patience

Monday May 3,

11:06

[Comment From Wondering]

It is unusual that most of the killers are under the age of 25?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:07

Eric Velasco:

Overall, killers tend to be under age 25. This has been a trend over the last three decades, according to the FBI. But Birmingham and Jefferson County, we found, had a greater percentage of people 16-24 charged with murder than the national average.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:07

[Comment From keicia]

Hello

Monday May 3, 2010

11:08

Eric Velasco:

Hi. Any questions?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:08

[Comment From jeff]

Is there a particular part of Jefferson County where the homicide rate seems to be higher?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:10

Eric Velasco:

In the period we studied, 2006 through 2009, Birmingham's west precinct had the highest number of homicides, followed by the Birmingham East precinct, then Birmingham's North precinct. Bessemer also had a high number.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:11

[Comment From keicia]

Growing up in the westere part of birmingham it is not unusual for the overall killers to be under 25

Monday May 3, 2010

11:12

Eric Velasco:

Sad, but true. I would venture a fair number of the victims also live in that area. Even worse are all the people who live there trying to have good, productive lives but are practically held prisoners in their own homes.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:12

[Comment From Jeff]

It looks like the kids in the Bessemer area are wising up and many are taking another path... why can't this catch on everywhere else?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:12

[Comment From keicia]

What can the city truly do to stop this trend? Because first hand , whatever they are doing is not working?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:14

Eric Velasco:

Both of you touch on a similar topic.

Just about everyone I talked to said we need to improve our schools. Make them a place to find positive peers, mentors and a value in living for the long term -- family, a career, children, etc. -- rather than the short term of what do I want today?

Also, experts talk about the need to work more with people who break the law, including former prisoners, to keep them out of an ongoing cycle of crime and incarceration.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:14

[Comment From Jeff]

What percentage of homicides are drug-related?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:15

Monday May 3, 2010

11:15

Eric Velasco:

Can't say right offhand. A fair number. I included a couple of situations in the paper that definitely fall into the category of:

- (1) addict breaking in to get money or drugs for a fix,
- (2) someone trying to rob someone selling or possessing drugs
- (3) drug deals gone bad

Monday May 3, 2010

11:15

[Comment From jeff]

Aside from publicly funded programs have you seen any private or church ministries step in with any success?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:17 Eric Velasco:
Birmingham Police chief A.C. Roper is a strong proponent of building partnerships with private groups, such as the Dannon Project. He told me recently that churches and organizations are starting to come to him now, which is progress.
But even an individual being a Big Brother or Big Sister could make a difference.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:17 [Comment From Wondering]
Today you talked about not putting young offenders in jail. Isn't that a hard sell for politicians who try to make hay by attacking crime?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:19 Eric Velasco:
Very much so. What we're seeing is a cycle. Back in the 60s and 70s, the juvenile system was all about rehabilitation. But when the crack wars gained full bloom in the late 1980s through mid-1990s -- when deadly youth violence hit its peak -- politicians decided it was time to get tough. That's when we started seeing laws that automatically put juveniles charged with certain crimes into the adult system, and increased detention of teens in the juvenile system.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:20 Eric Velasco:
But the studies are showing that often just breeds a better criminal. That's why judges like Judge Huff in Jefferson County are exploring other ways to get through to teens who stray toward crime, while still punishing those who are hardcore criminals already.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:20 [Comment From Greg]
Okay, we need to be proactive rather than reaction. What could the criminal justice system be doing more effectively to make sure these offenders know they won't be treated with kid gloves?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:21 Eric Velasco:
It's already doing that. Some researchers, law officials and judges are concerned that the "steel glove" approach is making matters worse, not better.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:21 [Comment From keicia]
I graduated from the now demolishe west end high school in 96, and from my class there are about 100 of them killed in violent murders, dealing with drugs, territiry what have you, and we had younger kids growing up under us hearing and seeing these acts, i am a former gang member and I teach my kids that gangs are for punks, I am truly teaching them the opposite of what I grew up seeing

Monday May 3, 2010

11:22 Eric Velasco:

We need more people like you out there spreading that word. I have no credibility with certain people out on the streets. Neither does Chief Roper or Judge Huff or people like them. I always maintain we learn more from our mistakes that we do from our successes and someone who has made those mistakes can have better credibility saying "I've been there. Let me tell you how it is."

Monday May 3, 2010

11:22 [Comment From CRIMEBOS45]

When you put the murderers FACES on the page, it gives some the impression that blacks are out randomly killing people and people become afraid. This damages race relations that are already poor. Why did you not use the victims' FACES? This would have shown black FACES yet we would have more compassionate responses than that of racial hate and people talking about arming themselves.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:24 Eric Velasco:

What should we have shown? There wre white faces and Latino faces there, too. Had the majority of accused killers been white, the chart would have reflected that. Also, gaining access to victims' photos is difficult if not impossible. The stories did not ignore them, however.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:24 [Comment From keicia]

the cycle is continuing as we speak , when we have people in these areas promoting violence the trend will never end....

Monday May 3, 2010

11:25 Eric Velasco:

What do you mean by "promoting violence?"

Monday May 3, 2010

11:25 [Comment From Pleased2]

Hi Eric, I would like to know why Gang activity is not mentioned in the report and why illegitimate births are not mentioned as a causative? Kids that grow up without fathers, as over 80% of inner city kids do, are very easy conquest for the gangs in Birmingham.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:25

Monday May 3, 2010

11:27 Eric Velasco:

Gangs are one of the unspoken issues here. When I covered courts in Georgia, we reported how the police were denying a gang problem -- eight years after they set up a gang task force. It was only when gang involvement became a sentence enhancement int

he courts did a frank discussion of gangs start there.

But that is a huge problem: Gangs are the alternative family for many children. But membership in that family comes at a great cost.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:27

[Comment From vickii]

eric and the news, great job on the stories. but I didn't see that you had taken a look at what other cities are doing to lower the stats of youth and others in this age group. any ideas on what's working elsewhere and bringing it here.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:28 **Eric Velasco:**

I would have like to have done that comparison. It had to build a database from scratch for the local demographics, drawing for at least a half-dozen sources because there wasn't a central resource. That's why I couldn't really compare with other cities. No real breakdown of age, race, gender, circumstances for those places.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:28

[Comment From outdoorchas]

Do you feel that the crime is drug related? If so, wouldn't stopping the drugs be the first step?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:29 **Eric Velasco:**

I don't know how stopping the drugs would be achieved. And then there would be other reasons why people kill. Killing has been with us as long as we've had people.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:30

[Comment From Lee]

Great article. I think the idea that young adults and teens are extremely impulsive and small arguments that should be settled with fists are settled with guns. That seems to make a lot of sense since the murder rate drops so much after 25. Any research into how make these inevitable disputes less lethal?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:31 **Eric Velasco:**

That's a hornet's nest, because statistically, it seems the solution has to do with fewer guns being available. Fighting is the oldest form of male bonding. Guys would get into a fight and be best friends the next day. But as Dr. Ackerson said, too many kids today fight with bullets, and those results can't be reversed.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:31

[Comment From Greg]

Eric, you're just the messenger. But how can judges, law officials and research believe not using a steel hand is better? I like the expression, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." But offenders have nothing to fear if they think they

will be out in a few years. You take a life, you should serve the rest of your time in prison or be executed.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:32 Eric Velasco:

It's not always that simple. Many of the people in that group of young arrestees were accomplices who played a minor role, if any. Yet under our laws they can be treated the same as the person who actually pulled the trigger.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:33 [Comment From Guest]

Why isn't there more support for the accused families that try to maintain strong family contacts with them. So that the accused will have a better chance of recovery. The experience of jail or prison is very traumatic especially for those that have been wrongly accused.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:34 Eric Velasco:

That is a good point. Especially since it can create a cycle for the next generation. It breaks my heart to see young children in court, waving to a parent in a jail uniform awaiting trial or a sentencing. It's very sad.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:34 [Comment From Pleased2]

So why didn't you put that in the article, about Gangs? Even the uber Liberal Tennessean recently did an article about Gangs.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:35 Eric Velasco:

There was a lot I wanted to put into my articles, but space limits prevented it. I felt I had enough research for a book.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:35 [Comment From keicia]

ex. when you have drug dealers on the block, promoting that, hey, you can make all this money by selling crack or heroin, you have people in these communities that thrive on confusion and conflict, I have witnessed men and women promoting that, if you see these particular person in the streets you need to whoop or show them your hood is ruthless,

Monday May 3, 2010

11:36 Eric Velasco:

And they do take over the neighborhood. It's a lure for young people: Those are the folks with the money, the nice cars or rims, the clothes, the women. It's that short-term vs. long-term thing: We need to promote the value of taking the long-term approach and finding reward in living a good life helping others.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:36 [Comment From Pleased2]
When the illegitimate birth rate was low, the killing rate in the inner city was much lower.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:38 Eric Velasco:
It's not that simple. And there are many people raised by single mothers (single fathers, too) who live in impoverished situations and still move on to live good lives. Chief Roper talks about being raised by his grandmother (and his four siblings), because neither parent was in a position to do it. What put him on his path was a good mentor in school, and a grandmother who let the children know the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:38 [Comment From keicia]
I have also witnessed when kids have been bullied to the point to where they are turning them into killers, they feel that the only way is to pick up a gun to defend them selves, not knowing the repercussions to their way of thinking,

Monday May 3, 2010

11:39 Eric Velasco:
That is true.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:39 [Comment From Kathy]
I think education of guns and violence should begin in Elementary School.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:40 Eric Velasco:
In many cases, and in places where violence is the norm, it should begin as soon as the child can talk. But yes, the sooner we reach children and provide positive alternatives to violence, the better.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:40 [Comment From tony]
eric, since most of the bad boys have no fear, what makes us think anything will change other than the situation will get worse and we return to the ol west?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:42 Eric Velasco:
Judge Huff put it in perspective in Sunday's story with the program where juvenile intake officers could warn a child and the caregivers about what could happen if the lawbreaking continues. He said 88 percent didn't return to court within a year. The other 12 percent are the people you're talking about. Those are the cases where the

desire for crime needs to be broken by a tough system.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:42

[Comment From Pleased2]

You yourself have just said that gangs are causative and we know that unmarried black women raising kids without fathers leads them to gangs and creates a moral vacuum and now you want to pretend like guns are the cause??? Eric, I just lost every bit of respect I ever had for you. You are a prime example of why new media rules and dinosaur media is dead. You don't want to report the facts, you want to spread an agenda.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:43 **Eric Velasco:**

I did not say gangs are causative. They're part of the symptom and the alternative family for many kids at a crossroads in life.

What are the facts?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:43

[Comment From jbzny1]

I am a firm believer in the fact that mentoring programs for youth, as well as adult education programs are the way to reshape these communities, why is so much focus locking people in jail and not in building communities?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:44 **Eric Velasco:**

I think the focus for some, like Chief Roper and Judge Huff, is swinging back toward building communities. What better ministry is there for some of our churches?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:44

[Comment From eric w.]

I think a simple solution would be to hold parents accountable for the actions of juveniles. If for every crime a juvenile committed, their parents had to pay a fine, you would see a lot more parents take active roles in preventing their children from committing crimes. When an irresponsible parent can just throw their child into our legal system, without any regard or responsibility, then it is up to the city to hold them accountable.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:45 **Eric Velasco:**

The juvenile court has been taking a similar approach to truancy, which seems to have had some success.

But let's face it, parents often have limited influence on even the best kids. I've got a trial coming up in which the defendant flopped at a friend's house because he found his own "too boring."

Monday May 3, 2010

11:45

[Comment From 35208]

what role has the lack of education and employment opportunities played in the number of killings?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:47 **Eric Velasco:**

One person I interviewed drew a direct line between the growing prison population in Alabama and school systems like Birmingham's with a high number of schools failing to meet national standards. Throw in a higher unemployment rate in these neighborhoods and the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs and it's not hard to see why some people rob and sling dope.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:47

[Comment From Tangi]

If you want to really address the crime we have to address the poverty. It's hard to resist the lure of fast money while you watch your mom or dad struggle to meet the basic needs. Then when the those that did serve time get out, they are regulated to low wage jobs. They are forever punished after they paid their debt to society.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:48

[Comment From Concerned]

Although I hate the acts that these "kids" commit, I know that often the cause is lack of parental guidance. It sounds crazy, but there should be an application process for parenthood, just like there is for any other job. No response necessary.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:48 **Eric Velasco:**

My wife and I often wished our babies came with a training manual.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:48

[Comment From keicia]

when the city realizes and that's all cities, because now Chicago is going bananas with kids killing kids, Birmingham is not far behind them, we have to start in the communities to get the dope man of the corner, get old school teachers back in the schools, that really care, when the neighborhoods stand up and stop allowing these guys to take over, we have a long road to go, but it can be accomplished

Monday May 3, 2010

11:49 **Eric Velasco:**

Yes. It is everyone's problem. Green flight has had the worst effect on Birmingham's crime-ridden neighborhoods.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:49

[Comment From 35208]

what has changed in 2010 the numbers of killing are down from last year?

Monday May 3, 2010

11:51 **Eric Velasco:**

Luck in part. Increased enforcement for another. The number of teenagers and young adults ebb and flow.

The 16-24 year olds I wrote about were born during the highest period of youth violence in this country's history, a time when so many young people were killed, maimed, imprisoned or addicted.

Many of the kids coming of age now saw the terrible consequences of that, and perhaps are reacting.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:52

[Comment From keicia]

your article really opened my eyes to a former way of living that I now hate. I will make a step forward to talk to the youth, and advise them on a better way of living . It is not worth it, no one wins .

Monday May 3, 2010

11:52 **Eric Velasco:**

PLease do. Everyone can make a difference. Talk to the principal of your local school or Chief Roper and they can help you find an audience.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:52

[Comment From keicia]

What made me change my life is when I lost 11 friends in one month, I just stopped going to the funerals. It was to much to bear, at that point I said no more, I can not raise my children in this cycle, I moved out of west end, and not to say that violence is not every where, but I had to leave all my family and friends behind. I did not want my kids growing up seeing the same ol way of living and thinking. as parent i had to change up my scene , the people i hang with , my everyday way of life.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:53

[Comment From jbzny1]

What do you think can be done in regards to the relationship between the police and the community, there is a distrust there that is rarely discussed. I remember the beat cops growing up in NY they were always in the neighborhood and were known and therefore trusted, now police are only seen when there is something wrong, which, in a youths mind may help place a negative stigma upon the. Hopefully Roper seeks to correct that.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:55 **Eric Velasco:**

You make a good point about a community's relationship with the beat cop versus the patrol that reacts. The police do need to do a better job of establishing relationships with the people they serve. But I also hear them talk about their frustration in trying to fight crimes when no one will come forward to help with information or to testify. Maybe there's a place to meet in the middle

Monday May 3, 2010

11:55

[Comment From tony]

we have been hashing this same stuff over and over for years....rehab/church/courts/stiffer fines/electric chair....it's like playing a board game and starting over again and agin.....don't you agree??

Monday May 3, 2010

11:57 Eric Velasco:

And, to some degree, we'll continuously be starting over. We've made some progress, though. Hopefully this community can move forward to the point where those statistics won't be as noteworthy to a newspaper reporter.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:57

[Comment From eric w.]

Parents always have some sort of influence and ultimate responsibility. If your dog goes out and bites someone, are you not, as the owner, held responsible. What incentive do parents that offer no parental guidance to thier children have to do so.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:58 Eric Velasco:

I had great parents, but that didn't stop me from getting in trouble. Thank goodness the temptations and consequences of that behavior weren't as severe as they are now. I could have been the hotheaded teen who grabbed an available SKS when I felt disrespected and powerless to fix it otherwise.

Monday May 3, 2010

11:58

[Comment From 35208]

Summer jobs will be scare this year. Is this be long hot Summer?

Monday May 3, 2010

12:00 Eric Velasco:

Let's hope not. One person I interviewed is trying to start something akin to an apprenticeship program under someone with special work skills (carpentry, for example), who can train and mentor -- and not necessarily at a high cost.

Monday May 3, 2010

12:00

[Comment From Tangi]

Maybe you should visit the families that out there Mon-Friday visiting with their loved ones at the county jail Eric Velasco. Get thier stories from their

perspective, because all I'm seeing is from one side of the story.

Monday May 3, 2010

12:01 Eric Velasco:

I speak with them often in the courtroom. Victim's families, too. What side of the story am I missing? I need to address that, too.

Monday May 3, 2010

12:01 [Comment From keicia]

will doI have been wanting to become a mentor of some sort, but your story really pushed me towards it even more.....we have a lot of work to ...

Monday May 3, 2010

12:01 [Comment From Tangi]

"snitches get silenced" is the main reason why many don't come forward with information. Also, there is a valid mistrust with police abuse in some communities. Bad cops are giving the rest a very bad rep

Monday May 3, 2010

12:03 Eric Velasco:

All very true, especially the "snitch" perception. Bad cops exist, too. But I don't know if that is sufficient explanation to mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and others who lose someone to murder and no one comes forward. If neighborhoods can find ways to establish better relations with the police, and help them weed out the bad on either side of the law, you'd see less of a stigma in being a "snitch."

Monday May 3, 2010

12:04 [Comment From jbzny1]

I believe that there is a socioeconomic divide in the birmingham area and you can't find a positive person in the community, the doctors and lawyers all live OTM, who are the youth looking up to? its sad

Monday May 3, 2010

12:05 Eric Velasco:

Good point. But people can still make a difference in communities where they don't live. It's a matter of where people place their priorities.

Monday May 3, 2010

12:07 Eric Velasco:

Thanks for joining us on today's chat. I hope we all can do whatever we can to make this a better place. One of the most tragic consequences of murder is the level of waste on both sides, the lost potential.