



## L.A. High School Confidential

**Black-Latino tensions. Gang Warfare. Teenage rebellion. Hype.  
Los Angeles students speak out on**

By [Bobbi Murray](#) & [Donnell Alexander](#)

It began as that most high-school form of communication: The rumor.

From somewhere in cyberspace, word spread through the Los Angeles Unified School District that Mexican gangs would shoot black youths on Cinco de Mayo, 2005. And as a result, tens of thousands of black Los Angeles teens took that day off from school. There's no definitive way to run down the source of the original rumor, but like its cousin the urban legend, the gossip focuses and expresses a general anxiety about something real in the students' lives. A series of fights had erupted between black and Latino youths in high schools in April, including melees involving as many as 100 students at Jefferson, Fairfax, and Jordan high schools, and threat and fear were in the air. But the news reports were so shot-through with hype that the real picture was obscured. The only way to see whether this was race rioting or gang warfare or a bad case of teenage rebellion or all of the above was to get the view from those who know best: the kids who fill this city's classrooms and cafeterias.

What a dozen teens told us was poignant, insightful, and funny - often simultaneously. Right now, in

addition to the traditional difficulties of every generation's youth, L.A.'s high school students encounter a specifically complex set of racial tensions. Close proximity and familiarity over time, as well as the omnipresence of loaded pop culture, has brought them to the point where a once-pejorative racial label is now tossed about with apparent offhandedness. At the same time, teenage struggles for power and recognition can erupt into violence so frenzied that it results in locked-down campuses. Where students elsewhere might have been traumatized, or might at least seek distance from such scenes, these children take it as a fact of life, like air pollution or high rent.

High school can be a special brand of hell even without L.A.'s added challenges. There are bitter struggles for approval and for validation, anxieties about sex, dramas over parents and keeping up with clothes and cars and drugs, not to mention a massive dose of future anxiety. And then, of course, the pressure to succeed.

But in L.A. we heat that explosive mix with crumbling facilities, textbook shortages, hardcore gangsters, and an invisible, yet stultifying district bureaucracy. As these kids try to find the path to an educated mind-state, they get props just for showing up.

## ~ The Physical World ~

*If you haven't been in high school for a while, it's hard to remember just how that day-in day-out - even if you ditch - defines your teenage life. Despite the addition of 13 new campuses to the LAUSD system, at many urban schools it's the routine hassle-quotient that sets the parameters for getting an education.*

**Tracy Amaya**, Fremont High, 17, Class of 2007: Most of the kids at our school, they don't feel safe, and it's a problem - just basically everything, like gangs and stuff, like, "I'm gonna shoot this person because of this and that." It doesn't come basically to shooting because, I don't know, they say they're gonna shoot people. They end up fighting. People don't feel safe.

**Toye Mitchell**, Fairfax High, 16, Class of 2007: We have security guards, but half of them are trying to befriend us to be, like, "that mentor we need." Push 'em along. Get them to their classes. They only really technically try to do their job when they're being watched. If you get caught with your cell phone, they'll probably give it back to you. They won't give it to the principal like they're supposed to.

**Jozik Benitez**, Manual Arts, 14, Class of 2009: You might take a certain class, and they'll barely have enough books. Just say I'll have homework in my math class, the teacher says copy the pages from your book. They just have enough books for the classroom, not for you to take home.

**Jessie Fernandez**, Fremont High, 18, Class of 2005: I had a lot of great teachers, so they made sure we had books. But a lot of my friends, there weren't enough books for them or their books were in horrible condition.

**Tracy**: You know how kids go late to class? Now it's like, in the beginning of the school year, everybody's trying to rush to class, like hurry up, or you won't get a seat. You'll just stand during the whole time. But you can't try to learn with all these people and stuff, especially when they're standing up, they talk and everything.

**Jozik:** I just got a letter yesterday to see what homeroom I'm going to go to. And in the letter it also said that if I don't go to school, they're going to take me to another school. I assume that school's pretty crowded, because it said that if I don't go to the first day of school then I won't be attending that school.

**Jessie:** They always make that threat, that if you don't show up the first day of school you're going to lose your spot in the school and for a long time that's been a joke. But I guess now - my brother and my cousin are at Fremont - they're starting to get serious about it.

**Tracy:** I have a sister, she's in the ninth grade. And they said it was too full for her to go to Fremont, so they sent her to Franklin. So she takes busses to Franklin [in northeast L.A.]. She leaves at 6 a.m. to make sure she gets there, so the bus doesn't leave her. 'Cuz if the bus leaves her she's going to miss a day of school.

**Kayla Kirkland**, Washington High, 14, Class of 2009: To me one of the worst things was when they took away all the candy and stuff ... .

**Jessie:** It's kind of funny. They say, like, you're obese, they take away all the candy, all the soda, but then for lunch they give you like this slice of pizza that's just dripping with grease.

**Shaetel White**, Washington High, 18, Class of 2005: In my school, we have no school spirit whatsoever. Pep rallies or whatever? Like the cheerleaders, they're just sitting around, they're like [slumps in his seat] you see 'em doing this, they're all sad. It's like, no fun for them. I was also in leadership at Washington, and we were trying to do a whole bunch of activities, and every time we'd get on the PA system in front of the school, people wouldn't listen. They'd just, like, wave you off.

## ~ Food Chain ~

*One constant of high school life is that athletes occupy a lofty perch in the hierarchy. Jocks still set that dynamic, but, like much in L.A.-area schools, it's racialized. Blacks are a minority in L.A. schools, but the fact that they dominate in the realm of sports is just one contemporary way the superficially familiar is actually surprisingly dynamic.*

*The high school food chain, of course, features aspects beyond athletics, and students who survive figure out other ways to get a little extra juice with the administration and approval from their peers.*

**Toye:** The lunchroom is full of, um, I don't know exactly what they are. But they're, like, European. And on one side is a bunch of football players. Football players, they're a mix. We have a few blacks, a few Hispanics, and a couple of Asians on the football team. The JVs are separated from the varsity. And the JVs kick it inside of the cafeteria. And the varsity, they kick it outside. And most of them are black. So they kick it together. There are a bunch of black groups that are, like, the basketball team. They all kick it together. And then there's a bunch of Asian groups that kick it together. And then they're separated by a, like, Korean, Filipino, Asian kind of thing. And they don't kick it together, but they know each other. They know of each other.

**Reggie Quarker**, Fremont High, 18, Class of 2005: Jocks usually have a little bit more pull than other people, as far as with the administration. You might have someone pulling strings here and there. But it depends on how large your school is, as far as your sports programs. 'Cuz I know our school is pretty dominant. But even this year, jocks didn't have a lot of pull. There were about 7 that didn't graduate. They

thought they were gonna lay back and get that extra attention.

**Kayla:** There's an in-crowd and an out-crowd at my school, but it ain't like the in-crowd don't get along with the out-crowd. They get along, but the out-crowd don't hang out with the in-crowd.

**Chiquita Jordan**, Compton High, 16, Class of 2007: Compton High's crazy, but I go through with it. I wouldn't necessarily say it's racism up there, but it's somewhat racism. Most black kids don't like the Mexicans and Latinos. Some [Latinos] do get along with you. But Latinos know how black kids are at Compton High School. They know if they like 'em or not. They just got that vibe. If you look at them, then they know.

**Nadine Perez**, Long Beach Polytechnic, 16, Class of 2007: [Black students] - that's mostly all I kick it with. Latino people, they be like, "Oh you're racist because you're hanging out with black people." Or, "You're this because you're hanging out with black people." They say a lot of bad things about them. Like they have AIDS and that they have a lot of diseases. I'm like, "Why are you guys saying that? You guys don't even really know." Or I just let them talk, let them say whatever. Most of 'em wanna fight me because I hang out with them.

**Lashanika Crenshaw**, Lakewood High, 15, class of 2008: All the whites are going out in one section, all the blacks are going out in one section, and then the Mexicans hang out in another section, and then the Asians are in another section. But like there are certain spots where they're mixed. Like in the basketball courts and stuff, that's like the only time.

### ~ The N-Word: The World is a Ghetto ~

*Among the young it's become hip to say "nigga," almost independent of racial considerations. Although many students use the word, not a lot have come to terms with its meaning.*

**Toye:** I have a girls' problems book that me and my friend were writing in. My friend was like, "I'm going to stop saying it." And we're like, "Oh, you're a liar! You're a liar! Whatever." And she's like, "But, my nigga, I'm serious!" And I'm, like, "You just used it right now!" She was like, "I'm going to stop after this." But she never stopped.

**Jozik:** Honestly? My dad, he doesn't like us saying that word. But sometimes it just like slips out.

**Jessie:** I use the word sometimes, too. And you really don't think twice about it anymore. You know, I could be talking about a Latino, and I would say the word. It's just become so embedded in the culture of, I guess, inner-city, that it just comes out.

**Tracy:** To me, that word is just a little disrespectful to others. I don't want to make other people feel uncomfortable. Even though it's probably like just a figure of speech, you know, just me saying that, it's just not my place to say it.

**Reggie:** People use it nowadays as simply saying "bro" or "man." I don't know what terms they used to use in, you know, ancient days. I've kind of come to the conclusion you can't really say anything when a word has been taken and been made mainstream. It's just kind of like it's popular to say "skeet." Who's to say it should be said? But it's popular, so it's gonna be said by everyone no matter what it is.

**Kayla:** Do I say it? Maybe to a boy or something if he's getting on my nerves.

**Reggie:** I truly dislike when a woman says that to me, because I feel, you know, that other word that women truly dislike - we all know that word - and I feel like, when a woman says that to me, it's like the opposite of that word. So I feel like you shouldn't say that to me, especially with an attitude in the context of how you say it, if you don't wish for me to call you out. So I feel truly disrespected when a woman says that to me, especially like she just says she uses it.

*Reggie looks at Kayla.*

**Kayla:** I don't really have nothing to say. But people say it at my school and stuff like that. But brown people saying it? Like two Latino girls that hung out with the in-crowd, they might have said it to some boy or something, but some black girls look at them like "Why are you saying that?" Like, "You can't say that," or whatever.

**Shauntice Randolph,** Long Beach Millikan High, 14, Class of 2009: We have some Mexicans that hang out with us and some whites that hang out with us, too. It's like a big old group. But if they like try too hard to be like us, we have to tell them, "You should be yourself," or whatever. We tell them it's cool to act like how you are. You know how we talk? Our words? They try to talk it, too, but it doesn't seem to come out right when they say it. So we try to tell them that it's OK. Don't try to be like us. You still our friend even though you talk like that, you know what I'm sayin'?

## ~ Gangsta, Gangsta ~

*A child in a Los Angeles school doesn't have to be in a gang to have gangster problems. Associations with family and friends are often enough to bring worries to a young student.*

**Reggie:** I've known and heard about numerous fights on high school campuses. It's never been about race. It's usually somebody's feelings got hurt or they feel disrespected. Or it's over a girl or a boy. Little stuff like that.

**Jozik:** If you probably have gang members close to your block or whatever - and they're in between, walking down the street over there - if you happen to see a group of gang members, you might try to play it off like, "Oh, I probably forgot something," and you know, go over to the next block or take another route or whatever. You gotta watch out because you might have something valuable with you and then they might try to steal it. So you watch out and sometimes you might be scared, but ... .

**Chiquita:** My cousin, she hangs out with a lot of gang members, but she don't bang. We was at the park and somebody came up to her and was like, "You gangbang?" And she was like, "No, I don't do that." And they was like, "Yes you do! Yes you do! I always see you with them." And she had a lot of commotion behind all that.

**Tracy:** It's true. It's like, it's a girl I know at school, her mom and her dad - I don't know what gang they're in, but they bang - and it's like, people actually go after her to try and get back at her parents and stuff. And it's kind of crazy because [gangsters] will be like, "Oh, that's such-and-such's daughter, let's get her." Try to hurt their family because they're the rival, you know? She's scared to go to school and she tries to hide out. Because of her family, she has to be hiding from certain people because they try to kill her if she steps out on the street.

**Reggie:** [Jefferson High's rioting] wasn't that racial as the media portrayed it to be. It was probably some gang violence with some other stuff going on. If it was really that racial, it would have overflowed into the streets, because the area is predominantly Latino. The African-American students while walking home or catching the bus - which the majority of them do; I know a few people who play sports over there - they wouldn't be safe, at all. They would get gang-jumped, beat up or, worse, killed.

**Toye:** There are gangs at our school, and they don't front like there isn't. This school is predominantly Blood. A few of my friends hang around the gangbangers, but they don't disrespect us. But they do get out of hand sometimes. They say, like, "crucial" and "cuz" this and "Blood" this. We just never understood it.

**Chiquita:** Say the Bloods don't get along with the F-13s. Or the Crips don't get along with Whittier. It's a mixture of being racist and the gang stuff, but it's two different things. If they start fighting at school, say, for instance, if she was a Blood and I was a Crip, that mixture's not gonna get along. If her gang was to come along and fight me because I'm a Crip we would know that because she'd be like, "Blood be over there Crippin'. I don't like her."

**Toye:** A couple of weeks before school got out, these groups of gangs were gonna fight because of one friend [who] was on the bus one day, and this [other] guy was like "You guys were like B-I-T-C-H-S" and stuff like that. And they brought it to school. Most of them got kicked out because of what happened on the bus. It escalates from the bus or the streets or sidewalks to our school. And you don't even know most of the people. You're like, "Does he even go here?" There was one riot at our school. They jumped a guy from one of the Hispanic gangs and the Hispanic guy brought all of his friends up here. There's all blacks on one side and all Hispanics on the other.

It's really bad, because it forces a lot of Hispanic boys and girls who kick it with black people to choose. You have to pick sides. Like, half the whole school did not talk to us. During that whole month, we were like split.

**Jessie:** My life's been complicated, too, I mean, walking home from school or whatever. You know, it's weird, I don't know how people feel that ownership over something like that. It makes no sense. Somebody might think that this is their turf - "You can't come on this side of school or this side of town because this is where we hang out." And that's nonsense. You certainly don't own that. You're just living there, you don't run anything. You certainly have no power over it.

## ~ Cinco De Mayo Rumors ~

*The mass absenteeism on May 5 was a testament to both the power of rumor and to the jittery state of race relations in the schools. For the 51,000 students reported absent that day, anxiety about violence easily turns into panic.*

**Reggie:** I'm pretty sure no one of this generation really knows the history between blacks and Mexicans, how far it goes back. I'm not too sharp on that either.

**Jozik:** The rumors I heard was: If you wear a certain color, like pretty much if you wear the colors of a Mexican flag, if you were African-American, pretty much you were gonna get shot up that day.

**Lashanika:** One of my homeboys was from one of the gangs and he told me how in the Long Beach area,

the Mexicans that were in jail had told all the Mexicans that are out to kill as many black people as they can on Cinco de Mayo, and he was like, "Don't go to school." So I didn't go to school.

**Tracy:** I heard about it. It didn't really affect me. I kind of thought it was like blown out of proportion a little bit, you know? "They made it seem like it was really something big and that's why it spread around. It spread fear around people. People do kind of crazy things when they're scared. And some people would be like, "I'm not going to let some Latino person do this to me, so I'm gonna fight back." So then it starts tension around people, and it scares people.

They were also saying that they were going to shoot any black person that was wearing a white T-shirt - for the boys and stuff. I actually had a friend and he was scared, seriously. I thought he was playing, but he was scared - he walked out with a pink shirt. I thought he was joking around, making it as a joke, and I'm like, "What are you doing?" And he's like, "Uh-uh, I'm not gonna get shot, so I'm wearing a pink shirt." And I was like, "OK." I didn't hear about nobody getting shot. 'Cause I know some people did wear white T-shirts and be like, "I wish they would shoot me," you know?

**Toye:** A lot of things I do hear, it is true. Like, you don't want to believe it's true, but it is. And then stuff like this, you can't joke about that. Either you're serious and you're going to go through with it or you're serious and something is going to happen. Big. If you weren't Hispanic, you were gonna get it. A lot of people were like, "I'm not coming to school. I'm not taking that chance of it starting if I'm there." A lot of parents were like, "Oh yeah, you guys are not coming to school." My parents were, like, "Oh, no. You're not coming to school that day, even if it is a joke or a theory or whatever."

**Reggie:** I didn't stay in the house the entire day, I didn't go to school. What did I do that day? I think I actually went to a party. Spent some time with a couple of friends ... .

## ~ Just to Get By ~

*It would be soul-crushing, the difficulties publicly educated, inner-city students encounter on a daily basis, were it not for the strategies of distraction they devise and the ways they carve out a little control over their daily lives.*

**Kayla:** One of the best things is, I don't know, having fun with your friends and stuff like that. Like laughing together and stuff like that.

**Jessie:** I'm working with counter-recruitment, counter military recruitment, I've been doing that for a while. The way I feel about it, military recruiters target high-achieving low-income youth to bring them into the military, and I find that incredibly unfair. I understand that's the way the world works - I mean, as nice as it would be to have a peaceful lifestyle, it's never going to happen, the way things are running. You're always going to have the military, so I respect the military as a profession. My brother's in the military, and - the way I see it - I'm trying to combat that. It should be an option, it shouldn't be just crammed into you. Why aren't we promoting college a lot more? So I'm trying to change policy.

**Reggie:** The upperclassmen in the high schools should be tried to be worked into the solutions more, as far as giving them certain surveys about what they think and how the school's been run. Because they've been through the cycle and they're making it through high school, so I think they would have the best insight on what could be better developed within the school.

**Chiquita:** I do poetry, through a program called Julliard-L.A. It helps me get through my problems instead of going ballistic.

**Jessie:** People cut me slack because I put myself out there as an activist at the school. I wasn't a jock, but I'd get strings pulled as well. There's only so far you can get as a student. You can get pull, you can talk to administrators. They like you and might cut you a little bit of slack. But you're still a student.

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