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Reformed: Sergio Argueta

EX-NEW YORK GANGSTER PLEADS: STOP THE VIOLENCE

A REFORMED New York gang leader was today calling on London teenagers to reject violence and gangs.

Sergio Argueta, 29, was speaking to hundreds of teenagers and young children in an attempt to curb the growing problem of gang culture.

Two teenagers have been murdered in London in the first two weeks of this year. The toll in 2007 was 27.

Argueta, who spent most of his life as a gangster on New York's streets and lost two friends in gang-related murders, was due to speak to pupils at St Bonaventure's Roman Catholic School in Forest Gate.

He said: "It's your community and if you can't take care of it, who will?"

"We live in a culture that still glamorises gang culture. Young people are dying at unprecedented levels."

Argueta, who gave up on gangs after a member was shot dead in an ambush, earned a master's degree in social work.

He founded a grassroots organisation dedicated to educating young people about the importance of resisting gang life.

The 29-year-old said education and empowering youth communities by "promoting healthy and viable alternatives to gangs and gang life" — as opposed to tougher prison sentences — were the only ways of breaking the cycle of violence.

BENEDICT MOORE-BRIDGER