

## EDITORIAL: Drive-by murder of Fresno youth must stop

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Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer walks in front of the casket during the memorial service for Janessa Ramirez held at Cornerstone Church on Jan. 24.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

The drive-by murder and maiming of Fresno youth by gang members must stop.

But it's not going to end or even be significantly reduced until many more of us commit to doing something about this pox in our community.

Nine-year-old Janessa Ramirez and 16-year-old Marina Talamantez — both killed in the crossfire of gang disputes — are the latest victims in a long cycle of violence against Fresno youth.

Our response has a pattern. Outrage. Promises by law enforcement to catch those responsible for these heinous acts. Sometimes there are arrests and convictions; sometimes not.

Then it's back to business as usual until the life of another innocent child is snuffed out by a bullet. Or a youngster is paralyzed by gunfire, which happened to 6-year-old Andrew Mitchell, who was playing with his new toys the day after

Christmas in 2002. Or a 5-year-old and a 4-year-old are hit by gunfire but survive, as happened in July and August of last year.

These are our children. They are kids who should be able to go for a walk with their mom or play outside without getting shot or murdered. If we can't stand up and protect our children, what kind of community are we?

According to a 2014 report by the California Department of Public Health, Fresno County is one of the most violent in the state. While the California yearly average for homicides is 5.2 per 100,000, Fresno County had 7.9 homicides per 100,000 from 2010 to 2012.

One of the biggest problems is that too often witnesses to these murders don't cooperate with police and the cases aren't prosecuted. Sometimes it's because witnesses don't trust police or fear retaliation. Whatever the reason, every time someone gets away with murder, it tears at the fabric of Fresno and emboldens someone else to spray bullets into a house or a car.

It's encouraging that Fresno police have caught the two men they believe responsible for killing Ramirez. Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer said Friday that police had received 44 tips in the case, 10 of which linked the suspects to the homicide. And one of the men involved in killing Talamantez has been arrested, charged and ordered to stand trial.

These results should send a loud message: If you want you and your family to be safe, you must help police and prosecutors do their jobs.

Our community leaders also must do better. Yes, they utter platitudes about helping children at city council and supervisors board meetings. But their votes and budgets rarely reflect a commitment to improving conditions for Fresno County children. It's past time for these leaders to help create an environment in which children can thrive.

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