

THE 2021 REGIONAL WINNER OF THE UNHCR NANSEN REFUGEE AWARD IN THE AMERICAS

BIOGRAPHY

Jorge Santiago Ávila Corrales



Jorge Santiago Ávila Corrales is a 33-year-old Honduran social worker and director of Jóvenes Contra la Violencia or Youth Against Violence, an organization that gives young people a way to escape gang violence. He is the regional winner of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award in the Americas. Raised in one of the most violent neighborhoods of Honduran capital Tegucigalpa, Ávila has made it his life's mission to empower youth and enable them to escape forced recruitment by criminal organizations. He does this by bringing young people into a tight-knit organization that gives them the tools to resist the pull of the powerful gangs that hold sway over large parts of the country.

B I O G R A P H Y

Ávila's commitment to the young people of Honduras began when he was in his early twenties and his 16-year-old brother was murdered by gang members. The tragedy also forced the rest of the family to flee their home, initially taking refuge in another region of Honduras and subsequently abroad. Still, despite the looming dangers, Ávila opted to return to Honduras to start Jóvenes Contra la Violencia, which over the past 10 years has worked with children and young people aged between six and 20.

“Many of these kids are flirting with the gangs and maras. They don't want to join them, but that's the only group in their community. That's why we go there and create a new group, to offer boys and girls an alternative.”

Ávila is being honored for his courage and dedication to challenging the appalling violence that is a daily fact of life for many Hondurans. Ávila and the network of volunteers that make up Jóvenes Contra la Violencia are present in many of the communities that have been hardest hit by gangs. There, the group sets up safe spaces where at-risk youth are able to escape the pressures of the streets. They also seek out and provide support to families at risk of displacement. Furthermore, Jóvenes Contra la Violencia champions legislation aimed at protecting children and young people. Several of the bills they campaigned for have been signed into law.



Santiago Ávila and volunteers of Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (JCV) (left) walk in the high-risk neighborhood of Comayagua City. They visit families that have benefited from JCV activities.

“I see my brother’s face in every boy and girl we work with. I think that, if an organization like Jóvenes Contra la Violencia had existed back then, perhaps the story could have been different.”

In 2018, Jóvenes Contra la Violencia won UNHCR’s Youth Initiative Fund. Since 2020, the group has been a UNHCR partner, spearheading youth programs in schools and communities across Honduras.

Background of the displacement situation in Honduras

Violence has forced at least 247,000 people in this Central American nation of nine million people to flee to other regions of the country. Nearly 70 per cent of those who have been internally displaced are under the age of 30.

While displacement has many causes, including murder and extortion, other structures imposed by gangs, such as restricting mobility, forced recruitment and even sexual slavery, also force young people to flee. The work of civil society organizations, local NGOs and community-based organizations is vitally important, as these groups work on the frontlines to try to protect young people and all those impacted by violence.