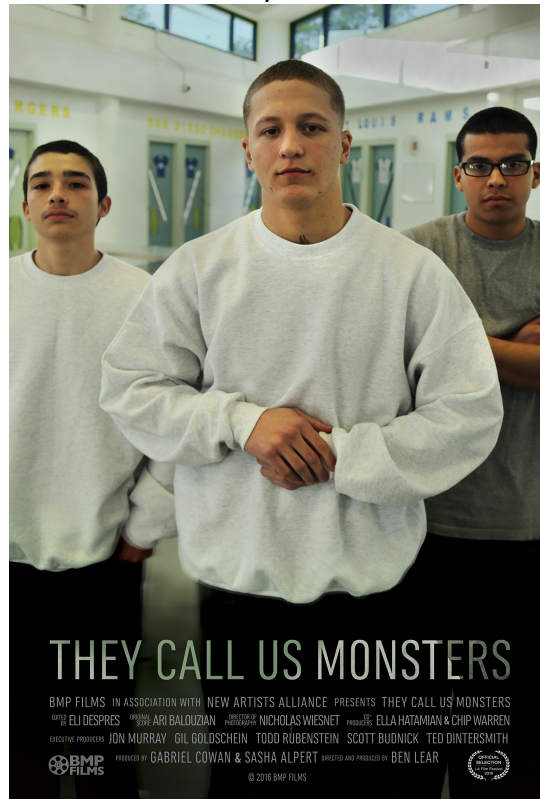


# THEY CALL US MONSTERS

A film by Ben Lear



## U.S. DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION

TRT: 82 MINUTES

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## SYNOPSIS

THEY CALL US MONSTERS takes viewers behind the walls of the Compound, the facility where Los Angeles houses its most violent juvenile criminals. To their advocates, they're kids. To the system, they're adults. To their victims, they're monsters.

Three such young offenders sign up to take a screenwriting class to write a movie while they await their respective trials: Jarad, who was arrested at 16 and faces 200-years to life for four attempted murders; Juan, who was arrested at 16 and faces 90-to life for first-degree murder; and Antonio, who was arrested at 14 and faces 90-to life for two attempted murders. Each boy lost his innocence around age 12. That was the year Jarad watched his father try to kill himself, the year Juan's brother jumped him into their gang in El Salvador, and the year Antonio became addicted to meth. These shared experiences, along with Juan's unrequited love for his childhood friend, Abigail, form a narrative through-line for the boys' short film.

Halfway through the class, Antonio returns to juvenile court and gets released with time served. Once back in his neighborhood, he quickly falls victim to the same environment and patterns that led to his incarceration in the first place. Meanwhile, the realities of Jarad and Juan's crimes and pending trials set in. One of the victims of Jarad's shooting is only 17 herself and will use a wheelchair for the rest of her life. The judge on his case fears he is a risk to public safety. Juan faces deportation even if he is eventually released and separation from his family, including his baby son.

Ultimately, the film asks how should the system deal with offenders like these young boys. Do they have a capacity to change and return to society one day? Does society have a responsibility to these kids? Or to their victims? Do they deserve a second chance? These are the questions legislators are grappling with across the country as they attempt to reform our juvenile justice system.

Each new perspective challenges the viewer to reconcile the film's central conflict—that Jarad, Juan and Antonio are violent criminals, but also kids. There is no clear line between childhood and adulthood, humanity and evil.

## OUR SUBJECTS



**JARAD**, arrested at 16, facing 200 years for four attempted murders



**JUAN**, arrested at 16, facing 90-life for first-degree murder



**ANTONIO**, arrested one month after his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, facing 90-life for two attempted murders

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Compound is a jail within a jail—a high-security facility in the middle of Sylmar Juvenile Hall. Outside its gates, kids play soccer and kickball on a grassy field. These minors are being tried as juveniles for non-violent crimes. They will return home in a matter of months. Inside the Compound, the kids look the same—almost entirely Hispanic and African-American boys dressed in county grays—only they're not allowed on the grass. They won't be going home anytime soon. They are LA County's high-risk juvenile offenders, tried as adults for violent crimes and facing decades, if not hundreds of years in adult prison.

When I first entered the Compound in early 2013, I expected to find stocky, steely-eyed gangsters staring me down, wishing to jump me if given the chance. Either I'd forgotten how young teenagers really look, or I'd watched too much *Locked Up Raw*, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Instead I met a classroom full of kids, giddy and eager to tell their stories. They went around the room and shared their career goals. Sixteen-year old Martin said, "I might want to be an architect. Or an artist. There are so many things I don't even know about yet. But I'm excited to learn!" Then he paused and added, "I just hope I get the chance." He faced 100 years to life for first-degree murder.

For days after, I couldn't stop thinking about this world I'd stumbled into. The narrow space between a lost childhood and a stolen adulthood where these kids managed to live, laugh and discover their potential. When I learned about an upcoming California Senate Bill that would provide them the opportunity for a second chance, I knew I had a film to make. Two and a half years later, the result: *They Call Us Monsters*—a coming of age story set behind bars.

Until now, no independent filmmaker had gained access to film in the Compound. I owe mine to the incredible juvenile justice advocate community in Los Angeles, who took a chance on this film, and, in doing so encouraged LA County Probation to do the same. I could not be more grateful for the opportunity to tell this story.

## THE ISSUE

On October 8<sup>th</sup> 2014, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his 1994 crime bill, President Clinton predicted that sentencing reform would become one of the hot-button issues in 2016. “We basically took a shotgun to a problem that needed a .22,” he admitted. Twenty years later, we’re dealing with the consequences of “tough on crime”: heavily overpopulated prisons, a dearth of educational programming and reentry services, all contributing to a recidivism rate of over 70% in California.

Chief among these problems is our treatment of juvenile offenders. While juvenile crime has decreased continuously since 1994, we’ve continued to pass tougher and tougher juvenile crime laws. In California, juveniles between the ages of 14-17 can be tried as adults and receive sentences longer than their natural life expectancy.

The message rings loud and clear: these kids are lost, defined by and no better than their worst act. But due to recent advances in brain science and a handful of Supreme Court decisions, we have started to once again see juveniles as different from adults.

In the last three years, California has passed the first two bills in three decades (the second of which we followed for this film) to decrease juvenile sentences. This movement has re-sparked a national debate over the very nature of our most violent juvenile offenders. The only group silent from the debate are the minors themselves. This film gives them a voice.

A list of juvenile justice reform legislation passed in California since 2012:

**SB 9 (2012):** Eliminates the “life without parole” sentence for juvenile offenders (except for those with special circumstances).

**SB 260 (2013):** Provides parole board hearings at 15 or 25 years for juvenile offenders with defacto life sentences.

**SB 261 (2015):** Raises the age of SB 260 to 22-years old, affecting an additional 16,000 inmates.

California is a leader in sentencing reform for juveniles. This film showcases that success and the importance of second chance opportunities for juvenile offenders nationwide.

## **FILMMAKER BIOS**

### **Ben Lear – Producer/Director**

Ben Lear graduated from NYU in 2010 with a degree in music composition. As his senior recital, Lear wrote and performed his folk-opera, *Lillian*, about a man, who travels to the great pacific garbage patch to reclaim all he's lost, with a 20-piece orchestra and light show. Upon the album's release, he partnered with Plastic Pollution Coalition and 5Gyres to raise awareness for plastic pollution. This work has led Lear to performances at TED and the UN.

As a result of shooting this film, Ben sits on the advisory board of InsideOUT Writers and is an ally member within the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, teaching a weekly writing class within the Compound and mentoring former juvenile offenders upon reentry.

### **Sasha Alpert – Producer**

Sasha Alpert is both Executive Vice President of Bunim/Murray Productions as well as of the documentary division, BMP Films, which she founded in 2006. Her most recent film is *Valentine Road*, which premiered in competition at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013 and went on to air on HBO in October 2013 and was nominated for two Emmy Awards. BMP's first film, *Autism: The Musical*, won two Primetime Emmy Awards including Best Non-Fiction Special and previously garnered numerous festival awards. The film premiered on HBO in March 2008. She also produced *Shadow Billionaire*; the story of DHL founder and tycoon Larry Hillblom who disappeared mysteriously in a small plane crash leaving his unacknowledged children to fight for a share of his vast fortune.

Additionally, Alpert produced *Forever Hollywood*, a film about the history of Hollywood, which has been playing continuously at the American Cinematheque's Egyptian Theater in Los Angeles for 13 years. Alpert also wrote, directed and produced a documentary on the Western Film as part of the PBS series *The American Cinema*. She has also produced numerous documentaries and specials for PBS, including films on Film Noir, poets Sylvia Plath and TS Eliot and on Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky. Additionally, she has produced specials for CBS, MTV, TBS and The Disney Channel.

### **Gabriel Cowan – Producer**

Gabriel Cowan is an award-winning filmmaker and the President of New Artists Alliance. His film *Cheap Thrills* won an audience award at SXSW 2013, where *Bad Milo*, a film he produced alongside The Duplass Brothers also premiered. 2016 finds Cowan writing and directing *Truck'd Up*, a television pilot for Ted Field and Radar Films, producing *Genesis*, a Science Fiction television show by Steven Bochco and premiering *Fear Inc* (Abigail Breslin) at the Tribeca Film Festival where he also premiered *Loitering with Intent* (Sam Rockwell, Marisa Tomei) and *Just Before I Go* (Seann William Scott, Olivia Thirlby). Cowan is an IFP fellow for *Extracted*, a film he co-wrote and produced that premiered at SXSW 2012. Since graduating CalArts in 2008 with an MFA in film directing, Cowan has produced over 20 feature films.

As a musician, Cowan has earned two Platinum records and recorded with Jackson Brown, Robbie Robertson, The Tower Of Power, Ry Cooder, Van Dyke Parks and others. He serves on the board of Inside OutWriters, an organization that provides creative writing services to kids in juvenile hall and is on the advisory committee of Common Sense Media, an organization dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology which has over 65 million users.

### **Jonathan Murray & Gil Goldschein/BMP FILMS – Executive Producers**

BMP Films was started to create documentaries and narrative films which tell intimate human stories; compelling and emotional accounts of real life events.

Our previous films include *Valentine Road*, which unravels a well-publicized and complex story of a shooting in a middle school classroom of a 15-year old gay teen by a fellow student. The documentary first played at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival in the documentary competition and then premiered on HBO.

In 2007 BMP released our first documentary, *Autism: The Musical*, which premiered on HBO and later played on OWN. The film won two Primetime Emmy's – one for Outstanding Non-Fiction Special and the other for Outstanding Picture Editing for Non-Fiction Special – as well as numerous audience and jury awards at festivals worldwide.

In 2008 BMP Films produced *Pedro*, the story of Pedro Zamora who was the first

openly gay, HIV positive person on prime time TV. The feature premiered at the Toronto Film Festival, aired on MTV and is now out on DVD.

In 2009 BMP produced *Shadow Billionaire*, the story of DHL founder and tycoon Larry Hillblom, who disappeared mysteriously in a small plane crash leaving his unacknowledged children to fight for their share of his vast fortune. The film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival. It aired on CNBC and is now available on Netflix and On Demand.

### **Scott Budnick – Executive Producer**

Scott Budnick is the Founder and President of The Anti-Recidivism Coalition. He grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and graduated from Emory University in 1999 with degrees in Business and Film.

As Executive Vice President of Todd Phillips' production company, Green Hat Films, Budnick executive produced many successful comedies including the highest grossing rated-R comedies in history, *The Hangover* series.

Outside of film, Budnick is a fierce champion for children in need. Budnick is a teacher and on the Advisory Board for InsideOUT Writers, is a board member of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, and on the Advisory board for the Loyola Law School, Center for Juvenile Law and Policy.

For his work with youth in the criminal justice system, Governor Jerry Brown named Budnick California's Volunteer of the Year for 2012. In August of 2013, Budnick was appointed to the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) by the Speaker of the Assembly, John Perez.

In 2013, Budnick launched The Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC), an organization of very high-achieving, formerly-incarcerated young adults who work to support one another, while stopping the flow of men and women into the criminal justice system.

### **Eli Despres – Editor**

Eli Despres co-wrote and edited the documentary *Blackfish* (BAFTA nominee • 98% 'Fresh' at rottentomatoes.com), which was watched by over 21 million people in the US alone, has catalyzed state and federal legislation, and was



shortlisted for an Oscar®.

His other writing and editing credits include the upcoming *Red Army* (Cannes • 100% 'Fresh' at rottentomatoes.com), the Emmy-winning investigative journalism series *Exposé* (PBS), feature documentary *City Lax* (ESPN), short documentary *At Risk* (ACAP) and the fiction feature *Wilderness Survival For Girls* (ContentFilm/Image Entertainment), which he also directed.

The Hollywood Reporter described his work as “Shattering... Eli Despres edits with propulsive narrative drive.” Eli was nominated for the 2014 American Cinema Editors' Documentary award.

## CREDITS

BMP Films Presents  
In association with  
New Artists Alliance

THEY CALL US MONSTERS

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