



L.A. Home Turf for Hundreds of Neighborhood Criminal Groups

EDITOR'S NOTE: We're often asked at LA Community Policing about issues involving gangs and other youth problems in the community. Here's an LA Times article that helps illustrate just how large, difficult and violent the situation is in Los Angeles.

We can't tell you where the statistics the Times used came from ... but they are alarming. Among other things the sheer scope of the problem is an excellent argument for doing all we can as a community to both participate in and support anti-gang prevention and intervention programs.

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by Richard Winton
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The problem isn't new, but gang violence seems to be on everybody's agenda at the moment.

The House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a bill that would, if enacted by the Senate and signed by the president, allow some kinds of gang crimes to be tried in federal court. It would also lengthen sentences and create a RICO-like statute to give law enforcers an additional tool with which to attack the problem.

Locally, barely a day goes by in the Los Angeles mayoral race that the candidates don't trade charges about who is or isn't soft on gangs. So it seemed a good time to take stock of what is really known — and what is not.

Question: How many gang members do police believe are operating in the city of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County?

Answer: According to CAL/GANG, a statewide database maintained by the California Department of Justice, the city of Los Angeles is home to 463 gangs with 39,032 members — about the same number as residents of Encino.

Among those, Latino gangs are the most numerous, with 22,309 members. Predominantly African American are the so-called Crip gangs, with 10,306 members, and Blood-affiliated gangs, with 4,209. The rest are smaller gangs. These numbers are down from 1997, when the database showed 64,000 gang members.

Countywide, CAL/GANG estimates there are 1,108 gangs with 85,298 members. About 53,121 are members of predominantly Latino gangs, while the Crips, with 210 cliques, have 17,542. The numbers include those for the city of Los Angeles.

To be listed in the CAL/GANG system, a person must meet two or more of the following criteria: be an admitted gang member, be named by a reliable informant, wear gang attire, display gang signs or tattoos, frequent gang areas or be arrested with known gang members.

Q: Is there any reason to think the CAL/GANG statistics are inaccurate?

A: Anti-gang activists, academics and even some police officers believe the real number of active gang members may be far lower, but no one has better data.

Malcolm Klein, a USC sociologist who has studied gangs for 42 years, says the system tends to let gang members' names remain in the records long beyond their activity. However, he also says police tend to be unaware of juvenile members and to undercount female gang members.

"When they say there are 20,000 18th Streeters, they are basically guessing," Klein said.

Q: Where are gangs operating?

A: Sixty-six of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County report some gang activity. In general, it's rarer in wealthy enclaves, although places such as San Marino and Arcadia have some Asian American gang activity. South Los Angeles has 121 gangs, and the San Fernando Valley is home to 81.

Latino gang members are the most geographically dispersed, with members in the far reaches of the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys.

Q: How deadly are the local gangs?

A: Los Angeles recorded 291 gang-related slayings last year, accounting for 57% of the city's 515 homicides. While other types declined last year, gang killings increased 12.4% over 2003. Furthermore, 172 gang-related killings occurred elsewhere in the county. Those numbers are significantly lower than in the early 1990s.

Q: What strategies are the LAPD and Sheriff's Department using to reduce gang violence?

A: The LAPD delivers most of its anti-gang work through "gang impact teams" based at divisions throughout the city. About 360 officers are on the teams, which gather intelligence on gangs' criminal activities and develop cases against members.

Much of the LAPD's strategy is based on what is known as the 10% Factor, which holds that law enforcement should target the 10% of criminals who account for about half of crimes.

The Sheriff's Department's anti-gang operation, known as the Safe Streets Bureau, is particularly active in the Compton-Lynwood areas. One of its key strategies is to focus on the "shot callers" who direct a gang's activities.

The department also operates a multi-jurisdictional clearinghouse for gang intelligence.

Q: The mayoral candidates have been talking a lot about gang injunctions. What are they? Do they work?

A: Gang injunctions usually focus on the few dozen blocks of a neighborhood that a gang claims as its territory. Within that area, named gang members typically are prohibited from congregating, using cellphones and harassing or intimidating neighbors, with violators facing up to six months in jail.

Los Angeles has 25 gang injunctions in place, affecting neighborhoods across the city. Initiated in the early 1980s, such injunctions have been upheld by the Supreme Court despite opposition by civil libertarians.

Although the injunctions make for good political rhetoric, their effectiveness remains in question. Cheryl Maxson, a UC Irvine criminologist, said the actions have a modest effect on crime and may help perceptions about an area. In the late 1990s, Jeffrey Grogger, a former UCLA professor now at the University of Chicago, studied 14 gang injunctions and concluded that violent crime fell 5% to 10% in the year after they took effect.

Critics, however, warn that often those named in the court actions move to new turf, leaving a younger generation to take over the affected territory.

As for Mayor James K. Hahn's proposal for a citywide injunction, most experts say it goes against the basic idea behind the injunctions: that a gang has a turf and you want to take it away from them.

Q: Even Police Chief William J. Bratton admits you cannot arrest your way out of the gang problem. So what is being done to intervene in the lives of those drawn to gangs?

A: There are a plethora of gang intervention programs across the county and city. The city of Los Angeles spends \$82 million a year on anti-gang programs but does little to determine which are working. To address the issue, some City Council members want a new agency formed to focus the anti-gang approach.

Two well-known programs are L.A. Bridges, aimed at middle-school children, and Homeboy Industries, which gives predominantly Latino gang members a chance to start a career on the right side of the law.

Q: What are the trends in gang activity?

A: There is growing hostility between black and Latino gangs in South Los Angeles. Crips and Bloods are increasingly traveling to the suburbs to commit robberies.

Gang members are also becoming involved in more white-collar crimes such as credit card fraud. They also are less likely to wear traditional gang attire.

A new generation of gangs may also be evolving from tagging crews that are graduating from graffiti to serious crimes.

Gangs of Los Angeles

Gang-related crime touches every corner of Los Angeles, but the Newton community south of downtown saw the most incidents from January through March.

Number of gang-related crimes by LAPD Division

Devonshire	67
Foothill	83
West Valley	37
Van Nuys	48
North Hollywood	36
Hollywood	24
Wilshire	129
Rampart	146
Northeast	176
Hollenbeck	129
Central	35
Newton	206
Southwest	187
77th Street	142
Southeast	161
Harbor	67
Pacific	34
West LA	20

Gang-related crimes through March 2005

<i>Category</i>	<i>YTD 2005</i>	<i>YTD 2004</i>	<i>2004 total</i>
Homicide	76	84	291
Attempt homicide	165	180	717
Felony assault	689	600	2,616
Attacks on police officers	25	19	61
Robbery	498	665	2,308
Shots into a residence	61	46	188
Witness intimidation	141	200	754
Carjacking	35	41	118
Others*	37	31	102
Total	1,727	1,866	7,155

**Includes kidnapping, rape, arson and extortion*

Known Los Angeles gangs

	<i>Number of gangs</i>	<i>Number of members</i>
Hispanic	246	22,309
Crip	113	10,306
Blood	45	4,209
Asian	32	1,106
Stoner**	16	541
White	11	561
Total	463	39,032

*** Usually teenagers of various races/ethnicities, who listen to metal or gothic music*

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