

*Young gangsters distort Golden Rule:
Do unto others for what they did to you.*



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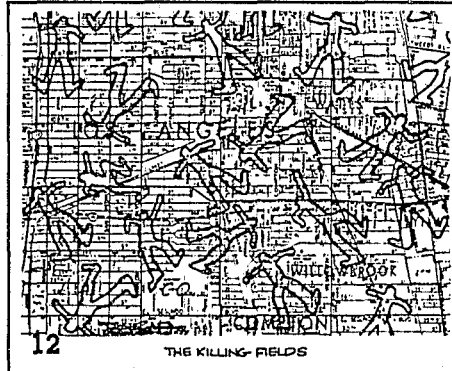
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About the cover:
 Gang "brothers" pose for this portrait, proudly flashing their gang hand sign. Photograph by Merrick Morton.

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 ACQUISITIONS

BY SUZANNE HARPER

Regarded as the nation's gang violence capital, LA's politicians, and law enforcement and school administrators are using knowledge from lost battles to win the war.

LA's gang busters — lessons learned

A teenager is walking down his neighborhood's street at dusk, on his way to meet friends, when a slow-moving car approaches.

Another teenager calls out: "What's your name? Where you from?"

Before the questions can be answered, a gun is pointed out the window, shots ring out, and another person is dead, killed by gang members. A tragedy has occurred, one that will bring grief to the teenager's family and friends, one that will reverberate throughout their lives, one that will add to the sense of fear in a community where even a walk to the store can bring death.

But this is Los Angeles, and the death rates only two paragraphs on an inside page of the newspaper.

Los Angeles, commonly considered the gang capital of the country with more than 600 gangs involving 70,000 members, has been dealing with gang violence for years. And it's no longer confined to the inner city — young suburban teenagers have begun imitating gang dress and scrawling graffiti in traditionally upper-middle-class neighborhoods.

The violence escalates each year. Statistics tell the story: In the last decade, there were 2,700 gang-related homicides in Los Angeles. Gang-motivated crimes increased 31.8 percent in the first six

months of 1989, compared to the same time period a year ago, according to the Los Angeles Police Department. During the same period, gang-related homicides increased 4.6 percent.

In the first five months of 1988, gang members were responsible for an average of one drive-by shooting a day, a 20 percent increase over the same time period the year before. According to Los Angeles District Attorney Ira Reiner, the 1989 figures are approaching two drive-by shootings a day, and half of those are innocent victims.

Unfortunately, evidence indicates that other parts of the country are rapidly developing their own gang problems. A number of unlikely cities — including Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Memphis, Tennessee; Jackson, Mississippi; and Atlanta, Georgia — are reporting an emergence of big-city gang culture as Los Angeles gang members expand their operations nationwide. The Drug Enforcement Agency has confirmed the presence of Los Angeles street gang members in 49 cities.

Although gang activity is springing up in cities across the country, it is the citizens of Los Angeles and the law enforcement officials who serve them who have been intimately confronted with gang problems on a daily basis — and who have learned what does and doesn't work in fighting gangs.

LA gang history

Street gangs have been a part of the Los Angeles culture since the turn of the century. Early gangs were primarily found in the Latino community and were turf-oriented, organized to maintain the integrity of their barrio. Some of those gang members have fathers and grandfathers who were in the same gang.

The introduction of drugs, especially crack, has dramatically changed the gang scene. According to District Attorney Reiner, approximately 300 black youths belonged to gangs in the 1960s; today, there are approximately 40,000 black gang members. And, as Los Angeles Sheriff Sherman Block points out, drugs provide a major inducement to join a gang. "The entrepreneurial individuals who are involved in drug dealing have recruited many young people into their gangs by providing them with a variety of jobs, everything from being a street corner lookout for a crack house to being a messenger or whatever," he says. "So they've had money to offer them, which is certainly an enticement in communities where you have young people with virtually no material assets."

However, young people who join gangs lack other things as well, such as self-esteem, that make the gang life appealing. "The young people who join gangs and use drugs have little or no identity, really; they're virtually non-

Suzanne Harper is associate editor of School Safety.

entities," Sheriff Block says. "They seek what all of us seek, and that is a level of acceptance, recognition, and a sense of belonging. The gang seems to provide the fulfillment of that need."

That opinion is seconded by Lilia "Lulu" Lopez, coordinator of instructional planning and development in the office of elementary education in the Los Angeles Unified School District. "I've asked kids, why did you get in the gang and what keeps you there? Acceptance comes up a lot, but they also want to know somebody cares about them. In the gang, you have a sense of family, you take care of each other, you go there for support. Now if we could create that in the classroom, maybe we could eliminate a whole lot of kids joining gangs."

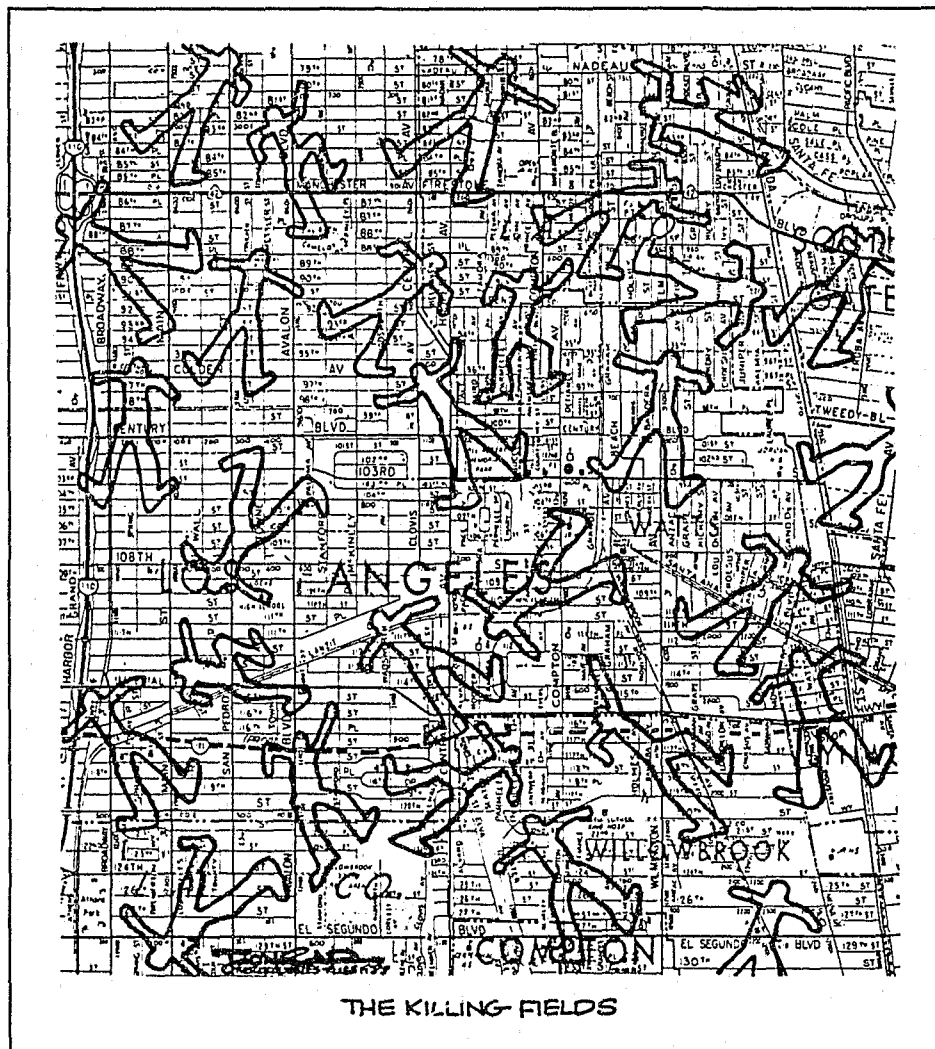
Finally, many youths initially join to alleviate their boredom, an affliction that is as common for suburban teenagers as for inner-city youth. As George Will pointed out in a March 28, 1988, *Newsweek* column, "What the life [of gang members] often lacks in longevity it makes up for in intensity."

What law enforcement can do

In Los Angeles, law enforcement officials have approached the gang problem with both prevention and intervention strategies. Generally, everyone agrees that prevention is the only real cure for gangs, although the results may not be seen for one or two decades.

However, the odds of preventing young children from joining gangs are certainly better than persuading them to leave gangs once they've been accepted into that culture. "Everybody needs to come to grips with the idea that a hard-core gangbanger cannot be turned around," says District Attorney Reiner. "When one of these kids is sucked up into that violent world, that person is lost forever and there is nothing but one prison after another for him for the rest of his life. The sooner we understand that, the better."

Both the LAPD and the Sheriff's Department understand that all too well, which is why they have targeted younger



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children with gang and drug prevention programs. For example, many elementary schools participate in DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education, offered by the LAPD) and SANE (Substance Abuse and Narcotics Education, offered by the Sheriff's Office).

LAPD also started the Jeopardy Program. Officers phone or make dinner-time visits to parents whose children are flirting with gang membership. In addition to telling parents about the subtle signs that indicate gang involvement, police officers refer them to local clergy, school counselors and local youth clubs for support.

The Sheriff's Youth Foundation, a board of 13 prominent community members, raises funds to augment the public funds available for youth programs. The foundation funds an athletic program, SANE, and has just established a program to counsel teenage girls about the dangers of drug abuse and pregnancy.

Although prevention is an important part of the war on gangs, the most pressing job of law enforcement agencies is dealing with existing gangs.

Coordinating the efforts of law enforcement and criminal justice agencies can create a more efficient system. In Los Angeles, the Interagency Task Force on Gangs was formed with full-time employees from the police and sheriff's departments, probation and parole departments, the California Youth Authority, Community Youth Gang Services and others. In addition to sharing information about gang members, the task force produced a resource guide to help make existing gang diversion programs more effective and established a system that linked the city attorney and the district attorney's offices for faster apprehension and prosecution of gang members.

Police "sweeps," which involve hundreds of officers descending on a neighborhood to make arrests, are among

those approaches used by the LAPD to eliminate gangs. The theory behind the sweeps is that, through sheer numbers, the police will convince the neighborhood that they are there to keep order. However, the sweeps approach has come under fire for allegedly violating the civil rights of those arrested, since mere membership in a gang is not grounds for arrest.

That's an argument that doesn't go over well with people who have seen the results of gang violence. As Gary Williams, a visiting professor at Loyola Law School writes, "Times of strife, unrest and fear pose the greatest danger to our civil liberties, because people are often willing to give up their personal freedom in exchange for liberty." However, he adds that sweeps should not be used if they include "the indiscriminate detention and railroaded arrest of black youngsters because they look like gang members, or because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Arguing the other side in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, Los Angeles City Attorney James K. Hahn wrote, "Regardless of mistaken perceptions, no constitutional rights are absolute — not those of average citizens and certainly not those of murderous gang members bent on turning our neighborhoods into centers for organized drug dealing and our streets into combat zones.... Time and time again the balance has been struck on the side of the state's legitimate concern for protecting something more significant and vital to our society than an individual's constitutional rights."

In addition to the legal issue, opponents of the sweeps point out that most of the hundreds of arrests that result from a typical sweep turn out to be misdemeanors. For that reason, law enforcement officials also recommend a more targeted approach that focuses on getting hard-core gang members — who are usually involved in more serious crime — off the streets.

Operation Safe Streets is the Sheriff's Department program to target specific gangs and specific individuals within

that gang. "Our purpose is to arrest and prosecute the individuals who constitute a threat of violence to that community," says Sheriff Block. "The officers involved in this gang suppression will also assist other gang members who are just on the fringe in finding jobs or getting back into school. But we operate on the theory that the only way to kill a snake is to cut off its head. Cutting off the rattlers won't do it."

However, gang members who commit criminal acts often are not convicted because witnesses are afraid to testify. In the late 1970s, the Sheriff's Department had a conviction rate of less than 30 percent for gang killings for that reason. In response to the problem, a special homicide unit was created, staffed by bilingual personnel, with the sole purpose of investigating gang-related killings. The officers not only investigated the homicides, but they worked to convince community members that they could reduce the level of violence. Although witness' safety could not be guaranteed, sheriff's deputies offered any assistance possible to provide for their safety. As a result, the conviction rate soared to almost 80 percent.

Although the public's and the media's attention often center on the criminal activity associated with gangs, LAPD's Deputy Chief Bernard Parks offers other police departments a word of warning about blurring the distinction between gang membership and crime. "In most instances, belonging to a gang is not criminal," he says. "So if you spend more of your energy identifying gangs and tracking gang members and lose sight of the fact that the only reason that's important is if they're involved in criminal activity, you could miss the boat entirely."

What schools can do

"There are so many things that can be done to keep kids from joining gangs," says Lopez of the Los Angeles Unified School District. "It starts with the first day a child walks in the school. We can make the kid feel comfortable and welcome, so that they indeed find a nurtur-

ing environment. That's the very minimum we can do."

Beyond that, Lopez believes strongly that teachers should learn techniques for enhancing children's self-esteem and that children should be taught better communications skills. As chairperson of the curriculum and instruction leaders for the Association of California School Administrators, Lopez is helping develop a guide for administrators on how to enhance self-esteem at school.

"We got away from the affective side of education, the feelings and attitudes and values, and got too much into the cognitive because we had to improve those test scores," she says. "But in order for the cognitive to hold, kids have to think, 'Hey, I can do that math, I know I can.' They really can achieve their own greatness just by thinking about it."

Teaching self-esteem and communications skills may help students resist the lure of gangs — but what about those who have started to act like gang members? District Attorney Reiner is adamant on what action must be taken: "There is one thing and only one thing that school districts should do when they see just the barest suggestion of a gang problem. And that is to come down on it like a ton of bricks, as if the problems of Los Angeles were just around the corner."

For example, Reiner suggests that a student displaying gang colors should be expelled, even though such misbehavior may seem relatively minor. "The problem with gangs is that they don't grow arithmetically, they grow geometrically," he says. "And nothing is worth jeopardizing your entire educational system, not the welfare of one kid or the welfare of 10 or 20 kids. Schools in Los Angeles that have gang problems barely function, and that can happen so quickly."

What communities can do

Most experts agree that community involvement is key to suppressing gang problems before they start. At its most basic level, a community that expresses