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Author(s): Cheryl L. Maxson ; Malcolm W. Klein ; Karen Sternheimer

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Adolescent Homicides in Los Angeles: Are They Different from Other Homicides?

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INTRODUCTION

The avid media attention and public concern regarding child "superpredators" and youth offender-precipitated "bloodbaths" (see Howell, 1998, for origin of these terms) has waned recently in the face of dramatic declines in homicide and violence. California's 1998 homicide rate of 6.5 is the lowest in three decades and represents the fifth consecutive year of decline (California Department of Justice, 1999). Recent reductions in youth violence have reflected these more general trends. In 1998, juvenile arrests for violent crimes in the US were 19 percent lower than their peak in 1994, and arrests for murder decreased 48 percent from 1994 to 1998 (Snyder, 1999).

These recent declines in youth violence offer an opportunity to redirect policy and practice attention toward prevention. It is critical that recommended strategies be based on sound empirical assessments of the nature of youth violence. Few youth violence prevention programs have been adequately evaluated (Sherman, Gottfredson, MacKenzie et al., 1998); only a handful have withstood the rigor of a strong scientific evaluation design and produced positive effects on their clients (but see Wasserman and Miller, 1998; Lipsey and Derzon, 1998; Elliott and Tolan, 1998).

While evaluation researchers pursue the effort to identify effective programs, other scholars continue to look for the critical aspects of offenders, victims, and violent incidents to provide direction for the development of promising programs. In particular, studies that compare the characteristics of youth violence with other forms of violence have the potential to generate guidelines for the development of such programs. Characterizations of youth violence become more meaningful, and more useful, when these are contrasted with violent events that do not include youths.

The larger project from which the data reported here are derived ("Juvenile Violence in Los Angeles," OJJDP grant #95-JN-CX-0015, 96-JN-FX-0004, and 97-JD-FX-0002) placed emphasis on four thematic dimensions of youth violence in the Los Angeles area: patterns of gang participation, drug and alcohol involvement, weapons use, and differential patterns among ethnic minorities. These topics formed the key research questions posed in the supplemental study funded by the National Institute of Justice (grant #97-IJ-CX-0018) which supported the collection of data from a sample of homicides which did not include youth:

1. How does the level and nature of gang involvement vary in adult as compared with adolescent homicide?
2. How does the nature and extent of drug and alcohol involvement vary in adult as compared with adolescent homicide?

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3. How does the level and nature of firearms presence and use vary in adult as compared with adolescent homicide?
4. How does the nature and extent of homicide committed by or against racial/ethnic minorities vary in adult as compared with adolescent homicide?

Each of these issues is prominent in the violence research literature, but rarely are these age-based comparisons conducted. Thus the extension of the youth homicide data collection to include a comparison sample of incidents with only adults¹ permits us to frame the juvenile data within a broader context, and to assess the policy and practice recommendations that emerge in this larger context as well.

Why would we expect homicides that involve adolescents to differ from other homicides? First, the research on age-based violent offending patterns (Elliott, 1994) tells us that most juveniles "mature out," especially when they get jobs and form relationships that help keep them out of trouble. The serious and violent offender research points to only a small number of chronic offenders that continue to cause trouble well into adulthood.

Second, developmental theorists tell us there is something special about adolescents: peer influences are stronger and we might expect more spontaneous or expressive violence (Elliott and Tolan, 1998; Flannery, Huff and Manos, 1998). Certainly, we expect more co-offending and youth-involved events that would have a more chaotic or less organized flavor. Status issues might come into play more and there may be less thoughtful reasoning around the use of guns.

Finally, routine activities theory tells us that youth hang out more. They have more unstructured time, engage in risky behaviors, and have more opportunity for violence exposure than do adults.

This report describes the findings from an assessment of comparable samples of adolescent homicides and homicides without youths. Confirming the conclusions derived from the adolescent homicide sample only (Maxson, Sternheimer and Klein, 1998), we find that gang factors in this Los Angeles setting loom very large in the distinction between adolescent and other homicides. Also, some drug and alcohol indicators surface as important due to higher presence in adult homicides. Less important to the distinction between the two types of cases are firearms use and ethnic patterns. We conclude this report with a discussion of some policy and programmatic directions based upon these results.

¹ Although murders of young children by adults were included in the comparison population, only 10 (less than 4%) such cases emerged in the sample. Therefore, we refer to the comparison sample as the "adult" sample or "other" (than adolescent) sample.

METHODS

Data were extracted from police investigation files for homicides within the jurisdictions of the Los Angeles Police Department and the unincorporated areas of the Los Angeles County patrolled by the Sheriff's Department. These two jurisdictions represent about 70 percent of all Los Angeles County homicides. All incidents occurred during 1993 and 1994. Approximately half of all cases (281 homicides) with at least one adolescent (12 to 17 years old) involved as a victim or offender was sampled. A comparison sample of 267 homicides was drawn from the remaining incidents; this sample represented just over 10 percent of the non-adolescent homicides. Data from the stratified random sampling design are weighted to approximate the total population of homicides from these jurisdictions in this time period.

FINDINGS

By far the strongest patterns to emerge from the separate analyses of adolescent homicides in Los Angeles (Maxson et al., 1998) concerned gangs and firearms. Gang members were involved in the vast majority of adolescent homicides, gang homicides were quite distinct from other adolescent homicides and the presence of firearms emerged as the most important distinguishing feature of gang homicides. The drug aspects and ethnicity issues were far less salient. The supplementary sample of homicides **not** involving adolescents provides the opportunity to examine these patterns further. Our main purpose here is comparative. Are homicides involving adolescents distinct from other homicides and if so, in what ways? Do these differences suggest policy and practice guidelines that might offer distinct directions for **youth** violence interventions? In particular, do gang, drug, gun and ethnic patterns differ in ways that suggest unique types of interventions for youth?

We begin the analysis presentation with a description of the incident and participant characteristics and then address the four thematic issues of gangs, drugs, weapons and ethnic differences.

A. General (Non-thematic) Incident and Participant Descriptors

Homicides that involve adolescents differ from other homicides on the majority of the dimensions tested. As shown in Table 1, adolescent homicides are more likely to take place in public settings, such as a street, in a vehicle or parking lot. Nearly three quarters of the adolescent homicides occur in these open settings, compared with slightly more than half of other homicides. Similarly, more adolescent homicides include a vehicle (48% versus 30% in other homicides) as a relevant feature of the homicide setting. Furthermore, about one-fourth (24%) of the adolescent homicides were drive-by shootings, as compared with just 11 percent of other homicides. There were no seasonal patterns in the timing of either type of homicides. While some monthly variations are observable, homicides are equally likely to occur in all four

seasons of the year. Both types of homicide typically take place in the late hours, after 10 o'clock at night.

Table 1 Here

The characteristics of the participants in the two types of homicide differed. Victims and suspects were far less likely to know one another well in adolescent homicides (12% versus 29% in other); participants were total strangers in 62 percent of adolescent incidents, but just 40 percent of other homicides. On average, adolescent homicides had more participants. In both types of homicide, there were about two participants on the victim's side, but adolescent homicides tended to have more suspect participants (3.10 versus 1.99 in other homicides). As a matter of definition, the mean age of participants is almost ten years younger in adolescent homicides (20 years versus 30 years in other homicides). Finally, homicide participants are overwhelmingly male, but slightly more so in adolescent (93%) than in other homicides (88%).

This initial set of tests for differences in incident and participant characteristics yields a number of distinctions in adolescent homicides. While certainly not unique, adolescent homicides more often take place in public settings, often in the street, and often involve vehicles. More people participate, particularly on the offender's side, and participants on the two opposing sides less frequently know one another than in other homicides. As might be anticipated from these characteristics, the two types of homicides also reflect different patterns of motives or incident circumstances.

After reviewing all materials in the police investigation case files, the primary motive for the incident was assessed by coders. A secondary motive coding option was available, but used only rarely. As shown in Table 2, just over half (55%) of the adolescent incidents were motivated by gang dynamics, usually turf or affiliation issues. The proportion of other homicides with gang motives was far lower (22%). Other homicides were far more likely to be motivated by other (than gang or drug) types of conflicts or arguments. Drug motives were infrequent in both types of homicides, but occurred twice as often when adolescents were not involved (14% versus 6% of adolescent homicides). Finally, instrumental homicides occurred during the course of other crimes, usually robberies, in about 12 percent of both types of incidents.

Table 2 here

The large number of adolescent homicides with gang motives is striking. The next section addresses the question of whether the patterns of gang involvement in adolescent homicide differ from that in other homicides.

B. Gang Involvement

The motive data reported above indicate that homicides with adolescent participants are more than twice as likely to be precipitated by gang dynamics. In addition, adolescent homicides with other than gang motives are far more likely to

involve gang members, particularly on the suspect's side. Table 3 displays the distribution of gang participants as aligned with either the victim or the offender's sides. In both types of homicide, gang participants are present on either both sides (44 % of adolescent and 13% of other) or on the suspect side only (30% of adolescent and 10% of other). Nongang offenders rarely attack gang victims. The low prevalence rate of gang participants in other homicides makes further comparisons difficult. However, it appears that gang members more evenly participate on the suspect and victim sides in other homicides (23% on suspect side; 18% on victim side) whereas gang member suspects are far more common in adolescent homicides (74% on suspect side; 51% on victim side).

Table 3 Here

Combining the presence of gang members with gang motives in the case yields far higher levels of involvement, and disproportionately high rates for adolescent than in other homicides. Eighty-three percent of adolescent homicides contain either gang members or motives whereas just 31 percent of adult homicides feature gang indicators. In prior studies, gang involvement has been shown to be associated with a variety of incident and participant characteristics (see Maxson, 1999 for review). Given the far lower prevalence of gang involvement among other homicides, we wondered whether the patterns of gang involvement might be different than that in adolescent homicides. Accordingly, we tested more than twenty features of homicides by comparing gang with nongang cases in the adult homicide sample. These features spanned aspects of the homicide setting, firearm use, drug indicators and participant numbers and demographic characteristics. In nearly every instance, the gang/nongang differences (or similarities) in other homicides were the same as those found in adolescent homicides.

In both types of homicides, gang involvement was associated with higher levels of firearms and fear of retaliation, more suspect participants who were more often male and strangers to victim participants. The drug indicators did not distinguish gang from nongang cases in either the adolescent or other homicides. Adolescent gang cases occurred more often in public settings, involved a vehicle, included additional violent case charges, and more often included Hispanic suspects whereas adult gang cases are equally likely to include black or Hispanic suspects. In most other respects, the nature of gang homicide does not show much impact of adolescent involvement. Given the marked differences between adolescent and other homicides reported thus far, it appears that the sheer volume of gang involvement in adolescent homicides overwhelms any other aspect. We find a far lower prevalence of gang involvement in adult homicide, yet the gang impact is visible among these homicides as well.

C. Drug Involvement

As reported in Table 2, we found relatively low levels of drug motives in either adolescent (6%) or other homicides (14%). As in the case of gang involvement, a limited focus on motive may mask other aspects of drug involvement in homicide. Other drug indicators gathered from the case material included reports of drug use by

any participant on the day of the incident, any participant who was a known drug seller, and any participant who was a known drug seller. Alcohol use by participants in the incident context was also coded where it was recorded in the case file material.

The prevalence of these drug indicators is displayed in Table 4. While indicators were coded separately for victims and suspects, these are collapsed in the table due to low cell sizes. Adolescent homicides are about half as likely to reflect each of the drug indicators. Alcohol use by participants on the day of the incident was the most common indicator, recorded in 16 percent of adolescent homicides and 37 percent of the other incidents.

Table 4 Here

Given the well-documented association between alcohol and violence, and the high rates of positive drug tests among those arrested, we approach these data with considerable skepticism. Local law enforcement officials have suggested to us that drug and alcohol use might be underreported in the case file materials due to prosecution concerns. Studies that use alternative methods to examine the link between alcohol and violence are better able to address the issue of particular patterns of adolescent use and violence.

D. Firearms Involvement

Recent analyses find that the homicide spurt during the mid-eighties and early nineties was attributable to increased gun assaults among young people (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998; Zimring, 1999). Trends among nongun homicides and cases with adult offenders are relatively flat or show slight decreases. Interviews with representative samples of youth find gang membership to be significantly related to gun ownership (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995). Thus, we might expect that during the peak years of homicide incorporated in this study, adolescent homicides should reflect higher rates of firearm usage than other homicides. Data on weapons use are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Here

While firearms were used in most homicide incidents, homicides with adolescents were more likely to include a firearm (90%) than were other homicides (79%). This difference is also reflected in the use of handguns, which represent the vast majority of all firearms used in homicides. Guns were brought to the incident setting by participants in both sides of the conflict in about 10 percent of both adolescent and other homicides.

The elevated rate of firearm usage in adolescent homicide reinforces efforts currently underway to limit youths' access to guns. Handguns, in particular, are prevalent in youth homicides. About one-fourth of the youth we interviewed from high violence areas in Los Angeles said they could easily obtain a gun and listed an average of four specific places they could go to get a gun.

Adolescent homicides with gang involvement reveal even higher rates of firearms use – 19 out of 20 gang incidents included firearms. Gang involvement and firearms usage represent two vectors for prevention activities; efforts such as the Boston Gun Project which target weapon-carrying by gang members are particularly relevant to the Los Angeles adolescent violence setting.

E. Ethnic Patterns

Analysis of ethnic patterns among Los Angeles adolescent homicides confirm the findings of other homicide research; homicide is primarily intra-ethnic, involving participants among the same ethnic group, and disproportionately occurs among Hispanic and black populations. Among adolescent incidents, victims and offenders are of the same ethnicity in 70 percent of the homicides in which participant ethnicity information was available (Maxson et al., 1998). The ethnic distribution of adolescent and other homicide participants is displayed in Table 6. Analyses of victim and suspect characteristics reveal few differences, so all participants are aggregated to simplify the presentation.

Table 6 Here

Compared with the ethnic distribution in the residential population generally (40% Hispanics, 37% white, 13% black, and 9% Asian), both Hispanics and blacks are over-represented in homicide. Although Hispanics are the category with the highest participation levels in both types of homicide, blacks have higher rates of involvement relative to their representation in Los Angeles' resident population. As expected, participation by white and Asian individuals is quite low. Differences in ethnic participation in the two types of homicide are evident in Table 6. About 60 percent of participants in adolescent homicides are Hispanic and about 30 percent are black. Other homicides are somewhat more diverse, revealing a higher participation of blacks and levels of white participation more than twice that of adolescent homicide (although far lower than Hispanic and black participation).

F. Multivariate Analyses

Multiple logistic regression was conducted to assess which characteristics (incident setting, motive, gang and drug involvement, firearms use and a variety of participant descriptors) are most important in differentiating adolescent homicides. Just six of the 17 variables produce unique effects in predicting adolescent homicide. Gang membership, particularly on the suspect side, is a strong predictor. The presence of a gang member suspect increases the likelihood of adolescent involvement by a factor of more than 4. Gang member victim participants more than double the odds of adolescent involvement. The presence of an arrest is also a strong indicator of adolescent homicides, as are, to a lesser degree, more participants on the suspect's side. Alcohol use on the day of the incident, and drug seller participants, are indicative of non-adolescent homicide.

Neither the gang nor drug motive, firearms presence, ethnicity or gender of participants, nor the setting characteristics are significant. As discussed earlier, these

are features associated with gang involvement. It is quite possible that the gang member variables dominate these other characteristics in the multivariate analysis. It would seem that gang member participation is a defining element in adolescent homicide in Los Angeles.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study compared the characteristics of homicides with at least one adolescent victim or offender with other homicides that occurred in the city of Los Angeles or unincorporated county areas in 1993 and 1994. Thus, the unique context of Los Angeles during a peak period of homicide incidence is reflected in these data. Local law enforcement sources designated from 35 to 45 percent of all Los Angeles County homicides as gang-related during the first half of the 1990s. Such high proportions of gang homicides are startling to public officials in most U.S. cities, yet our analyses find that gang involvement in adolescent homicides is far higher than the aggregated data suggests. More than four out of five adolescent homicides during this period included at least one gang member participant. The figure for other homicides is far lower; about 3 out of 10 homicides without adolescents have gang involvement.

Gang involvement appears to bring with it a set of defining elements that further characterize adolescent homicides: more public settings, including vehicles, increased levels of firearms (particularly handgun use), and more participants (particularly those aligned with the offender group), who are less likely to know their victims. Hispanic participants are somewhat more frequent among adolescent homicides, and this disproportion increases in gang homicides. Drug issues are more prominent in non-adolescent incidents, but have generally decreased levels from the mid-1980s (Maxson and Klein, 1996). Thus, these findings confirm our prior research on the relative independence of gangs and drugs in homicides in Los Angeles.

The high levels of gang involvement, and the broad impact that this involvement appears to have on the nature of adolescent homicides, requires a cautionary note. Police-reported levels of gang homicide in Los Angeles County reached their peak in 1995 and have decreased by 50 percent since then. The gang-driven adolescent/adult differences reported in this document might well be far smaller if the study had been conducted in a period of radical decline in gang violence rather than at its peak. However, the proportion of all homicides with gang involvement remains high (37 % in 1999), supporting our contention that street gangs are a compelling facet of youth violence in Los Angeles.

Gang involvement clearly permeates adolescent homicides in Los Angeles and hence the primary policy implication of this is that both law enforcement and violence prevention practitioners need to recognize and focus on the gang elements of youth violence. As was anticipated in the introductory portions of this report, adolescent violence reflects developmental risks of adolescence and their routine activities—more

unsupervised and unstructured time, hanging about in peer groups in public, visible settings, and risky behaviors including gang affiliation and possession of firearms. Youth violence prevention efforts should address these developmental risks (see Elliott and Nolan, 1998, for description of developmentally based strategies). Long term prevention efforts are needed that simultaneously reverse neighborhood social and economic decline, and provide meaningful alternatives to the lure of the streets for young socially disadvantaged males. Recent reviews of gang prevention and intervention efforts over the last several decades catalogue a number of "promising" programs that might be tested (Howell, in press; Esbensen, 1999).

Currently, in Los Angeles, law enforcement officials have implemented several targeted suppression programs that focus on active members of violent gangs. The efficacy of the CLEAR program, several civil gang injunctions and a local variant of the Boston Gun Project is an open question pending the results of evaluations in process. One policy approach which strikes us as less than promising is the Gang Violence and Youth Crime Prevention Act, which California's voters recently approved via Proposition 21 on the March 2000 ballot. This proposition requires statutory waiver into adult court for juveniles 14 or older arrested for certain violent crimes, generally makes "fitness" for juvenile court more difficult to retain, and requires all individuals convicted for a gang crime to register with local law enforcement agencies. Despite its title, no funds in this act are allocated to prevention programs.

The results of the evaluations of violence prevention and intervention programs may help persuade policymakers to invest more resources in prevention. For the Los Angeles context, the findings of this study provide evidence of the value of investing more in gang prevention efforts in recognition of the very strong association between gang membership and youth violence. The suppression orientation reflected in California's disingenuously named Gang Violence and Youth Crime Prevention Act issues a challenge to advocates of balanced, comprehensive responses to youth violence to convince the public that incarceration is not the most effective approach to reducing youth violence.

Table 1: Incident and Participant Characteristics^a

	Adolescent Homicides	Other Homicides	P ^b
Incident occurred...			
During summer months	30%	24%	n.s.
During late night hours	48%	51%	n.s.
In public setting	75%	53%	**
Involving vehicle	48%	30%	***
Shooting from vehicle	24%	11%	**
Participant characteristics			
Close relationship between victim and suspect participants	12%	29%	***
Mean number participants			
On victim's side	2.54	2.24	n.s.
On suspect's side	3.10	1.99	***
Mean Age of participants			
On victim's side	22.97	30.78	***
On suspect's side	18.71	28.38	***

^a Weighted percentages and means are provided in table. Unweighted sample Ns are 281 adolescent and 267 other homicides. Weighted sample Ns are 105 adolescent and 442 other homicides. Number of valid cases varies slightly by variable.

^b Probability of difference: * = p<.05; ** = p<.01; *** = p<.001; ns = p>.05

Table 2: Primary Motive or Circumstances^a

	Adolescent Homicides	Other Homicides
Gang related	55%	22%
Other argument	19%	36%
Drug	6%	14%
Other crime	13%	12%
Other	7%	16%

^a Weighted percentages provided in table. $P < .001$. Weighted sample Ns for known motives are 100 adolescent and 375 other homicides.

Table 3: Gang Member Participants^a

	Adolescent Homicide	Other Homicides
Gang members on suspect side only	30%	10%
Gang members on victim side only	8%	5%
Gang members on both sides	44%	13%
No gang members involved	19%	72%

^a Weighted percentages provided in table. $P < .001$. Weighted sample Ns are 105 adolescent and 442 other homicides.

Table 4: Drug Indicators^a

	Adolescent Homicide	Other Homicides	p ^b
Any alcohol use on day	16%	37%	***
Any drug use on day	7%	16%	*
Any participant a known drug user	12%	22%	*
Any participant a known drug seller	12%	21%	*

^a Weighted percentages provided in table. Weighted sample Ns for drug mentions are 105 adolescent and 442 other homicides.

^b Probability of difference: *= $p < .05$; **= $p < .01$; ***= $p < .001$; ns = $p > .05$.

Table 5: Weapon Use^a

	Adolescent Homicides	Other Homicides	p ^b
Firearms present	90%	79%	*
Handguns present	83%	72%	*
Knives present	13%	19%	n.s.
Guns present on both sides	13%	9%	n.s.

^a Weighted percentages provided in table. Weighted sample Ns are 105 adolescent and 442 other homicides.

^b Probability of difference: * = p<.05; ** = p<.01; *** = p<.001; n.s. = p>.05

Table 6: Ethnic Characteristics of Participants^a

	Adolescent Homicide	Other Homicides	p ^b
Percent black participants	30.48	39.74	n.s.
Percent Hispanic participants	61.34	47.15	**
Percent white participants	3.65	10.11	*
Percent Asian participants	3.39	2.19	n.s.

^a Mean percentages of all case participants within particular ethnic categories provided in this table. Cases are weighted to approximate homicide population. Weighted sample includes 105 adolescent and 441 other homicides.

^b Probability of difference: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$; n.s. = $p > .05$

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