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Big drop in homicides in L.A.
The turnaround comes after a high-profile program that enlists the help of gang intervention workers.

By Hector Becerra and Richard Winton

Los Angeles has seen a significant decline in homicides so far this year -- including a 50% drop in killings in some South L.A. neighborhoods, such as Watts -- as police embarked on a new strategy involving asking ex-gang members to help prevent violence.

The city got through the traditionally violent summer months with 167 gang-related homicides, compared with 214 for the same period last year. Homicides citywide are now at levels not seen since 1970.

The drop comes nine months after Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton vowed to crack down on gangs. But though previous anti-gang campaigns have involved mass arrests and high-profile sweeps, this effort has been more targeted.

And in its most radical shift, the LAPD is putting aside decades of suspicion and turning for help to gang intervention workers, many of whom were gang members.

"For the first time, we're requiring captains to call the gang interventionists, give them the word on the shooting and get out there and avert another homicide," Deputy Police Chief Charlie Beck said.

"We are pretty good at solving homicides, but we are trying to get better at preventing the next homicide."

Beck and other LAPD officials said the intervention workers have been particularly good at "rumor control," calming tensions after a shooting to prevent retaliation.

It's a delicate dance, with gang interventionists taking pains to not look as though they're directly working with police out of fear of losing street credibility. They will help ease tensions, but most refuse to provide detectives with gang intelligence.

"That's a paradigm-changing breakthrough," said Connie Rice, a civil rights attorney who was hired by Los Angeles to evaluate its anti-gang programs. "They know they can't contaminate each other, and they're figuring the lines that can't be crossed, so they're negotiating that right now. I know that work is going forward."

The decline in homicides underscores an 8% decline in overall violent crime in Los Angeles, bucking a trend that has seen violent crime inch up in other major U.S. cities.

Homicides in communities patrolled by the county Sheriff's Department and police officers from neighboring cities were down about 15%, according to sheriff's statistics.

Overall, Los Angeles has recorded 351 homicides so far this year, with Bratton saying he believes the city will end the year with the lowest number of killings in 37 years (in 1970, there were 394 homicides). Authorities believe the help of gang intervention workers has made a difference, but they acknowledge that they can't fully explain the drop.

Averting conflict

In June, 16-year-old Dovon Harris and some friends got into a quarrel with some other teens near his Watts school. They then boarded a bus, but the other teens followed them in cars. When Dovon got off the bus, two gang members pulled up and fired into the crowd of boys and girls. Dovon was struck and killed.

Police called intervention workers and asked them to hit the streets. Within a week, there was an arrest, and no retaliatory shootings.

"Without a doubt, this would have started a shooting war," Beck said. "Usually this would have started a cycle where there would have been a series of retaliatory shootings day after day. But that didn't happen here."

In a first, all of the LAPD's probationary officers in South Bureau divisions attended a June session led by gang interventionists at the department's training academy. Another session conducted by law enforcement experts dealt with gathering intelligence and interrogation techniques.

There are dozens of gang intervention groups around L.A. -- some funded by the city or county, others by nonprofits and religious organizations. Some have won praise -- but others have received law enforcement scrutiny, including one Eastside organization that prosecutors say continued to operate as a criminal enterprise under the guise of keeping teens out of gangs.

LAPD officials acknowledge that not all gang intervention programs are perfect -- but they believe some can help prevent more violence.

Community activists and gang workers say they have noticed the difference.

"Gone are the days when law enforcement did its job and rounded up the shooters and the leaders or both, and everything would be OK," said Tony Massengale, senior human relations consultant for the county and a community organizer who has worked with gangs.

In the Imperial Courts housing project in Watts, three members of the PJ Crips gang had their own explanation for the drop in violence.

They said veteran gang members -- known as "original gangsters" -- played a role. (Gang intervention officers try to work with older gang members because they tend to have more influence over younger members.)

"It's quieter because the O.G.s stepped up to the plate," a 43-year-old said as he leaned against a car in the parking lot. "We decided to talk to the youngsters."

On both sides of the lot were memorials to a shooting victim and a stabbing victim. But the men stressed that the stabbing, the more recent of the two crimes, happened a year ago.

"See how quiet it is now? All you hear is birds," said a 32-year-old PJ Crip who identified himself only as "Blue Man." "You get tired. You grow up. As far as doing stupid. . . like shooting and all that, you're through with that."

Mike "Cubano" Garcia, 62, a "retired" gang member from Boyle Heights, said he believes January's high-profile announcement of a gang crackdown probably played a role in the downturn because it bred uncertainty among gangs about what was coming.

"O.G.s are probably talking to the youngsters and telling them, 'Use your head. Don't just go out there shooting and bringing the cops over and making our neighborhood hot,' " Garcia said.

Whatever the reasons, Maria Villegas, 22, of Watts said it has been noticeably quieter. As she and her 2-year-old son, Francisco, sat on a park bench on 103rd Street, Villegas said she doesn't hear as much gunfire around her neighborhood as she did last year.

"There's less shootings, chases, police looking for people. It's gone down a lot," Villegas said.

"Before, it was real bad with the gangs."

An outreach effort

For Patrick M. Gannon, an LAPD commander in South L.A., the realization that there was a need to reach out to intervention workers happened on a Friday night two years ago when a spate of shootings rocked a neighborhood in the LAPD's 77th Street Division.

By that afternoon, more than 20 shootings had been reported, with a handful of injured. Gannon said he knew how to do police suppression, but that there had to be more.

"I started reaching out to these gang intervention groups. I came hat in hand and said, 'Can you please help me?' " Gannon said.

"It was a rocky start. There was hostility and not a lot of trust between gang intervention groups and the police."

Hoping to foster more cooperation, Councilwoman Janice Hahn early last year began holding weekly meetings in Watts after a month that saw 18 gang-related shootings and seven homicides.

The Watts Gang Task Force included residents, law enforcement officials, gang interventionists and Hahn.

The meetings were tense. There were recriminations about gang injunctions, which resulted in the city attorney's office streamlining the way people got removed from gang lists. A few officers from the Southeast Division were transferred because of complaints.

"It was not a pleasant experience for anybody on both sides," Hahn said. "There was a lot of mistrust from the community for the LAPD. And there was a lot of angst in the LAPD toward the community. Crime scenes became very volatile."

But she said she thinks the meetings made a huge difference.

Donny Joubert, 47, a task force member who grew up in the Nickerson Gardens housing complex in Watts and who has long worked with youths and gang prevention workers for the city's Recreation and Parks Department, said he was proud that his neighborhood was seeing less bloodshed.

But he said killings like that of Dovon Harris were a stark reminder that much more needed to be done. The boy was his nephew.

"We are getting tired of stuff like this. It needs to stop," Joubert said. "It has been a good turnaround, compared to years back. A great turnaround. But we have to keep working on it."