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## A New Approach to Gang Violence Includes a Multiple-Choice Test

By NICHOLAS CASEY

LOS ANGELES -- In more than 40 years of studying this city's street gangs as a social psychologist, Malcolm Klein says his home was burglarized nine times. Now, the retired University of Southern California professor is offering the city what he hopes one day will help stem crime: A test that he says could predict if a child is destined to join a gang.

The multiple-choice screening, some 70 questions long, shows how closely Los Angeles has begun to examine the work of social scientists to tackle complex policy issues like gang violence. Last year, city officials turned to Dr. Klein and his colleagues at USC to design a test that they hope will empirically identify which children are headed toward a life on the street. This year, the test will help decide the direction of the millions of dollars the city spends annually on gang-prevention efforts.

The screening, intended for children between 10 and 15 years old, asks a range of questions on issues ranging from past relationships to drug use to attitudes toward violence. One question asks test takers if they recently had a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend; another asks test takers if they are kind to younger children.

In order to avoid stigmatizing children with the label of potential criminal, Dr. Klein says test takers aren't told that the questions are intended to screen for future gang involvement.

Some youth advocates are worried the test will identify too few children who could genuinely benefit from gang-prevention programs. "This cannot be the only solution," says Ellen Pais, a senior director at Urban Education Partnership, a Los Angeles program that hosts events such as community plays to provide alternatives to gang activity. "We didn't expect this to be so narrow."

Recent research is challenging many of the city's ingrained practices for gang prevention, Dr. Klein says. For example, programs to rehabilitate gang members by assigning them to group community-service projects actually reinforce their identities as delinquents. And Los Angeles's strategy of suppressing gangs by barring members from gathering in public places ends up deepening their ties to the group, he says.

Previously, city officials depended on what they concede was a patchwork of information to build gang-prevention programs, often using anecdotal tips from local beat cops or high school teachers. "We were not relying on data," says Rev. Jeff Carr, an evangelical minister who is the city's "gang czar," leading outreach and prevention efforts. "We had gang-prevention programs, but no criteria to determine who was in a gang."

Los Angeles is the site of some of America's worst gang activity, the hometown of organizations such as the Bloods and the Crips whose reputations have spawned gangs across the U.S. as well as in Mexico and Europe. Los Angeles County has some 80,000 gang members in roughly 800 gangs, according to law-enforcement agencies.

Last year, the city says, gang-related homicides dropped by 30% from 2007, but gang membership appeared to hold steady. "They control parks, they control housing projects, they control prisons," says Constance Rice, director of the Advancement Project, a nonprofit that was hired by the city last year to evaluate the spread of gang violence.

Yet Dr. Klein says studies that he and other researchers have conducted suggest gangs involve a far more narrow segment of the youth population -- perhaps 15% in gang-ridden areas, and even lower elsewhere -- than previously believed. The vast majority of adolescents even in neighborhoods where gangs are most prevalent will never join a gang, he says.

In Los Angeles, Dr. Klein's theories are appealing to policy makers eager to stretch limited resources. This year, the test is being given to children for the first time, and officials say they will use the results to determine whether some of the city's \$24 million annual budget for gang prevention is being spent on children who aren't at high risk.

The emphasis on data is part of what policy makers have been calling an "epidemiological" strategy, drawing analogies between the spread of crime and disease. The focus is shifted from treating "symptoms" of gang activity -- violent crime, for example -- to prevention efforts that will stem proliferation.

Dr. Klein initially began his work on gangs in the 1960s in Los Angeles, he says, "seduced by the group-dynamics aspect of gang life." Over four decades, he amassed some of the field's early studies of gangs, walking the streets in some of the city's roughest neighborhoods, and recording observations in notebooks at night. Some of his work in the 1960s debunked the myth that women don't join gangs -- he catalogued a number of what he dubs "female auxiliary groups."

Last year, Dr. Klein and Rev. Carr hatched a plan to devise a predictive test based on more than two decades of data that Dr. Klein and his researchers had compiled. So far, 958 children who live in active gang areas have taken the test; of that group, about one-third have been identified as potential future gang members and will be enrolled in prevention programs. But city officials won't know for several years whether the test failed to pick out children who went on to join a gang.

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