

L.A. vows gang crackdown

LOS ANGELES (AP) - A 14-year-old girl was killed by Hispanic gang members who police say were targeting Blacks. A 9-year-old girl died after being hit by a stray bullet as gang members exchanged shots near her home. A cop was wounded in a gun battle with a suspected gangster.

The soaring violence is prompting police and politicians to promise one of the toughest crackdowns against gangs in city history.

"This is the monster, this is what drives people's fears," said Deputy Chief Charles Beck, who oversees a South Los Angeles district where gang-related crime jumped 24 percent during the year ending in November.

However, the effort has met skepticism in the city that has an estimated 700 gangs with 40,000 members — about four for every police officer — and that gave birth to some of the nation's most notorious gangs, including the Crips, Bloods and Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13.

"It's too big, it's too entrenched, it's too intimately connected with the urban setup here," Malcolm Klein, a gang expert at the University of Southern California, said of the gang problem. "You can reduce it. But the idea you can somehow eliminate it is ridiculous."

Gangs have thrived for generations in Los Angeles, but the especially violent past year caught police brass off guard. Citywide, crime rates fell in 2006, but gang-related



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Social welfare professor, gang expert at UCLA

offenses increased 14 percent — the first hike in four years. In the San Fernando Valley, gang murders, assaults, robberies and other crimes jumped 42 percent.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has appealed to U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez for millions of dollars in anti-gang funds and for more federal prosecutors to pursue racketeering and other charges used in the past against organized crime mostly.

FBI Director Robert Mueller has assigned agents to an anti-gang task force in the San Fernando Valley to work alongside police deputized as federal officers.

Authorities promise to increase enforcement in afflicted neighborhoods. The officers will be armed with injunctions forbidding gang members from assembling in certain areas, lawsuits aimed at shutting down gang hangouts as nuisances and probation orders barring gang members from returning to their neighborhoods after their release from prison.

In some ways, the approach mirrors a multi-

agency Boston campaign in the 1990s, known as the Boston Miracle, which resulted in a dramatic decline in gun violence and murder rates.

Past efforts in Los Angeles, however, have produced mixed results.

"We've seen this movie before," said Mario Corona, a former member of the Pacoima Criminals gang in the San Fernando Valley who now works to rehabilitate gang members.

The city has been hampered in the past by a lack of resources and changing department priorities, according to a city-funded report by civil rights attorney Connie Rice.

And a 1980s anti-gang unit known as Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, or CRASH, was disbanded after allegations of police corruption. Few of the thousands of suspected gang members in South Los Angeles were ever charged.

Residents are demanding renewed action while trying to stay out of the line of fire.

Esteban Martinez, 41, hears gunshots at night in the San Fernando Valley, where

he lives with his wife and four small children.

"Everybody is afraid, but they don't speak (to police) because they are afraid to get into trouble with the gang members," Martinez said. "I'm worried about my family."

Two weeks ago, an officer searching a house in the area for wanted gang members was wounded in the leg when a gang-banger fired through a closed bedroom door.

Nothing has outraged the city more than the gang slayings of children. Last month, 9-year-old Charupha Wongwisetsiri was standing in her family's kitchen when she was struck by a stray round from gang crossfire in Angelino Heights near downtown.

That came just five days after the shooting death of Cheryl Green, a 14-year-old Black girl, who was talking to friends in the Harbor Gateway area. Two Hispanic gang members, who police said were intent on killing Blacks, were arrested.

Alex Sanchez, a former MS-13 member who now runs a gang intervention program, said police moves to identify the worst gangs could instead lead to more crime.

"It's feeding the egos of gang members," Sanchez said. "They're all going to want to be on the top 10."

Others said nothing will change without more jobs and better education.

"Until we get those gangsters into real jobs, we are going to have a lethal ongoing problem, pure and simple," said Jorja Leap, a social welfare professor and gang expert at the University of California, Los Angeles, who advises the mayor. "It will never change."

Obama close to answering

By James Wright
Special to Sentinel-Voice

BALTIMORE (NNPA) - Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has set up his exploratory committee for a possible run for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. Obama said that he will announce on Feb. 10 whether he will officially run for the White House.

Exploratory committees are designed to let a candidate know whether a bid for office is viable. The committees gauge public opinion, fundraising capabilities and media strategy for a candidate.

Obama said that he has thought long and hard about running for president, according to his website.

"Running for president is a profound decision — a decision no one should make on the basis of media hype or personal ambition alone — and so before I committed myself and my family to this race, I wanted to be sure that this was right for us, and, more importantly, right for this country," he said.

The first-term lawmaker said that he has received letters and e-mails from people across the country talking about the problems people have in their lives and how these people feel that government could make a difference but does not. Obama said he understands these people's frustrations, but he said the real problem is the gridlock in Washington.

"It is the smallness of our politics," he said. "America's faced big problems before. But today, our leaders in Washington seem incapable of working together in a practical, common-sense way."

"Politics has become so bitter and partisan, so gummed up by money and influence, that we cannot tackle the big problems that demand solutions."

If Obama runs, he will join a field that consists of Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsak, Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) and former Sen. John Edwards. David Bositis, a senior research associate at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, said that Obama appears to be on his way to making a run for the White House.

"It sure looks like he is running," Bositis said. "Anybody who forms an exploratory committee is likely to run."

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), after forming an exploratory committee to measure her presidential prospects, recently announced that she will run. Her public statement was made shortly after Obama said he was beginning his process.

Bositis said that Obama will have to start raising money for the bid. The key will be his financial staying power.

"The primaries will tell everything," Bositis said. "Let's see where he stands with the first three or four primaries. That is usually when someone catches on."

James Wright writes for Afro Newspapers.

Inmates outlive the free

WASHINGTON (AP) - State prison inmates, particularly Blacks, are living longer on average than people on the outside, the government said this week.

Inmates in state prisons are dying at an average yearly rate of 250 per 100,000, according to the latest figures reported to the Justice Department by state prison officials. By comparison, the overall population of people between age 15 and 64 is dying at a rate of 308 a year.

For Black inmates, the rate was 57 percent lower than among the overall Black population — 206 versus 484.

But White and Hispanic prisoners both had death rates slightly above their counterparts in the overall population.

The Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics said 12,129 state prisoners died between 2001 through 2004.

Eight percent were murdered or killed themselves, 2 percent died of alcohol, drugs or accidental injuries, and 1 percent of the deaths could not be explained, the report said.

The rest of the deaths — 89 percent —

were due to medical reasons. Of those, two-thirds of inmates had the medical problem they died of before they were admitted to prison.

Medical problems that were most common among both men and women in state prisons were heart disease, lung and liver cancer, liver diseases and AIDS-related causes.

But the death rate among men was 72 percent higher than among women. Nearly one-quarter of the women who died had breast, ovarian, cervical or uterine cancer.

Four percent of the men who died had prostate or testicular cancer.

More than half the inmates 65 or older who died in state prisons were at least 55 when they were admitted to prison.

State prison officials reported that 94 percent of their inmates who died from an illness had been evaluated by a medical professional for that illness, and 93 percent got medication for it. Eighty-nine percent of these inmates had gotten X-rays, MRI exams, blood tests and other diagnostic work, state prison officials told the bureau.

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