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THE GANGS OF L.A.

To rid a city of gangs, look to the basics first

Nero has become synonymous with deadly inaction in the face of crisis, which is precisely why his name springs to mind as one considers the Los Angeles City Council and its dangerous fiddling over control of the city's anti-gang programs...(Tim Rutten, "[That Deadly Gang in City Hall](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2008)

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Now that our home-town paper has joined Controller Laura Chick's campaign to transfer control of gang programs from the self-dealing City Council to the self-serving Mayor, it seemed a good idea to turn on the ol' time machine (*L.A. Times* historical on *Pro-Quest*) and check out the gains we've made during the last century and a quarter of anti-gang crusading:

Last night between 11 and 12 o'clock Officers Whaling and Steele, together with the private watchman on the beat, made a round-up and captured seven of as tough youngsters as there are in the city, five of whom were white and two colored.... ("Youthful Hoodlums," Aug. 3, 1889)

More than forty robberies here, in Long Beach and in the Big Bear Lake district were said by the police to have been admitted in signed confessions obtained yesterday from members of the "baby bandit gang" who were rounded up on Monday.... ("Baby Bandits Admit Crimes," Aug. 6, 1924)

Chief of Police Parker yesterday ordered additional police into duty to combat juvenile gangs, as detectives in the latest gang slaying faced the "silent treatment" from witnesses....Meanwhile more youth gang crimes were reported here. ("New Crimes by Youth Gangs Bring Boost in Police Force," Dec. 16, 1953)

Three cars filled with Watts area youth drive 40 miles to Pacoima, stop a carload of unknown boys and blast them with a shotgun. The attackers roar away before police can get to the scene. Five carloads of boys from Pasadena cruise into South Los Angeles, fire a shot and toss a gasoline-filled bottle at a group of boys....

("Cars Give Teen-Agers Range and Speed in Crime," July 5, 1961)

After declaring that youth gang violence had reached "epidemic proportions," Los Angeles County Sheriff Peter J. Pitchess announced a new crackdown Thursday on juvenile crime. He told a Hall of Justice news conference that a special 50-man team of veteran officers has been assembled.... ("Pitchess Opens War on Youth Violence," Dec. 19, 1975)

Los Angeles police are conceding that traditional patrol practices are no match for the continual wave of violent street gang crime in the East Valley, including Sunland-Tujunga. The LAPD's Valley Bureau has asked the department to create a 28-man unit that would specialize in breaking up gangs and arresting members.... ("Special Patrol Urged to Curb Youth Gangs," Nov. 12, 1978)

Flash forward thirty years:

Scores of marchers walked through a section of the South Robertson area of Los Angeles with banners calling for an end to gangs and guns and urging other locals to join the fight against crime. But just days later, residents [were] shaken by fresh bloodshed in two separate shootings that left a 37-year-old resident dead and a transient wounded. ("[Two Shootings Unnerve L.A. Neighborhood](#)," April 3, 2008)

Los Angeles police shot and killed a man Wednesday afternoon in Wilmington after he fired at them several times, authorities said, with one of the rounds from his gun ricocheting off an officer's protective vest and grazing his body...Officers had intended to arrest the man, David Sedillo, 26, who authorities said was in a street gang and was wanted for threatening law enforcement officers' lives. ("[Suspect is Shot, Killed](#)," April 3, 2008)

Gangs are an endemic fixture of urban life. (If you think they're only a problem here, check out Paris, whose suburbs regularly explode in [riots](#) set off by encounters between besieged cops and the young underclass.) Try as we might, it seems impossible to shake off the cycle of poverty, ignorance and hopelessness that leads youth astray. We've become so desperate that when a smart cookie like the City Controller comes along and promises that we can reorganize our way out of the

swamp we snap at anyone who stands in the way. How *dare* the City Council disagree!

Well, simmer down. What Controller Chick [proposes](#), placing all gang programs under a “czar” working out of Hizzoner’s office, sounds suspiciously like that oh-so successful Federal model of Homeland Security. Really, if all it took to rout gangsters was bureaucratic reshuffling, wouldn’t every city across the U.S. from Alameda to Washington already be doing it? Are our elected officials really so venal that they’d let the killing continue just so they can hang on to pet projects?

We actually know a lot about gangs and crime. For example, we know that if you’re reading this post you probably live in a place where it’s safe to walk at night. Crime, particularly *gang* crime, is a matter of place. Demographics *do* matter. Gangs arise in areas beset by poverty and its correlates: unemployment, violence, drug-dealing, single-parent households, illiteracy. The values that form in this witches’ brew are passed on between generations, accounting for the persistence of behavior that bedevils outsiders and even gangsters often find self-defeating.

What’s to be done? Nothing can happen until residents of gang-infested areas feel free to go about their business without fear of being killed or extorted. Anyone who’s been exposed to the perverted mentality of gang leaders and “shooters” (triggermen, an influential few within each gang) knows just how difficult a task this is. It’s a job for police, who must respond in sufficient numbers -- and here quantity *is* important -- to restore the salience of conventional controls.

Where society is profoundly disorganized schools wind up being the best place -- often the *only* place -- for transmitting and promoting positive values. But schools often take on the character of their communities, which isn’t necessarily a good thing. In areas where the neighborhood *is* the problem we must help transform educational institutions into oases of peace and learning. [Tough-love policies](#) and a willingness to exclude disruptive students are key to creating an atmosphere of safety and tranquility where those who are inclined to learn, can. Many students would also be better served through quality vocational education rather than conventional curricula that leaves them without a marketable skill even if they somehow manage to hang on until graduation.

Prisons are the place of last resort. Yet they too can help. Creating “prisons within prisons” -- secure places where inmates disposed to better themselves receive intensive educational and vocational training -- can go a long way towards breaking the cycle of release and re-incarceration that besets our correctional system. Naturally the same goes for community corrections.

There are other valuable approaches. Still, until the basics are attended to, local programs of the kind that L.A.'s "gang czar" might oversee are unlikely to provide significant relief. (If you don't agree, do your own *Pro-Quest* search and report back.) Getting upset about who's in charge of what doesn't count is a silly distraction. It's like fiddling while Rome burns.