

Gun Violence in the LAPD 77th Street Area

Research Results and Policy Options

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Gun Violence in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) 77th Street Area: Background Information and Policy Options

Introduction

This document is intended to aid the U.S. Attorney's Office in designing and implementing a Project Safe Neighborhoods gun-violence reduction strategy in the 77th Street Area of the Los Angeles Police Department. (A future analysis, pending approved access to and analysis of homicide records, will focus on the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Century Station and its nearby areas.) We consider three topics:

1. Analysis of data on the 322 homicides, most of which were gang related, in the area from January 1998 through March 2003
2. Insights gathered from interviews with local experts, including police officers, probation officers, and community representatives, including their assessment of individual gangs in the area
3. A review of three potential interventions implemented elsewhere and the pros and cons of applying them to the 77th Street area

Analysis of Homicide Data

We chose to analyze homicide data to gauge violence in the area because no other type of crime gets more time and attention than homicide, and because homicide has been shown to be a good proxy for other types of violence, especially gun assaults. The difference between a homicide and an attempted homicide or an aggravated assault, for example, rarely depends on the intent of the offender but rather on the location of the wound and the speed of medical attention. Information on the nature and causes of homicide can therefore offer insights on other types of violence in the community.

To analyze homicides we culled data on each incident from January 1, 1998 through March 31, 2003 as listed in the books maintained by the 77th Street Area Homicide Detectives Unit. These books contain a short narrative on the means and motivation for each attack; information on victim and offender age, race, sex, and gang affiliation; incident date, time, and location; and other variables.¹

¹ LAPD Homicide Detective III Rudy Lemos greatly assisted our efforts by providing one-page summaries that could be entered off-site. Unfortunately, our progress was slowed by misplacement at the LAPD station of forms for nearly 200 cases, for which we had pre-coded data but needed additional information from the department.

Demography, Gangs, and Guns

The basic demographic characteristics of offenders and victims are not surprising. Overall, 91 percent of homicides in the area involved firearms. Males, African Americans, and gang members are disproportionately represented among both victims and offenders (Table 1).

Table 1--Demographic Characteristics of Homicide Victims and Offenders

	<u>Victims</u>	<u>Offenders</u>
Mean age*	28.9	23.7
Race/ethnicity		
Black	78%	67%
Latino	21%	19%
Other	1%	0%
Unknown	0%	14%
Sex		
Male	86%	86%
Female	14%	3%
Unknown	0%	11%
Gang affiliation		
Member	39%	58%
Non-member	21%	7%
Unknown	41%	35%

*Estimated for offenders, whose exact age was not always known. If categorical information of offender age was known (e.g., “between 20 and 25”), then the median of this category was used as the value in calculating overall mean.

As elsewhere, males are the overwhelming majority of homicide victims and offenders. Latinos rather than African Americans are now a majority in the area, but blacks comprise the large majority of homicide victims and offenders. We hope to analyze this discrepancy further.

The high proportion of victims and offenders with “unknown” gang affiliation has two principal causes. First, the nature of these events, including many “drive-by” shootings and others in which an offender is not apprehended, prevents determination of gang affiliation for all offenders. Second, victims for whom there is some suggestive information but no formal documentation about gang affiliation are considered to have “unknown” gang affiliation. Regardless, gang members are disproportionately represented among victims and offenders.²

More surprisingly—particularly given the heterogeneity of the community and widespread perceptions about inter-ethnic violence in the area—there are relatively few inter-ethnic homicides (Table 2). Intra-racial or intra-ethnic homicides comprise more than three in four of the homicides we analyze; 202 are “black-on-black” and another 47 are “Latino-on-Latino.”

Table 2--Distribution of Homicides (n=322) by Race/Ethnicity of Victim and Offender

		<u>Victim</u>		
		Black	Latino	Other
<u>Offender</u>	Black	63%	4%	0%
	Latino	4%	15%	1%
	Unknown	11%	3%	0%

An even lower proportion of the 170 “gang motivated” homicides are inter-ethnic, which is especially surprising given that many African American and Latino gangs claim the same territory (Table 3). Intra-racial or intra-ethnic homicides comprise more than five in six of the homicides we analyze; 122 of such homicides are “black-on-black” and 22 are “Latino-on-Latino.” The relative lack of inter-ethnic violence warrants future analysis and explanation.³

² Without knowing the true proportion of area residents who have gang affiliation, it is impossible to compare gang prevalence among homicide victims and offenders with that in the total population. Nevertheless, one police officer told us, “90 percent” of area residents appear to be homeowners who want nothing to do with gangs.

³ One reason for the lack of inter-racial or inter-ethnic homicides may be the shifting demographics of area population and gang membership. One police officer estimated that for every single “Blood” and every three “Crips,” both predominantly African American gangs, there are six Latino gang members; in other words, Latino gang members outnumber African gang members by a three to two margin. Besides outnumbering African American gang members, Latino gang members are reputed to control the state prison system, and African American gang members do not wish to fight Latino gang members in prison. Still, estimates of the actual distribution of gang members by race or ethnicity, like that for the true number of local gang members, can vary, and such estimates do not, by themselves, explain why “black-on-Latino” shootings are about as prevalent as “Latino-on-black” shootings.

Table 3--Distribution of "Gang Motivated" Homicides (n=170) by Race/Ethnicity of Victim and Offender

		<u>Victim</u>	
		Black	Latino
<u>Offender</u>	Black	72%	1%
	Latino	2%	13%
	Unknown	11%	1%

Motives

"Gang motivated" homicides, i.e., homicides related to inter-gang rivalries or intra-gang conflicts and strictly limited to gang issues, comprise most homicides in the area (Table 4).⁴ "Arguments" are the second most frequent motive for homicides. These typically result from the escalation of a verbal or physical conflict such as barroom or gambling disputes or ongoing disputes between neighbors and acquaintances (but do not include homicides related to drugs, gangs, or domestic disputes). "Drug involved" homicides were third most common. These included disputes over quality or quantity of drugs sold, collection of drug debts, killing of rival dealers, and robbery of drug dealers. "Robbery" homicides, i.e., those that took place during a crime where the primary intent was to take property or money from a person or dwelling but not including those that may have been "drug involved," were fourth most common. "Domestic" homicides, including those resulting from disputes among family members, were fifth most common. Homicides from still other motives comprised 4 percent of the total, while 9 percent of homicides had unknown motives. Even though nearly half of the homicides in the 77th Street Area are not "gang motivated," two in five of these homicides involve a gang member.

⁴ "Gang motivated" homicides are considered to be exclusive from other categories in Table 4. If, for example, a gang member were involved in an "argument" not related to gang issues that led to a homicide, the homicide would be coded as being motivated by an "argument" rather than being gang motivated. Likewise, a homicide resulting from a robbery involving a gang member is considered to have "robbery" as its motive rather than being "gang motivated."

Table 4--Homicides by Motive

<u>Motive</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>% of total</u>	<u>% involving gang member*</u>
Gang motivated	170	53%	100%
Argument	35	11%	43%
Drug involved	29	9%	62%
Robbery	24	7%	46%
Domestic	22	7%	27%
Other	14	4%	21%
Unknown	28	9%	32%

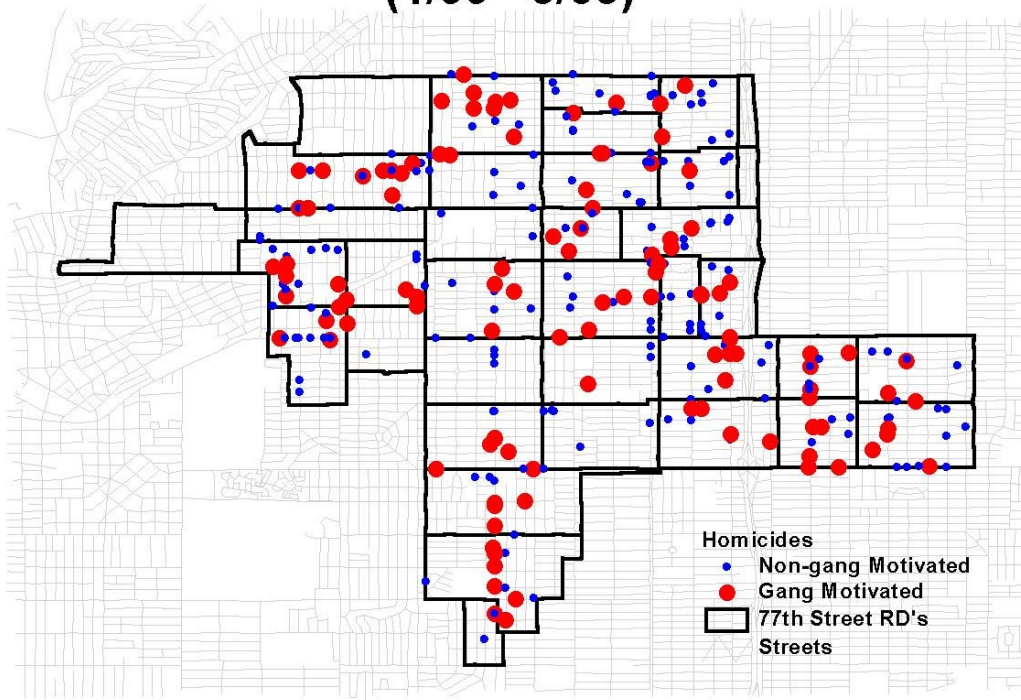
**Includes victims for whom gang membership is suspected but not formally documented, or some listed as "unknown" gang affiliation in Table 1.*

Contrary to some community and law enforcement perceptions, there is little evidence of a link between drug market competition and inter-gang violence. Rather, the issues that lead to gang homicides usually involve issues of “respect” or longstanding feuds. Gang members do sell drugs, and there is violence associated with this dealing. Nevertheless, homicides related to such violence are more likely to be from a drug deal gone bad than from a calculated decision of one gang to take over the market of another. Put another way, even if all drug dealing were eliminated, there would likely be little effect on area homicides, given that less than 10 percent had a clear drug motive. Eliminating killing resulting from inter-gang rivalries, however, would reduce the overall number of homicides by more than 50 percent.

Spatial and Social Distribution of Violence

There is little evidence of a spatial pattern of homicides in the 77th Street Area (Map 1). Instead, both gang motivated and other homicides appear to be randomly distributed throughout the area. In future analysis, we plan to analyze what patterns, if any, there are in the relationships between offender and victim residences.

Homicide in 77th Street (1/99 - 3/03)



Map 1

Local Community Perceptions and Assessment

The local “experts” we interviewed, including police officers, probation officers, and members of the community, implicated gangs for much area violence. There was some disagreement regarding organization and sophistication of gangs and their level of drug trafficking. Community members and police officers of all ranks also noted great distrust of local residents regarding the police.

Spatial and Social Distribution of Violence

Police officers and community representatives offer a variety of explanations, primarily related to drugs and gangs, for violence in the area. LAPD homicide detectives view drug-related disputes as being the single leading cause of homicide in the area. LAPD line officers also view drug-related disputes or disputes regarding other profitable criminal activities as the primary causes for area homicides. By contrast, LAPD gang detectives believe the violence is not associated with drugs but personal disputes. Police officers said it was difficult to generalize why violence varies from one year to another.

One officer said that murder often occurs by “luck.” He observed that while the number of shootings remains relatively constant over time, some victims given little chance to survive do so, while some who may not be critically injured die anyway from developing complications.

Regarding gang related homicides, local observers emphasize that such violence often stems from longstanding disputes, and can be predatory, retaliatory, or just opportunistic. The exact meaning of “longstanding” in this context is not clear. One officer described the disputes as just personal conflicts that occur from time to time. At an opposite extreme, another officer noted that the gangs are generational, in that a member’s grandfather might be an “original gangster” or “OG” of the gang. Clearly such ties could contribute to institutional memory that may include grudges. Nevertheless, it is difficult to gauge how much “institutional memory” may affect gangs whose victims and offenders are in their teens and whose older members are incarcerated, or how much, if any, institutional memory newer gangs have. Still, gang rivalries do appear to extend over long periods of time. Some observers describe a “mushroom” effect whereby a cycle of violence can develop momentum regardless of the inciting events. One officer, for example, claimed that a disorganized gang with much intra-gang violence would quickly act collectively to revenge the killing by another gang of one of its members, no matter how hated that member may have been. Presumably gangs unable to act collectively except when a member is killed by another gang would help violence escalate faster than it may have started.

Community Distrust

Community distrust of and animosity toward the LAPD are pervasive throughout the 77th Street Area. Beyond specific distrust of the LAPD, there appears to be a broader general distrust of the entire criminal justice system, as demonstrated by a lack of witness cooperation. Part of this may be due to intimidation. One officer claimed many community members are eager to participate in police actions, but that fear of gang members prevents them from doing so. Yet others claimed refusal to provide statements or testify is not motivated by fear of reprisal from the gangs, but from expectations of extra-judicial justice, e.g., that the gang would “take care of it” or an offender would “get what he deserved.”

Some community institutions are also viewed suspiciously, especially if they appear to have a relationship with law enforcement organizations. Yet, one neighborhood council is apparently at odds with the police over an early-morning raid to serve warrants in which the community felt threatened by the surprise tactics and heavy firepower used by the police. Because of this distrust, an apparently large number of residents views police interactions negatively, meaning any increased presence of police or other law enforcement agents would likely meet with resident disapproval.⁵ Persons active in the

⁵ This was vividly demonstrated to one of the authors while riding with an LAPD officer in the area who came across the scene of a serious vehicle accident. The officer’s pause to assess the scene for any apparent hostility or weapons was met with protests about his alleged procrastination. When other police

community, including those supporting police, are generally older or over 50. An LAPD officer also told us that many persons working with police are involved in area churches, some of which are quite large, but most of which seem to be small “storefront” congregations.

Such distrust and suspicion of law enforcement agencies create two hurdles for any Project Safe Neighborhoods violence reduction effort. First, the threat of federal prosecution may have little deterrent effect if residents actively resist police efforts to locate suspects, collect evidence, or otherwise help prosecutions. Second, with community distrust at such high levels, any hint of heavy-handed policing tactics may further damage the public image of law enforcement agencies and harm any future law enforcement initiatives.

Organization of Gangs

We consistently heard from police officers of all levels that area gangs, particularly those of African Americans, have little formal structure, making it hard to control or discipline them as a group. Apart from sharing a name and sometimes tenuous alliances, most area gangs have no hierarchical structure and act collectively only in retribution for an attack. These are relatively flat organizations, with a number of “OGs” who each command a crew of five or six persons who commit crimes for profit. The horizontal structure creates animosities between different groups within gangs that lead to a large number of internal, typically violent disputes. The prevalence of intra-gang homicides also suggests a lack of overarching structure and control. Gang members, especially more senior ones, are often described as seeking to use the gang identity primarily as a tool to advance personal objectives, e.g., making money for themselves through crime; this self-serving behavior, our informants suggest, makes area gangs different from those elsewhere. Some Latino gangs, however, have more vertical structure, as well as formal structural relationships with the Mexican Mafia, which may direct their activities.

Gangs seem to permeate all aspects of area life. We often heard that one living in the 77th Street Area is either a gang member or victim. Our informants said a survival mentality drives youth gang membership, and that this has implications for gang organization and structure and, consequently, the nature of gang violence. Local observers maintain that street robberies and petty thefts or crime are the most common gang activities, although this varies by gang and crew. Drug sales are common, but it would be misleading to say all area gang activity revolves around such activity. We were told that the drug activities of the gangs are seldom profitable—as one officer said, “the dope trade is piss poor”—and that few gang members actually earn a lot of money from it.

later formed a barricade around the scene, the son of one of the accident victims broke through police lines and was apprehended. His father began yelling at the LAPD officer to “go ahead and arrest” his son, “because that’s what you’re going to do anyway,” and to take the young “black boy” to prison. There were at least one hundred witnesses to this scene, and a few began yelling insults at the police although the father calmed down when his son was released. In addition, a witness accused the author of being a gang detective and striking the son of the victim.

Gang Characterizations

LAPD sources identify twenty gangs in the area (Table 5). They classify these as Latino or African American, with the African American gangs being split between “Blood” and “Crip.” Crip gangs are, by far, the most numerous in the area. Perhaps because of their large number, Crip gangs are more fractious and less likely to form alliances. Blood gangs, perhaps because of their small number and a need for survival, all get along. Latino gangs are also less likely to be allied with others. Among Crip gangs, the “Rollin” gangs are allied with each other and with the “Neighborhood” gangs. A competing Crip alliance includes all Hoover Crip gangs and the Eight-Tray Gangsters. While the alliances that exist are long-standing, they can also be fluid; violence can often flare between members of allied gangs. Area gangs can also form alliances with gangs from outside the area; Crip gangs from Compton, for example, have strong alliances with gangs in the area, as do Blood gangs from Inglewood and Watts.

Gangs tend to be segregated, both in their membership and rivalries, but there are two notable exceptions. First, the Swans gang, a Blood gang, has several Latino members. Second, there has been a significant dispute between the East Coast Crips, an African American gang, and Florencia 13, a Latino gang, which was triggered by the theft by East Coast Crips of a large amount of drugs from Florencia 13 members. This resulted in the Mexican Mafia putting a “green light” out on the East Coast Crips, sanctioning violent retaliation against the East Coast Crips until the debt has been repaid.

An African American gang’s territory will rarely overlap with that of another African American gang, and a Latino gang’s territory will rarely overlap with that of another Latino gang, but it is more common for an African American gang to share territory with a Latino gang. African American gangs in particular incorporate street names in their names. For example, the “Rollin 90s” can generally be found between 90th and 100th Streets, while the 52 Hoovers can be found near the intersection of 52nd and Hoover Streets.

Because of the parochial nature of many gangs, they may be best analyzed by neighborhood. The 77th Street Area may be seen as comprising five areas—Western “Panhandle,” Southern Panhandle, Eastern Panhandle, Northern “Plateau,” and a Central Region. We consider each of these in turn.

Table 5--77th Street Area Gangs

"Blood"

62 Brims

Swans

Van Ness Gangsters

"Crip"

"Rollin"--Neighborhood Alliance

46 Neighborhood Crips

55 and 57 Neighborhood Crips

58 Neighborhood Crips

67 Neighborhood Crips

Menlo Neighborhood Crips

Rollin 40s Crips

Rollin 60s

Rollin 90s

Rollin 100s

Hoover--Eight-Tray Gangster Alliance

Eight-Tray Gangsters

52 Hoovers

59 Hoover Criminals

74 Hoovers

83 Hoovers

Other Crip Gangs

51 Trouble Gangster Crips

59 Hoover Criminals

102 Budlong Crips

103 Hardtime Hustlers

105 Gangster Crips

107 Underground Crips

Top Dollar Hustler Crips

Latino

18th Street

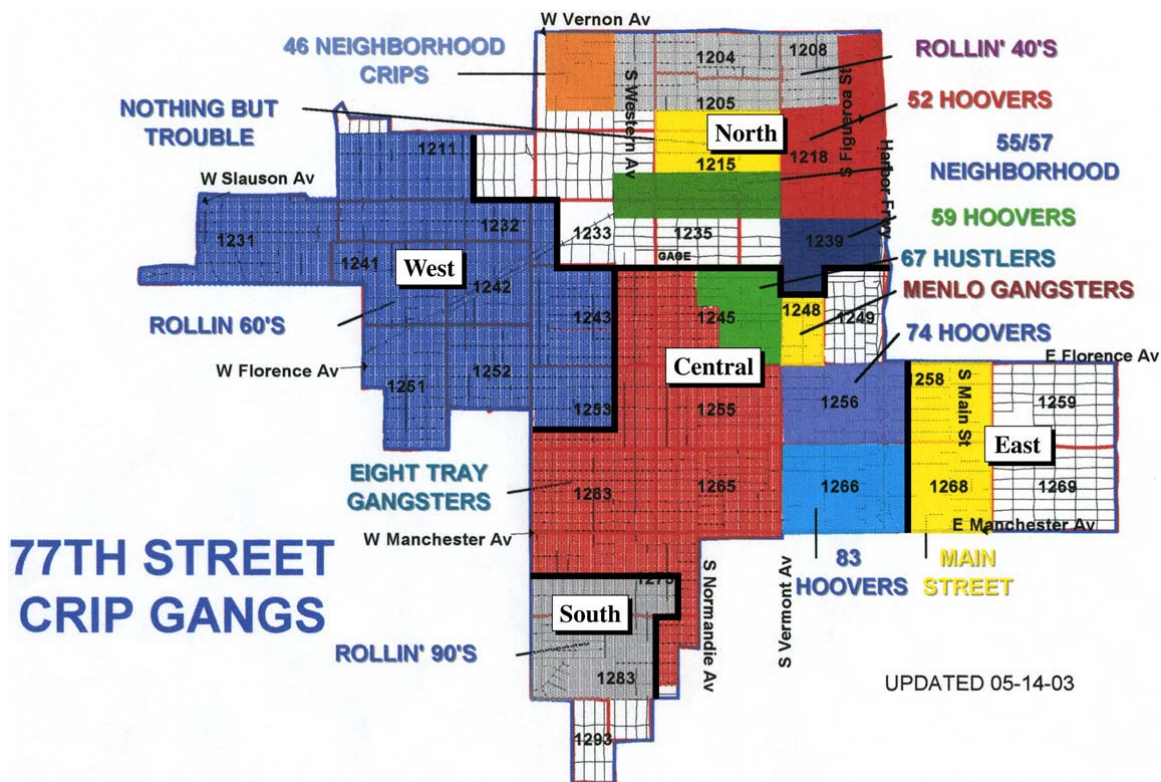
Carnales

Florencia 13

Locos 13

Western Panhandle

This is predominantly a “Crip” area (see Map 2). The Rollin 60s, a Crip gang, are found throughout the neighborhood. This gang is perhaps the largest and, as we will discuss, the most violent, in the 77th Street Area. Four cliques comprise this gang. The Overhills are in the west and north of the neighborhood, the Avenues are in the central part of it, the Arlington clique is in the south central portion, and Front Hood is in the east and far southern portion. The Rollin 60s share the central part of this neighborhood with Florencia 13, a Latino gang.



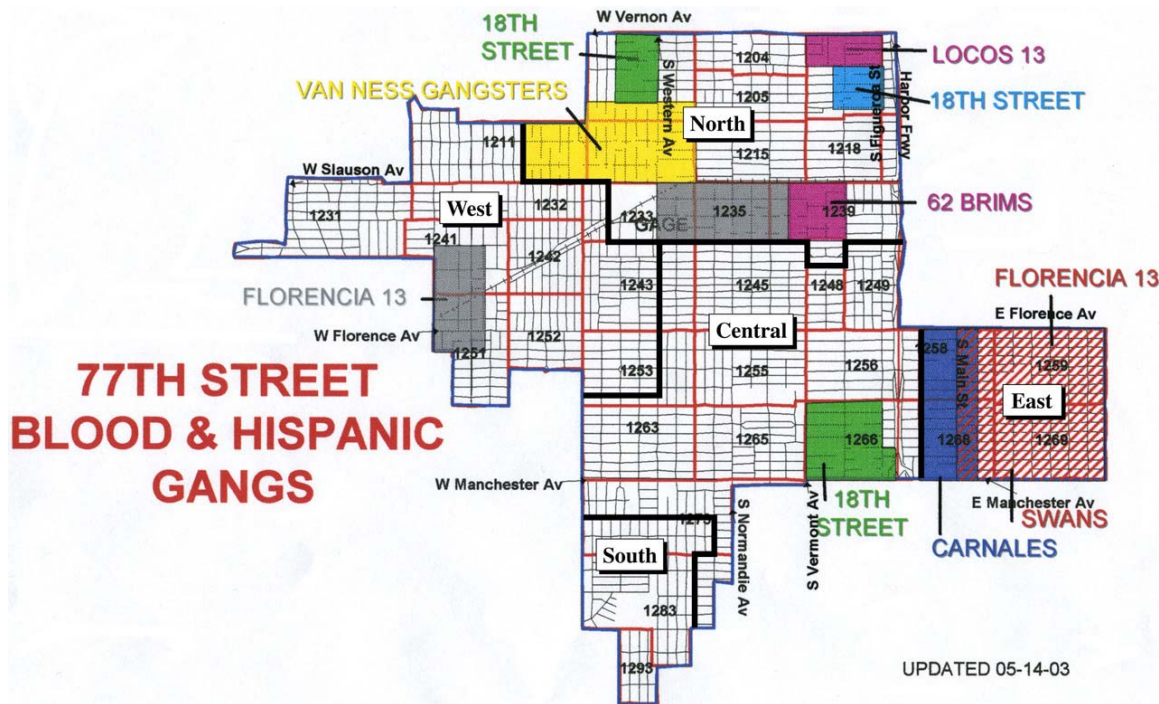
Map 2—77th Street Area Crip Gang Territories

Southern Panhandle

The Rollin 90s, a Crip gang, occupy the central part of this neighborhood. An internal dispute has split this gang into two factions, Bangside and Western Avenue. A large number of smaller Crip gangs, including the Rollin 100s, 107 Underground Crips, 103 Hardtime Hustlers, 102 Budlong Crips, and 105 Gangster Crips, are in the southernmost portion of this neighborhood and adjacent areas.

Eastern Panhandle

Two Latino gangs, Carnales and Florencia 13, dominate this area (see Map 3). Carnales is in the western portion of the neighborhood, and Florencia 13 is in the eastern. Swans, a Blood gang, shares Florencia 13 territory and part of Carnales territory in the west. Main Street, which appears to have been a Crip gang, has become less active in recent years, but used to share Carnales territory. The demise of Main Street may have left a vacuum that the East Coast Crips, traditionally based to the northeast in the LAPD Newton Area, are trying to fill.



Map 3—77th Street Area Blood and Latino Gang Territories

Northern Plateau

Gangs in this neighborhood appear to have more members but less territory than other gangs in the area. Blood, Crip, and Latino gangs are all prevalent in this neighborhood. Blood gangs in this neighborhood include Van Ness Gangsters in the western portion, with some territory possibly overlapping that of the 55 and 57 Neighborhood Crips (a single gang) to the east, and the 62 Brims, including a Harvard Park subfaction, in the south.

Crip gangs in this neighborhood include 46 Neighborhood Crips, Rollin 40s, and Top Dollar Hustler Crips in the north; 52 Hoovers in the east; 51 Trouble Gangster Crips (formerly Nothing But Trouble) in the central portion of the neighborhood; and the 55

and 57 Neighborhood Crips, 58 Neighborhood Crips (an offshoot of the Rollin 60s), and the 59 Hoover Criminals in the Southeast.

Latino gangs in this neighborhood include 18th Street with territory in the northwest portion overlapping Rollin 40s and 52 Hoover territory, Locos 13 in the northern portion with territory straddling that of both Rollin 40s and 52 Hoovers, and Florencia 13 in the southern portion of the neighborhood with territory it shares with the 55 and 57 Neighborhood Crips and the 58 Neighborhood Crips.

Central Region

The Central Region is viewed as clean and less subject to violence than other neighborhoods of the 77th Street Area, although Eight-Tray Gangsters, a Crip gang and one of the most violent gangs in the Area, are in most of the neighborhood (suggesting this gang commits its violence away from its territory). Other Crip gangs in this neighborhood include 83 Hoovers in the east and southeast, 74 Hoovers and the Menlo Neighborhood Crips in the northeast, and the 67 Neighborhood Crips (a.k.a. 67 Hustlers) in the north. The Latino gang 18th Street claims territory nearly identical to that of the 83 Hoovers. A northeastern portion of this neighborhood is unclaimed by any gang, but is controlled by pimps and is a local hotspot for prostitution.

The Nature of Gang Violence

Violent events in the area, our informants told us, usually involve a group of gang members entering rival territory for a target in retaliation for previous violence. Often any target will do; gang members have been known to confront non-gang members, ask them what gang affiliation they claim, and shoot them regardless whether one is claimed or not. Most violence by area gangs is intended for other area gangs, but occasionally area gangs will direct violence toward gangs of other areas. In one case, members of the Venice Shoreline Crips were murdered in the area. Area gangs are also willing to operate elsewhere on occasion; crews from area gangs have been known to commit crime in areas such as Hollywood, where area gang members often go on weekend nights to party.

Below we present statistics on homicide victims and offenders definitely known to have gang affiliation for groupings comprising 17 of the 27 area gangs in the area (Table 6). While some gangs are more involved in homicide than others, no single gang or group of gangs appear to dominate area homicide. Even members of the four “Rollin” gangs, the most violent grouping we identified, appear to have been involved only in about one-fourth of the homicides definitely known to have been “gang-involved.”

Table 6--Homicide Victims and Suspects by Gang

<u>Gang</u>	<u>Victims</u>	<u>Offenders</u>
62 Brims	7	4
East Coast Crips	9	2
Eight-Tray Gangsters	11	13
"Hoovers"	17	18.5
"Neighborhood Crips"	8	8
"Rollin"	32.5	45
Swans	1	11
Van Ness Gangsters	3	8.5

Note: "Hoovers" include 52 Hoover, 59 Hoover Criminals, 74 Hoovers, and 83 Hoovers.

"Neighborhood" Crips include 46, 55 and 57, 58, 67, and Menlo Neighborhood Crips.

"Rollin" includes Rollin 40s Crips, Rollin 60s, Rollin 90s, and Rollin 100s.

Data are only for homicides where gang involvement is definitely known. When a victim or suspect is definitely known to be a gang member and exact gang affiliation is not known but thought to be in one of two gangs, that person was coded as 0.5 in each.

Potential Interventions

Three types of interventions have been implemented in recent years in communities similarly plagued by gang problems. They include directed patrol, which mostly involves local police; federal prosecution of prohibited possessors of firearms coupled with state and local cooperation and "retailing" of the message that firearms violations would no longer be tolerated; and "pulling levers" with message retailing, which involves both law enforcement agencies to enforce sanctions against offending gang members and social agencies to provide services helping prevent offenses.

Directed Patrol

Directed patrol involves increasing police patrol to reduce gun violence in an area. There are two variations of this strategy, general deterrence and targeted deterrence. Directed patrol with a general deterrence strategy would saturate a high crime area with police presence, including stops of as many persons as possible for all (primarily traffic) offenses. Directed patrol with a targeted deterrence strategy would focus police patrol on specific behavior, individuals, and places. Under both strategies, perceptions of the probability of punishment for crime generally, and, under targeted deterrence, of violent

crime particularly, will presumably increase, thereby deterring more individuals from committing crime.

Directed patrol has been demonstrated to be effective in a variety of places, including Los Angeles. In Indianapolis, both strategies were associated with a reduction in homicide, but the targeted approach also reduced overall gun violence and used fewer resources. Directed patrol has also been shown to be effective in Kansas City. Similar efforts were also the most effective portions of a recent anti-violence initiative in the LAPD Hollenbeck Area. Within the 77th Street Area, a recent increase in the number of patrol officers on the street helped reduce homicides. Directed patrol also has the advantage of requiring little coordination with other agencies, and could be implemented swiftly, as there is little need to gather data prior to an intervention.

Given the poor relationship between citizens and police in this area, there may be limits to the effectiveness of directed patrol, especially if the broader community perceives significant inconvenience resulting from increased police presence and stricter enforcement of traffic laws. Gaining the community acceptance to make directed patrol most effective in this area may take a significant effort. Directed patrol also does not provide the services lacking in this community that may help prevent individuals from engaging in violence. Finally, the costs of the intervention would be incurred primarily by the LAPD, and therefore may be only as effective as LAPD resources allow.

Federal Prosecution with Message “Retailing”

Vigorous federal prosecution of prohibited possessors of firearms offers another means by which violent offenders may be more effectively deterred from crime. This strategy also entails prior and concurrent “retailing the message,” in which those engaging in violent activity and unlawful firearm possession are made aware that such activities will no longer be tolerated and will result in stiff federal penalties. Presumably, this will both deter individuals from committing violent acts and incapacitate more that do. Some of our informants seemed to believe that such an intervention could work in the area.

This intervention would have the advantage of not unduly burdening any one agency, but instead spread the costs of implementation among multiple agencies, including the LAPD and prosecutors’ officers. Some officers explicitly noted the lack of a penalty for firearm possession as one of the biggest problems contributing to violence in the area.⁶ Some added that federal prosecution would be helpful, because gang members do not take gun laws seriously, although some also said the requirements for filing a federal case are too strict. Some officers also noted the lack of resources for developing working relationships with federal prosecutors. This strategy also requires coordination among

⁶ In one notorious case described to us, an individual with a firearm-related conviction was placed on probation, committed a carjacking for which he was released on his own recognizance during a crowded court docket, and finally committed homicide.

several agencies that may not always be timely.⁷ Furthermore, given the poor relationship between residents and law enforcement agencies in this community, this strategy, too, would require a significant effort to gain community cooperation and participation. Finally, it would not provide lacking social services that may help prevent individuals from engaging in violence.

“Pulling Levers” with Message Retailing

“Pulling levers,” or holding a gang collectively responsible for the activities of its individual members, could also help reduce violent crime. This intervention targets particularly violent gangs, for which a list of “vulnerabilities” of each member is collected. These vulnerabilities serve as levers that are pulled for each individual when any member commits a violent act. Possible levers could include serving of outstanding warrants, seizure of assets, or stringent enforcement of regulations regarding parole and probation, public housing residency, vehicle licensure, child support, or truancy. In addition to these “sticks,” gang members are also offered “carrots” or social service incentives for desisting from criminal behavior, including job referrals and education. This strategy, too, entails “retailing the message,” in which violent offenders learn further violence will not be tolerated and that services are available to help offenders lead law-abiding lives.

This strategy has been shown to be effective in other cities, particularly Boston, and some elements of it also have been effective in the LAPD Hollenbeck Area. The strategy offers the advantage of simultaneously encompassing both enforcement and prevention, and its costs would be shared among participating agencies. The multi-agency working group needed for it is already in place for Project Safe Neighborhoods, although additional agencies may need to be represented.

Nevertheless, it would likely be challenging to coordinate this intervention across different agencies; indeed, the time needed to do this proved to be a particularly challenging problem in the LAPD Hollenbeck Area. Time is also needed to gather the required information about offenders and their vulnerabilities. Given the apparent loose structure of gangs in the 77th Street Area, there is some doubt as to how well an intervention based on collective responsibility can work there. Many officers also expressed skepticism about focusing on any one group or neighborhood, contending the whole area needed attention. Finally, as with the other possible interventions, given the poor relationship between residents and police in this community, gaining community cooperation necessary to implement it could be a substantial challenge.

⁷ LAPD officers have seen similar plans fail to be implemented. Two officers told us of a prior plan, never implemented, to turn over to the Internal Revenue Service for processing any cases of apprehended criminals driving vehicles that likely were purchased with drug profits. One officer recounting this story also noted that, in his quarter century of service to the department, he had seen many task forces begin with great fanfare but eventually die out, although he also said he was willing to help any new such efforts in the hope they would succeed.

Intervention Caveats

All these interventions are deterrence-based. This means they are based on the assumption that violent offenders are rational decision makers and will choose not to commit crime once they determine that the certainty and severity of punishment have increased to a point that they outweigh the potential benefit of their crime. There is likely no single intervention guaranteed to reduce gun violence, just as there is not likely any way to determine with certainty beforehand the likely success of any one or more interventions. Interventions will likely need to be iterative, or revised after initial attempts. Above all, given the great distrust of the community toward law enforcement agencies, any current intervention, and iterations of it, will have to focus on gaining community acceptance, lest such interventions further strain relations between the police and the community.