# Gang intervention workers and police build trust

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**By Robin Urevich**
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Gang intervention workers and cops are working together to curb gang violence in Los Angeles. But trust between the two groups hasn't come easily as some 40 Los Angeles Police Department officers and LA County Sheriff's deputies made clear during a recent all-day training session on the topic.

Early in the day, LAPD Deputy Chief Pat Gannon, a 34-year LAPD vet who's since retired, quickly established his tough cop bona fides before describing his growing support for gang intervention.

At the beginning of his career, Gannon said, "I really had a good time in South LA locking up knuckleheads. I had a blast."

The officers – most of them young and casually dressed in jeans and t-shirts – listened politely, but many sat with arms crossed in front of their chests, their body language betraying their skepticism.

Gang intervention workers and cops have historically regarded each other with apprehension. After all, the ex-gangsters who do the work often don't trust law enforcement, while police have questioned whether the workers, who mingle with gang members for a living, still dabble in crime.

Gannon, a third generation LAPD officer, said that as he got older, he realized he was focused too narrowly on arrests and he wondered if he was really making progress.

"I still want to put bad guys in jail but i also want to stop gang shootings."

The reason?

"We won't solve homicides if we have retaliatory shootings," Gannon said. Caseloads for detectives become too overwhelming.

Los Angeles is known as the gang capital of the world with 700 gangs and 40,000 gang members, according to a 2007 report by the Advancement Project, the non-profit that sponsored the law enforcement training.

Working with gang interventionists—most of them ex-gangsters-turned-peacemakers—can help stem the violence, Gannon argued. Their job is to persuade those most likely to seek revenge not to. They show up at the scenes of gang shootings to stop retaliation, broker peace deals between rival gangs, and aim to defuse potentially violent situations.

Gannon's embrace of gang intervention represents a major cultural shift among the top brass at the LAPD. But the enthusiasm has yet to filter down to the department's rank and file.

"Everybody's kind of skeptical," said Tony Batras, an LAPD detective who attended the session.

Cops wonder whether intervention workers, most of whom are ex-gangsters, have really cut their criminal ties, Batras said.

"Are they going to jeopardize our investigation or warn about our serving a search warrant?"

In recent years, a few high profile cases have reinforced police suspicions.
In 2008, a director of an anti-gang group called No Guns pleaded guilty to illegal weapons sales, while the head of another intervention group is currently fighting what some high profile supporters say are trumped-up federal charges of posing as a peacemaker while calling shots and ordering a murder for the MS-13 gang.

Now, the Advancement Project has turned its attention to eliminating mistrust of gang intervention by creating a training academy and establishing professional standards.

The group, which claims credit for convincing the city to add violence prevention and community policing to its suppression-heavy approach to gangs through the Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development, has trained 1200 gang intervention workers in its Los Angeles Violence Intervention Training Academy.

Graduates train for 14 weeks in such topics as hospital intervention and law enforcement dynamics, submit to drug tests and background checks to weed out sex offenders and recent parolees and probationers, and adhere to

a code of conduct.

It starts with looking the part, said Paul Carrillo, a former gang member who could pass for a young corporate exec.

“Dress is very important,” Carillo said. Workers are encouraged to wear a polo shirt. No ties, and no gang attire whatsoever.

Carrillo outlined the rules, including keep promises, be honest, no drugs, no alcohol on the job, no weapons, no dating those who you work with.

Never cross the yellow tape that police string up at a crime scene. Don’t spread rumors or let yourself be drawn into an argument. Dialog with anyone. Always promote peace and don’t take sides. Work is 24/7/365.

“If you’re home sleeping, you will be called at any time of the night,” Carrillo said

Gannon noted that it’s now standard practice to call an intervention worker after a gang-related shooting.

Strong relationships between gang intervention workers and police are key to an effective anti-gang strategy, said Fernando Rejon who runs the Advancement Project’s training programs.

But the close collaboration doesn’t mean gang intervention workers will help cops solve their cases. They’ll never say who committed a crime, even if they know, Rejon said. “They won’t snitch.” To do so would destroy their credibility with gang members

“In any major city, law enforcement basically runs the streets,” Rejon said. Already tense situations can blow up, he noted, “if cops perceive gang intervention workers as adversaries or don’t understand their work.”

The police training is aimed at both building that understanding and introducing the officers to some of the gangsters-turned peacemakers.

Carrillo along with a handful of others shared their own stories of transformation – to help the cops understand that change is possible, Rejon said

“I promised myself that if I ever had kids, I wouldn’t raise them the way my father raised me,” Carrillo said, adding that his children know nothing of his past. They’ve never even seen him shirtless because of his gang tattoos.

Late in the day, some of the officers appeared to be listening more intently. Then, during a Q and A, they seemed to wrestle out loud with conflicting feelings.

Angelica Gutierrez, an LAPD officer who works the gang unit at East LA’s Hollenbeck Station said she liked what she heard from the presenters, but noted that not all gang intervention workers have gotten the professionalism memo. Gutierrez, who’s been on the force six years, said she’s currently dealing with an intervention worker who’s smoking weed and interfering with her investigations. How do you handle that? she asked.

Another officer described a gang interventionist who crosses police lines to talk to the captain and a second one who appeared under the influence at work.

Police commanders argued that accountability is built in: the city’s gang program managers can handle issues, while contract agencies who hire gang intervention workers risk losing city funding if their employees are out of line, and they advised the front line cops on who to call when there are problems.

The Advancement Project and the Mayor’s Office tout their success: An Urban Institute evaluation of the city’s gang program found that after the second year gang violence was down more sharply in the 12 parts of the city that the mayor’s program targeted than in the rest of LA, although rates of gang crime have dropped citywide.

While interviews with those involved show the program has brought positive change, researchers have been unable to measure gang intervention program results. Rejon said such metrics are being developed.

“I’m all for it,” Gutierrez said. “I grew up in a gang-infested area, so I appreciate what you [anti-gang workers] do.”

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