

# 'A lethal absence of hope': making communities safer in Los Angeles

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**Although gang violence in Los Angeles is generally falling, certain neighbourhoods remain hot zones. In this article, Susan Lee describes how the city's groundbreaking Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development – informed by a report by the Advancement Project<sup>1</sup> – has made progress in reducing violence and creating safer conditions for the city's children.**

Los Angeles has experienced a remarkable reduction in violence since the early 1990s, when mothers tell of putting their children to sleep in bathtubs for fear of flying bullets. From over 1000 homicides annually then, in 2010 the number fell below 300. Nonetheless, a 2010 analysis<sup>2</sup> conducted by the Advancement Project reveals that there are pockets of neighbourhoods where safety remains elusive, violence entrenched and gang activity rampant.

**Figure 1 Safety in Los Angeles, measured by crime rate**



Geographic data from Esri, NAVTEC, DElorme  
Source: Advancement Project, 2010

As the Figure 1 shows<sup>3</sup>, the least safe Los Angeles communities (those shaded dark) are not spread out across the city, but instead are geographically concentrated in its southern and eastern regions.

No map can tell the story of the fear that children feel in these communities. While they may no longer sleep in bathtubs, we still hear many stories of children not being able to walk to school safely, avoiding parks because of gang members and drugs, and being afraid while they are in school.

In some of the violence hot zones, a small area of 2 to 3 miles can be claimed by as many as 27 gangs, making it impossible for children and young people to avoid gang recruiters, intimidation, and fear. One study of students in Los Angeles schools found that 90% of the children in some neighbourhoods had been exposed to violence as a victim or a witness. Even if parents do everything they can to keep their children safe, violence can claim even the youngest – as happened to 1-year-old Angel, who was shot and killed while his father was holding him in his arms on a warm June night this year. The shooter mistook the father for a gang member, possibly because of the colour of the shirt he was wearing (Blankstein and Quinones, 2012).

Safety challenges are particularly acute for newer residents in areas experiencing rapid demographic shift – a common feature in one of the most diverse cities in the USA, with more than 224 different languages represented and over 92 languages spoken in schools. For example, the community of Watts in southern Los Angeles is historically African American, but the 2010 census showed that Latinos now make up 72% of residents. Despite their majority status, Latino residents in Watts remain under-represented in the civic leadership and under-served by formal support structures.

The isolation from formal support is particularly acute for undocumented immigrants, who avoid coming into contact with government entities, especially law enforcement, for fear of deportation. While violent crime in Watts is high overall, it has more intense impacts on

isolated Latino residents. In a 2010 survey (Advancement Project, 2010), 67% of Latino residents in Watts reported feeling unsafe at night compared to just 16% of African American residents.

**Children and the cycle of violence**

As discussed elsewhere in this issue, research shows that the impact of chronic community violence on children can be severe and long lasting. The experience of the Advancement Project is consistent with this research. Infants and toddlers demonstrate behavioural problems such as excessive irritability, sleep disturbances, emotional distress and regression in language development. Children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder – comprising 27% of those exposed to violence in Los Angeles, according to the study cited above – exhibit symptoms such as aggression, depression and difficulty in concentrating.

Exposure to violence tends to make children more susceptible to substance abuse, more likely to become violent themselves, more likely to be suspended or excluded from school, and more likely to be caught up in the juvenile justice system. Violence in the community permeates all the institutions and settings that a child encounters while growing up, including parks, schools, streets, and homes. And it is not only violence itself but also the fear of violence that severely limits children’s daily functioning in ways that erode their well-being – for example, the lack of safe public spaces discourages physical activity.

These compounding conditions create what Father Greg Boyle, a long-time Los Angeles leader in gang violence intervention, calls ‘a lethal absence of hope’. It is common for children in the most violent neighbourhoods to grow up believing they will not live beyond 18. The absence of hope drives many of these children into gangs or other high-risk behaviour.

Children who are exposed to community violence typically also have to navigate other challenges such as poverty, failing schools and poor health care. A further map prepared by the Advancement Project makes clear

the correlation between the most violent districts and those which cater least well for their youngest residents. The map shows which areas of Los Angeles have the best and worst public schools – the areas with the worst schools are shaded dark. These areas are typically also those with the least pre-school provision.

**Figure 2 School Score maps, Healthy City, Advancement Project**



Geographic data from Esri, NAVTEC, DElorme  
Source: ESRI ArcGIS Online, 2011

Therefore, many children exposed to violence live in communities where not only are they in the harm’s way, but also they face multiple factors that lead to their own harmful behaviour as they grow up. For these children, lack of community safety is crippling. Before we can expect improved educational and health outcomes, the goal must be to achieve a basic level of safety so that children can learn and thrive.

### **The GYRD – a comprehensive response**

The multiple root community conditions that fuel and sustain violence demand a comprehensive response. In 2006, the Advancement Project released its seminal report, *A Call to Action: A Case for a Comprehensive Solution to LA's Gang Violence Epidemic* (Advancement Project, 2007). Although the report came to be called 'the Gang Report', in fact, the report laid out a blueprint for a community wrap-around strategy. It called for resources to be focused on the highest-need areas, to broaden primary prevention and early intervention infrastructure and meld it with smart law enforcement built on principles of community policing.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa embraced the idea and established the Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD). The first of its kind, GRYD is responsible for implementing a comprehensive strategy including prevention and early intervention in 12 zones located in communities where the rate of gang-related violent crimes is five times as high as the rest of the city. GRYD responds to every shooting incident in the city and coordinates with law enforcement and gang intervention workers to prevent further escalation of violence that normally follows gang-motivated shootings.

One of GRYD's key innovations is the family system approach to prevention and intervention. Research has shown that the availability of a strong parent or other adult caregivers can build a child's resilience against violence and counteract some of its negative impact (Osofsky, 1999). Service providers are trained to develop genograms of families up to three generations and to identify within the genogram the individuals in the family who serve as positive support for the children and young people at risk of joining gangs.<sup>4</sup>

Families are then coached to maximise this asset and develop strategies to provide ongoing support for children and young people attempting to keep away from gangs and other high-risk behaviour. In GRYD's approach, families are defined broadly to include not only extended relatives but also family friends and neighbours, which accommodates non-traditional

family structures and focuses on identifying the adult with whom the child has the strongest relationship.

The GRYD strategy also features deployment of gang intervention workers. Sometimes called street outreach workers or violence interrupters, gang intervention workers are often former gang members who have dedicated themselves to preventing violence. They respond to gang-related shootings to de-escalate tension in the community and to prevent retaliatory shootings. In addition, they mediate conflicts between gangs and help to create alternative pathways for those ready to leave the gang life.

Relying on their street credibility and reputation, gang intervention workers – much like *promotoras* in the health service arena – are trusted in the community and can be successful in reaching the hard-to-reach families where outsiders may fail. Because of their unique position, they can link isolated, gang-affiliated families with services for their young children or for family members returning from incarceration.

At the centre of the city's strategy is its Summer Night Lights programme, through which 32 parks in high-violence communities are transformed each summer, from the first week of July to the first week of September, into community safe havens for children, family-friendly activities, and late-night sports. These are parks which are usually underutilised as they are taken over by gangs. In coordination with law enforcement, gang intervention workers, community service providers and residents reclaim the parks, which remain open until midnight. Food is provided – over a million meals have been served in the past 5 years.

All community members, young and old, and even gang members, are welcome at Summer Night Lights, but all are held to a strict standard of positive behaviour. After five consecutive years of running the Summer Night Lights programme, there is no doubt that the programme reduces violence, with 55% reduction in shots fired in and around the parks. More importantly, however, the programme builds community cohesion

as residents reinforce standards of behaviour and discourage those who would disrupt the operation of the programme.

### Results and replication

The GRYP strategy is particularly notable because of its coordination of stakeholders from multiple sectors, including significant cooperation from law enforcement, mobilisation of civic leaders and philanthropists to contribute funding, and, importantly, the inclusion of community leaders and service providers who have credibility and an understanding about the unique assets of their own community. The strategy is also attempting to operationalise what has mostly been a conceptual model of a comprehensive approach to violence reduction, melding prevention, intervention and law enforcement.

In this sense, the practice standards that are coming forth from Los Angeles, in working with individual children at risk of joining gangs, in responding to gang-related shootings to prevent retaliation, and in building safe havens for an entire community, have the potential for guiding effective replication in other places with entrenched community violence.

There is evidence that the comprehensive GRYP strategy is having an impact. While homicides have declined by 15.6% citywide, the decrease is more than 33% in the areas where the GRYP strategy is being deployed. Despite these gains, the experiment is far from reaching its goal. Our mission is not simply to reduce crime rates, or even the incidence of violence. Our mission is to achieve a level of safety in all Los Angeles communities so that children do not fear walking to school or going to a park, can learn in a violence-free school that supports them rather than pushes them out, and can return home to a family that is thriving and healthy.

In short, achieving community safety is more than absence of violence. Reducing violence is only the first step to the kind of transformation we seek. Community safety, for us, is the existence of peace that allows equitable access to opportunity. We know that many

of our communities do not have this level of safety and that it will take more than the efforts of last 5 years to achieve it.

### References

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### Notes

- 1 For information about the work of the Advancement Project, visit: <http://www.advancementproject.org/>
- 2 The analysis, Community Safety Scorecard, pulls together indicators for four areas: safety, state of schools, risk factors for violence and protective factors for violence. Based on an index created by these indicators, each zip code in Los Angeles received a 'score'. For more information visit: <http://v3.advancementprojectca.org/?q=Scorecard>
- 3 Datasets for the Community Safety Scorecard were identified for each indicator at the ZIP code level for the City of Los Angeles. A correlation analysis was then completed to identify which school, protective, and risk factors were most strongly related to safety indicators. Each category of the Scorecard has a minimum of three indicators; the factors were weighed equally to construct the final index score. The scores were assigned a corresponding letter grade based on a quintile system: the top 20% received an A, the second 20% a B, and so on respectively, until the bottom 20% received an F grade. More information on the methodology and the full report are available at: <http://www.advancementprojectca.org/?q=Scorecard>
- 4 The GRYP family system approach is an original service model created by Deputy Mayor Guillermo Cespedes who has more than 30 years' experience working with families and at-risk young people. The model is currently being documented for future publication.