

# What's Happening

## IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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### A Conference Examines Gang Violence

**M**any cities in California and the U.S. have problems with gangs. Unfortunately, gangs have brought a high level of violence to Los Angeles. In May people will gather there for a different kind of conference. Its focus will not be on punishment, but on building safe communities.

L.A. has an unusually high number of gangs and gang members. In the U.S. there are more than 30,000 gangs. They have more than a million members. In Los Angeles County there are more than 1,400 gangs with more than 150,000 members.

Since 1980 the number of killings in Los Angeles County has fallen. However, the percentage of them related to gangs has grown. In 1980 it was 19 percent. In 2008 it was almost 40 percent. In the city itself in 2011, gang killings were 57 percent of the total.

The Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles (VPC) formed in 1991. It has 61 organizations that help people with all kinds of problems related to violence. The organizations see violence as a public health problem. In fact, the VPC calls violence a disease.

Violence destroys a community's sense of security. About 300,000 children live in parts of L.A. where gangs are most active. Many of them hear gunshots, and some become the victims of drive-by shootings. They suffer from

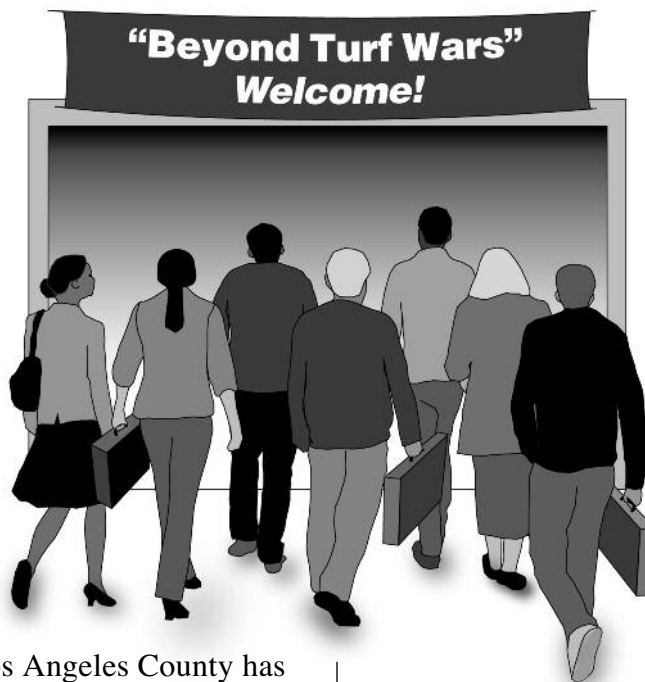
the same stress that soldiers do. Too many students miss school because they feel unsafe at school, or while going to and from school.

The VPC considers violence a preventable disease. It has worked on laws that make it harder to get firearms. Many of the VPC's

organizations offer counseling to young people and parents. They also run tutoring programs, as well as after-school and summer activities. Some organizations negotiate peace agreements between gangs. They help individuals who want to quit gangs too. They offer services like tattoo removal, counseling, job training and literacy programs.

The conference in May is called "Beyond Turf Wars." Usually law enforcement agencies run conferences about gangs. The VPC has organized this one though. About 300 people will attend. For two days they will share ideas about reducing gang violence in Los Angeles. Topics will include things like the role of parents, girls in gangs, and how to reach young people before they ever join a gang.

Everyone recognizes that gangs are a huge problem. Preventing gang violence takes cooperation. Families, police, schools, churches and organizations must work together. If they do, then some communities in Los Angeles may be once again become places where people can live healthy, happy lives.



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## BIOGRAPHY

### PAUL CARRILLO

INJURY PREVENTION COORDINATOR, ST. FRANCIS MEDICAL CENTER

Paul Carrillo felt for a long time that he could be helping young people. Now he is doing that in two different jobs. He uses his own experiences in a gang to counsel them. He tries to help them choose a life away from gangs and violence.

As a boy in South Los Angeles, Paul played outside with friends. He was a good athlete who liked basketball and baseball. He collected newspaper articles that interested him, mostly about sports. His father left the house when Paul was 10 years old. That same year Paul started getting into trouble at school.

Gang life was part of Paul's upbringing. His father, uncles and cousins were all members. Unfortunately, the big influences in his life were all negative. Paul felt that he had no options, so at 15 he joined a gang. It was where he felt accepted, but it also became a source of trouble. In the next three years he spent a lot of time in juvenile hall and at probation camps.

At 18 Paul spent a year in jail. During that time he began to change. People always had told him that he could do good things. He finally started believing that they were right. He never really wanted to be in a gang, but he did not know what else to do. Although he returned to the gang for another two years, the change had begun. He did not like the person that he saw in the mirror.

Three things happened within weeks that

changed Paul. A powerful gang member got arrested, so Paul saw his chance to leave. Soon after that a 14-year-old boy got murdered. Even though Paul had tried to help him stay away from the gang, he felt guilty. Then Paul got arrested again, and he

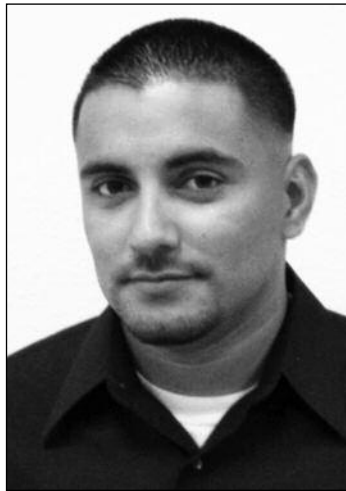
was sad to be in jail when his daughter was born.

Mr. Carrillo found help when he got out. He volunteered for four months at St. Francis Medical Center. In 2001 St. Francis hired him, and he has worked there ever since. When gang members arrive with a stab or gunshot wound, he visits them. Mr. Carrillo gives them information about organizations that can help them change their lives.

In his other job he leads an organization called Southern California Crossroads. He goes

to schools in gang neighborhoods and counsels young people. Often they talk about bullying. They also talk about gangs. Helping them stay away from gangs is easier than helping them get out of one later.

Paul Carrillo has seen enough gang and youth violence. The upcoming "Beyond Turf Wars" conference was Mr. Carrillo's idea. He knows that health professionals have lots of good ideas. He has hopes for young people in Los Angeles, just as he has for his own children. He wants them to succeed in school, to help people, and to be happy and safe from violence.



*"I promised my baby girl  
that I'd never leave  
her again."*

# Background Information

The First Annual L.A. Gang Violence Prevention and Intervention Conference will take place on May 21 and 22.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors recognizes the VPC as a successful model program. Other violence prevention coalitions have begun in Nashville, Atlanta, Cleveland and Orange County California.

The VPC gives an annual award called “Angel of Peace.”

Los Angeles has become a model for gangs around the world. They imitate the dress, tattoos, music and behavior of L.A.’s gangs.

The Los Angeles Police Department reports that there were 289 homicides in the city in 2011, and 170 were related to gangs.

Los Angeles County has laws that enable deputy district attorneys to seek enhanced penalties and longer prison sentences for gang members who commit crimes.

Experts say that the violence connected to gangs has been at crisis level for nearly 30 years.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed students in Los Angeles in 2007. More than 11 percent of students said that they had missed some school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to and from school. Nearly 14 percent of students (including 23 percent of the males) reported having carried a weapon in the previous 30 days.

Los Angeles has an annual gun buy-back program. Its purpose is to get guns off the streets. People who turn in guns receive gift certificates, and do not have to answer any questions about the guns. In 2011 it got 2,062 firearms, including 91 assault rifles and a machine pistol. In 2009 it got 1,696 guns, and in 2010 it collected 2,511.

In response to gang violence, the mayor of Los Angeles created an Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development. The office started its public programs in 2009. It tries to find alternatives for young people who would otherwise join a gang. Its Summer Night Lights provides activities in city parks. Its intervention officers, many of whom used to be in gangs, respond to every gang shooting and try to calm the situation down.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

*Pre-reading:*

- Make a list of ways that gang activity and violence can affect people who are not gang members.

*Comprehension:*

- How do organizations in the VPC help people?

*Beyond the Text:*

- Give examples of things that people usually think of as “public health” issues.
- Tell why you think the VPC is correct, or not, to work toward limiting people’s access to firearms.
- How does your school handle gang issues, including graffiti, clothing, violence, and personal problems related to gangs?

## Vocabulary

*Article-specific:* prevention; disease; drive-by shooting; firearms; to negotiate; literacy; turf; law enforcement

*High-use:* conference; focus; percentage; security; stress

## Sources

*Los Angeles Times* April 3, February 27, 2012; May 9, 2011

NPR “Tell Me More” March 11, 2008

*Daily News* (Los Angeles) January 11, 2012

Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office  
[da.co.la.ca.us/gangs](http://da.co.la.ca.us/gangs)

Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles  
[www.vpcgla.org](http://www.vpcgla.org)

## CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

### English–Language Arts

*Reading* 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

*Writing* 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

### ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

### History–Social Science

11.11