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Saturday, Jan. 13, 2007 6:28 p.m. EST

## L.A. Needs 'Marshall Plan' to Stop Gangs

Plagued by an out-of-control crime problem - sparked by 720 street gangs with a mind-boggling 39,000 members - Los Angeles needs a billion dollar Marshall plan to stop the epidemic of gang crime, a new study suggests.

"This epidemic is largely immune to general declines in crime," according to the report by the Advancement Project, a \$593,000 study commissioned by the L.A. City Council. "And it is spreading to formerly safe middle class neighborhoods. Law enforcement officials now warn that they are arriving at the end of their ability to contain it to poor minority and immigrant hot zones."

According to the Los Angeles Times, city officials revealed the shocking statistics of the extent of gang related crime, including assaults and robberies, which rose 14 percent last year. Moreover, 56 percent of the city's 478 homicides last year were gang-related.

The report called for a significantly greater investment, as much as \$1 billion during the first 18 months, project director Connie Rice said. She described the program as a comprehensive mix of programs that include gang intervention and prevention and economic development. Rice explained that much of that money may be in the city budget for such programs but not as part of a focused, comprehensive strategy.

Noting that nearly 75 percent of youth gang homicides in California occurred in Los Angeles County, the report warned that violence would continue to spread without effective countermeasures.

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Just how badly a new approach to the problem is needed is obvious from the failure of past approaches.

"After a quarter-century of a multibillion-dollar war on gangs, there are six times as many gangs and at least double the number of gang members in the region," the report states.

The \$1-billion potential cost would include all programs in a comprehensive strategy, including job creation, economic development and after-school intervention programs for at-risk youths, Rice said.

Among the findings of the report:

- A department of neighborhood safety should be created, headed by a "high-powered, politically skilled" gang czar to recast and run the city's scattered 23 anti-gang programs that cost \$82 million annually.
- The Los Angeles Police Department needs to get smarter at gang enforcement.
- "Los Angeles needs a Marshall Plan to end gang violence," the report concludes. "City approaches must address the conditions in neighborhoods and the unmet needs of children that allow gangs to take root, flourish and expand."
- The study identified 12 hot zones of poverty and gang crime. About 300,000 at-risk young people live in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and/or gang activity, the study found.
- Because the city's gang crime costs victims and taxpayers \$2 billion a year, the report suggests that a research and policy institute be formed to determine whether gang programs are working.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa embraced the report's findings in general, but did not commit Friday to any specific recommendations, the Times reported.

"Gangs are public enemy No. 1 in Los Angeles. Gang crime will not be tolerated," the mayor told the Times. "We agree with Connie Rice. We need to develop a comprehensive strategy — one that takes into account prevention, intervention and suppression."

Both the mayor and police chief William J. Bratton have said in recent days that they were developing a new strategy for battling gang violence, including a focus on the city's 10 most dangerous gangs.

Along with then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former New York City Police Commissioner Bratton is largely credited with cleaning up his city's notorious crime problems.

According to Rice, a civil rights lawyer, hers was the third city-commissioned report in two decades to determine why Los Angeles is failing to reduce gang violence.

"And it is the third time that experts have recommended that smarter suppression be linked to comprehensive prevention and intervention and that above all, the city end the conditions that spawn and sustain gangs and neighborhood violence," the report concluded.

The challenge for the city is for its leaders to have the political will to tackle what has become an entrenched problem, the report said.

"In the meantime," the report concluded, "residents of Los Angeles' most dangerous neighborhoods continue losing children to senseless violence, and residents of safe areas are beginning to see that the threat could spread to them."

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