

## A Tale of Two Cities : the street gangs of Paris and Los Angeles

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The authors are not alarmist outsiders of either city. Francois Haut, a native and resident Parisian, is a University of Paris criminologist, a professor of law, an expert on world terrorism and urban violence and a frequent visitor to the United States and, more specifically, Los Angeles - where he has spent considerable time studying street gangs. Mark Kroeker is a 29 - year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department. He holds the rank of deputy chief and commands his department's Operations - South Bureau with its diversified communities and troubled neighborhoods, featuring the greatest intensity of street gang influence and attendant violence to be found anywhere. Kroeker also is an interested student of French life. Having lived in France and Africa as a youth, he speaks French and maintains many liaisons with French officials. In this article, Kroeker and Haut meld their mutual observations and commentary on the street gang phenomenon, a sad bonding point for two major world urban centers.

Paris and Los Angeles : two cities as different as any two on the face of the planet - the City of Light and the City of the Angels. One, a beloved link to all that is to be remembered : the quintessential resting place of the arts, education, philosophy and la vie Parisienne - a carefully guarded icon. The other, a link to all that is to come: a symbol of the winning of the American West, a high-tech city always on the cutting edge of whatever it is to become. With its sunshine, fitness addicts, fast - lane lifestyles and condos in Palm Springs, Los Angeles is racing. But as the end of the second millennium approaches, with the world's major urban centers beginning to develop sometimes - striking resemblances, Paris and Los Angeles are showing a new - found similarity. This newly shared identity lies not in "fast food," "franglais," sports, music, pop figures or technological mirroring - all of which are happening. The resemblance is in the startling mutual phenomenon of the urban street gang.

### About the Cities

Los Angeles : according to the 1990 census, is a city of almost 3.5 million people. With its swelling immigrant population, its real population numbers are likely to be considerably higher. The municipal government places a high emphasis on the city limits as distinct from the 87 other cities in the county of Los Angeles. Its demographic composition earns it the title of "arch melting pot." As a contiguous population region, Los Angeles actually spreads out to more than 12 million people who, while living in the cities of San Gabriel, Pasadena or Beverly Hills, all share in the destiny of the metroplex called Los Angeles.

Paris, on the contrary, places less emphasis on its city limits, although historically walls and gates kept Paris proper very distinct from surrounding areas. The Paris metropolitan region is comprised of slightly fewer than 10 million people. One in five French citizens lives around Paris. But without the American historical passion for home rule and a relatively weak federal government, the Paris municipal governmental strength remains much less developed than that of the federal. Like Los Angeles, Paris has become an ethnic crossroads. From the third century B.C., when the Parisii settled on the Ile de la cite, people have been coming to Paris. With certain exceptions, most who consider themselves real Parisians still live in the more expensive, although very dense, residential areas within the old walls, while the new arrivals find less expensive housing in les Banlieues, the suburbs. The current ethnic population of Paris is a tremendous mixture; growing minorities composed of Arab and Subsaharan Black African emigres, as well as Asian and Middle Eastern people, are continuing their quest for a better life.

### The Histories

Los Angeles gang situation is heavily intertwined within the history and character of the city itself. When Los Angeles goes through its chapters and phases, the gangs do also, albeit in ways that are sometimes vastly different. For example, while the post - war years were driving national and local economies onward, the street gangs had begun to flourish in Los Angeles. One of the city's oldest east side Latino street gangs exploded into activity and steadily expanded in influence while the economy was moving forward. In the late '70s, when a major recession throttled economic growth, gang violence in Los Angeles took giant strides forward. Now, in the mid - '90s, while the Los Angeles economy sits in its "parenthesis," gang violence on the street is lessening while the organized criminal economic interests of original gangsters<sup>1</sup> is

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<sup>1</sup> Original gangsters (OGs) is a term mainly used in African - American gang parlance to describe gang members who have sunzved the violent intergenerational rites of passage and are seasoned, self - described "home boys" for life, but have a more measured outlook and vem vriolence as a tool rather than a passion.

flourishing. Notwithstanding economic comparisons or paradoxes, the three factors through the decades that characterize gangs in Los Angeles are continual growth in numbers (until just recently), an increase in violence<sup>2</sup> and unrelenting geographic expansion.

While in the '40s, '50s and most of the '70s gang violence was relegated to east, central and south Los Angeles, the '80s saw considerable expansion into the suburban sprawl regions, including western Los Angeles and, most significantly, the previously untouched San Fernando Valley. Along with the geographical spread, the gang membership increased. While 1970 estimates of hard - core gang members in Los Angeles ranged in the hundreds, recent tallies put this number at more than 50,000. As the gangs spread and grew, the Los Angeles gang-related death toll climbed to its all - time high of 433 in 1993. As of August 1994, this number had declined by 42 percent when comparing the first eight months of 1994 with the same period in 1993.

Fueling the expansion and the violence was the arrival of the mother of all urban destructive phenomena - crack cocaine. Its addictive properties and availability added a huge economic factor to the traditional territoriality. Now, Los Angeles faces a shift from the senseless, territorially driven random violence perpetuated for its own sake to the new "original gangster" or prison gang - based cartels that demonstrate all the characteristics of such traditional organized crime groups as La Cosa Nostra.

Paris has a much more recent history of street gang growth. While daily life for a post - World War II Parisian differs vastly from that of the Angeleno, Parisians and all French persons retain the vivid image of another type of occupying gang - the Nazi "gang bangers" who had terrorized their lives, killed their people, occupied their land and usurped their government. When France was liberated and the war ended, Paris became itself again, surviving without street gangs in the Los Angeles genre. Paris had its share of criminal enterprises, of course - including pickpocket teams, organized criminals and urban terrorists - but street gangs were not "chez nous".

Four phenomena gave birth to the Parisian street gang of today: public housing, with its underclass in the Paris outskirts; the arrival and adulation of the hip - hop culture with its "attitude"; the building of the fast regional "RER" (an express metro rail system deep in the remote suburbs) and, most important, the factor it shares with Los Angeles - narcotics. Across the decades, Paris has not been immune from drugs. Hashish and heroin continue to be the more significant threats; cocaine arrived later and is not very fashionable. But the scales were tipped heavily when crack cocaine arrived on Paris streets in quantities merely a year ago.

The current population of Parisian public housing areas is comprised largely of African - French persons, many of whom are first - generation arrivals from East or Central Africa. An almost equal number come from North Africa, with their Arabic ethnicities, languages and cultures. It is, in most cases, the second generation acculturated young persons from these homes who make up the new street gangs of Paris.

While the local, social and governmental cultures preclude a Los Angeles - style assessment of the number of gang members or the extent of their violence, the realities are undeniable. Paris has street gangs - and in substantial numbers.

### The Neighborhoods

In Los Angeles although spread out from the 1.5 million - population San Fernando Valley to the north of Los Angeles and the Venice beach area to the west, the heavy influence of violence remains predominantly in L.A.'s eastern, central and southern areas. South Central Los Angeles, which begins barely two miles from the Los Angeles Central Business District, has the heaviest concentration of gang violence. Its communities are now shifting radically from AfricanAmerican to a predominantly Latino population. Life in the neighborhood presents to many of its residents and merchants daily reminders of its influence. In 1993, 27.5 percent of the 429 homicides in LAPD's South Bureau were motivated by the gang phenomenon. For a young person growing up in one of these neighborhoods where gang influence is strong, the pull toward gang participation is very strong. The ethnic composition of gangs in Los Angeles remains heavily AfricanAmerican, Latino and, to a lesser degree, Asian or Southeast Asian.

Paris is similar in this regard. A young person growing up in a Cite (public housing area) - many of which ring the city of Paris - must struggle daily to avoid gang participation. Paris had no options for its placement of public housing but to take it outside of the city proper, where lower land values and more space made the decision automatic. More recently, many Parisians are seeking the suburban life for the same reasons Angelenos moved outward - i.e., inexpensive housing and a more peaceful environment. When they do, they move just beyond "les Banlieues" and travel through them by train to and

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<sup>2</sup> As measured by gang - related or - motivated violent crimes such as assaults and murders, including "drive - by shootings."

from work. The new gang members, however, use the same public transportation system to come to the city center, where they "hang out" with associates, deal drugs and display their gang affiliation - although not exactly in the Los Angeles gang style of distinctive clothing, hand signs or colors.

## The Profile

In Los Angeles a typical hardcore, active gang member will be a male in his mid - 20s. He will have a criminal history of multiple police contacts, arrests and, to a lesser degree, convictions and sentences for a variety of offenses. In many cases, he will be out of touch with the mainstream - i.e., no job, traditional family, driver's license or standard associates. His entire identity is wrapped up in his gang. Its members are his family, and its interests supersede - or become - his own. As a result, he is often not adverse to acts of violence, which are carried out either spontaneously or as a result of a retaliatory or preemptive strike.

In Paris, the average gang member is younger and has had fewer arrests or police contacts, but not because he doesn't deserve it. While he may owe strong allegiance to a gang or its leadership, he will often go to school. His family life is usually weak; his parents may be separated. As a result, he has very little in the way of traditional values or education. His parents are likely to rely on systematic public aid of several varieties, rather than wages, and often show little interest in finding a job. For this youth, work and mainstream lifestyles are often unknown; the link between money and a regular job is unknown too, especially when large amounts of cash come from drug dealing. He tends to feel strongly about the sanctity of territory.

In Los Angeles gang names or sets are likely to emerge from the streets, neighborhoods or districts where they claim territory. In some cases, gang names are hard to trace and simply exist and are handed down with a very faint historical root, if any.

In Paris, gang names were initially much more aggressive in tone, often expressing the "in - your - face" attitude common to the hip - hop lyrics to which they are extremely partial. These names were hostile and openly violent<sup>3</sup>. More recently, the names have become more geographic as the gang activities tend to settle on the territories of the Cites.

In Los Angeles street gangs' leadership is diffuse and, contrary to much public impression, not clearly identifiable. Rather, Los Angeles gangs typically have a vague leadership circle or self - proclaimed, more seasoned "shot callers" who seem to hold influence over the large group. More recently, some so-called "truces" or "directed cease - fires" have been produced by members in a variety of leadership roles inside or outside the gangs. In some cases, these cease - fires have been initiated in an attempt to demonstrate good will; however, others have been merely an attempt to facilitate the new move toward Mafia - like violence, carried out as means to an economic - often drug - related - end.

In Paris, leadership is shifting from some charismatic leaders who led the first "Zoulou" gangs<sup>4</sup> to new territorial drug lords. Now, more and more, leaders are those who have proven their "talents" in both drug dealing and neighborhood violence. They are admired for their money, fancy cars, jewels and good - looking girls, and are feared for their cruelty. No strict hierarchy should be inferred, however. Rather, these are "man-to-man" links; money is spread as a means of securing the system's longevity.

In Los Angeles visible signs of gangs are very clear, and rarely escape the notice of an average resident of the city. The gang graffiti on public or private walls, buses, street signs, freeway overpasses or billboards are daily reminders that the gangs exist. Gang participation is also communicated by tattoos, clothing styles or gang signs that denote the fraternal brotherhood of home boys when "flashed" among co-members, but signify open hostility and war - like aggression when flashed to non-members.

The Parisian gang member is less given to signs, colors or symbols, but will not hesitate to mark his name or a gang name by spraypainting L.A. - style graffiti on walls, public transportation and signs. As a result, graffiti has become very visible in Paris, and much of it is related to the relatively new street gangs. The L.A. fashion of gangster - style clothing, music and subculture has reached Paris as a sort of an intellectual link between gang members.

Los Angeles gangs would have a much different character if the use of semiautomatic weapons were not part of their daily activities. Los Angeles police officers regularly seize an unbelievable array of military and civilian weapons from gang

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<sup>3</sup> The actual names of gangs in Los Angeles or Paris are not used in this article. It is the policy of the LAPD not to name gangs in open communication, since it is felt that doing so adds to the gangs' influence and contributes to the spread of gang violence.

<sup>4</sup> The first non - territorial gangs to appear gave themselves this generic name in reference to the "Zulu Nation".

members during the service of search warrants or in daily activities on the street. In earlier days, crude handmade weapons such as brass knuckles or zip guns dominated the gang world. Today, the acquisition of semiautomatic or even fully automatic weapons is determined simply by their affordability. And, when profits are linked to an ever - growing cocaine market, weapons of choice are always available.

Paris has thus far escaped the proliferation of readily available semi-automatic weapons, but more of these are reportedly becoming available from eastern European sources, largely as a result of destabilized governments with shifting military arsenals. As Paris' crack cocaine market burgeons and dealers reap hefty profits, more of these weapons will no doubt become available. For the moment, the principal firearms in use by gang members are pump - action shotguns.

## The Violence

in Los Angeles violence is a part of daily life. In 1993, Los Angeles experienced 433 gang - motivated homicides - i.e., a homicide in which gang membership was a principal part of the murder, as opposed to a robbery - related murder in which the perpetrator just happened to be a gang member. Much of the violence is gang on gang. The seething hatred and hostility fuel the violence at the street level, resulting in the strikes, counter - strikes, and preemptive and retaliatory incidents that carry so high a toll.

Parisian gangs' violence is directed more at the police, as society's representatives. When responding to a call for service inside a gang - dominated public housing area, an unattended police car can be overturned and set on fire. As a result, several officers are normally left to protect the vehicle while an additional three or four are required to conduct the police - related business that so often becomes an ugly confrontation. Fires have been set just to ambush the firefighters or doctors called to emergency incidents. When gang members "swarm" a downtown area and one is arrested and detained in a nearby police station, the station may be attacked or pelted with rocks, and unattended police cars burned or destroyed. Local supermarkets are regular targets of violent attacks and riotous arson situations in which merchandise is stolen to feed the local "bizness" or to pay for drugs. A constant tension is felt by the "foreigner," or non - gang member.

In Los Angeles neighborhoods, the first evidence of gangs' choke - hold can be seen in the public display of unremoved graffiti. This is often followed by a downward spiral in a neighborhood's quality of life. Fear of gang members and of their violence can hold a neighborhood hostage. Witnesses to violent crimes are intimidated not only by direct threats or secondary violence, but by the stifling atmosphere common in gang infested areas.

In Paris, the neighborhood effect of gangs is seen in the development of what French observers call les zones grises, i.e., outlaw areas or secondary social systems that exist outside of the government infrastructure. For example, in gang - infested areas, black - market mini - marts sell stolen merchandise of all types at very low prices, creating a real underground economy. Similar to L.A., gang control of an areadefined by graffiti and a "gang atmosphere" - leads to the deterioration of the neighborhood and its "decertification."

## The Response

Los Angeles residents react to gang violence with little - if any - approval or support. Especially in the more heavily affected areas, law - abiding people push for stronger enforcement, stronger police action and heavier legal sanctions. Most would also agree that a balanced approach of prevention, alternative activity, job-producing inducements and positive mainstream programs is called for. A typical editorial in a daily Los Angeles newspaper would probably condemn the violence and urge a multifaceted strategic approach, including a heavier budgetary commitment to healthy community - based prevention programs in conjunction with an aggressive enforcement alliance designed to put the perpetrators of the violence in prison.

In Paris, however, the public/governmental reaction is extremely mild, and is heavily weighted toward social restructuring. Gang members are referred to as les jetmes-the young ones. Prescriptive remedies fall heavily on a purely social agenda of entitlements, government offerings of youth activities and a substantial continuing dialogue about housing, education and opportunities for the disenfranchised. When gang - related violence against police or economic targets occurs, it is often soft - pedalled or even excused, with apologists urging that citizens understand the plight of being an underprivileged youth growing up in les banlieues. A typical editorial in a Paris daily newspaper would rarely (if ever) refer to enforcement, would probably not condemn the violence and would comment on the continuing need for social reconstruction entitlements, ,education and housing.

In Los Angeles, the criminal justice system response is the product of four decades of experience and massive amounts of academic, political, governmental and media dialogue. In Los Angeles, information is gathered on active gang members, files are maintained, informants are cultivated, tracking systems are used and multijurisdictional law enforcement

endeavors are evident. Concurrently, community - based organizations in numerous grant - funding proposals refer to preventive programs, alternative activities, parenting, mentoring, main tracking functions - all on the preventive side.

LAPD's Jeopardy Program is one such activity. Working with police officers, "pre - gang members;" school officials, parents and community organizations or businesses, Jeopardy seeks to balance the odds that a young person growing up in a gang - dominated neighborhood will join a gang and wind up dead or in prison shortly after reaching puberty.

Prosecutorial agencies - both the county district attorney's office and the municipal city attorney's office - bring special emphasis to the gang problem. For example, the district attorney maintains and staffs a hard - core gang unit in order to provide special expertise to the prosecution of gang members who commit violent felonies. The city attorney looks for creative ways to mitigate gang violence, such as a litigation against an entire street gang to civilly enjoin its members from performing acts that in themselves would be legal but, when operated under the guise of gang involvement, create the street equivalent of domestic violence. L.A.'s courts have shown a willingness to impose heavier sentencing options against criminal acts when they are committed by gang members. Probation and parole agencies alike demonstrate their openness to working together on gang abatement in a "layering" of their traditional roles.

In Paris on the other hand, there is no such gang - related tracking or information gathering no gang enforcement or prevention strategies, no special court sanctions, no post - sentencing supervision programs related to gang violence. The reason is that there is a general unwillingness to acknowledge that such a phenomenon as gang violence could exist by itself. The attention is still on the individual, rather than on the collective behavior.

### The Prognosis

From Los Angeles the L.A. style gang phenomenon has spread to numerous other U.S. cities. In many western U.S. cities, it is not uncommon to see graffiti that bears the sign of an L.A. based gang. Moreover, the substantial drug trade has brought L.A. gangsters to live and "open shop" in many other U.S. cities, where they can generate huge profits and operate free of L.A.'s sophisticated personal information - gathering and tracking systems. The easy-access airline travel system, the fax machine, the cellular phone, the nationwide beeper, e - mail, computer transmissions and, of course, the MAC 10 and other semiautomatic weapons of choice are the new tools of L.A.'s displaced gang member/cocaine entrepreneur - and he can use these tools in Seattle, Phoenix or Des Moines.

Parisian gang members are also being found in other French cities. A housing area in the city of Lille, called les Biscottes, has become the site of ongoing gang and drug-related street violence. Street gangs with the same behavior as those in Paris have also surfaced in Marseille - an already troubled community besieged by drug trafficking, links to organized crime and a high concentration of heroin addicts. The influence of these gangs is being felt across the French Republic.

In Los Angeles, the gangs of the future will no doubt bear a stronger resemblance to mafia - like enterprises. The creation of a sovereign state, the manner in which non - compliant participants are disciplined and witnesses intimidated, the recruiting of new members from regions with strong mafia influence, the practice of operating legitimate profit - making enterprises to screen the even more profitable criminal activity the money laundering devices and strategies - all are classic characteristics of La Cosa Nostra, fully transplanted on the organized street gang mafias of the future.

Meanwhile, if the trend in Los Angeles continues, there will be less street violence, fewer drive - by shootings and, consequently, more breathing room for solid community - police alliances to prevent the inevitable self - destruction experienced by youths who adopt the gang lifestyle.

In Paris, however, the future is likely to hold a complete remaking of all the early mistakes made in Los Angeles. And, with the accelerated, exponential rate of change experienced by all the world's urban centers, Paris will soon catch up to Los Angeles in this major urban problem. Many of its young people are being recruited by gangs, its neighborhoods are being defaced and its culture is being undermined by the spread of crack cocaine and heroin. If it is unable to implement aggressive enforcement and prevention strategies, Paris is destined to travel the long, troubled trail blazed by Los Angeles.