

Street tough

The number of street gangs in the USA is truly astonishing, and the fight to contain them is a never ending battle for thousands of police and other law-enforcement agencies across the country. By Peter Riley

It is a battle that has reached fever-pitch in Los Angeles where there is a reported 430 gangs responsible for murders, rapes and a dozen and one other criminal acts.

In recent years the number of street gangs in Britain has also steadily increased with police and government apparently unable to curb their activities. In Moss Side, Manchester, for example, these gangs recently showed their utter contempt for the law by allegedly marching 25 abreast down many of the ghetto's main streets armed with a variety of guns. When Greater Manchester Police sent in armed response units the gangs had disappeared into the maze of streets, safe, in the knowledge that their weapons bring fear to the local population who dare not identify members.

In an attempt to bring some sort of order to bear on the growing cancer of gun crime and gang culture, Euro MP Arlene McCarthy has visited Los Angeles to see for herself what is being done to tackle the problem.

Across the USA the number of gangs is at a frightening level, with latest figures from the country's National Youth Gang Survey estimating 24,500 operating at 3,330 jurisdictions in the 50 states. According to the same survey the number of gang members stands at an unbelievable 816,000. Little wonder, therefore, that crime figures are so high in the United States and in Los Angeles, in particular, the criminal gangs were responsible in the past five years for 784 murders, 12,000 felony assaults, 10,000 robberies and almost 500 rapes.

Arlene McCarthy's trip to L.A. was organised through Greater Manchester Police. During her trip she shadowed a number of police officers to learn about

the kind of US style gangs the Manchester youth gangs are modelling themselves on and most importantly to see what methods the LAPD are using to bring these gangs under control.

Of course gang crime is nothing new in the USA, but in Britain it is a growing trend that has seen many young people

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killed in recent years, and Arlene adds, “Of course our local problems are not on the same scale and dimensions as the city of Los Angeles with its 430 gangs and 40,000 gang members, but I've learned that the strategies for tackling this are the same, namely intervention and prevention. 10pm curfews are used not only to stop gangs congregating, but to prevent innocent young people from becoming the victims of gun crime. Intelligence-led policing working with the community provides the information to arrest and charge offenders. We need to get across the message to our young people to reject the gun and gang culture they see glamorised in Hollywood films and by rap artists.”

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It seems an uphill struggle for LAPD officers and cops across America to control and defeat gangs, but in Los Angeles at least they are trying their best to tackle the problem within the scope of civil rights, though their definition of civil rights does not come anywhere near the rigidity in which British police find themselves operating under the much maligned Human Rights Act. In Los Angeles, for example, police name and shame gangs and gang members as well as using Gang Injunctions (their form of ASBO). At the present time there are 29 active injunctions involving members of 38 gangs. These injunctions are a restraining order against a group rather than an individual which declares in a court order that the gang's public behaviour is a nuisance.

A statement from the LAPD said: “Gang injunctions have a clearly demonstrable positive effect on the neighbourhood area covered, and some have had a remarkable effect. In smaller areas, gang nuisance activity can be permanently removed, while in larger areas, where gangs have been entrenched for years, the gang's hold on the area can be reduced and maintained with a small team of law enforcement officers.”

This was backed up by Lieutenant Roger Mora, who says, “We will never get rid of gangs but we will disperse them through obtaining gang injunctions. We also use police Gang Impact Teams who will take photographs of gang members, their

tattoos and their graffiti symbols. This allows us to identify individual gang members, particularly through their tattoos which usually hold a hidden meaning if you look very closely. Every gang has its own street name and this is used to put fear into members of rival gangs or simply in the local community.

“We have to use innovation, education and prevention to stop the proliferation of gangs, and here in the LAPD we are doing everything we can

current gang trends, which will provide them with invaluable advice and a common cause. To date the Association has member groups in more than 150 countries, including the UK.

When asked what advice the LAPD could offer his colleagues in Britain on tackling gang culture, Lt. Mora said: “My advice is to make sure the gangs know the police are there on the streets and that gang members can be identified. You see, most gang members think it is big to carry a

Manchester. LAPD has 19 gang squads across the city to deal with 430 gangs with 40,000 members, with large trans-national connections especially in Mexico and El Salvador. Although California has one of the strictest gun laws in the US it is still easy to purchase a gun or access it on the black market.”

She said that many of the problems facing Los Angeles could also face British cities in the next 20 years unless they were dealt with now, and



Photography: Janine Wiedel Photolibrary / Alamy



Photography: Arlene McCarthy

within the framework of the law to keep things under control.”

The proliferation of gangs referred to by Lt. Mora led to the formation in 1998 of the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations which held its first annual ‘World Gang Summit’ in December 2007. The goal of NAGIA is to provide top level training, gang trend briefings, and strategic planning meetings that allow members from around the world to meet others who are tackling the gang threat on a global scale and share experiences, expertise, and

weapon, whether it is a gun or a knife. They also have to be able to hide their weapon or throw them away quickly if they know they are going to be stopped and searched, and by being constantly vigilant and keeping the gangs on their toes, the police will have the upper hand.”

Arlene McCarthy, whose admitted the trip to shadow the LAPD was an eye-opener, concluded: “The scale of the gang problem in L.A., as the world’s gang capital does not allow comparisons with our problems in

admitted the LAPD was only “managing” a major problem rather than solving it. However, in Manchester, she believes the smaller scale of gangs means the problem could be resolved with proper police resources and the support of local communities.

“This trip has made me more optimistic because the problems we have in Manchester are the sort of problems we can deal with although we cannot realistically compare Los Angeles with Manchester.”