

Teen murders in South Los Angeles raise specter of new gang war

Hannah Bell and LaMarrion Upchurch die weeks apart

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On April 27, Hannah Bell was shot multiple times, at least once in the lower torso, according to

LAPD Det. Everardo Amaral. Bell died one hour later at a nearby hospital.

Bell, 15, and her mother had been living with relatives a few blocks from The Best Burger at Western Avenue and 78th Street, relatives said. That evening, Bell and her mother walked to the hamburger stand for a bite to eat. "They'd taken this trip many times," said Nancy Wilson, Bell's aunt. Around 8:55 p.m., as Bell and her mother stood in line to order, multiple shots were fired, authorities said.

"My mom told me she pulled Hannah down to protect her," said Markeis Jones, the teenage girl's brother. "When the shooting stopped, my mom got up and told Hannah to get up...but she didn't."

Two weeks after Bell was killed, LaMmarrion Upchurch, a 15-year-old student at Long Beach's Cabrillo High School, was shot to death in a South Los Angeles parking lot, according to authorities.

Upchurch was an up-and-coming dancer who went by the moniker "Lil BZ" in LA's hip-hop clowning scene, according to members of the dance crew he performed with.

Upchurch was killed along with another teenager and two young men wounded around 1:30 a.m. May 13 when a car pulled up to them near Manchester Avenue and the 110 Freeway, according to police. The people in the car reportedly began yelling and proceeded to open fire, an LAPD spokeswoman said.

Upchurch died at the scene, police said. The three others with him were wounded and taken to a hospital in stable condition, according to authorities.

"It took everybody by surprise. He was a pretty popular dude," said Tommy Johnson, who is known for bringing the clowning dance style to Los Angeles as "Tommy the Clown."

Immediately after the shooting of both teens, rumors began circulating that both shootings were gang initiation homicides. To determine whether these were just rumors, several older gang members, law enforcement officials and gang specialist were interviewed investigating a new fear of African American gangs killing civilian or non gang affiliated individuals.

"John Smith," a Metrolink construction worker who has been a gang member for more than 30 years, told Our Weekly exclusively that no gang member deliberately kills kids.

"Bloods and Crips do not kill kids...we kill gangsters and earn stripes with pride. We will drive around and look for the enemy. We do not shoot innocent occupants of the village, when looking for a rival. When something like this occurs in our neighborhood—the shooting of a kid—we attempt to find out who approved of the shootings. When law enforcement describes a shooting in the hood as a 'gang homicide,' the common reason [they have] for the shooting being associated with a gang initiation," Smith explained. "It is my belief that the term gang initiation is used so detectives will not have police captains up their rear ends demanding results. Kids are targeted deliberately in Mexico and El Salvador, but not in South Los Angeles. Killing kids is stuff that the Mafia does. It usually involves business, drugs, or money."

Many of the gang members interviewed by Our Weekly believe that whomever executed Bell was “angry” based on the fact that she was murdered while standing with her mother—and not with any suspected gang member(s)—and because the assailant pulled the trigger multiple times.

When interviewees were reminded that, at one time, a few African American gangs still in existence in South LA did include shooting a rival as an initiation, Smith responded: “That was maybe 30 years ago. There was a time you would go to a rival's neighborhood and shoot someone who you believed was an enemy.”

“Things change,” according to another former gang member who also chose not to be identified. “Initiations originally required you to walk down a human corridor or path of individuals on both sides of you, and you receive blows from both sides as you walk. Or gangs would just ‘rat pack’ an individual. That's when you are beat by a mob. There are also members that got in without any physical initiation. This was allowed to happen when a new member would bring in more individuals (soldiers). Almost like a military alliance, this was common when a new gang took over a new turf. As what happened a lot when the Crips gang was expanding its turf.”

Today the term “put-on,” is used when describing a gang initiation. This involves a individual meeting in a member's backyard and he fights one to three members. That person is immediately “sized up” by weight almost like gladiators. Initiations are often referred to as “Thunderdome.” Several initiations can take place during that period. Some members get in without any initiation.

“We had one individual, a Belizean, that was asked to join based on the way he made money. He did not attract attention, but he was issued an ultimatum: If you live in the hood and make money in our hood you must be part of our hood or you must move out our hood and make your money elsewhere. You can live in a neighborhood and you are automatically part of it. Black gangs do not promote the murder of innocent individuals to join a gang.”

Lisa Taylor-Austin, a professional counselor since 1988, began her career working with gang members of some of the most notorious Crip and Blood sets. According to Taylor-Austin, each gang is different. Some gangs have gang initiations and some do not. There are several ways to get into a gang: “Born in,” “blessed in” (recruited), “jumped in” and initiations. However, African-American gangs in Los Angeles reportedly do not deliberately kill innocent people (what gang members on the east coast call neutrals).

What is the LAPD's evidence this is a gang related crime? In Bell's case, it could have been mistaken identity, or it also could be related to the fact that the teenager was standing near the intended target.

Our Weeklys “go to” LAPD specialist, former LAPD Sgt. Cheryl Dorsey, agrees and believes Black gangs do have a “code of ethics,” and killing innocent teens or kids for an initiation is not in that code.

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All interviewees believe that once that newly inducted gang member is in, there exists a human powder keg. This new member is going to want to prove himself and earn his stripes, and move up the ranks. This usually involves going out and becoming a predator, shooting at rivals. This type of aggression can lead to the shooting of actual gang members or someone who is or believed to be gang affiliated. That could mean someone with a special connection with a gang, but are not an actual member. In many instances, someone looking at a gang member (and is unknown) may be mistaken as a gang rival and be attacked.

Other rumors circulating after the shootings state that Mexican Mafia could be using its Black Belizan underlings to increase already existing volatility between warring Black gangs. Reportedly, if a gang war arises over the recent shootings, the Mexican Mafia may be able to can increase its turf and lay siege to medicinal marijuana clinics operating in Black gang neighborhoods.

Some rumors describe the shootings as a result of a homicide anniversary or hard feelings still existing over a murder that took place 29 months ago at 1700 W Florence Blvd. The LAPD cannot comment on the ongoing investigation into Bell and Upchurch murders. However, family members close to Bell have informed Our Weekly that detectives have questioned them about whether Bell had gang ties.

[<< Previous Page](#)

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