COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Search for interim sheriff starts

Hunt to fill Lee Baca's position gets underway as inspector general appointed by supervisors begins job overseeing department

By Christina Villacorte
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With Sheriff Lee Baca abruptly retiring at the end of January and a duly elected successor not taking over until December, county leaders have begun moving to fill the void, even as a newly appointed official is setting up his office to oversee the department.

The Commission on Jail Violence had urged the Board of Supervisors to create Inspector General Max Huntsman's position to strengthen oversight of the Sheriff's Department. His first day was Jan. 2.

Huntsman is not concerned about arriving at the department just as Baca is retiring. Their tenures would overlap by only a month.

"We are providing oversight of the department, not of the sheriff," Huntsman said.

With someone other than Baca at the helm, however, Huntsman's job could become more complicated.

Since the sheriff is an elected official, he is not legally required to answer to an inspector general appointed by the board. Baca agreed to give Huntsman full access to department files. A different sheriff could technically refuse. Huntsman said that loophole will soon be closed through an ordinance to be passed by the board.

"The board has a lawful duty to supervise the Sheriff's Department," he said. "I believe that once we get an ordinance in place, we will indeed have a lawful basis for access."

Huntsman said he hopes, however, that the ordinance would not be needed.

"I'm optimistic that whoever the sheriff is, that person would want to participate in the reform process," he said.

The blue-ribbon Commission on Jail Violence urged the supervisors to create the Office of Inspector General in September 2012 after a nine-month investigation concluded deputies engaged in "a pattern of unnecessary and excessive use of force" against inmates.

Huntsman, a veteran prosecutor, has conducted several major corruption investigations, including those against the city of Bell

SHERIFF » PAGE 5

FROM PAGE 3

and the city of Vernon.

In the meantime, Baca's spokesman, Steve Whitmore, said the Board of Supervisors' lawyers — the Office of County Counsel — have started reviewing the credentials of members of the Sheriff's Department's command staff to see if they have the necessary certifications and meet the other legal requirements to be appointed interim sheriff.

"The process could take up to 90 days, but we don't think it will last that long," Whitmore said. "We hope the interim sheriff will be in place before the sheriff leaves."

Baca's own choice for interim sheriff is Assistant Sheriff Terri McDonald, who joined the department only last March.

Her position did not exist before then. Its creation was among the reforms recommended by the blue-ribbon Commission on Jail Violence, which said the department needed a manager who would focus on the jail system, the largest of its kind in the world.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas also expressed support for McDonald, whose last job was undersecretary for operations at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

"The freshest face of reform in the Sheriff's Department is Terri McDonald, and I believe, quite frankly, that reform is the order of the day," he said.

"She was hired to help move reform forward — everyone else was already here."

Ridley-Thomas acknowledged, however, that other names have been thrown into the mix.

"All of the other assistant sheriffs have been mentioned, every one of them," he said.

Supervisor Don Knabe is wary about appointing an interim sheriff who would seek election, and two of the three remaining assistant sheriffs — Todd Rogers and James Hellmold — are potential candidates.

"From my perspective, I'd like an interim sheriff who's not going to run, so they can spend the time doing their job," Knabe said.

"We want to be on solid ground so that when we make the appointment, we'll do it right the first time," he said. "Right now, we're just waiting to hear from county counsel if the candidates are qualified."

A Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence, appointed by the County Board of Supervisors, recommended in late 2012 that the county revamp how it runs the jail from top down. Among its concerns were excessive use of force, lack of oversight, additional training and real-time review of complaints. Here is a list of its recommendations.

Use of Force: Promote a comprehensive and easy-to-understand use-of-force policy and train custody personnel on the policy.

Review inmate grievances.

Track data on use-of-force incidents in real time and review them at the highest levels of sheriff's management.

Management: Sheriff must be engaged in oversight of the jails.

Undersheriff should have no responsibility for custody operations or the disciplinary system.

Develop a formal policy on campaign contributions.

Culture: Implement reforms that emphasize respect, engagement and communication with inmates.

Zero tolerance for acts of dishonesty.

Create a rotation policy that precludes troubling cliques from forming.

Personnel: More custody specific training overseen by the department's Leadership and Training Division.

Increase the ratio of supervisors to deputies and minimize administrative burdens for custody supervisors.

Set up a Custody Division with a jail workforce.

Discipline: Revamp investigative and disciplinary system.

Require deputies to provide a timely written report on force incidents without prior review of video tape footage of the incident.

A risk manager should track and monitor use of force investigations at each jail.

Oversight: The Board of Supervisors should create an independent Inspector General's Office to provide oversight and monitoring of the department and its jails.

The department should report regularly to the Board of Supervisors on use of force and the status of reform recommendations.

The OIG should review the department's data for trends, spikes and patterns in the jails.

To read the entire list, visit dailybreeze.com

Source: Report of the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence executive summary

Race for sheriff sees a shift in strategy

Thur 1-9-14
LA Times

With Lee Baca out, candidates focus on what sets them apart in a wide-open field.

By Seema Mehta

Before Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca announced his surprise resignation this week, those campaigning to replace him mostly argued that the 15-year incumbent needed to go so leadership could be returned to the beleaguered department.

When former Undersheriff Paul Tanaka announced his candidacy atop a helicopter landing pad, he said county residents were "long overdue for a new direction from their sheriff." The prior day, former Cmdr. Bob Olmsted announced his bid, saying he was "running for sheriff to restore integrity."

Now the man who was their foil will be gone in three weeks, inexorably changing the campaign for both challengers, according to political analysts.

"They're going to have to talk about themselves and why they're the most qualified, and that makes it a totally different campaign all the way around," said Allan Hoffenblum, a former GOP strategist and publisher of the nonpartisan California Target Book, which handicaps legislative races. "There's no one to contrast with."

In one practical manner, Baca's decision helps them — despite the myriad scandals that unfolded under his watch, he would have been a formidable candidate. Baca had high name recognition in a county of 10 million people, a strong fundraising ability and deep ties to Los Angeles' diverse communities. Taking him on was never going to be easy.

But his departure is prompting many who once decided against running to reconsider.

Already, Assistant Sheriff Todd Rogers has announced that he is joining the race; among those weighing a bid are Assistant Sheriff James Hellmold, Long Beach Police Chief Jim McDonnell and Los Angeles

[See Sheriff, AA6]

[Sheriff, from AA1]

Police Department Deputy Chief Terry Hara.

Given the ongoing federal investigation of the sheriff's county jail management, which has resulted in the recent arrests of 18 current and former department members, voters may look elsewhere for a fresh start, as city leaders did when they appointed William J. Bratton from New York to take over the Los Angeles Police Department.

"I think it increases the likelihood that voters might start looking for someone outside of the department who is not tainted by any of the department's problems," Hoffenblum said. "It's going to be wide open."

Tanaka said Baca's retirement does not affect his campaign, which is focused on telling voters about his crime-reducing efforts during 33 years in law enforcement, as well as the fiscal responsibility he showed when managing the Sheriff's Department's budget and serving as Gardena's mayor.

He added that outsiders from other agencies have never dealt with a system as multifaceted as the county's Sheriff's Department, which is the largest in the world.

"The Sheriff's Department is a very complex operation, and I think experience is going to make a big difference when voters take a look" at the race, Tanaka said.

John Shallman, Olmsted's campaign consultant, said the former commander offers a mix of insider knowledge with an outsider's perspective.

The consultant said Olmsted had a track record of ferreting out misconduct that occurred under Baca's watch, and going to the FBI when he believed that Baca and Tanaka ignored his warnings of problems in the jails.

"He's the guy who's been on the front lines of this battle standing up every single day, talking about reforming this department," Shallman said. "Everyone else is going to be a Johnny-come-lately."

Shallman added that Olmsted ran because of his "political courage," while new candidates would be "political opportunists," driven by the conditions of the field rather than the department's needs.

"Now people are going to come out and say they're getting in for all the right reasons. I think voters are not looking for another politician to be in that office. I think quite the opposite," he said.

On Wednesday, Olmsted's campaign argued that Baca's retirement was the direct result of Olmsted going to the FBI with his concerns about misconduct in the jails, and the candidate called for a series of debates in the race.

"Voters deserve a thoughtful, in-depth, and spirited campaign where they'll have a real opportunity to learn about the candidates' backgrounds and their visions for the office of sheriff," Olmsted wrote in a letter to media outlets asking them to host debates.

One thing everyone can agree on is that the race will be unlike any sheriff's contest in more than half a century.

Traditionally, retiring sheriffs all but anointed their successors, with the exception of Baca's run in 1998. That year he was challenging his former mentor and boss, Sheriff Sherman Block, who appeared to be headed toward reelection until he died days before the voting.

"It's astonishing — we're looking at the first true, open and competitive race for sheriff in generations," said Raphael J. Sonenshein, executive director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs at Cal State Los Angeles. "It should certainly be an opportunity for voters to look at the widest range of candidates — it's like a big job interview."

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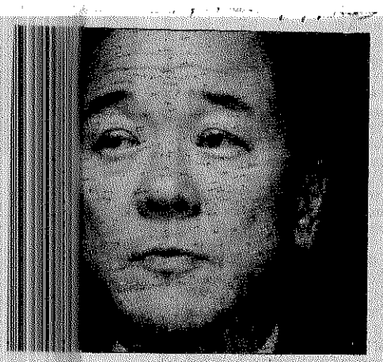
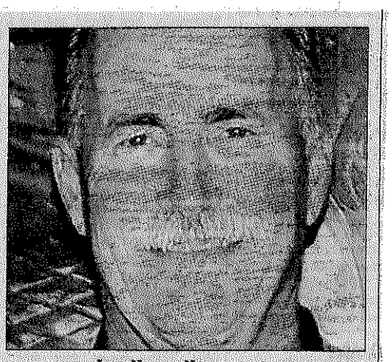


Gary Friedman Los Angeles Times



Jane Napier Neely La Cañada Valley Sun

FORMER UNDERSHERIFF Paul Tanaka, left, and former Cmdr. Bob Olmsted focused on setting themselves apart from the sheriff when entering the race.

Tues 1-14-14

Learning to get it right

Training is revamped to give inexperienced social workers an edge

SANDY BANKS

The mother had lost her children to foster care after injuring them in a drunk driving crash. Now her kids were back at home and a social worker was sitting at her kitchen table, trying to figure out if they would be safe with her.

Mom was disheveled, dodging questions and stumbling when she walked. Her overbearing boyfriend showed up unexpectedly and hijacked the conversation, butting in whenever the social worker tried to talk.

The social worker finally threw up her hands and walked off. Another took her place, then another and another.... They wound up frustrated, uncertain of whether mom was simply tired or on drugs.

Fortunately, this bout of indecision didn't put children at risk. The encounter, staged at Cal State L.A., was part of a training session for social workers by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.

The drug-using mom was social-work veteran Beth Minor; her boyfriend was played by Warren Ondatje, a sheriff's deputy. The rotating social workers were learning the ins and outs of a job that feels very different when you're in a stranger's kitchen than it did in a college classroom.

The simulation is part of a revamped training process that replaces eight weeks of PowerPoint presentations about policies and procedures with a yearlong program that gives inexperienced social workers small caseloads and lots of hands-on training that includes role-playing, ride-alongs and mentoring.

That should better prepare caseworkers to sort through the social, economic and cultural issues that fracture families.

It's a change long overdue in an agency in which poor training has been blamed for social worker mistakes that contributed to the deaths of more than a dozen youngsters in county care over the years.

"They were having to learn on the job, and that was just so stressful," said department director Phillip Browning.

"They had the theory, they had the textbook stuff."

But that hadn't prepared them for the complicated process of policing parents, protecting children and preserving families.

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The program is a product of a collaboration between the county department and local universities. The simulations will be used for more than training professionals.

They'll become part of college social work courses.

Students and professors at Cal State L.A. and Cal State Long Beach helped design and construct the sets: replicas of a courtroom, a hospital and an apartment, with realistic-looking props, including cockroaches and cocaine.

There were three scenarios going on Friday when I visited Cal State L.A: The drug-using mother, a teenager having trouble adjusting to his foster home and a session with foster parents whose religious convictions were making life hard for their gay foster child.

Watching the young social workers try to sort things out gave me a sense of the challenges they face. In the simulation of the drug-using mom, the social worker had to be part cop, part teacher, part psychologist — demanding a drug test, giving her parenting advice, probing the dynamics of her romance.

The process is often adversarial, despite their best intentions.

Social workers see themselves as helpers, but parents tend to see their scrutiny as a threat.

"It's a difficult balance," Minor said. "It's easy to overestimate your authority. The sense of being in someone's home tunes them in to the little things that can help defuse conflict."

And the experience of role playing in a safe environment helps develop confidence and builds good judgment, Minor said.

Minor and trainer James Ferreira critique the trainees, gently, when each round is done: Too much jargon. Not enough eye contact. Too many softball questions. Don't make promises you can't deliver. Don't let a lie slide by.

Some seemed innately confident, displaying a natural mix of tenderness and grit. Others tried so hard to be friendly they didn't get the information they needed.

"It's a big jump from being in the classroom, and some are reticent," Ferreira said.

"They want to be liked. Empathy is nice. But if all you do is empathy, you're not doing any good.

"They're learning how far they can push themselves and their clients," he said. "They're learning to focus on one thing: How does this impair parents' ability to provide a safe environment for their kids."

Director Browning expects to hire 450 social workers by the end of this year. They will each be expected to go through dozens of simulations, and he won't be surprised if some bail out.

"Some of them may decide they don't like this work; 'I didn't know it was as difficult as it is.' That's OK to say," he said. "It's better for everyone when we know that early on."

Before a family is needlessly split up or a child left at risk.

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Inmate money stayed in jail

Fri-

Sheriff's Department wrongly kept funds not claimed on release, an audit finds.

By Robert Faturechi

Los Angeles County sheriff's officials inappropriately kept more than $1 million belonging to county inmates in a two-year period, an audit released Thursday found.

When inmates are booked, the cash they have on them is held until they're released. And while they're inside, their loved ones can deposit money into accounts the prisoners can use to buy goods from jailhouse commissaries.

Every year, money is left behind by inmates who are released and don't claim their funds.

Sheriff's officials have been using that money to boost their department's revenue when they should have been alerting the county treasurer to put out a public notice about the funds, county officials said. And if the money remained unclaimed, it should have gone to the county's general fund, not the Sheriff's Department, they said.

That problem and others were detailed in a report by the county's auditor-controller. The audit found that

[See Sheriff, AA6]

[Sheriff, from AA1]

sheriff's officials incorrectly handled at least $160 million in special funds.

The Sheriff's Department, like many other government agencies, maintains special funds to store proceeds from revenue streams that have legally restricted uses. For example, money from vehicle registration fees is supposed to be used to combat car theft.

According to state rules, when government agencies gather excessive revenue in these funds, they are supposed to reduce fees or create reserve accounts. But according to the report, sheriff's officials accrued more than $160 million in these accounts.

Department officials said they are creating plans to spend the money they control and to implement all the recommendations made by the auditor-controller.

"We appreciate this audit," sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said.

County officials said the problems found by the auditor related to accounting missteps, not anything more nefarious.

Glen Dragovich, a director for the sheriff's administrative and training division, said the department would probably not push for fees to be reduced but instead is creating formal spending plans.

"There is a balance year after year because I don't know what the next year is going to bring, so we're conservative in how we spend it," he said.

He said about $65 million of the $160 million was part of a countywide fingerprint database fund that sheriff's officials did not solely control.

There are rules, in general, about what the various funds can be spent on, he said, which poses another challenge. "We can't just go out and buy stuff," he said.

Dragovich downplayed the seriousness of the problems found by the auditor, saying they all related to accounting practices.

"These special funds are in each published budget," he said. "There's nothing being hidden here."

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Supervisor's home project is probed

Fri 1-17-14 LA Times

Garage conversion at Mark Ridley-Thomas' Leimert Park house is under review by city.

By Paul Pringle and Jack Leonard

Los Angeles city building inspectors launched an investigation Thursday into whether county Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas has an illegally converted garage at his Leimert Park home, where government employees recently performed thousands of dollars' worth of work.

The Los Angeles Building and Safety Department opened the probe less than a day after The Times reported that county crews installed a security system, drywall, an air conditioner and other appliances in Ridley-Thomas' detached garage.

A search of city databases found no permits for that work or any other improvements to the garage. A source familiar with the property said the garage was being used as an office, with a restroom, and appeared to have been converted before the most recent work was done.

The city Building and Safety Department placed a notice of the investigation on its website.

[See Investigation, AA2]

[Investigation, from AA1]

"If anybody calls and complains about a politician or anybody, we'll go out and investigate," department spokesman Luke Zamperini said.

Generally, permits must be obtained for the installation of restrooms, air conditioners, electrical wiring and drywall, he said. Violators of the city's permit rules could be ordered to pay fines and correct any improper work, the department website says.

Ridley-Thomas and his spokeswoman did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The source with knowledge of the work at the supervisor's garage, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to talk, said county crews replaced older wood paneling with the drywall and, in addition to the air conditioner, installed a flat-screen television, a refrigerator and electric wiring.

The work was done as part of a project to add a security system to the garage.

The county released documents Thursday to The Times that say the "security enhancements" cost $10,038. The source said he was informed that Ridley-Thomas paid for the air conditioner, TV and refrigerator, but it was unclear whether he reimbursed the county for any other costs.

The documents, which were heavily redacted, provide no details about the security work and show no reference to the drywall, appliances and electrical wires.

Principal Deputy County Counsel Dawyn R. Harrison wrote in the county's response to The Times' request for the records that "information that could be used to compromise the security of the homes of the supervisors was redacted as the public interest in nondisclosure of an elected official's security outweighs the public interest served by disclosure of security measures taken by the local agency."

The county offers home security systems for the five supervisors as well as for other top county officials, but taxpayer money is not supposed to be spent on unrelated improvements. Supervisors earn an annual salary of $181,292.

The work at Ridley-Thomas' garage was done by employees of the county's Internal Services Department.

Tom Tindall, who retired last year as head of the department, said he was informed before he left his post of the need to upgrade or replace an alarm system.

Tindall said he did not know the details of the Ridley-Thomas project, but work on the walls might have been required to repair damage caused by wiring the security devices.

"The only thing I was a little concerned about is that it was finished space," he said.

Jim Jones, Tindall's successor as department director, declined to comment.

Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Mike Antonovich said through their spokesmen that the county has performed no work on their homes during the last five years.

Supervisor Don Knabe's spokeswoman, Cheryl Burnett, said she was waiting for more detailed information, but any work done at his house was "not a big security system."

Knabe "said to me there were lights put up at some point," Burnett said.

In 2012, the county spent about $7,400 on security modifications at Supervisor Gloria Molina's Mount Washington home, according to county records.

Molina's spokeswoman, Roxane Marquez, said the work was done after the Sheriff's Department for several years strongly advised the supervisor to make security upgrades worth about $12,000. Molina had received threats, Marquez said.

She said the supervisor, whose final term in office ends this year, agreed to only some of the recommendations.

The bulk of the work involved upgrades to a gate at

A deadly distinction

Tiny Westmont has L.A. County's top homicide rate

By Nicole Santa Cruz and Ken Schwencke

A detective calls it "death alley." The two miles of South Vermont Avenue that stretch north from Imperial Highway are home to churches, liquor stores, mortuaries and one of the highest rates of homicide in L.A. County.

Sixty people have been killed along this corridor since 2007, most shot to death.

The violence, which seems never-ending, landed at Angela Hawkins' doorstep.

When gunshots sprayed from a passing car in October, panicked neighbors fled through the hallways of her apartment complex on West 92nd Street.

Hawkins opened her door to find Joe Anthony Ordaz on the floor, saying he'd been hit. People surrounded him, telling him he would be OK.

She recognized him. Their young children played together. Ordaz, 24, would die before sunrise.

Early last year, Hawkins, 31, moved out of her mother's home and into this unincorporated community, known as Westmont, lured by a cheap deposit.

Since then, she's seen Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies storm the mint green complex, guns drawn. She's watched as people tossed weapons and drugs onto the roof to avoid arrest. In the courtyard, a man was beaten and stabbed with shards of a broken plate.

By the time Ordaz lay mortally wounded, Hawkins had seen enough. She vowed to find a way out.

"There's violence everywhere," she said. "But it's not like this."

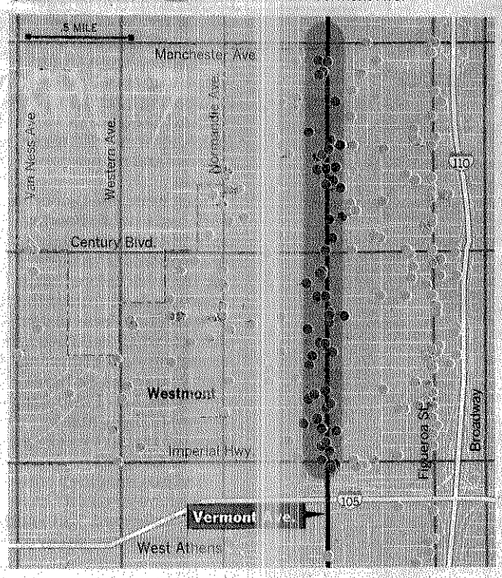
In a county of 10 million people, Westmont is among the deadliest places to live. In the last seven years, 100 people — nearly all of them male — have been killed in the 1.8 square miles wedged between the city of Los Angeles and Inglewood. Times analysis of homicide data collected in that time found Westmont's rate of killings to be the highest overall.

The community, which has no city government of its own, has fallen through the cracks, said Nathan Arias, who heads a nonprofit group trying to make a difference. There's a youth center south of Imperial Highway, a gen-

[See Westmont, A18]

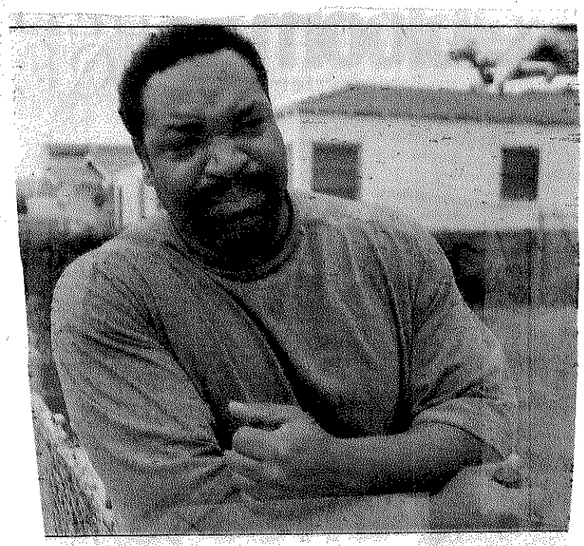
Homicides in 'death alley'

Since 2007, 60 people have been killed on a two-mile stretch on or near South Vermont Avenue between Manchester Avenue and Imperial Highway. The area is the border of the Westmont and Vermont Vista neighborhoods.



Sources: The Homicide Report, L.A. County Coroner's records.
Graphics reporting by Ken Schwencke, Nicole Santa Cruz

Los Angeles Times



[Westmont, from A1]

eral community task force meets weekly and scattered school programs exist, but there has been no widespread effort to reduce violence.

"It's amazing that an area with such high need is so underserved," he said.

Westmont's homicide figure is about the same as the combined total in Highland Park, Glendale, Pasadena, Eagle Rock, Glassell Park and Atwater Village, an area with 14 times as many residents and some neighborhoods that have experienced gang problems of their own. Even among a patchwork of areas across South L.A. notorious for gangs, drugs and violence, Westmont stood out among data reported since 2007 for the online project The Homicide Report.

Westmont's neighbor to the east, Vermont Vista, shares "death alley" as a boundary. But the L.A. city neighborhood, similar in size and demographics, has had a little more than half as many homicides, 57, over the same period.

Violent crime in the nation — and in Los Angeles County overall — has reached its lowest levels in decades. In many respects, that downturn has spread evenly across neighborhoods, a Times analysis found. But depending on where you live, violence may be an everyday fact of life or so rare that it still shocks.

The face of who gets killed was unchanged over the seven years of homicides.

Men account for nearly 85% of homicide victims. One of every three males killed is between the ages of 17 and 25. Latinos, about half of the county's population, account for nearly half of all killings since 2007.

Blacks, just 8% of the county's residents, remain disproportionately affected, accounting for 32% of homicides. Last year, black people in L.A. County were killed at more than seven times the rate of all other racial and ethnic groups combined. The homicide rate for blacks has remained stubbornly high even as homicides have plummeted in the county from 941 the year Homicide Report began to 594 last year.

In many ways, Westmont provides a window into chronic issues facing urban communities. Until a sharp uptick to 15 last year, homicides here had dropped like elsewhere in the county. But they still occurred at a much higher rate than other neighborhoods. Blacks in Westmont are killed at four times the rate as Latinos, although each group makes up about half of the 30,000 residents. People here are poor — about 40% live below the poverty line, more than double the average rate in the region. Few residents have college degrees.

On these streets, children watch how they dress for fear of being confronted by a gang member. Residents complain of break-ins and gunshots. Nonprofit workers tasked with removing graffiti have faced threats. Finding a person who has been the victim or witness to violence is as simple as walking the blocks and asking.

On the corner of South Vermont Avenue and West 88th Street, L. Christopher Caver Jr. clutched a can of Modelo beer and smoked a cigarette as soul music flowed from a small boom box. Another man known on the streets as "Maverick" swayed to the beat.

Caver, 38, has lived around here for more than a decade. Two years ago, he was shot seven times inside his car. He lifted up a red Buccaneers jersey to reveal a thick, jagged scar that runs down his stomach.

"It's just Vermont," he says. "It's one of the most dangerous places in L.A."

Nearly every street in the area is claimed by gangs known as the Underground Crips, South Los, The Hoovers, 8 Trey Gangsters, the Raymond Crips and the Rollin' 100s.

"There's not a whole lot of blocks you can go to that are up for grabs," said L.A. County Sheriff's Sgt. Richard White, who works in the area as a gang investigator.

Kevin "Twin" Orange used to claim alliance with the Hoovers. But after he survived eight bullets in 2006 and his brother and cousin were killed three years later, he made it his mission to help quell the violence in the area. He is one of three gang interventionists and two case managers for Soledad Enrichment Action, a nonprofit headed by Arias that gets private funding to reduce violence in Westmont.

"We're more passionate about stopping the violence than anybody," he said of his team, which works in the Westmont area. "Because we created it."

On a recent evening, Deputies Branden Williams and Lisa Moya drove down West 105th Street between Normandie and Denker avenues. As the two flashed a bright light into the dark, men automatically lifted up their shirts to reveal their waistbands — proof that they weren't carrying a gun.

The street was once two-way, but in 1996, the Sheriff's Department requested that it be changed to a one-way to help with crime-fighting efforts. The area has long been controlled by a gang named the Underground Crips whose members would, in more violent days, walk across Normandie to shoot at rivals.

"At least if there's a drive-by, we can catch them," said Williams, who has been patrolling the area since 2010.

The violence here goes beyond conflict between gangs.

Isaiah Kevin Gray, 28, was shot to death in December on the balcony of the light blue apartment complex where he lived for three years. His brother has been charged in the murder, which allegedly took place after a dispute over keys to a storage space.

"It's the hardest thing to see the love of your life just collapsing and dying," said Gray's fiancee, Jacky Pineda, 22, who still lives at the apartment.

That night, her neighbor, Tarasha Patterson, took care of the couple's two children, Elijah, 3, and Noah, 2, while detectives and deputies processed the crime scene.

Patterson, 37, said she's always on high alert. She avoids grocery shopping in the area. On New Year's Eve, she crouched in her hallway, hiding from stray bullets. Still, she was shocked when she found herself cleaning up Isaiah Gray's blood.

"It's rough, but the thing is, it's affordable," Patterson said of the neighborhood, then paused. "You don't have a choice."

Down the street, Angela Hawkins is saving to move away, but it's slow going. With three children, ages 3, 5 and 7, even the expense of school pictures can be a setback. Hawkins, an in-home caretaker, volunteers for overtime shifts whenever she can, and has a family member watch the kids.

Her shifts sometimes start as early as 4:30 a.m. On those mornings, she's afraid to walk to the bus stop in the dark. Thoughts of her children keep her going.

"I want them to be able to go out and play and everything, and not have to worry about being shot, and seeing guns and stuff like that," she said. "That's too much for me."

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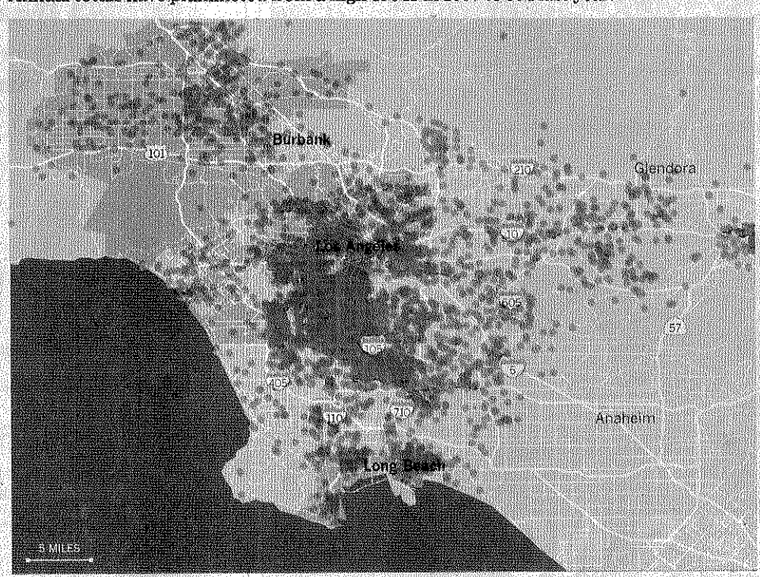
Times staff writer Maloy Moore contributed to this report.

Homicides in L.A. County

More than 5,200 homicides occurred in Los Angeles County in the last seven years. Annual totals have plummeted from a high of 941 in 2007 to 594 last year.



Source: Source: Homicide Report, L.A. County coroner's records
Graphics reporting by Ken Schwencke, Nicole Santa Cruz

Raoul Rañoa Los Angeles Times

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Fewer probation department employees arrested in 2013

WED 1-22-14 LA Times

By Abby Sewell

Los Angeles County probation officials have made substantial strides in reducing criminal misconduct committed by department employees, according to a report released Tuesday.

Officials said the improvement — with cases falling from 74 in 2011 to 32 last year — was the result of an expanded internal investigations team and the imposition of more stringent professional standards for the department's roughly 5,000 employees.

"We've come light-years from where we were to where we are today," probation Chief Jerry Powers said.

The probation officers' union disputed Powers' assessment of the reasons behind the decrease.

"It's cyclical," said Ralph Miller, president of the county probation officers' union. "So taking credit for reducing the number of people arrested ... it's almost like taking credit for the sun rising and setting every day."

The department's officers supervise criminals upon their release from jail or prison, or those who are sentenced to probation. And they run the county's juvenile camps and halls.

In 2011, 74 probation officers and other department staff were arrested on charges including driving under the influence, theft and assault.

The following year, the figure dropped to 44, but included some high-profile cases, such as a probation officer arrested on charges of filing fraudulent workers' compensation claims. Two weeks after that incident, Carl Edward Washington, a division chief of intergovernmental relations and a former state legislator, was arrested on federal charges of defrauding banks by falsely claiming to be a victim of identity theft.

Most arrests were for off-the-job conduct. As in previous years, the greatest number of those arrested in 2013 — 15 — were for driving under the influence.

In recent months, the department has been praised by the county Board of Supervisors for implementing stricter hiring standards, including requiring a polygraph test and conducting more extensive background investigations of applicants.

But the probation officers' union has complained that the new standards are unrealistic and that the slow pace of hiring is jeopardizing public safety. More than 1,000 of the department's 6,600 budgeted positions remain vacant just as county workers are being asked to track more former inmates because of the state's prison realignment program.

In a letter sent to the Board of Supervisors last week, unions representing probation employees asserted that Powers had "seriously mismanaged the hiring and promotional process, resulting in a grave public safety crisis."

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Fix the Sheriff's Dept., now

What's needed are oversight, accountability and an unyielding stance against deceit and secrecy.

The 10-month gap between Sheriff Lee Baca's departure at the end of this month and the swearing-in of his elected successor in December should be a time of decisive action, not a ponderous waiting period or quiet intermission. Problems in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department are deep and require immediate attention. Baca's unexpected but welcome resignation creates an unusual opportunity, before the arrival of an elected sheriff, to lock in badly needed reforms.

Even as candidates campaign for the job and deputies wonder who their next leader will be, there is an existing diagnosis of the department's problems and an agenda for fixing them. Both are set out, in part, in the September 2012 report of the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence.

Baca agreed to most of the commission's recommendations, including separating the custody and patrol divisions of the Sheriff's Department and opening its operations to an inspector general. But the department has yet to acknowledge that there are cultural or systemic problems that led to its current situation: deputies charged with violence against inmates and visitors, shoddy hiring practices, numerous lawsuits, Baca's resignation under fire, and the entire operation the butt of scornful jokes among law enforcement professionals outside the county.

The Board of Supervisors should appoint an interim sheriff for the next 10 months who embraces not just the marching orders of reform but the underlying need for real change. Such a person must be prepared to root out an entrenched attitude of resistance. He or she must be prepared to face and overcome deputies and supervisors who believe they can wait out any departmental revamp.

If the Sheriff's Department needs a housecleaning — and it does — now is the time. Proven dishonesty should result in discharge, and supervisors uncomfortable with scrutiny and new structures of accountability should be moved aside. An interim sheriff who fires and demotes as the situation requires may well be unpopular, but that's the point: As a short-term appointee, he or she can and should take steps that might give pause to someone seeking election or reelection.

The interim sheriff should make clear in both word and deed that dishonesty — as opposed to personal disloyalty — will be punished. Honest deputies must see that deceit will be found out and punished. If there is a jailhouse code of silence meant to protect deputies and enable the abuse of inmates, it must be eliminated. An unyielding stance against secretive conduct and deception should be adopted by the interim sheriff and should be considered nonnegotiable by the time the elected sheriff takes office.

Mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability that will transcend and outlast any single person's leadership must be put in place. There is already an inspector general to monitor and report on jail conditions and the use of force, and to conduct its own investigations, and that's a good start, but more is needed.

The Board of Supervisors has before it a motion to create a five-member oversight commission. The idea is not perfect; unlike the commission that oversees the Los Angeles Police Department, this one would have no actual authority over an independently elected sheriff. But it would be one way to provide a forum for the inspector general to publicly report on his findings and for the sheriff to respond. That's a more useful format than weekly Board of Supervisors hearings currently provide.

An interim sheriff should establish a pattern of accountability by appearing regularly before the board — or before the oversight commission, if the board moves forward with that plan — and responding to inspector general reports. Candidates for sheriff should pledge to do the same if elected, and should promise to push for any required state constitutional changes that would give such an oversight commission actual power to compel production of documents and administer discipline as appropriate. If they don't support the creation of the commission, candidates should present their own plans for oversight and accountability that would meet or exceed the standard set by such an empowered commission.

The Board of Supervisors and sheriff's officials should continue, and step up, separation of the department's custody operations from its patrol functions. They should publicly acknowledge, in a way they have yet to do, that the training and skills required of patrol officers in the county's unincorporated areas and in cities and agencies that contract for the sheriff's services are fundamentally different from what is required from professional jail officers.

The interim sheriff should demonstrate by his or her actions — and candidates for sheriff should make clear on the campaign trail — that the department is far more than a police agency. The sheriff of Los Angeles County should be the most important figure in California in reinventing not just the local jail system but the entire criminal justice system. The sheriff should be committed to programs and policies that ensure that inmates, whether awaiting trial or serving sentences, do not leave jail the same way they went in. The sheriff should be the champion of reentry programs to ensure a safe and successful return to society, and an advocate for constantly improving systems to assess an inmate's danger to society and amenability to reform. The interim sheriff should plan to press the Board of Supervisors for greater resources for reentry programs and policies and not just more jail beds. An interim sheriff should lead the charge to make the state's criminal justice "realignment" process work and not merely complain about the burdens it places on the department. Candidates for the permanent job should do the same.