

# Fight against them must include programs to prevent kids from joining in the first place

**T**HE scariest fact about two Latino gangs in San Jose and Los Angeles is that not even prison can contain them.

Strong evidence suggests that Nuestra Familia in Northern California and the Los Angeles-based Mexican Mafia have ordered murders, intimidated witnesses and run their violent businesses from maximum-security prisons.

Alleged members of both gangs are currently being tried in San Jose and Los Angeles courtrooms on various charges, including conspiracy and racketeering. Even before the trials began, the "NF" and "La Eme" were known to have set up shop in other towns and states and in Mexico.

But they aren't the only ones exporting crime. Local street gangs from other ethnic communities are becoming more sophisticated and daring in their drive-by shootings, drug trafficking, carjackings and homicides.

One of California's senators, Democrat Dianne Feinstein, thinks she's found an answer to gangs — if their crimes cross state lines. Her proposed gang-violence act would double federal penalties for interstate gang activity, including the recruitment of minors, and expand racketeering laws to include weapons trafficking, immigrant smuggling and using juveniles in a violent criminal conspiracy.

The problem with Feinstein's bill is that it's all punishment and no prevention. Crimes must be punished. But unless the gangs are denied new recruits, their power won't

## Editorial

*The opinion  
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be broken.

Any smart anti-crime bill involving youths also ought to include programs for saving wanna-be gang kids before it's too late. At the root of the problem is the seductive power gangs have for luring troubled youngsters who have less a criminal impulse than a desire for inclusion. That desire can be constructively redirected by effective anti-gang counseling, job-training, education and even recreation programs.

There must be a balance between law enforcement and prevention, as former Nuestra Familia member R. Rios explains at right with insight and remorse from San Quentin State Prison. His view ought to be required reading for wanna-be gang-bangers, members of Congress and elected officials who think they know all there is to know about modern gangs.

A few weeks ago, Feinstein received an overdue rebuke. She went to the Los Angeles City Council hoping for rubber-stamp approval of her crime bill only to be told, correctly, that it was simplistic.

Feinstein says she's willing to support prevention efforts. We encourage her to strike the proper anti-gang balance in her bill, even as we're mindful of what the Republican Congress will and will not approve. The GOP's approach to

crime at the moment is almost entirely based on law enforcement. Still, President Clinton supports gang prevention and intervention methods.

Any politician wishing to solve the gang problem should listen to the thrust of R. Rios' message: Make it so that youngsters never feel they have to join a gang at all.



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**Enrique Lopez, 24, was a foot-soldier in a gang in Los Angeles. A payback gang bullet paralyzed him five years ago. Now he's confined to a wheelchair and lives in a small shed behind his aunt's house.**

# I know the rules: Because I denounced Nuestra Familia I am marked for death

By R. RIOS

**I** KNOW firsthand the propaganda that gangs project to young Latinos in our neighborhoods. I used to be a member of the Nuestra Familia. I was also one of the original defendants in the ongoing trial of alleged NF members in San Jose, which is nothing that I'm proud of.

The gang problem on our streets won't be solved by simply isolating prison gang leaders. Let's not fool ourselves. Nuestra Familia, based in Northern California, and the Los Angeles-based Mexican Mafia, called La Eme, have leaders-in-waiting and fresh recruits. And both gangs are aggressively recruiting members of other gangs.

Because both gangs mislead and manipulate recruits with the promise of a rewarding future, nothing would be gained by scattering convicted gang members throughout the nation in separate federal prisons, as Los Angeles prosecutors want to do with alleged Mexican Mafia members now on trial. The truth is that gang leaders are only licking their chops at the opportunity to extend their reach to other states. This would allow them to recruit or become allies with members of other gangs in these prisons.

Still, you can't knock anti-gang efforts that emphasize incarceration of gang members. The law is getting tougher on gangs, stiffening the penalties for gang-related crimes and conspiracies. For example, some defendants in the Nuestra Familia trial in San Jose face the death penalty.

But one can only ponder. Will this really be the whole solution to gangs?

One thing is certain. Gangs and anti-

gang laws are trying to reach youths in our communities at the same time, for opposite purposes. We need to focus on prevention and programs that will help gang kids get out before it is too late. Young gang wanna-bes need to be made aware there is no rewarding future in being a carnal (brother) in the Nuestra Familia or La Eme.

**It's important to** internal functioning of gangs, the side one does not see from the outside. Gang leaders regularly abuse their authority. They mislead members, who must make sacrifices and struggle to meet unachievable goals demanded by the leaders. The

only rewards available are enjoyed by those in leadership positions. When most ordinary members find out their sacrifices for the gang have gone unnoticed or unrewarded, it's too late

And once someone is a member of Nuestra Familia or La Eme, there is only one way out, and that's by death. Most guys stay for that reason only. The only way to avoid all that is to never join. Therefore, that message needs to reach our youths before the gangs do. And believe me, the gangs talk a good program.

Because I have denounced the gang, I am now marked for death.

That's all right, I can live with that. I know the rules. The only thing left for me to say is, I saw no other humanistic way to make amends to others and myself for the actions I took as a member of Nuestra Familia.

What I ponder a lot is what unsuspecting youth they'll recruit next to do their deeds. The poor guy will not know until it's too late that the sacrifices he's made will shortly be forgotten by the gang.

## A view from the inside

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R. Rios is an inmate at San Quentin State Prison in San Quentin, Calif.