

Deadly gang shootout renews calls for violence prevention



XAVIER MASCAREÑAS XMASCARENAS@SACBEE.COM

Valynda Cole, right of center, whose cousin Johtaya Alexander was one of the six people killed in the downtown Sacramento shooting on April 3, stands next to a photo of her family member on the growing memorial for the victims April 6, on 10th and K streets in downtown Sacramento.

BY ALEXANDRA YOON-HENDRICKS AND CATHIE ANDERSON

AYOON-HENDRICKS@SACBEE.COM

CANDERSON@SACBEE.COM

Community organizations and advocates say the deadly gang shooting that erupted last weekend in downtown Sacramento is evidence that the city has not invested enough in youth services and violence prevention.

Details are continuing to emerge about the events that left six dead and 12 wounded, but police said Wednesday that the shooting broke out between two groups of men just as clubs and bars were letting out April 3. Police this week have arrested [three individuals in the wake of the shootout](#), all of whom appear to have ties to gangs.

The city of Sacramento has not made consistent or significant investments in keeping youth on a healthy path or intervening with those who stray, particularly in neighborhoods where families don't have the income to do as much for their children, said Monica Ruelas Mares, an organizer with local nonprofit Youth Forward.

Chet Hewitt, the chief executive officer of Sierra Health Foundation, said Sacramento's power brokers have been emphasizing economic development and law enforcement at the expense of public health and the well-being of youth.

"No city is a great city if it's not intentionally committed to investing in its children in a sustained way," Hewitt said.

"We need to be as intentional in our planning for what children get as we are in our planning for the Railyards," he added, referring to the multimillion-dollar [downtown redevelopment project](#).

City leaders acknowledged that the tragedy brought urgency to the issue. During a vigil in downtown Sacramento Monday evening, Mayor Darrell Steinberg said: "Our young people don't know what their future is or even if they have a future."

And on Wednesday, Steinberg called on Gov. Gavin Newsom and Democratic leadership to spend [\\$3 billion toward violence prevention](#) — funding for victim services, re-entry programs for ex-offenders, youth programs and mental health and addiction treatment.

Community organizers and activists renewed calls for the city to make a more significant, ongoing investment from its own revenue stream, something many of them had hoped for when they succeeded in a grassroots effort to get Measure G on the ballot in 2020 — but [failed to get it passed](#) by voters.

Measure G [would have directed the city](#) to spend a percentage of the general fund toward youth programs, particularly in neighborhoods with large populations of low-income families. At that time, it would have raised an estimated \$12 million annually.

Steinberg and others opposed the 2020 initiative, saying it would reduce funds for city services and put the budget in jeopardy. Voters [living in affluent, more white neighborhoods](#) rejected it, while voters in low-income communities of color approved the measure.

"When that happened and I saw the mayor's statement about youth funding and prevention, it did trigger me a bit," Ruelas Mares said, who helped lead the Measure G campaign with Youth Forward. "When we talk about prevention, we want to see those dollars invested before anything like this happens."

Sacramento City Councilman Jay Schenirer said that he, the mayor and other city officials also want a dedicated pool of money to invest in youth, so they're working on a new initiative to put before voters that aligns with the spirit of Measure G.

Planned for the November ballot, the measure would provide a protected funding source for youth development and enrichment, Schenirer said. He said he also plans to introduce a resolution that would require the city to increase funding for youth by at least the same percentage it raises the police budget annually. The Sacramento Police Department's [budget rose by 22%](#) from 2020 to 2022.

While details are scant still about how much money a ballot measure would raise, Ruelas Mares said it is a step in the right direction: “It’s really time not just for the city, but for the voters, to step up.”

PANDEMIC, POVERTY CONTRIBUTED TO RISING SACRAMENTO GANG VIOLENCE

The coronavirus pandemic has further frayed social connections and ruined economic opportunity. In underserved communities, Ruelas Mares said, so it was only a matter of time before this brutality spilled into centers of commerce: On the same weekend as the shooting on K Street, police swarmed at the Delta Shores shopping center to break up fist fights.

“Oftentimes, unfortunately, it takes a situation like this for people to take seriously what we mean by prevention,” Ruelas Mares said.

The number of Sacramento County residents killed in homicides has risen significantly since the start of the pandemic. In each of the last two years, 225 county residents were homicide victims, up by 36%, from 2018 and 2019, according to death certificate data from the California Department of Public Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

More than a third of those who were killed were between the ages of 15 and 24, despite that age group only accounting for about 12% of county residents.

The work of preventing gang violence and helping kids onto the right path can take years of investment and programming, in conjunction with targeted enforcement against gang leaders and some active gang members, before cities see signs of improvement, community organizers said.

Beefing up police funding and increasing patrols in the short-term is not a sustainable or effective solution, said Youth Forward organizer Nia WeatherMoore.

“What if our understanding of public safety wasn’t police officers, but after school programs? A community mentor paired up with a high schooler?” WeatherMoore said. “Who knows what could’ve happened instead?”

Community advocates acknowledged that, since the passage of the Measure U sales tax in 2018, the city has increased investments toward youth services and violence prevention.

But much of the sales tax — marketed in part as a way improve the quality of life for young people in underserved communities — funds economic development and other departments like police. In addition, \$16.9 million of the [budgeted “youth” dollars](#) actually pay for recreational sports leagues, aquatic facilities and community centers that serve adults as well, city records show.

Today, the city spends roughly a total of \$38.2 million toward youth-oriented programming and facilities such as the Sacramento Zoo, kid-friendly museums, free bus transit, violence prevention, workforce training and development programs. And about \$5.5 million of those funds were distributed as grants to youth-serving organizations.

This is where community organizers would like to see more financial firepower.

Mervin Brookins, who runs the mentorship and intervention program Brother 2 Brother, received a \$250,000 grant last year through the city’s Office of Violence Prevention.

However, he said, it's not the all-important ongoing funding that is crucial to maintain the quality of staff needed to be effective with kids at high risk of seeing or experiencing violence in their homes, falling behind in school, or being pressured to commit a crime to pay for basic needs. Currently, he's working with about 50 high-risk and gang-involved individuals.

"It has to be a long-term commitment that allows organizations to plan and implement those plans and build on those successes," Brookins said. "Anything else is just a Band-Aid."

HOW CAN SACRAMENTO BETTER SUPPORT YOUTH? LOOK TO BOSTON.

Hewitt said he would like to see a pyramid-shaped model when it comes to funding for youth, aiming most of the dollars at the base for behavioral and developmental activities to keep young people on a healthy path.

This is where the U.S. Centers for Drug Control & Prevention recommends [evidence-based programs](#) that keep kids on a healthy track: early childhood home visitation, preschool, classes on parenting and relationship skills, youth mentoring and after-school programs, for example.

The next level of the pyramid should focus on intervening with youth who are at high risk of becoming involved with gangs or drugs. By making these investments, Hewitt said, you will need less money at the top of the pyramid for gang suppression and drug enforcement.

Harvard University researchers found that police interventions work best when they are carefully coordinated with social workers and others advocating for youth, federal and state authorities, probation and parole officers and, yes, even researchers who can scientifically evaluate the success of tactics and strategies.

Boston made such an effort with its Operation Ceasefire, a program that has been duplicated nationwide, and the Massachusetts capital saw a remarkable drop in homicides and nonfatal violence. When researchers did peer-reviewed evaluations of Operation Ceasefire, they found that the success of the program was largely due to the working partnership among agencies rather than to outside factors such as the economy.

The combination of police specialists with individuals who knew each youth's history was powerful, said Meaghan McDonald, director of programs at the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College.

Social workers, parole officers, probation officers and community-based agencies worked in parallel with the gang specialists to find resources such as job opportunities to rehabilitate many youths, used the threat of negative consequences to gain information, and to come down hard on the worst offenders.

The gang specialists in the police force found that they were able to discourage violence by threatening to make any group behind it a focus of enforcement, McDonald said, and after they actually demonstrated how tight of a chokehold they could put on offenders, most did what they could to avoid that kind of attention.

"Part of the importance of this kind of work is identifying that small number of people who are most likely to be victims or suspects of violence, and putting together a structure to engage directly with

them,” McDonald said, “and before getting to the point where you can engage directly with them, it is creating a structure for offering support, and then following through on those commitments.”

The Bee’s Phillip Reese contributed to this story.

Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks: 916-321-1815, @ayoonhendricks