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Pacoima middle school in deadly neighborhood

13 people have been killed within a mile of the Charles Maclay campus since September 2007. A gang injunction seems to have helped the area, but threat is an everyday thing for the students.

By Ken Schwencke, Los Angeles Times

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Charles Maclay Middle School sits at the corner of Glenoaks Boulevard and Pierce Street in the San Fernando Valley, at the intersection of a gang injunction zone and public housing.

Within one mile of the school amid a grid of sun-bleached storefronts, laundromats, liquor stores, and fast food restaurants, 13 people have been killed since September 2007. In all of Pacoima, 31 people have been killed in the same period.

[Alejandro Villa](#), a 14-year old Maclay student, was shot to death two blocks from the school while walking down Van Nuys Boulevard in 2008. [Cesar Diaz](#), 15, was killed in March while riding his bike three blocks away. [Olga Martinez](#), a 33-year-old mother, was stabbed to death in May at the housing project across the street.

Two months ago, eighth-grade English teacher Anthony Mize heard about another homicide victim near the campus and worried that it was one of his students. As he searched for information about the killing, he discovered The Times' interactive [Homicide Report](#)

He was relieved that he did not find the name of any of his students, but the list gave him an idea.

"They're dealing with stuff on a daily basis that would make us call in sick," Mize said of his students. "It's like a constant blanket of anxiety."

He had his eighth-grade students begin researching the [31 homicides in Pacoima](#) that occurred since they entered middle school in 2007.

In a display case in the school's entryway, each victim is represented by silhouettes cut out of black card stock. On white paper shirts, Mize's students wrote each person's age, as well as the date and cause of death. Interspersed between groups of victims are colorful calls to action: "Stop the violence and increase the peace," reads one. "Drop the gun or drop your life!!" reads another.

For Mize, the project was a way for the students to think about how they could affect the community where they live. In Pacoima, the students said gunshots and gangs are part of everyday life.

"It can be kind of a dangerous place sometimes," said Alexis Ramirez, 14, who will attend Discovery Charter Preparatory School next year, just down the street.

In creating the display for other students, parents and teachers to see, Alexis said he felt that he and his classmates had done something good for the community where he was born and hopes to stay "forever."

"You can just be yourself," he said of the neighborhood. "You can walk everywhere. People know you."

His classmate Francisco Valles has plans to leave. The gangs are bad, he said. "Pure violence, pure shooting, pure drugs. Pure hurtful stuff."

Francisco, 14, hears gunshots almost every night. The manager of his apartment was shot three times one night but survived, he said. Francisco said he had been chased down the street by gang members. When he leaves the local park, he's afraid of getting robbed of his skateboard.

When Mize's students were asked what gangs are prevalent in the area, the names came tumbling out: Terra Bella, Van Nuys, Thirteens, Latin Kings, San Fernando, Project Boys, Piru. It goes on.

The nine Pacoima homicides this year, while far from the highest among Los Angeles communities, already equal the neighborhood's 2009 total. In 2008, the area saw eight homicides, with 10 in 2007. Overall, however, year-to-date violent crime is down almost 25% from both 2009 and 2008 levels, according to LAPD statistics for the Foothill Division, which includes Pacoima.

Veronica Arreguin, Maclay's principal for three years, sees the area as a community in transition.

Since 2001, a large portion of Pacoima has been covered by a [gang injunction](#) against the Pacoima Project Boys. The order prevents gang members from appearing in public with other gang members, intimidating crime witnesses or gang critics, and from possessing guns, illegal drugs or open liquor containers in public.

Arreguin said she believed the injunction and the resources in place to enforce it have made a difference. As evidence, she points out that big chains like Lowe's and Best Buy have opened in Pacoima this year.

And signs of change extend to the campus. A community center opened at the school this year. The center refers people to services for help finding food and clothes and for paying bills. It also provides a monthly meeting place for community groups like [El Nido](#), a family counseling organization, and the [Youth Policy Institute](#), an educational organization for low-income families.

"Maclay is a different school than when I inherited it," she said. "The gangs still exist, but they've learned not to bring it on campus."

The school's Academic Performance Index rank is still in the lowest 10% for the state, though,

and a staggering 99% of the school's students are on a free or reduced-price lunch program, according to the California Department of Education. Of Maclay students surveyed in 2009, 63% percent responded that their parents had not completed high school.

The school is losing six or seven teachers to budget cuts this year, Arreguin said. Mize is among those being laid off.

Mize, whose father works at the school and who first came to the campus as an intern three years ago, said he's thankful for the opportunity he had at Maclay. He sees his students as having unlimited potential. "They need to be shown how they connect and relate to the world," he said.

"I'm still holding out hope for coming back here," he added. "I don't know if I want to teach anywhere else."