

INTERVIEW WITH LETICIA

California Youth Authority's Gilbert Garcia, Project Director for the Gang Violence Reduction Project, conducted this interview with Leticia Ramirez, a former gang member. Ms. Ramirez is now a gang consultant working for the Gang Violence Reduction Project.

Gil: Leticia, could you give me a brief history of where you were raised and a little of your family background?

Leticia: I was born in El Paso, Tex. and moved to the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles when I was 10 or 11 years old. My mother died when I was about seven, and my father brought me and my brother here. He was an alcoholic and was supportin' 12 kids. When my mother died, we all kinda separated and went our own ways, so you could say we were kinda dysfunctional.

Gil: When you moved here, were you aware of the gangs that were in the neighborhood, or were you too young to understand what was going on?

Leticia: I was too young, and I didn't know nothing about gangs being in Los Angeles. When I was about 12, I realized what was happening.

Gil: What happened to make you take notice of the gang situation?

Leticia: I was told that one of my friends who lived in the same block I did was killed by a gang member. He was about 18 years old, and that's when I realized there really were gangs, and there really were people killin' other people.

Gil: Was he a gang member?

Leticia: Yeah. He was a member of a gang here in East Los Angeles.

Gil: What effect did that have on you?

Leticia: Well, I couldn't believe it at first. It just kept goin' through my mind about how could a human being kill another human being, and why. I went to

his funeral. I got real bitter and thought that if I was old and knew who did it, I would go for them.

Gil: What do you mean by that?

Leticia: I was about 14 years old, and I just started hangin' around the neighborhood. But I never got into a neighborhood until I was about 17. That's when I got really involved.

Gil: Why did it take that long for you to get into a gang?

Leticia: Because I was really afraid of my father. He was real strict, and he was



Four gang members display a weapon and are throwing hand signs.

an alcoholic. Every time he'd get drunk or be mad from work, he would take it out on me. He'd beat me up and throw me out of the house. That held me back for a long time.

Gil: What was the first gang incident you were involved in?

Leticia: The first thing I ever did was I knocked out some guy's teeth with a baseball bat, and I beat up a girl. I kept slamming her face on the wall, and from there I started not carin' about other people's feelings no more.

Gil: Most females usually get started a little earlier than you did, more like junior high school.

Leticia: I never went to junior high because my father, he wouldn't enroll me. He wouldn't buy me no clothes and I didn't like that. I was embarrassed because I'd see my friends well dressed, nice lookin', washed, clean hair and everything. I didn't have a mother to help me. So I never went to junior high school, and when I wanted to start, my father wouldn't go through the trouble to sign the papers, miss work, nothin' like that. My older sister was the one that wanted to enroll me, but she couldn't. So that's why I didn't get into a gang. I was always around my father, and he had good control of me.

Gil: Do you think that if you had gone to junior high you would have become involved in gangs sooner?

Leticia: Well, I had that meanness in me because my friend was killed, but it didn't occur to me to join a gang. What I wanted was to go to school, get my diploma. I even wanted to become a peace officer. But I never had that chance because my father, he didn't care. Whatever he did, it was for himself and that's it.

Gil: Do you think that your anger for your father had something to do with you joining a gang?

Leticia: Yes. I blame my father because he took his anger out on me. I think all that pressure of my dad hittin' me, throwin' me out, that's what made me go to the streets and the gangs. I found a lot of friendship. And one of my friend's moms, she took me in. Somehow she was able to enroll me in school. I promised her that I'd do good because I didn't wanna give her no problems. But I didn't do what she said. I was in the 9th grade when I started hangin' around gang members.

Gil: How old are you now Leticia?

Leticia: I'm 31 years old.

Gil: So you've been involved in gangs for the past 14 years. Tell me about how the male gang members feel about the females that say they are in the gang.

Leticia: I consider myself a "representative" of my gang. I'll do anything a male does: drugs, stealing, fightin', shootin'. We all do the same things.

Gil: But do the guys, because of their machismo, just say you are a girl that lives in the neighborhood and backs them up? And does this upset you?

Leticia: Yes, it does. It makes us angry, it makes us wanna show them that we can do the same things they can do. I know one girl who is bolder than the guys. She did drive-bys, murders. She's willin' to do anything. She's crazy. She loves to get high. She's short, skinny — but she's a crazy girl.

Gil: Besides gang-banging, are there other things the girls are expected to do?

Leticia: Nowadays, nothin' but going to the corner, kickin' back, gettin' high. Get pregnant and steal drugs, that's about it.

Gil: Tell me Leticia, what happens when one of the "home girls" from your neighborhood goes and meets with a guy from a different neighborhood or rival gang? How does she survive in the neighborhood?

Leticia: First of all, if they find out they'll be on her case tellin' her to leave him or get out. If they see him, he'll get jumped, the girls will be after her. If she don't listen, I know they'll start on her family — with threats. You have to be from the same neighborhood or people that would get along with our neighborhood. It's OK to go around with different barrios that get along. But if they're rivals, there'll be problems.

Gil: Are gang girls getting pregnant more?

Leticia: Some do it because their parents don't give them any money and they don't buy them what they need. The girls go out and get pregnant knowing that they'll be able to get on welfare and get more of what they want.

Gil: How do you feel about that?

Leticia: I think it's stupid. I mean, if I got a second chance I would want to go to school and forget about kids.

Gil: When you got pregnant, what was the reason?

Leticia: I wanted a baby. I was about 19. But that didn't stop me from continuing in gang activity. I never thought that it wasn't a good life for me and him. I was in my 20s before I grew up, I guess. My kid meant a lot to me, and that's why I started comin' down from gangs.

Gil: What do you think about tattoos?

Leticia: Girls are gettin' more and more tattoos. I think that's stupid too. People look at you're like your a piece of shit. You know, they disrespect you. Every time I look at mine, I regret them. I wish I could take them off. My first tattoo was on my back, and it was my street name, "Stranger."

Gil: Was your brother involved in gangs?

Leticia: Yeah, but he was never involved in serious shit like me. He's glad that we're both out of it now. He told me when I was in my early 20s to forget about gang-bangin', to do it for my kid.

Gil: What's your relationship with your father now? Has it changed?

Leticia: It's changed a lot. He finally came down to earth and realized that what he did in the past was wrong. And now he's there for my son and daughter. He's very helpful; he's there for good and bad. I know he wants to be there for me because of what he did to me in the past. I was the only one of his children that he treated like shit. I know he regrets what he did, but I'm still angry about it.

Gil: Do the girls in the gang ever get fed up with the guys telling them what to do? Do they ever go out and do things on their own, things the guys don't know about?

Leticia: Yeah. In fact, not too long ago, the girls did a drive-by and didn't tell the guys. They shot and killed someone. If they'd known, our guys would have been prepared.

Gil: How many girls are in your gang?

Leticia: There are about 40 girls in the gang, and maybe about 60 guys. There's a leader; he's been around for about 13 years. He's about 32 years old, and he's been to jail. But the leader of the girls' clique, she can be leader of the whole gang in this neighborhood.

Gil: So there's the possibility that if the leader goes to prison, he can give the leadership to a girl?

Leticia: Right. But really the only time we need a leader is when they're gonna do a drive-by or somthin' comes down in a neighborhood. The leader is like an adviser.

Gil: So it doesn't necessarily mean that the leader is going to have the guns or do the shooting? It just means that person is the most respected and is asked for advice.

Leticia: Right.

Gil: What happens if the members don't follow the leader's advice?

Leticia: Well, it does happen. Then they get jumped out, you know, beat up.

Then the gang makes sure that everyone knows that person ain't from that neighborhood no more. They say it with a lot of disrespect. He won't have no recommendations to get into another neighborhood. They make him look so bad no one else wants him. But that's never happened, someone livin' in this neighborhood and gettin' kicked out. But I've heard about it in other neighborhoods. They have to cover up their tattoos, make it black or something, or color in the words.

Gil: Tell me about the youngest and the oldest members of your gang?

Leticia: I'm the oldest female, the oldest guy is 37. The youngest girl is about 12, and the youngest guy is 10 or 11. I don't like to see them so young, but you know, the ones that get the young kids into this, I don't think they even have a heart.

Gil: What kinda drugs are being used in your gang now?

Leticia: Coke, PCP and the one you call rock. It's mostly coke. The girls like PCP the most, I guess 'cause it makes them wild, but I don't know. I didn't like nothing about it. I couldn't even see, it made me go to sleep, and it started comin' out of my system. I was gettin' the chills, and I was gettin' fever. I went through a lot when I took it. I only took it once.

Gil: Do the guys ever take advantage of the girls when they're on PCP?

Leticia: Yeah, for sex. Any way they can think of they'll take advantage.

Gil: Can you tell what kind of drug a person has taken if you just see them walking down the street?

Leticia: I can usually identify it. I can tell when a person's on PCP. I watch the way they talk, the ways their eyes look, the way they move. They move like they're in space. And you can smell it.

Gil: You can smell the ether?

Leticia: Yeah. And the people I know who use rock, it makes them hyper, they repeat everything over and over, they don't come out with one sentence.

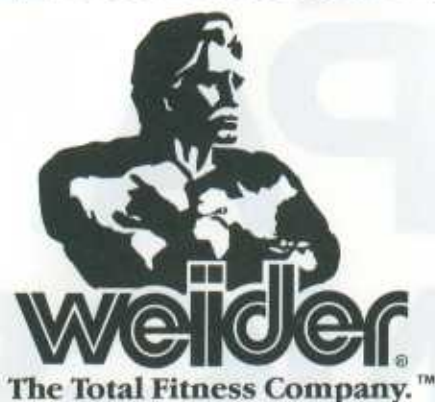
Gil: What about the youngest person you've ever seen use drugs? Is that person still around?

Leticia: Twelve years old usin' PCP. He's about 20 now, but you can tell it's had an effect on him. He's dingy. Real dingy.

Gil: Leticia, now that you're mature, you're 31 years old, you have children of your own, what would you say if your boy said, "Mom, I want to join the neighborhood?" How old is he and what would you tell him?

Leticia: I would sit down and talk to him, let him know what's up, what's goin'

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down, what's comin' down, what I went through. I would tell him my background, see that it gets through his head, give him advice, which I have already done. He's 13. He's never come up and told me he was gonna be from a gang. He has told me they want him to be from here, or there. The only thing I ever tell him is Rudy, think about it. You wanna lose whatever you got right now? It's up to you. I told him the first time you're in jail, OK, I'll be there for you. Second time, I'll think about it. Third time, don't even expect me to go see you. He knows that when I say somthin' I mean it. And you know, the only thing I can say is I thank God that he still listens to my words.

Whatever I say he'll do.

Gil: Has your son ever thrown it up to you that you were a gang member?

Leticia: No. He's never done that. I have it in my mind that someday he might come to me and say, "Well Mom, you were in a gang, so why can't I do it?" I don't know. I might be wrong. But I'm waitin' for that day.

Gil: Has anything in your life changed you or made you a better parent?

Leticia: Back in 1986 and 1987, that's when I started changin' because of my son. I seen that he was growing up, and all his little friends were there. They would always tell him, "Hey Rudy, I seen your

Mom..." He would ask them what I was doin', was she drinkin', what was she doin', you know. And thank God, they would always tell him she was just sittin' there talkin', not doing nothin'. I know he was afraid they were gonna say I was drunk, or that they seen me with some guy or you know, the bad things. I noticed he was keepin' an eye on me with his friends, and from that day I changed.

Gil: How does he react when people come up to you and use your street name, "Stranger," instead of calling you Mrs. Ramirez?

Leticia: It's happened with my friends that I haven't seen for years. They come up to me, or we see each other, and they say "Stranger! What's up?" You know, I feel funny, I get a funny feelin' inside — like embarrassment. I can't do nothin' about it. When that happens, he just looks at me and he puts his head down and that's all he does. I think he just trips out, you know, like "Well, they call her 'Stranger' and I call her 'Mom'." I've asked him about it. He says he's not embarrassed, and I believe him. But I tell those people to forget about my street name and just call me Leticia. A lot of people just say, "Hey Leti, what's up?" When they do that, I see my son smile.

Gil: Are you saying that everyone wants the best for their son or daughter,

even gang members? Won't their children live in the neighborhood, marry someone from the neighborhood, stay there and raise their kids? Do they ever stop and say, "Enough is enough?"

Leticia: There are a lot of females that get trapped by their boyfriends. Some feel that the only way to keep their old man is if she goes along with whatever he's doin'. And some of them let go and look for somebody else better, or they just stay on their own. Well, I just want the best for my son and daughter. I know a lotta females that could be gang members. They could've been criminals, to the max, but I know they changed, and changed their way of thinking. I know they wanna do what's best for their children.

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