

Peace walk to stress community unity

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PASADENA - So far this year, Pasadena is a murder-free city.

After a spate of gang shootings, inter-racial brawls and other violence last year that claimed 10 lives, police are reveling in a sharp decline in the 2008 statistics, including a dramatic drop in what officials have labeled "youth street crimes."

Usually racially motivated, youth street crimes typically have involved black teens - in some cases gang members - attacking Latinos as they walked alone or in small groups on Northwest Pasadena's streets.

Those types of crimes peaked in 2006, when 56 incidents occurred, then fell to 23 last year, according to numbers police provided Wednesday.



So far this year, only four youth street crimes have occurred in the city, police figures show.

And while a shooting Monday in which a young man was shot in the foot involved a black victim attacked by three young Latino men, Pasadena Police Department spokeswoman Janet Pope Givens said investigators so far have found no evidence the shooting was racially motivated.

Randy Ertel of the El Centro de Accion Social, center, meets at El Centro de Accion Social in Pasadena, on Wednesday, to organize a peace march to mend relations between the black and hispanic communities this weekend. (Mike Mullen/Correspondent)

So what's behind the measurable drop in violence in Pasadena?

An intense police effort targeting gangs, parolees and drug dealers has had a major impact, according to police Chief Bernard Melekian, who currently is serving as Pasadena's interim city manager.

But he also credits the community.

"I think any time you have a reduction in crime and violence, it is never just because of the police or the community's good wishes," Melekian said Wednesday. "I think the community mobilized behind us, supported the police efforts and reached out to their kids, neighbors and people they knew.

"There were a dozen informal actions that probably didn't rise above anyone's radar screen but still made a difference."

Behind the scenes, Pope Givens and Melekian said, community groups and local anti-violence activists have made steady strides at helping to reduce racial tensions and racially motivated violence.

For the past year, groups like El Centro de Accion Social, the Pasadena NAACP, the California Coaches Coalition, Amer-I-Can, the Neighborhood Outreach Workers and the **Western Justice Center**, among many others, have quietly chipped away at the problem, according to area activists.

"We need to concentrate on our similarities, not our differences," said Israel Esteban, executive director of the upcoming Pasadena Marathon and an activist who has worked on building bonds between the city's blacks and Latinos. "We have more in common than we have different."

To highlight the commonalities and continue the dialogue, El Centro de Accion Social and Pasadena NAACP have organized a "Peace and Unity Walk," beginning at 1 p.m. Saturday at the Villa Parke Community Center. From there, blacks, Latinos and anyone else who wishes to join will walk to the Jackie Robinson Community Center, about a mile away on Fair Oaks.

"It's important to do this and develop trust between Latinos and African Americans, and I think it sends a strong message to our young people," said Randy Jurado Ertll, El Centro's executive director, who will walk at the head of the march next to local NAACP branch President Joe Brown.

While a lot has been accomplished in terms of increasing understanding between the two communities, the activists said Wednesday, much more still needs to be done.

"I feel we need to keep talking," said Tarik Ross, a city commissioner who represents Northwest Pasadena and a program director for the nonprofit community group Amer-I-Can. "Young African Americans and Latinos need to start communicating."

Those young people often do not get to learn about the history of cooperation between blacks and Latinos, said community activist Sheryl Hubbard, who also is helping organize Saturday's peace walk.

"Young people don't know about our history because black and brown history is not taught in schools," she said.

During the Civil Rights Movement, blacks and Latinos "lived together, worked together, fought together as a group," said march supporter Gary Moody, vice president of the local NAACP and founder of Crown Cities Community Development Corporation, which provides youth and family service programs.

He and other activists hope Saturday's walk will serve to boost grass-roots efforts at stemming violence, increasing opportunities for the Northwest's young people and forging deeper links between blacks and Latinos.

"We need to take this to a level where we can actually stop and talk to these kids when we see them," said Joe Ford, program director at Five Acres, a children's service organization in Altadena. "We need to start mentoring together."

Staff Writer Fred Ortega contributed to this story.