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**Expert Witness: Lewis Yablonsky Has Devoted His Life to Studying Youth Crime**

By ALLISON COHEN, Special to The Times

Their faces are etched in his memory. Sometimes they appear in his dreams: gangbangers he has saved from the death penalty, those he's put behind bars and the wrongly accused who have been freed based on his testimony. From his lost days as a teenage dice hustler on the streets of New Jersey to working inside juvenile detention centers, in jails and behind a professor's lectern for 31 years at Cal State Northridge, Lewis Yablonsky has devoted a half-century of his life to understanding gangs. When he started, they toted homemade "zip guns" fashioned of wood, pipe and rubber bands; today's carry AK-47s.

Since he gained emeritus status as a professor of sociology and criminology at Northridge in 1994, Yablonsky's sights have turned from the classroom to the courtroom, where he is putting to use "50 years of wisdom" as an expert witness in criminal cases from here to Florida.

"You are dealing with a lot of realities here," he said recently of the more than 40 cases he has worked on. If he believes in a case, he will pore over court records and police reports and interview defendants and their families to find something, anything, to sway a judge or jury that they might not have the right guy, or if they do, to spare his life. "About 5% of [murderers] are Jeffrey Dahmers," Yablonsky said, referring to the serial killer. "But most of these guys can be turned around. That's what I'm about." He has saved one Tucson gangbanger from the death penalty, arguing that the 24-year-old turned to a life of gangs as an adolescent only after his father murdered his mother. And he has freed another boy--named Geraldo--who was wrongly accused of a drive-by shooting in Sacramento after shots were fired from a truck in which he was a passenger. Yablonsky on a rare occasion has testified for the prosecution--earning thanks from former Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti for testimony that helped put Damien Williams behind bars for the brutal beating of Reginald Denny after the 1992 Rodney King verdict.

"In the case of Lewis, we are talking about someone who is saving lives and helping shape the court system," said sociologist Andrew Scott Ziner, who helped select Yablonsky for this year's William Foote Whyte Career Award for Sociological Practice, presented by the American Sociological Assn. "It's a great swan song for him," said former student and current social worker Mike Boretz, "to take all the years of his work and to be able to effectively incorporate them--the criminal and the therapeutic side." Yablonsky is considered the "most celebrated and distinguished faculty member in the department and the university as a whole," said Jane Prather, chairman of the Northridge sociology department.

"I probably have a lot more to give now than ever before in my life," Yablonsky said of the knowledge gained from the 7,000 to 10,000 interviews he has conducted with gangbangers over the years. As a child in Irvington, N.J., he was beaten by thugs because he was Jewish. He carried a switchblade until he was nearly 18 to protect himself from

black gangs in Newark. They beat him routinely, he said, because he was an ofay--a white boy. "I learned what it feels like to be an underdog," he said.

Although he never joined a gang, he befriended kids in trouble with the law, such as his best friend, Davie, who ended up in prison after hijacking a truck. "I went on to do well," Yablonsky said, "and I've always wondered why he went the way he did." After a three-year tour in the Navy, Yablonsky enrolled at Rutgers University on the GI Bill. It was there that he picked up his first book on sociology. In time, he earned master's and doctoral degrees in sociology and criminology at New York University. During those years, he worked full time at a juvenile jail in his hometown, where he ended up face to face with many of the gangsters he knew from the street. He is working on his 17th book, "Criminology: Into the 21st Century," and reviewing stacks of paperwork for upcoming cases at his modest Westside apartment. He is paid \$250 an hour to save a soul he believes has been wrongly accused. But, he said, "I'll take a case for a few hundred dollars if I believe in it." Copyright 2000 Los Angeles Times

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