

Teen's killing reveals alleged ties to gang

By Tracy Manzer and Kelly Puente, Staff Writers

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LONG BEACH - Police were out in force Monday working on the case of a 15-year-old Long Beach boy who was gunned down on a street corner Saturday night.

While the Long Beach Police Department officially declined to release the motive for Jabari Benton's slaying Monday and officials were tight-lipped about the investigation, multiple sources close to the investigation said the victim's gang affiliation most likely had something to do with the shooting.

Several officers, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Benton had amassed a solid criminal record by the time of his death.

The victim allegedly started out as a member of the Rollin' 20s Crips, then jumped to the 20s main rival, the Baby Insane Crips.

"That alone could have been enough," one officer said.

Benton also had already been arrested three times for felony robbery and was sentenced to time in the Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice Division, sources said.

"I wasn't surprised when I heard he was killed," one officer said. "He was one of those kids always looking for a fight...we figured if he didn't get someone else shot he would probably get himself killed."

Authorities said Benton returned to his former high school - even though he had not attended classes there since 2007 - last week looking to fight someone.

Long Beach Unified School District officials confirmed Benton attended Wilson until 2007, when the boy was transferred to Los

Padrinos Juvenile Detention Center in Downey. He never re-enrolled, according to the school district.

His father, Devious Benton, acknowledged his son had spent time in Los Padrinos, although he said it was for a minor charge of stealing.

Standing in front of his home holding his 2-year-old daughter on Monday, Devious (pronounced Dee-vay-us) Benton said if his son was in a gang, he wasn't aware of it.

"That all can be a possibility, but I think he was in the wrong place at the wrong time," his father said.

The 33-year-old father, who works as an inspector for commercial properties, said his son loved to play sports and dreamed of becoming a professional basketball player.

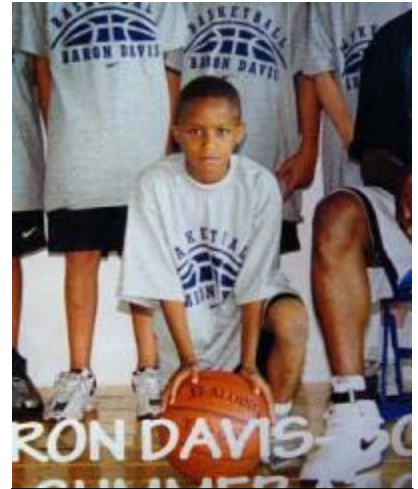
Benton would have turned 16 on Jan. 12, his father said. The teen had been an honor roll student and took accelerated classes, but began "falling" in the eighth grade while attending Bancroft Middle School, his dad said.

"I tried to help him understand that the decisions you make and the people you keep around are important," Benton said. He said his son got in trouble for stealing while attending Wilson and was sent to Los Padrinos.

After his release from Los Padrinos, the teen attended Rosie the Riveter Charter High School in Long Beach and was trying to make good grades so he could attend traditional school next year, his father said.

Devious Benton was 17 when his son was born and, he said, he raised his son with help from his family. Benton regularly saw his mother, who also lives in Long Beach, his father added.

"That was my boy, that was my son," he said. "The love that I had for him is what kept me in his life."



Jabari Benton, on a youth basketball team in 2001, was shot and killed near 11th Street and Ohio Avenue in Long Beach Saturday night. He was 15. (Team photo)

Devious Benton and his twin brother, Deonte Benton, said they grew up in a tough area of East Long Beach in the 1980s and wanted to keep the teen from that violence.

"We tried to keep him away from the streets that we grew up in," Deonte Benton said.

The 15-year-old victim was walking in an area beset by gangs when he was killed Saturday night.

The shooting occurred near the corner of 11th Street and Ohio Avenue at about 7:30p.m. when Benton was shot by a suspect on foot, Long Beach Police Sgt. Dina Zapalski said Sunday.

Benton suffered a gunshot wound to his lower torso and died at a nearby hospital, she said.

Zapalski said Monday that the department was not officially commenting on the motive due to the ongoing investigation.

Residents in the neighborhood said they heard five to seven shots ring out, and one resident - Marsha Williams - described the booming sound as similar to that of an M-80 firecracker.

Williams said she ran out of her apartment and heard a gurgling sound, which she thought at first was a dog moaning.

She saw a man bending over the victim, who was lying face-down on the sidewalk. The victim appeared unconscious and was gasping for air as the man called 911 for help, she said.

Residents said Benton may have been walking with a group of friends, who scattered when the shots rang out.

Sources close to the investigation said other youths have identified Benton's friends as gang members and some have speculated one of those individuals was the intended target Saturday night, not Benton.

Several officers also said that they were bracing for a retaliation shooting, but hoped that friends of the victim or the suspect who have information will come forward so that police can handle the matter.

Anyone with information about the slaying is urged to call Homicide Detectives David Rios or William Matsubara at 562-570-7244.

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