

## GANG VIOLENCE

# Santa Cruz police create gang unit

Three S.C. officers will focus on gang crime; county may be next

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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz police established its first dedicated gang unit Thursday, the possible precursor to a countywide gang enforcement team.

"This is a necessary and bold step toward breaking this cycle of violence countywide," Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry said.

The new police unit starts work as gang violence has reached "a tipping point" in the county, according to police spokesman Zach Friend.

"We've had shootings, stabbings and a homicide that were all gang-related in our city in the first three months of the year," he said.

Gang violence has also gripped Watsonville in recent weeks. Last month, there were three



**SKERRY**

Santa Cruz  
police chief

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gang shootings — including one fatality — in four days and police have made about two dozen gang-related arrests in the past two weeks.

The new gang unit comes on the heels of discussion by the Santa Cruz County Narcotics Enforcement Team Council about restructuring the team to have more of a gang focus.

Local law enforcement leaders are expected to vote on making SCCNET less narcotics-based later this month.

If that plan moves for-

ward, Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, who chairs the SCCNET council, said the new Santa Cruz police gang unit will be a big boon to the effort.

The unit "is enhancing the ability of this re-focused task force to provide a countywide and organized presence of law enforcement on our No. 1 problem: gang crime," Medina said.

The unit will be comprised of two officers and a sergeant, all of whom are court-certified gang experts. Two are bilingual, police said.

They will work full time to coordinate citywide gang intelligence, share gang information with other

county agencies and oversee department gang policy. Also, they will team with the Santa Cruz police Street Crimes Unit, the countywide Joint Area Gang Operations and the county's Narcotics Enforcement Team to combat gang activity.

"We really believe that this is a necessity," Friend said. "Violence is spilling over in Santa Cruz, it's spilling over into our county. Gang violence does not have any sense of a boundary."

The unit doesn't require any new staffing or extra funding. Police also said the dedicated gang officers will not leave other areas of the department short-handed.