

Youth Gangs In Santa Cruz —What Role Do They Play?

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The youth leaned against the wall of a stucco apartment and looked out from beneath a headband that covered his forehead from his jet black hair to his eyebrows.

Hands stuffed in his pocket, he watched the cars cruise along Leibrandt Street and waited for his friends.

The boy was an Eastsider — a member of a local youth gang which counts 80 to 90 members.

For this teen-ager, life consists of hanging out with friends, drinking beer and going to school. He is proud to be an Eastsider with his friends in the barrio.

But not everyone agrees with his philosophy. For some, gangs represent a nuisance and a threat to safety.

Residents of his "barrio" resent the fact that the boy and his companions paint apartment walls with graffiti, make noise and get in fights. Many wish he and other members of the youth gangs would go away and leave the neighborhood in peace.

But others see the gangs as a healthy way for the Latino youth of Santa Cruz to get together and spend their time with

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friends. They claim police blow out of proportion the gang's activities and blame the teen-agers for everything. The gangs are part of the Chicano culture, supporters say.

So far, no one has found the answer to the conflict.

According to police, youth gangs have their roots in Los Angeles, where groups of Chicano teen-agers banded together to protect their neighborhood. The gangs there have been around since the turn of the century, says Detective Bill Aluffi of the Santa Cruz Police Department. Some of the boys' grandfathers belonged to the same gang. "It's like a heritage," Aluffi explains.

But Santa Cruz is different.

Local youth gangs first surfaced in Watsonville in the '60s.

In 1974, two youths who called themselves Spider and Flaco formed the Northside Locos, a Watsonville gang which has gained strength in recent years.

The group, whose members now number approximately 120, have clashed

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with members of the rival Las Lomas Boys and there have been a number of stabbings and assaults attributed to the two gangs by police.

Things were quiet in the city of Santa Cruz until approximately two years ago when the Eastsiders and Westsiders were first noticed. Police knew about the two gangs, but there were no real clashes.

Six months ago things began to change, however. Members of the gangs became involved in more fights and there were several assaults associated with gang activity.

At one point, officers received a report of gang members luring two young tourists down a side street and attacking them.

The violence culminated in May when members of the Westside gang were allegedly attacked by Eastside members. One youth was stabbed in the incident and three others were hurt.

About a week later, police reported members of the Westsiders retaliated by

shooting a member of the Eastside gang in the groin. The defendants in that case were all convicted on assault with a deadly weapon charges. They are still awaiting sentencing.

Since that time, the violence has quieted. But police are still uneasy and are keeping watch on the situation.

The largest gang in the city is the Eastsiders. The group claims 80 to 90 members and call the area around Beach and Leibrandt Streets its barrio, according to Aluffi.

Many of the Eastsiders are believed to be illegal aliens or were born in Mexico. Some do not speak English and are looked down upon by the Westsiders, who are generally second or third-generation Mexican-Americans, according to police.

The Westsiders, who report approximately 40 members, think of themselves as "homeboys" and the Eastsiders as aliens.

It is that conflict which causes the rivalry between the two. According to Sean Upton, juvenile officer for the police department, the two groups have staked out their territory and usually stay within those boundaries. When they don't, there can be problems.

So far, the fights between the two groups have involved only individuals. There have not been any real territorial wars between the two gangs, says Upton.

Most of the fights have begun after one gang member calls a rival gang member a name or affronts him in some way, explains Upton.

The gangs usually don't attack non-members. People generally only get hurt if they walk into the middle of a gang fight, says Upton.

The incidents of the gangs attacking non-members is low in Santa Cruz although there have been some reports of violence against citizens. According to Lt. Dan Fite, however, there have been increasing attacks by Eastside gang members on local blacks and visitors.

The gangs have a very visible method of communication — both between gangs and individual members.

Their communications are called "placas" and appear as painted slogans on the walls of apartment buildings, homes and businesses.

To the uninformed, the writings are indecipherable. But the gang members know exactly what they mean.

According to Aluffi and Upton, the placas are a way of sending messages much like the wall posters of China.

A spray painted "SWS" means Santa Cruz Westside. Put a cross through those letters and write "SES" underneath it and it means the Eastsiders have invaded the territory and symbolically wiped out their rival gang.

Add a c/s plus the symbol No. 1 and the gang has issued an open challenge for warfare. That slogan means "we're number one and what are you going to do about it?" explains Upton.

Sometimes rival gangs will invade the other's territory and print their initials. It is a show of bravado more than anything else.

The gang members usually sign their names to the graffiti. Names like Spider, El Joker, El Shorty, Loco and El Preacher appear with regularity on the placas. The names are adopted by each gang members and generally refer to some physical or personality characteristic of the gang member. For instance, Loco (the Spanish word for crazy) may act crazy or Flaco (the Spanish word for skinny) may be skinny.

Sometimes, gang members may have two or three names.

The placas can be seen throughout gang territory.

Garfield Park on Almar Avenue is covered with placas from the Westsiders and the Beach Flats area is full of Eastside graffiti.

Last summer graffiti believed to have been painted by the Westside gang covered Santa Cruz High School. Damage from the vandalism, which was believed to have heralded the arrival of the Westside gang to campus, reached \$7,000, says Aluffi.

"It was incredible," he says.

Why do teen-agers join the youth gangs?

Upton says he believes it offers a camaraderie for the youths and a sense of belonging.

"It's an identity thing for them," he explains. "They like to be identified as an Eastsider or Westsider."

It is also a system of support. Like the camaraderie of an athletic team, the gang members look for support from each other.

But the youth gang members very seldom get involved in school athletics or clubs "because it destroys the 'cool' syndrome," says Upton.

"It's too bad because some of them are very talented athletically," says Upton, who coaches a local high school football team.

Even if someone came in and started a city league softball team, it probably would not be accepted, says Upton. "Ideas have to come from within before they are accepted." They have to fit with the ganging syndrome — that of hanging out and being cool, he says.

The gangs have an unwritten code of ethics and even a special way of dressing.

According to police, many youth gang members can be recognized by their baggy pants, white T-shirt, Pendleton shirt and spit-shined shoes. Some wear bandanas over their foreheads and others wear baseball hats with their gang initials printed on the inside brim. When a youth gang member wants to reveal his identity he may flip up his hat brim to reveal the initials and his allegiance.

Intimidation is a factor in the clothing. "The gang members like the fact that their appearance puts them out as a gang member and they don't bypass an opportunity to intimidate," says Upton.

However, as many members of the Mexican-American community warn, just because a Chicano youth wears baggy pants and a Pendleton shirt that doesn't mean he is a gang member. The style of dress is common in the Chicano community.

Three other gangs attempted to gain a foothold in Santa Cruz, but have generally failed, according to police.

One group called itself the International Players and vowed to clean up the mall, say police. The gang eventually died out.

Another gang called itself the Black Dragons and consisted of teen-agers who spent most of their day on the mall. That group also faded from the scene.

A third group, which modeled itself after the Los Angeles black youth gang called the Crips, also began to get organized but did not succeed.

The only two gangs who remained in Santa Cruz were the Latino youth groups, police say.

Officers hope there will be no more problems between the groups.

"We try to tell them they are not going to be a gang member all their lives. They are going to have to go to work sometime," says Upton. "If they get involved in street gangs and get a record, its going to make life more difficult down the road."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Attempts to interview gang members were unsuccessful. Those members of the gangs contacted by the Sentinel said they did not wish to talk.