

What the police are doing to combat the youth gangs

By ANN CONY
(Third in a series)

Youth gangs have existed in Watsonville for a long time, but "they were never this violent," said Deputy Police Chief Roy Ingersoll in a recent interview.

Although the city has enjoyed "periods of remission" in the past, he mused, it's now suffering through a "flare up" of brutal youth crime. "We can't wait and let it run its course."

"I think they are getting bolder," he said of the gangs. "They're more vocal and they're demonstrating their displeasure with policemen more openly." They identify themselves in conspicuous ways, he added: dressing alike and spray painting their names all over town, for instance. "They desperately want to be recognized," Ingersoll maintained.

He recalls when the North Side Locos first came to his attention a little over three years ago and "everybody laughed at them. They thought it was a big joke."

But it was no joke.

Ingersoll said the rise of the Locos seems to have more or less coincided with the end of police involvement with the local Boys' Club in 1976. (Administration of the club was taken over by the city's recreation department.) The Boys' Club had some 700 members when the police were running it, said Ingersoll, but attendance has since dwindled dramatically and the city's plans for building a new police station at one time called for demolition of the Boys' Club building.

Joe Flores, the juvenile officer in the detective division, commented that gang activity seems to be cyclical. The last bad point in the cycle, he said, was two and a half years ago, when gang members were involved in a shootout in Ramsay Park and a brutal knifing death.

By the end of 1977, as many as half of the 50 or so Locos were behind prison bars or in the custody of California Youth Authority, according to police. But since then, some have been released, the gang has actively recruited new members and, in the last six months, it appeared the gang was "regrouping," Flores said.

Virtually all of the Northsiders have been arrested by police at one time or another for curfew violations, drug possession, malicious mischief or more serious charges, Ingersoll said.

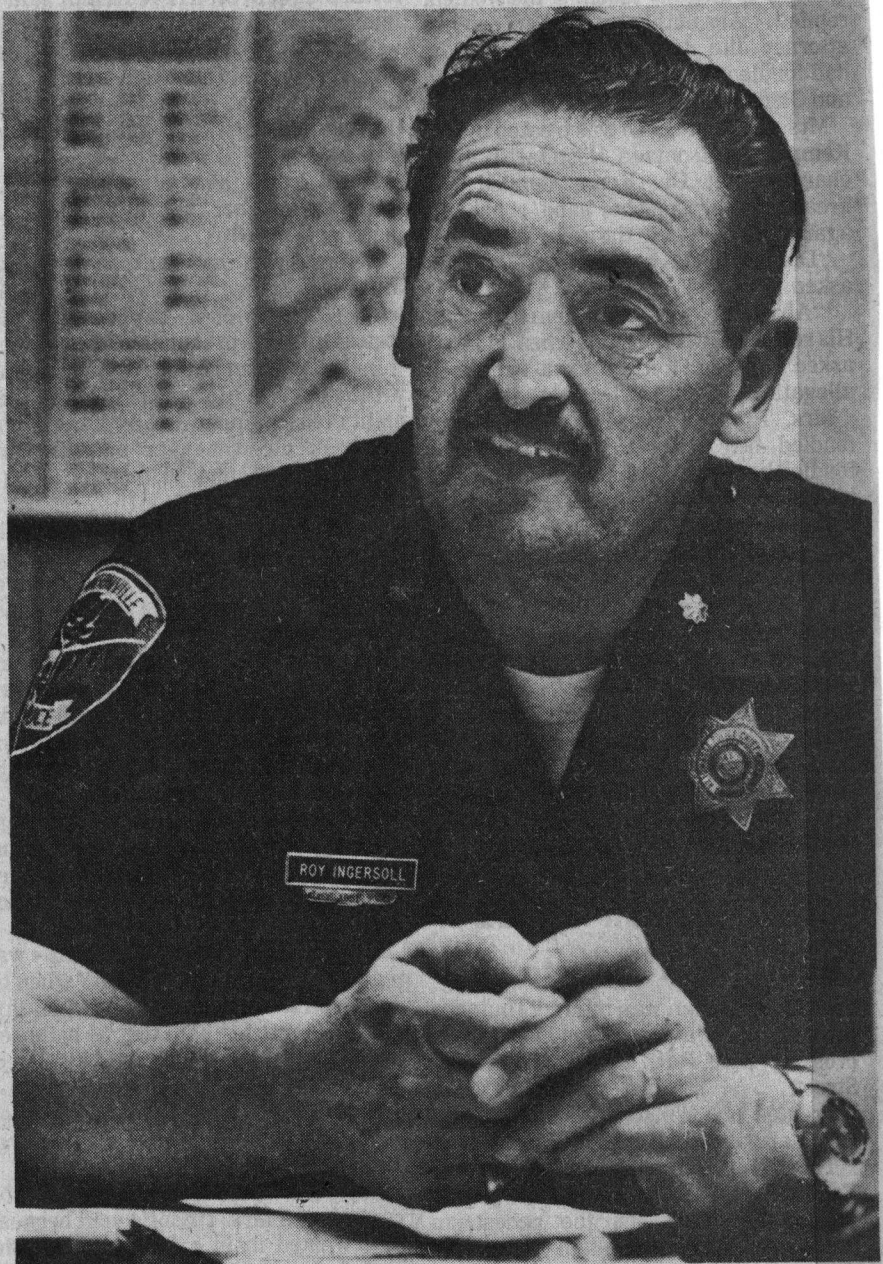
Flores said he now feels "the structure of the North Side is breaking up." Police maintain that at least a few instrumental gang members are "on the run" because of warrants for their arrest in connection with felony crimes. Still, "we're going to keep after them," Flores said.

A spate of violent street crimes before and during the Christmas and New Year holidays — stabbings, shootings, robberies, muggings — caught the attention of local residents. People aren't just frightened — they're mad.

"You can't hardly blame them," said Ingersoll. "A person works hard and saves, and in a moment it's all taken away from him."

Police and City Council members alike are getting more calls than usual from citizens who want to know what is being done to combat the crime wave in general and solve certain cases in particular.

(Still, "Some of our most irate complainers are people who complain that we didn't get the flags up on time and that cars are parked illegally on



ROY INGERSOLL — People laughed at first.

their streets," said Detective Sgt. Chuck Carter.)

"Manpower is a primary problem," Ingersoll acknowledged. And in these post-Prop. 13 days, it seems, "There's no bright light at the end of the tunnel," Carter added.

Manpower is a critical problem not only in Watsonville but in virtually all police departments, Ingersoll said. "We simply cannot be in all places at once."

Gang problems are by no means unique to Watsonville. San Jose and Los Angeles, for instance, have had tremendous trouble with gang-related crime. "In lots of respects Watsonville lags behind those cities" in terms of the rise of youth gangs, Ingersoll said, "and they haven't solved the problem either."

After a particularly violent New Year's weekend in Watsonville, Police Chief Al Williams announced the formation of a police task force to deal exclusively with youth crime in the city. The panel is headed by Ingersoll, who said the term "task force" is a misnomer of sorts.

The officers assigned to the so-called task force are looking into complaints of reputed gang activities and cases of youth crime in general. They are compiling dossiers on juveniles known to take part in crime and are making a concentrated effort to solve specific felony cases. They are also pooling their knowledge and resources with the sheriff's offices of Santa Cruz and Mon-

terey counties. ("We know the city limits, but they don't," Carter said of the youthful offenders.)

To be effective, "It's going to require a lot of manpower," Ingersoll said.

The task force is focusing on criminal activities such as assaults and strong-arm robberies. "The people committing these crimes have been identified as being young males, often 13, 14, 15 years old," Ingersoll said. And, he cautioned, they are "not necessarily all part of a gang," although "we know a terrific number of offenses against persons are committed by youths."

How many such youths are there in Watsonville?

"One hundred, maybe 125, 150 at the very most," Ingersoll said. "A tremendously low percentage of kids is really creating a black eye for the city."

And all are not boys. Police have received numerous reports of young girls being beaten by groups of other girls.

The Police Department and the district attorney's office have been hampered in making arrests and filing charges because victims and witnesses of violent crimes have often been reluctant to talk or testify in fear of reprisals.

Ingersoll acknowledged that such fears are not unfounded since suspects have the right to know who their accusers are. Often, "victims are reluctant to come forth and say, 'yes, I know who did it'." But recently, "I see more and more

(Continued on page 14)

people coming forth."

Because people are angry now about crime on the streets, said Carter, "they're more willing to take the risk and do something to stop it."

"The community as a whole has to recognize the problem and support the police," Ingersoll said.

He added they'd like to have the cooperation of high school students, some of whom seem to have fairly extensive knowledge of gang activities.

The police admit they have an image problem with teen-agers as a group, as is the case in most communities.

A group of students interviewed recently at Watsonville High indicated they were not anxious to help the police because "they bust us just for smoking pot . . . Nobody around here likes the cops."

Because the police represent authority

and enforce marijuana laws, alcohol, traffic and curfew laws, high schoolers as a group tend to be hostile to officers. But, Ingersoll said, "One on one, policeman and kid, they're really responsive to officers."

In terms of public relations as a whole, "This is an area we have to get back into," he admitted. "We have to go back and start communicating with people in the community . . . We should address young people in the primary grades, to demonstrate what can happen or what would happen if they choose to go outside of the law." Public relations has not been a top priority in the department because of the shortage of personnel, Ingersoll explained.

"We also have to have the cooperation of the parents. The parents are going to have to care a little more. We've seen a lot of young people just wasting away to nothing," Ingersoll said.

The parents of chronic juvenile offenders, Carter said, "care to the extent that they love the child and they're concerned, but they're often concerned about the wrong things." These parents, he said, tend to be extremely protective of their children and worried more about whether officers may have violated their kids' rights than about the offenses which have caused the kids to tangle with the law in the first place.

The victims of violent youth crimes are virtually all Mexican-American. Does this mean the Chicano gangs are hesitant to attack Anglos? No, said Carter, but Anglos for the most part, "don't get intoxicated, stagger out of the Pasa Tiempo (bar) and stagger home across the Plaza."

While robbery is the motive for some of the violent crimes committed by youths, often the primary motive is peer recogni-

tion. Some of the attacks are made "to gain stature or meet a challenge," said Ingersoll. Occasionally they may be committed on a dare and sometimes the violence occurs in response to mere verbal insults. In other cases, attacks are aimed at other gangs in retaliation.

Sometimes a juvenile offender will show remorse when arrested for a brutal act, but at the time of the offense, "They are, in a sense, unconscious of the consequences that lie ahead. They really don't think about it," said Ingersoll.

If the court penalties for juvenile offenders were harsher, he believes, youths might think twice before assaulting people.

(Robert Martinez Ramirez, a Northsider wanted by police in connection with an attempted murder last month, in which a man was shot execution-style on Lee Road, was convicted of manslaughter in 1977. When he knifed Eddie

Padilla to death, Ramirez was 17, not yet an adult in the eyes of the law. He was paroled from the California Youth Authority last August, after serving less than three years.)

"I think our legislators and the courts should take a very close look at youthful offenders," Ingersoll said. "When is a youth a youth?" If a person is old enough to carry and use a gun, perhaps he is taking on adult responsibilities. "It shouldn't uniformly be established by age. Some 14- or 15-year-old boys are quite capable of committing some horrendous crimes."

Reporters have heard some local people say the police should physically harass the "punks," beat them and "rough 'em up good" to teach them a lesson, even if the police can't pin a crime on them. The only thing those kids understand, say some, is violence. And the only way to curtail their violence is to

dish it out in return.

But physical harassment by officers is not sanctioned by the brass, said Ingersoll. "It makes us no better than them."

In addition, such action would violate the constitutional civil rights of the youths and "We don't have the power to violate anyone else's rights," Ingersoll pointed out.

"Fifteen or 20 years ago, that was not unknown. But those days are past.

"That doesn't mean a police officer has to stand back and be abused. He doesn't have a heck of a lot of rights left — but that's one of them — he has the right to defend himself."

And, "When we see young people gathering in big groups, they're going to be checked out — no matter who they are or where they are."