

# Gangs turn up the violence



Police Sgt. Ed Rodriguez walks the path along the Pajaro River near where two gang members were killed.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



# Watsonville police see rise in use of handguns

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WATSONVILLE — The "Tree of Knowledge" stands along the banks of the Pajaro River levee, its thick trunk carved with the initials CHW — City Hall Watsonville. Above the letters is sprayed the number "14."

This is the turf of the the City Hall gang. The asphalt walkway in front of the tree lists City Hall members, guys like Bear and Woody.

Woody Sandoval is dead, killed in a gang shooting. And rival gangs have issued their own challenges, by 'x'ing out City Hall's graffiti on its own turf.

Spurred by a shift in allegiances and paint sniffing among gang members, police contend gang violence in Watsonville has escalated sharply in recent months leaving a spray of gunfire through rival territories.

Though not larger, the gangs have been more violent, used bigger guns, and have fought more among themselves, police contend.

"In the last few months, we've seen the most gang activity we've ever seen," said Detective Dave McCartney, of the Watsonville Police Department. "We've never experienced the violent acts we've had this year in such a short period of time."

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Statistically, the number of gang-related incidents in Watsonville refutes the tension. Gang-related crime has decreased about 20 percent when compared to last year, averaging about seven incidents a month, according to Sgt. Eddie Rodriguez, who serves on one of the department's two gang units. Over the past decade, seven deaths in Watsonville have been attributed to gang killings.

But, the incidents this year, including a double homicide, have been more violent, Rodriguez maintained.

Rodriguez said the toll of gang-related

nie prisons and immigration, Watsonville gang observers contend. In gangs, they find a sense of belonging, protection and respect.

The North Side gang, with about 50 to 100 members, most of whom were born in Northern California, is the oldest established Watsonville gang, said McCartney. A Norteno, or northern-born, gang, members affiliate with number 14 and the color red.

City Hall, the largest gang with about 150 members, is also a Norteno gang, whose members identify with number 14 and red.

In the past, the two clashed with Watsonville's Sureno, or Southern-born, gang, the Poor Siders. The Poor Siders, primarily migrants from Mexico, identify with the number 13, and color blue.

McCartney maintains that the Poor Siders, who formed for self-protection, are "probably the most violent when they do act.

"Nortenos don't like them because they come from Mexico. They've had an ongoing feud. The guys who were born here have always had it in for them," said McCartney.

"North Siders and City Hall guys have gotten along without too many problems," said McCartney.

incidents includes:

- A stabbing of a Poor Side gang member at a dance on Aug. 31. A City Hall gang member is believed responsible.

- The following night, Sept. 1, about 15 shots were fired at an apartment complex on West Front Street. A person with no gang ties was shot in the hip. Poor Side members are believed responsible.

- On Sept. 7, shots were fired at a home at 119 Ford St. formerly occupied by a North Side gang member. The Los Lomas gang members are suspected. The intended victim is currently a defendant in a Santa Clara County homicide.

- On Sept. 20, a former City Hall gang member was shot in the stomach on Lincoln and Elm streets, across from Watsonville High School football field.

"Now we've seen a definite split between them.

"They're all warring with each other at this point," said McCartney.

While there may be a variety of reasons for the split, part of the animosity was created when "individuals from City Hall have gone to the North Side gang," said Sgt. Eddie Rodriguez, who serves on one of the department's two gang units.

"Some of it has to do with City Hall trying to establish its own identity and respect. They're not backing down," said Rodriguez.

Gang graffiti used to challenge rival gangs has reflected the breakdown, said Rodriguez.

At the same, there's been an upsurge of paint sniffing among youth, including those with gang affiliations. "A lot of the guys we're contacting now have been sniffing paint, which makes them more aggressive in their actions," said McCartney.

Police say, too, the weapons are bigger. "Before, they used their hands and feet and then baseball bats and knives. Now they're using guns," said Lynn Lofano, of the county Sheriff's Office. The 9mm semi-automatic handgun is being used, said Rodriguez. "But we're not seeing assault rifles like AK-47s."

Four North Side gang members have been charged in the attack. One of the suspects charged was a former City Hall member who had switched gangs.

- On Oct. 7, a Poor Side member was shot in the arm in a drive-by shooting in an alley. Police don't know who is responsible, and the victim has gone to Mexico.

- On Oct. 11, two members of the Poor Side gang were shot and killed on the Pajaro River levee. Police have no solid information on the suspect gang, but believe the shooting was gang-related, said Rodriguez.

Three main Hispanic gangs vie for territory in Watsonville, although there are other smaller gangs. Their roots can be traced to poverty, labor disputes, Califor-

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Police reactivated the department's gang unit the night of the Lincoln Street shooting outside Watsonville High School on Sept. 20. Since the double homicide, another gang unit has been added.

From contacts with gangs, Rodriguez estimates that the number of gang members is holding steady at around 300.

"We're still seeing kids joining, but not the significant numbers we saw the last two summers."

But a lot of wannabe gang members are on the fringe, evaluating whether to join, he said.

On the bright side, Rodriguez said schools have been able to remain neutral territory. School and community counselors have also been successful in gang intervention to a large extent, he said.

Given current tensions and media attention, that could change, warned Bill Zaragoza, a counselor for Youth Services.

"The more you put things out, the more kids eat that up. It gives power to the gangs," said Zaragoza.

"Right now it's real sensitive, a very volatile situation," he said. "The pressure is great to join. There are a lot of kids wanting to make a name for themselves and be in gangs. If you label them, it almost pushes them."