

# Homicide total at 11, with many unsolved

County killings down from 2010 but  
Watsonville sees increase

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*✓* SANTA CRUZ — After a weekend of back-to-back homicides, Santa Cruz County is poised to close out 2011 with 11 homicides, four of which remain unsolved. That's a decrease from 2010, which finished out with 15 deaths listed as homicides. *murder 12-18-11*

This year's cases include a father-son murder-suicide, a woman killed by a reckless driver and several incidents of suspected gang violence.

Last weekend, 36-year-old Ronald "Aaron" Carpenter was stabbed to death at a house in Capitola.

Capitola police officers said they'd received several calls about a domestic disturbance at the home prior to finding Carpenter's body at 10:45 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 11. Marcos Robert Chavez, 23, was arrested and charged in Carpenter's death. The day prior, 14-year-old Jesse Lopez of Watsonville was shot to death at a turnout on Highway 152. The teenager and a friend were at a party at the county fairgrounds, and decided to go socialize elsewhere, according to the Sheriff's Office. They piled into an acquaintance's car and drove to a turnout on Hecker Pass Road. Another car arrived shortly before

SEE HOMICIDE ON A10



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

The eyes of Jesse Lopez stare out from a photograph in an altar to the memory of the 14-year old Watsonville teen that was killed over the weekend.

# HOMICIDE

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8:15 p.m. and hostile gunfire ensued.

Lopez and his friend were both shot, but the friend survived and was able to call 911 for help. Lopez' family say their son wasn't involved with gang activity, and had never been in trouble with the law. The investigation into motive continues but four identified gang members have been arrested in the case.

Authorities have arrested David Moreno Sanchez, 19, of Los Banos, and Alexis Alejandro Rodriguez, 18, of Royal Oaks, on suspicion of homicide, attempted homicide and gang participation. Juan Soto Gonzalez, 22, of Santa Cruz and Carlos Valencia, 20, of Watsonville were arrested on suspicion of accessory and gang participation.

## GANG VIOLENCE

Gang activity continued to plague South County in 2011, with Watsonville hit particularly hard. The city saw an uptick in homicides this year with a total of six, compared to just one homicide in 2010. Four of these are believed to have been gang-related.

The year got off on a bad start with the stabbing death of 32-year-old Jose Coronel on Jan. 2. The father of three grew up in Watsonville and attended local schools. He was home with his sister and a friend when they went to get snacks at the store. As they returned home to his apartment near the corner of Pennsylvania and Hammer drives, he stabbed several times in the chest. At the time, police said they believed it was gang-motivated, in part because Coronel had dropped out of a gang.

Coronel's death left three



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Virgil Lane is blocked near the corner of Gross Road on Monday morning as Capitola police investigate the Sunday night murder of Ronald 'Aaron' Carpenter.

month before his death, Duran was stabbed with an ice pick, at or near a party in Watsonville, relatives said.

No suspect has been arrested, but authorities say they have some good leads.

"We're still actively working it," said Sgt. Ian Patrick of the Sheriff's Office. "This is a case we're investigating on a daily basis."

Patrick said the sheer number of guests at the party, combined with conflicting reports from some witnesses, have complicated the investigation.

"We have high hopes for a resolution that results in an

Rudy Escalante, and the investigations often take a long time.

That doesn't mean the department isn't actively working to solve them though.

Escalante said the department has worked hard to strengthen county, statewide and federal partnerships to help in combatting gang violence.

The Santa Cruz County Gang Task Force was formed in September following the spate of killings. Formed after a year of planning, it brings together members of the California Highway Patrol, State

at random.

Barajas, 48, was driving home on July 11, heading south on Highway 17 on Ocean Street when she was struck head-on, killing her. She was wearing her seat belt and the airbag deployed but the car was totalled and she was declared dead at the scene, according to the California Highway Patrol, which handled the incident.

Barajas had worked as an endoscopy and sterile-processing technician at Sutter Maternity and Surgery Center in Santa Cruz since 2004.

Weers, 28, stayed around the scene of the crash and

## 2011 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HOMICIDES

**JAN. 2:** Jose Alfredo Coronel, 32, was stabbed to death near the corner of Pennsylvania and Hammer drives in Watsonville across the street from his apartment. Police said Coronel had been at home with his sister and a friend when they went to get snacks at a store. When they returned, Coronel was stabbed several times in the chest and lay on the sidewalk. Police said the slaying was gang motivated, and Coronel had dropped out of a gang. The murder weapon, most likely a knife, has not been found and no one has been arrested.

**APRIL 26:** Heather Marie Stearns, 30, was found dead in an upstairs apartment on the 100 block of East Cliff Drive. Santa Cruz police said she had been deceased for at least a week while its tenant — 63-year-old parolee John Clauer — had been living there. Police held Clauer for questioning that night and he is now in an Alameda County jail on a parole hold. The Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office recently issued a Ramey warrant for Clauer to bring him back to the county when his out-of-county matters are adjudicated. Clauer has been charged.

**APRIL 10:** Isaac Ramirez, 20, was shot outside an apartment complex on the 200 block of Clifford Drive during a teen's birthday party, police reported. Ramirez was a known gang member, and he was treated for gunshot wounds at Watsonville Community Hospital before he died, authorities said. No one has been arrested in the shooting.

**JUNE 7:** Robin Miranda, 22, was shot and killed by Watsonville police after he refused to drop a shotgun that he had stolen from Big 5 Sporting Goods on Green Valley Road in Watsonville, police said. Miranda, of Watsonville, had filled out paperwork to buy a rifle and was told he had to wait to buy it, police said. Miranda left and returned to the store minutes later with an electric saw, which he used to cut off a wall lock, take the shotgun and load it, police said. He fired at least one shot in the store as a store employee called 911. Miranda's death certificate listed homicide as his cause of death. Miranda's family said he struggled with paranoia and other mental health issues.

**JULY 7:** Stephen Hull, 62, and Aaron Hull, 36, were found shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide at a home on the 100 block of Lawrence Avenue in Watsonville. Police were called to the house for a domestic disturbance, and Aaron Hull fired shots at a sergeant after they talked at the house. The sergeant saw a man dead in the house during their conversation, and a SWAT team tried to contact Aaron Hull during a seven-hour standoff. Police entered the house about 12:40 a.m. and found the two men dead from gunshot wounds. Aaron apparently shot himself, police said.

**JULY 9:** Luis Duran, 19, of Soquel, was shot and killed just after midnight as he left a party at a house on the 200 block of Manfre Road near the Watsonville Municipal Airport. An 18-year-old woman, unidentified, was shot in the shoulder, then treated and released at the hospital. They were among 50 and 75 guests at an 18th birthday party which was attended by gang members. Investigators say she wasn't a gang member, but they're not sure about him. They say he was stabbed about a

...at the corner of Pennsylvania and Hammer drives, he stabbed several times in the chest. At the time, police said they believed it was gang-motivated, in part because Coronel had dropped out of a gang.

Coronel's death left three children younger than age of 6 without a father, including a then 6-month-old daughter. He left behind his mother, two sisters and a brother. The murder weapon, most likely a knife, has not been found. No arrests have been made in his death.

Isaac Ramirez, 20, who police say was a known gang member, was shot outside an apartment complex on the 200 block of Clifford Drive on April 10, after a teenager's birthday party. Officers were responding to noise complaints at the apartment when several people reported gunshots there. Several people were detained at the scene, and police later found Ramirez with gunshot wounds at Watsonville Community Hospital. He died there a few hours later.

Ramirez did not live at the apartment, and police said another gang-related killing there had occurred two years' prior.

Police still don't have a suspect in the case, and there "aren't as many leads as we'd like," said Sgt. Saul Gonzales of the Watsonville Police Department. Gonzales said the department has struggled with getting witnesses to come forward and the case has been slow-going.

July was a particularly brutal month, with three gang-related shootings in three weeks.

Luis Duran was shot and killed in the early morning hours of July 9 as he left a party near the Watsonville Municipal Airport on the 200 block of Manfre Road, outside city jurisdiction. An 18-year-old woman also was shot after leaving the party, but she was treated and released. Duran, 19, of Soquel was among 50-75 guests at an 18th birthday party authorities have said was attended by gang members. Duran "had some trouble" as a younger teen, but was not a gang member, according to his uncle, Robert Ruvalcava. He worked at a retirement community and was attending Cabrillo College. Less than a

daily basis. Patrick said the sheer number of guests at the party, combined with conflicting reports from some witnesses, have complicated the investigation.

"We have high hopes for a resolution that results in an arrest," he said.

A week later, on July 16, Jose Ventura of Pajaro was shot and killed just before midnight on the 600 block of Rodriguez Street in Watsonville while walking home. A man got out of a dark sedan, and 22-year-old Ventura was shot and killed. No arrests have been made in that case, said Gonzales.

Watsonville police don't believe Ventura was an active gang member, but that he had loose gang ties and was a "perceived gang member."

"We believe there were at least a couple of witnesses and we're hoping they'll come forward," said Gonzales.

On July 23, Gustavo Diaz Zaragoza, 20, was shot and killed in the Target parking lot around 6:15 p.m. on a busy Saturday. Police believe Zaragoza was a field worker from Prunedale who was in town to shop with his girlfriend and another man. Zaragoza is believed to have gang affiliations though.

The three were leaving the store and were headed to the car when a another car containing two or three rival gang members passed by them, and the two groups of men exchanged glances. The car circled the lot and returned, pulling up alongside the victims. A gunman inside the car began firing a handgun. Zaragoza was shot. He died in the parking lot. The girlfriend was shot in the arm, but was treated for her injuries.

No arrests have been made but police in August identified the driver of the suspected getaway car as Miguel Angel Rodriguez, an alleged gang member. A warrant has been issued for his arrest.

Though Gonzales said the department doesn't know exactly what caused the spike in gang activity that month, police have said that the arrests of some significant gang members in June shook up the leadership of Watsonville gangs.

"These cases are extremely complex," said Deputy Chief

help in combating gang violence.

The Santa Cruz County Gang Task Force was formed in September following the spate of killings. Formed after a year of planning, it brings together members of the California Highway Patrol, State Parks, Capitola police, Santa Cruz police, the District Attorney's Office, County Probation, the Sheriff's Office, Scotts Valley police, Watsonville police and State Parole.

Escalante said the department also is working hard to strengthen education and prevention programs, as part of its multifaceted approach toward gang violence.

"We're not just approaching it from an enforcement perspective," he said.

#### SANTA CRUZ AREA

In Santa Cruz, police discovered the body of Heather Stearns in an apartment on the 1100 block of East Cliff Drive on April 26. The 30-year-old Santa Cruz woman had been dead in the apartment for several days, Santa Cruz police said. Stearns, a 1999 Santa Cruz High School graduate, had worked at a veterinary clinic briefly after high school but her family said she hadn't worked for several years prior to her death.

John Bruce Clauer, 63, lived in the studio apartment and was a friend of Stearns, police said. Clauer was taken into custody on a parole hold and prosecutors eventually charged him with her murder. Clauer has a long criminal history that includes convictions for battery, felony drug possession, burglary and resisting arrest, according to court records. He's scheduled for a preliminary hearing, which is held to determine whether there's sufficient evidence to bring a defendant to trial on the charges, in county court in February.

Stearns' death marked the sole homicide in Santa Cruz in 2011, down from six the previous year.

"One homicide is still too many," said Zach Friend, spokesman for the Santa Cruz police department.

A second killing occurred in July just outside city limits. Prosecutors say Eric Rsel Weers intentionally drove into oncoming traffic and struck Ana Barajas' vehicle

California Highway Patrol, which handled the incident.

Barajas had worked as an endoscopy and sterile-processing technician at Sutter Maternity and Surgery Center in Santa Cruz since 2004.

Weers, 28, stayed around the scene of the crash and was later charged with murder for what prosecutors say was an intentional act. He's in custody and will back in court on Jan. 5 for the setting of his trial on murder charges.

Weers has long struggled with mental illness, according to his attorney Bill Weigel, and has been institutionalized a number of times. The Soquel High School graduate was living in a group home at the time of the crash.

#### MURDER-SUICIDE AND SLAIN SUSPECT

Robin Miranda struggled with mental illness, according to his family. The 22-year-old was fatally shot on June 7 by police after he refused to drop a shotgun he'd stolen from Big 5 Sporting Goods on Green Valley Road in Watsonville. Miranda fired at least one shot in the store as an employee called 911. Police were cleared of any wrongdoing in the case, but his death certificate listed homicide as the cause of death.

A month later, on July 7, Watsonville police were called to a Lawrence Avenue home for reports of a domestic disturbance after a family member at another location called to say there was a problem and someone might be injured. Officers arrived and spoke to 36-year-old Aaron Hull, whom they discovered had killed his 62-year-old father, Stephen. A seven-hour standoff ensued, during which the younger Hull fatally shot himself.

#### DECEMBER

The latest two homicides come after several months of comparative quiet with regards to fatal crimes. Arrests have not been made in four of the year's slayings, but authorities say all of the unsolved cases are being actively worked on. Suspects in two of the cases will head to court for the respective charges in early 2012, while the Sheriff's Office and police departments continue to investigate those that remain unsolved.

police said. **JULY 9:** Luis Duran, 19, of Soquel, was shot and killed just after midnight as he left a party at a house on the 200 block of Manfre Road near the Watsonville Municipal Airport. An 18-year-old woman, unidentified, was shot in the shoulder, then treated and released at the hospital. They were among between 50 and 75 guests at an 18th birthday party which was attended by gang members. Investigators say she wasn't a gang member, but they're not sure about him. They say he was stabbed about a month earlier and it appears he had gang ties.

**JULY 11:** Ana Luz Barajas of Santa Cruz was killed on Highway 17 when Eris Rsel Weers, 28, drove an Acura SUV northbound in the southbound lanes and intentionally struck Barajas' vehicle.

**JULY 16:** Jose Ventura, 22, of Pajaro, was shot and killed about 11:40 p.m. on the 600 block of Rodriguez Street while walking home. A man got out of a dark sedan. It is unclear if he and Ventura spoke, police said. Ventura was shot twice with a shotgun, police said. He was taken to a hospital where he died, police said.

**JULY 23:** A 18-year-old Prunedale field worker, Gustavo Diaz Zaragoza, was gunned down in the Target parking lot on Main Street about 6:15 p.m. Saturday. Police said he and a man who drove a Honda Accord exchanged looks prior to the shooting.

**DEC. 10:** A 14-year-old Watsonville boy, Jesse Lopez, was shot at a turnout on the 400 block of Hecker Pass Road outside Watsonville, according to the Sheriff's Office. Lopez died at Watsonville Community Hospital. Authorities have arrested David Moreno Sanchez, 19, of Los Banos, and Alexis Alejandro Rodriguez, 18, of Royal Oaks, on suspicion of homicide, attempted homicide and gang participation. Juan Soto Gonzalez, 22, of Santa Cruz and Carlos Valencia, 20, of Watsonville were arrested on suspicion of accessory and gang participation.

**DEC. 11:** Ronald 'Aaron' Carpenter, 36, of Mid-County was stabbed to death at a house on the 3200 block of Virgil Lane in Capitola. 23-year-old Marcos Robert Chavez, who rented a studio from the couple who own the house, was arrested for murder.