

Why gangs exist

Gangs

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Membership branches out countywide

By JOHN ROBINSON
and MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writers

EDDIE REYES, a longtime Watsonville gang member, sits in the County Jail and says, "I wouldn't want kids to do what I have done. But you can't tell them. They are going to do it anyway."

The reasons gangs exist are complex and varied, from economics and social status, to the breakdown of families. Some join gangs for protection, others simply because it is fun and the violence is a high.

According to law enforcement officials, gang membership is increasing and branching out into neighborhoods countywide.

The gang life begins early for some children.

Jessie Martinez joined the "Northsiders" in Watsonville at 14, when he was "jumped in," by four gang members who beat him to test his toughness.

For years he wanted to be a member of the gang — to be one of the tough guys he looked up to at school and in his neighborhood.

Like many gang members, Martinez didn't receive a lot of guidance from his parents. His mother was always working and his father chronically absent.

"My dad was always out making kids" with other women, said Martinez, who has five brothers and sisters. "There were times I wanted to go to him, and talk to him about girls, just guy things, or hang around. I always had to beg."

In 1988, when Martinez was 16, he watched his friend Woody Sandoval die in front of the Watsonville Public Library from a shotgun blast by a rival Poorside gang member.

"I was a pretty mellow guy before my friend Woody got killed," Martinez said. "When that happened, it got to my head and I started getting in trouble with the law. I started going crazy. It built anger, and I wanted to do something."

Martinez has been in and out of jail ever since.

Now 22, he is serving time at the county rehabilitation center for violating probation. His offenses have included vandalism, sniffing paint, possession of stolen property and burglary. He considers himself lucky for not getting caught for assaults.

Law enforcement officials said most gang members don't join the violence because of a vendetta, but do it to defend and protect their "homeboys."

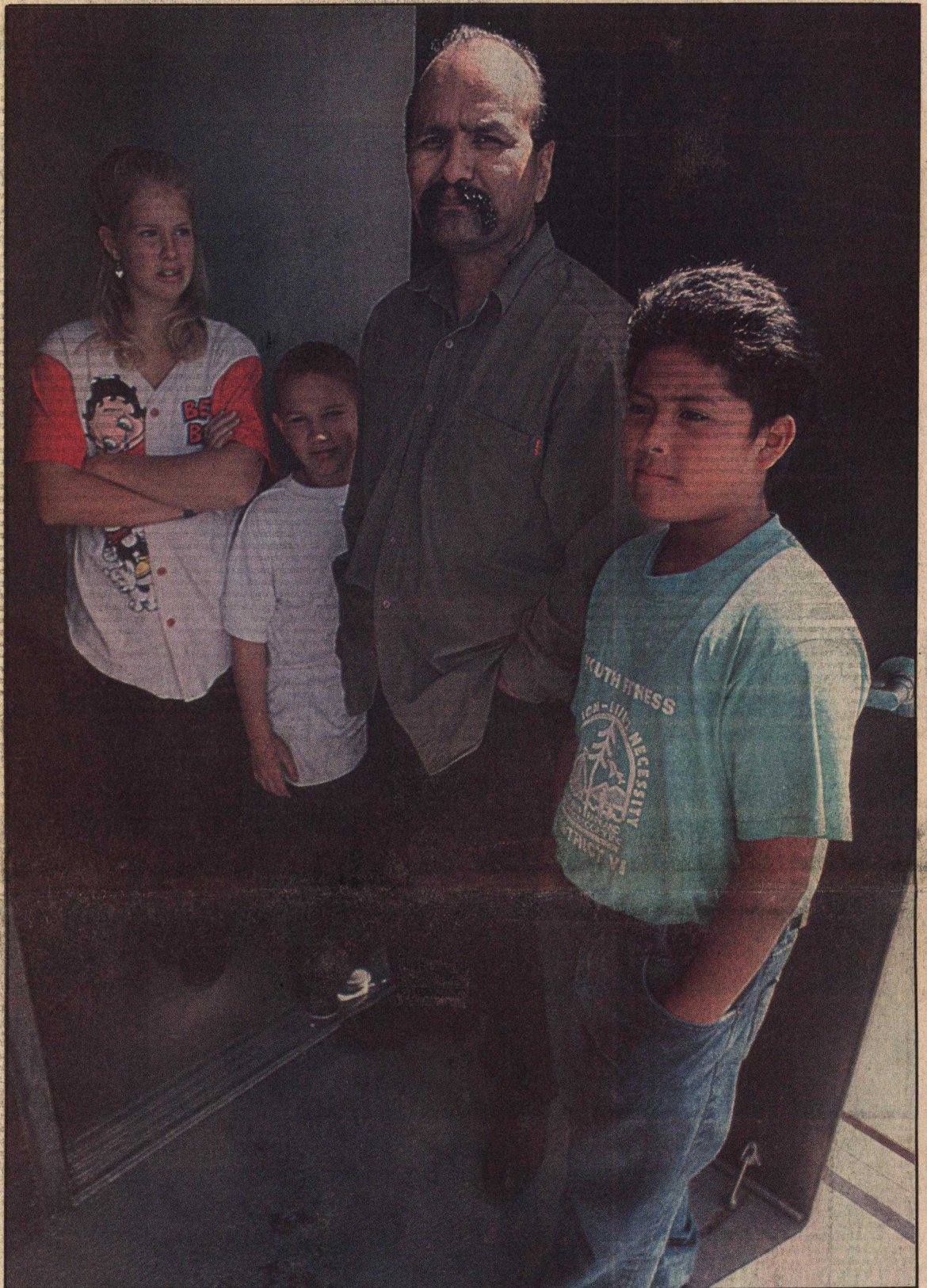
"The rivalries and retaliations have gone on for so long that they get lost in it. They forget where it started," said Robles.

Home life

Children who are in gangs or at risk of joining them are seeking a sense of purpose and an identity historically found in families, neighborhoods and churches, local social workers say.

Many come from unstable homes, where parents are either physically or verbally abusive, dependent on alcohol or drugs, or working long hours to provide their family food and shelter. Young people look outside their

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Former '70s gang member Mike Chavez pays a visit to E.A. Hall Middle School.

Former gang member becomes a key player

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

IN THE 13 years that have passed since Mike Chavez was a proud gang member, the Watsonville resident has distanced himself from his former allies.

His personal transformation over the past decade includes becoming a family man, Little League coach and youth counselor.

The tattoos on his arms and neck are now blurred, but still reveal a painful past that is always vivid to Chavez.

The tattoos show that the 39-year-old is a *veterano*, a veteran of the street wars. Most of his former 'homeboys' are in jail or are dead — this year alone, three died from violence or drug addictions.

As an anti-gang youth counselor with Fenix Services, Cha-

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vez is a key player in a network known as BASTA that unites law enforcement, educational and counseling agencies to combat gang activity.

"I make friends with kids a lot of parents have given up on," said Chavez. "(Parents) are responsible for their kids; they can't say 'No, I give up.' You've got to stand by him through thick and thin. This is your blood, this kid is something you created."

He knows the young suspects in the recent Pajaro Valley shooting deaths, and their young victims, including Michael Echevarria, who assisted his Little League team.

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KIDS ARE DYING

TODAY

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KIDS ARE DYING

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homes to recoup that lost support.

"They have low self-esteem, and it's their gang members who make them feel good," said Jack Borges, a Watsonville juvenile probation officer.

The same was true when gangs first cropped up in the Watsonville area in the early 1970s. The violence that became their medal of honor was a way to make the adults in their lives acknowledge their existence, said Francisco Ramirez, a founder of the Northside gang.

"We needed something outside of our families. A lot of time, parents don't view their children as individuals, someone with a mind. We wanted respect. But our parents were always out working, too busy providing food and clothing for us. They didn't realize what we were getting into," said Ramirez, 37.

The Rev. Raul Carvajal of Our Lady of Assumption Church in Pajaro said the breakdown in family communication is common among families in his parish, the majority of whom are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico.

Parents typically earn low wages and work long hours in the Pajaro Valley's fields. As their children attend local schools and begin taking on a new culture and language, parents remain on the outside. Suddenly, children wield power over their parents, acting as their translators in daily situations.

Children can become ashamed of their parents, whom they view as ignorant and uneducated. More and more, they listen to their friends, Carvajal said.

"Parents have lost the moral authority in their own homes," Carvajal said.

"A lot of parents lack child-rearing skills or just don't give a damn," said Watsonville Police officer Robert Montes. "There is a real difference in how children are raised here. In Mexico, children are beaten. Here it's not allowed."

Many gang members also come from single-parent families where the parent spends most of the day or night working.

"Most of the time, it is a mother," Montes said. "If she does care, she is usually working full time. But every now and then you get a decent parent and with a kid they can't do anything with."

The allure

For many children, particularly those in poor areas, gangs are part of growing up.

Gang members are not outsiders, but their brothers, fathers and friends. They are the people they go to school with, grow up with and see every day.

For young kids, gang members can be terrifying bullies or role models — romanticized outlaws and warriors willing to die for their "homeboys," and barrio.

To be a gang member means instant status — access to parties, drugs and sex and fear from others. It is a lifestyle.

But the cost is enormous.

"Most kids join because of the status — it gives a sense of belonging and a false sense of security," said Henry Robles, Watsonville Police gang investigator. "But what it really brings are death threats and beatings. It is not easy to get out."

Most gang members exhibit gang behavior in junior high or younger, Robles said. Kids begin spraying graffiti, flashing gang signs and beginning to dress the part. Later come the tattoos and entry into the gang.

"We see a lot of kids in middle school, the wanna-bes, vandalizing, spraying graffiti and talking (the talk)," Robles said. "It is all learned behavior. ... When you wear (gang colors) and sport new tattoos it makes you a billboard; you are a member."

Once in a gang, the young recruits are constantly forced to prove themselves, through fights, shootings and crime.

"When I joined, man, people looked at me different," Reyes said from jail of his early gang days. "I would do anything for my homeboys. Some parts of the gang, all they want to do is terrorize — the young guys want to come up."

Gang members prey on those around them, and some youths join for protection. The Poorsider gang was formed by Spanish-speaking sons of immigrant farm workers to protect themselves against attacks by Northsiders, police said.

"When you come to Watsonville you can either work in the fields or gangbang," Reyes said.

Most gang members end up in Juvenile Hall and County Jail, and many go on to state prison. As they age, gang members find themselves with few marketable skills, and often have visible tattoos which make finding employment difficult, police say.

So, according to Robles, they stay in the criminal life.

"There is no retirement plan," Robles said. "If we want to change it, we have to start listening to the needs of young adults."

Chavez

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Sometimes it makes Chavez want to quit, yet he remains hopeful about kids others see as criminals. "Someone can always change if you give him a chance. I was given a chance."

In the 1970s, Chavez was one of the original members of the Watsonville Northsiders, the first organized gang in the county and today, the largest. In the dozen years Chavez spent on the streets, he earned his reputation committing crimes that included armed robbery and attempted murder. Unlike many of his friends, Chavez never went to state prison, though he did serve time in county jail. He admits he was lucky.

Chavez regrets never thanking Judge Tom Kelly, the prosecutor he credits with giving him a break 14 years ago by sending him to County Jail instead of prison.

But seeing Chavez in Superior Court recently was thanks enough for Kelly, who recognized the former gang member immediately.

This time, he listened as Chavez spoke on behalf of a defendant he had counseled.

"I had heard about him, I had heard about the good things. It doesn't happen very often, but it does happen often enough to keep your faith in humanity," said Kelly.

"We joked about it, about how I prosecuted him ... and how he was pretty mean and scary and intimidating in those days. I asked him what was it that turned him around, because he was headed toward an evil end," said Kelly.

Fourteen years later, Kelly says the man who was a "chief gang player" already has put more back into the community than he took from it. Today, Kelly says he releases defendants to probation if they follow certain conditions, including: "Do what Mike tells you to do."

Not everyone is forgiving.

One County Jail officer pulled Chavez aside recently while he was visiting inmates and accused him of organizing gangs on the inside.

A mother almost pulled her son off Chavez's baseball team in Watsonville last year. She didn't want her son to play for a man who years before had feuded with her brothers from the rival Las Lomas gang. Chavez persuaded her to let the boy stay.

"What keeps me going is they stand behind me. I've had kids where I've hurt their fathers, and they've forgiven me," said Chavez.

As Fenix's gang counselor, Chavez visits youths at junior high and high schools, as well as Juvenile Hall and County Jail. He's formed a group called Milagros to provide recreational activities for children in the barrio. But lack of money



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Mike Chavez, at E.A. Hall Middle School in Watsonville, now coaches Little League and has a family of his own.

and time spent on the privately funded group has stunted his efforts.

Chavez is soft-spoken, but his voice urgent as he speaks of the ripe human harvest in danger of being wasted. "We've got trees here with a lot of fruit to be picked. We just have to get enough baskets and fill them up."

Young people who know Chavez say he has faith in them, and that makes them want to prove him right.

"What we need are more gang counselors out there like Mike. Ex-gang members who are rehabilitated," said Jesse Martinez, who has accompanied Chavez to anti-gang presentations in junior high schools, where he said "it all starts."

Another said: "Mike goes wherever he wants, Northside, Poor-side, and talks to them. Just because he talks to Poorsiders now, I still respect him," said the boy, who is trying to get out of a rival gang.

Chavez tries not to think of the deaths, the violence, the kids who don't get it the first time around. Or the second. He knows to be patient.

"I know it's important — nobody knows it like we do."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Chavez attempts to reach teens, like this E.A. Hall student, who listens to his message.