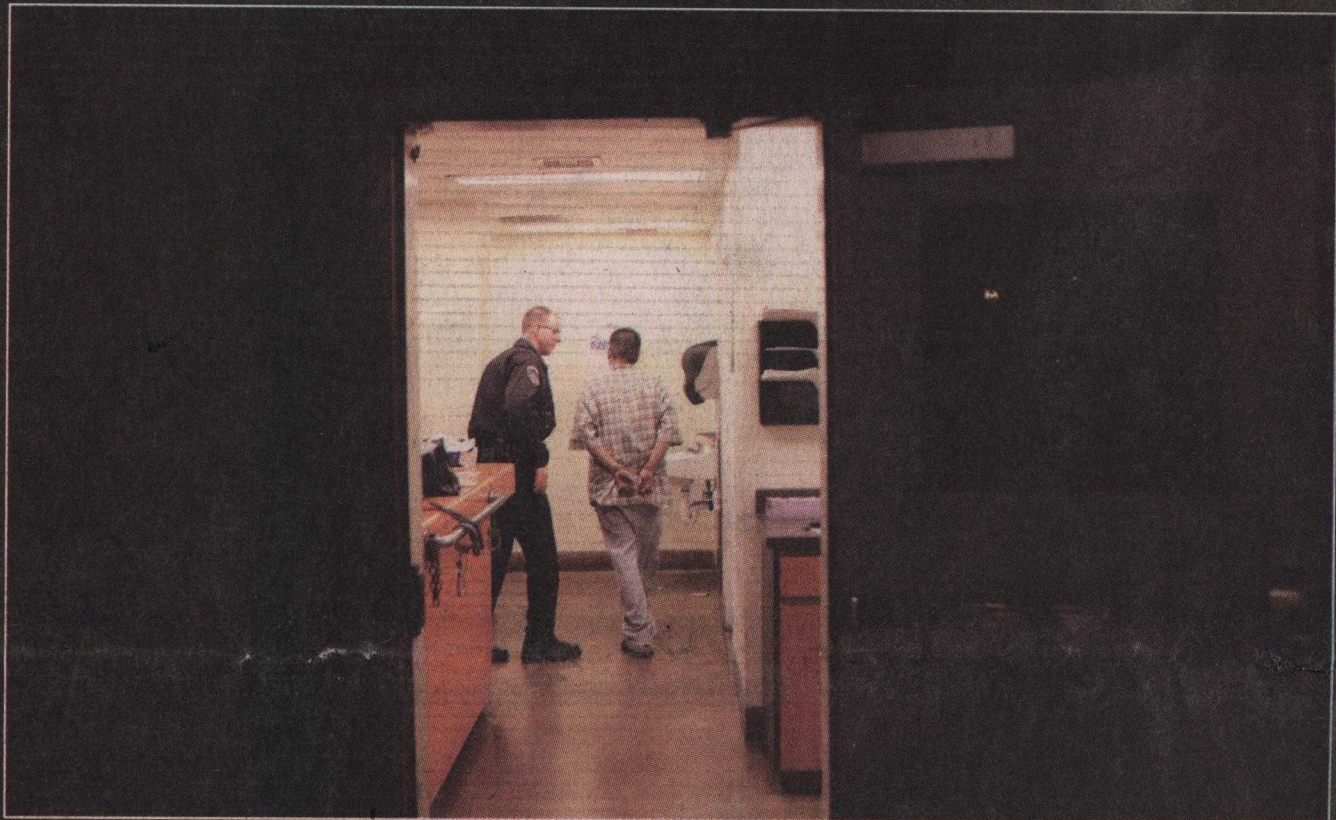


✓ *Cornes*

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FIGHTING GANGS: THE PROBLEM

# STREET COMMUNITY STRUGGLES TO RECLAIM NEIGHBORHOODS SCOURGE



DAVID ROYAL/SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Officer Radovan Radich leads a 'southerner' inside the booking and detention room at the Watsonville police station after being brought in on a parole violation during the evening patrol in Watsonville in April 17. The man said that he'd just been released from prison the previous day. He admitted to being a Sureno gang member.

## PART ONE

By JENNIFER SQUIRES | [jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com)

**WATSONVILLE** — Late one Friday night this spring, someone drops off a bleeding 16-year-old at the emergency room. The teen, who has gang tattoos on his chest and hands, has been stabbed repeatedly.

Watsonville police Sgt. Eddie Santana knows the boy. Four years ago, the kid's mom was worried her son was running with the bad kids in the neighborhood, so she brought him to Santana in hopes the cop could talk some sense into him. The boy walked out of the police station without talking, Santana recalls.

Now the teen is a bona fide gang member lying on a gurney at Watsonville Community Hospital and, once again, he won't talk to Santana

or other police.

"They wanted that kid dead. They wanted him gone," Santana whispers as he looks at the gaping, bloody wounds under the boy's right arm.

An officer takes photos of the wounds so that if, by chance, a case develops, they will have the evidence. But the boy won't even tell police where he was attacked. ER staffers deduced he'd been at the beach because sand spilled out of his shoes when nurses removed them.

Chances of arresting the person who stabbed the teen are obviously slim.

"He's being very protective," San-

SEE PROBLEM ON A7

## SENTINEL SPECIAL REPORT: ABOUT THE SERIES

**DAY ONE:** Gangsters have been wreaking havoc on the county and its residents for decades.

**DAY TWO:** The attraction of gangs starts in the teen years, and so do efforts to keep youth out of them.

**DAY THREE:** Law enforcement, parents and families band together to keep violence at bay.

## D.A.: Gang trials harder, sentences tougher

Prosecutors given leeway to present evidence of other crimes by the gang

By CATHY KELLY  
[ckelly@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:ckelly@santacruzsentinel.com)

**SANTA CRUZ** — Repercussions for gang-related crimes include longer potential prison sentences, and though the debate on the virtue of increased

incarceration continues, county prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys agree on one thing — gang cases are tough.

One notable provision in the 1988 California Street Gang Terrorism and Enforcement Act is a sentencing

enhancement that can add from two years to life to a convicted violent felon's sentence if prosecutors prove the crime was done to benefit, in association with or at the direction of a crimi-

SEE TRIALS ON A6



# Gang factions clash across the county

By JENNIFER SQUIRES

jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com

Gangs have existed in Santa Cruz County for decades, but in recent years their members have become increasingly mobile, and areas once known as strongholds for either Nortenos or Sureños are now in flux.

"Traditionally they were neighborhood gangs," said sheriff's Sgt. Roy Morales, who has been investigating county gang crime for a dozen years. "Now they're not. Basically the seed has spread."

Latino gangs originated in the prison system. In the late 1960s, Latino inmates in the state prison system were being picked on by other inmates, so they formed a group for protection, gang experts say. They were "city people" from the Los Angeles area who called themselves the "Mexican Mafia." The group adopted the No. 13 as their symbol — m is the 13th letter in the alphabet — and the color blue.

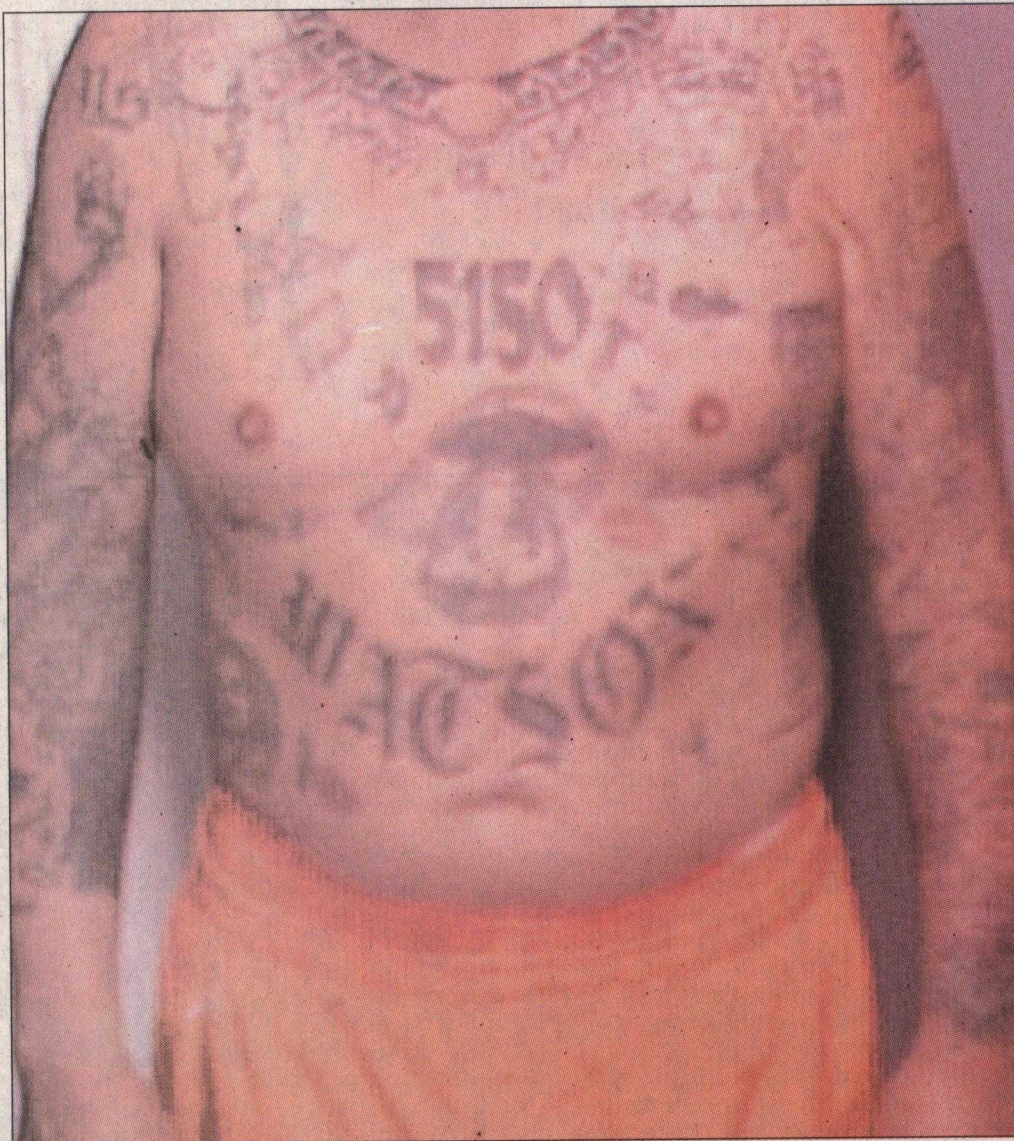
Shortly thereafter, northern Latino farmworkers who were incarcerated formed their own group. They called themselves "Nuestra Familia," claimed the color red and the No. 14, as n is the 14th letter.

The dividing line between the Mexican Mafia, or Sureños, and Nuestra Familia, or Nortenos, is somewhere near Bakersfield: red above and blue below.

However, that hasn't prevented gang clashes in Santa Cruz County, which contains a mix of red and blue gang members numbering nearly 600, law enforcement officials estimate.

Years ago, Nortenos found their way to Watsonville, while Sureños — migrating north from Los Angeles — took hold in Santa Cruz, according to police. Now multiple factions of both gangs exist in each city, and other sects claim parts of Mid-County, especially Live Oak, as their territory. So in addition to the natural red-blue rivalry, there is some infighting among subgroups of the same gang.

Like the military, gangs have a leadership structure. The highest-ranking gang members are usually imprisoned, but have lieutenants and others below them who carry out orders. Some of the gang crime in the county, though not



'Watson' is how many gang members refer to Watsonville. The number '5150' essentially means 'crazy' under California Penal Code. For a slideshow of local gang tattoos, visit the Sentinel online at <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com>.

much, is the result of prison decrees, according to local law enforcement.

## SANTA CRUZ

Until the early 1990s, there was just one Sureño gang in Santa Cruz, but the gang split over the drug market, said Santa Cruz officer Arnold Vasquez, who has been a gang investigator for half of his nine-year career: "The younger guys wanted to get a piece of the pie. That was when we really started to see a lot of kids claiming those cliques or subgroups."

The Sureño factions that exist within the city today don't do business together — that is, sell drugs or buy guns — but other than that generally get along, according to Vasquez.

Nortenos became established in the city as a response to the Sureños, according to police.

Children of farmworkers who lived on the Westside and in the Beach Flats

neighborhood were being terrorized by Sureño gang members, so the children of farmworkers banded together for protection, forming the city's first Norteno gang, Vasquez said.

"A lot of this stuff was really tightly organized in Watsonville before it ever was in Santa Cruz," he said.

Now there are two Norteno subgroups in the city, though their presence isn't as strong as it is in South County, and Nortenos in Santa Cruz are still outnumbered by Sureños, police said.

## WATSONVILLE

Historically, Watsonville is a Norteno area, but for a long time there wasn't a lot of the "What do you claim?" issues in the city, according to police.

The red-blue divide "kind of crept up," Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said.

There are seven or eight active Norteno subgroups in the city.

For years, there had only been one Sureño gang but now there are two, said Watsonville police Sgt. Eric Taylor. The split is now about 70-30 in favor of Nortenos, he estimated.

Gang violence has fluctuated in the city over the years. Medina remembers a rash of gang shootings in 1996: "We have gone through these periods. Our challenge always is to mobilize quickly."

In addition to violence, gang members have become increasingly involved in drug sales in the past five or six years. Taylor said the drug trade in Watsonville is evenly divided between what's controlled by gangs and what is being imported from Mexico.

Police have targeted gang-involved drug trafficking with several long-term undercover investigations. The crackdowns also focused on car thefts, burglaries and gun sales that involve gang members.

## SANTA CRUZ GANGS

	NORTENOS	SURENOS
Name	Nuestra Familia	Mexican Mafia
Color	Red	Blue
Number	14	13
Historic territory	Watsonville	Santa Cruz

## NO BOUNDARIES

Over the years, gang affiliations have changed with demographics, resulting in a patchwork of red and blue territory across the county.

Crackdowns on known gang hangouts have dispersed gangs but not reduced their numbers, according to police.

For example, in Santa Cruz, police have worked to clear out gang hot spots in the Beach Flats neighborhood and apartments on Chestnut Street. Both areas were claimed by Sureño subgroups, but rules prohibiting gang members from living in the mustard-colored Nueva Vista apartments in Beach Flats and the apartments on Chestnut Street have curtailed some of the gang activity. Families can be evicted for harboring gang members in the complexes, Vasquez said.

"I think that changed the dynamic," he said.

However, just because gang members don't live in the neighborhood doesn't mean they don't spend time there. Vasquez said when he patrols Beach Flats at night, he typically sees four to six known Sureño gang members hanging out on the street even though they live elsewhere.

Two Sureño gang members arrested for and convicted of murdering a Fresno man in Beach Flats three summers ago claimed that neighborhood, though both lived in Live Oak.

Gangs are more mobile than ever, as evidenced by the January slaying of a Santa Cruz man on Soquel Avenue by two suspected gang members from Watsonville.

Police said gang members use social networking sites to boast about their crimes or call their members to action. At least two Watsonville gangs have MySpace pages — complete with gang-inspired hip-hop and photos of members flashing signs — where gang members boast about their toughness and willingness to defend their neighborhood.

Despite a commonly held

belief, the majority of gang crimes are not committed by illegal immigrants, police and prosecutors say. Regardless, an accused gang member here illegally face charges like any other defendant, then is dealt with by immigration officials after the court process and any jail sentence has been completed.

## BEHIND BARS

It is jail and prison, where Sureños and Nortenos got their start, where gang members connect, increase their status in the gang and plot crimes. Rival gangs fight one another, and gangsters use creative methods to get their messages out to members on the outside. Many times, incarcerated gang members use their girlfriends, who are not in the gang, as a communication link, according to Morales, from the Sheriff's Office.

"I think it's a naive role," Morales said. "They're used. A lot of them don't know they're being used."

Girlfriends are another way gang members get guns. They rarely have police records, so they are free to purchase weapons. Gangs also acquire guns through burglaries, by stealing them from friends or relatives, or, if they don't have records yet, buying the guns themselves, police said.

Though gang members were using knives as their weapons of choice earlier in the year — to such an extreme that a Santa Cruz man started the Web site [www.stabsantacruz.com](http://www.stabsantacruz.com) to track the number of stab-bings in the county — police said in recent months they've seized numerous guns from gang members. Also, a rash of shootings this month in both Watsonville and Santa Cruz has been linked to gang rivalries.

"The way they operate, the types of crimes they're committing and the methods that they use are the same, but we see fluctuations in the activity," Watsonville gang expert Taylor said. "Over the last year, we've seen this recent spike in activity."



# TRIALS

Continued from A1

nal street gang.

Another provision is a standalone charge that the violence was done with the specific intent to promote, further or assist in criminal conduct by gang members. It carries a sentence of up to three years.

Proving the charges often involves testimony from police officers who have documented "contacts" with those believed to be engaging in gang activity — from shouting gang slogans during a violent attack to having tattoos of gang symbols.

Under the law, officers are allowed to testify about the accused person's previous criminal behavior or the behavior of those with whom he or she associates, or even the behavior of others in the gang.

But Santa Cruz prosecutor Charlie Baum said painting those dark pictures cuts both ways with jurors.

"Gangs elicit a lot of emotion," he said. "You have those who take it to be racial profiling or biased cops and others think, 'It's a gang, you're guilty.'"

"I'd love to say gang cases are easy, but they're not."

On the other side, public defender Tom Wallraff says even the allegation a defendant is a gang member can make their defense an uphill climb.

"It can be hard for jurors to keep an open mind and look at them with the presumption of innocence," he said. "And it's harder to defend a whole bunch of uncharged stuff."

Prosecuting the underlying

crime is no walk in the park either, District Attorney Bob Lee said, as witnesses can be reluctant to testify, either due to sympathy for the gang or fear of retribution.

"They are extremely difficult; the traditional ways of building a case simply don't exist," he said. "You don't have any witness statements. You can have a murder at a party with 50 people in the room and no one sees anything."

Wallraff said such silence does not necessarily mean a potential witness is being uncooperative: "Someone's refusal to corroborate could be factually correct. You can ascribe anything to a gang case, but you might still just not have a case."

In a recent trial, a man stabbed in the neck by an alleged gang member gave a completely different description of the men's clothing than the person he was with when the attack occurred. The alleged assailant was arrested a short time later, wearing what the companion described. The victim at one point told police he feared for the safety of his young sisters if he identified the gang member.

## THE PRISON SENTENCES

Reaction to gang sentencing runs the gamut in the larger community as well.

A new group called the Santa Cruz Alliance Against Gang Enhancements organized a small rally outside Santa Cruz County Superior Court this month, carrying signs calling enhancements unfair and urging "prevention not enforcement."

One of the demonstrators, Tomas Alejo, a 37-year-old UC Santa Cruz sociology student, said more emphasis should

be placed on providing support to at-risk youth.

"The majority of active gang members are adolescents," he said. "And when young people are incarcerated for a long time, it stops the maturation process. And prison is chaos, especially with gang enhancements; they are sent to a maximum security area."

Alejo agreed that if gang activity is well-defined and the sentences and rehabilitation options are more appropriate, the law could work.

County Sheriff Phil Wowak said any accountability includes some deterrence, but that is a bonus, as he believes gang enhancements are primarily about holding people responsible.

Often in gang cases, the crimes are ones that the person would not commit on their own, Wowak said.

"The accountability piece is really the most important," he said. "People perform these acts for the benefit of the gang or to further their status in the gang. It's really a criminal act that goes beyond your typical assault or drug case, and especially in homicide cases."

Wowak said he believes in alternative education and programs that deter violence as well, and supports those at Juvenile Hall. Barrios Unidos teaches there weekly, he said.

## POLICE AND GANG INTERACTION

Another man at the rally said his family moved to Santa Cruz from San Jose in part due to violence there, and that he understands the problem of gang members selling drugs and committing violent crimes. But the law has been used too widely,

Robert Erlich said, mentioning a friend who was "hit up by Surenos" because he was wearing red in Santa Cruz and then arrested on a gang paraphernalia charge due to his clothing.

"They try to find anything to lay on them," Erlich said.

A Watsonville mother had similar concerns and said her sons were unfairly "profiled" as gang members after one was accused of being in a fight and that both ended up in jail, losing jobs with State Parks in Monterey and the California Conservation Corps.

Maria Sanguino said she has lived in Watsonville for more than 20 years and that recent police activity on her street disappoints and saddens her.

Her sons were never in a gang, she said. They graduated from high school, got jobs and paid for their own cars and insurance and rent.

But officers investigating her younger son's involvement in the fight, in which someone used a bat and someone lost some teeth, found some photographs about a different fight on her older son's computer, she said, and he was arrested. But the photographs were of body slamming at a party, Sanguino said.

And while public defenders tell her the young men face misdemeanors and perhaps can get their jobs back, she remains concerned. Sanguino has seen police harass youth on the street, turning on the police car siren, laughing and taunting them, she said.

"It's really bad; I'm disappointed in them," Sanguino said. "And I complain and they don't listen. I want to ask them: Who can my sons

hang out with? Because supposedly everyone is a gang member."

"They can't even be in front of the house; they see three juveniles together and five or six police come. It gets me really mad."

Watsonville Police Deputy Chief Manny Solano said officers walk a delicate line sometimes when trying to combat gang violence in a certain neighborhood and keep track of gang activity without stepping on toes.

The recent attention is warranted, he said, reciting statistics on the number of crimes in a three-block radius, which includes the street where Sanguino lives with her husband and sons.

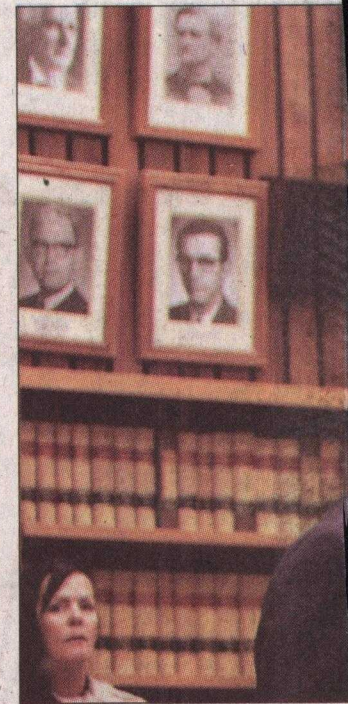
Police recently met with Councilman Luis Alejo, who represents that area, due to concerns residents had with crime and with some police activity, Solano said.

"Meetings like that can be good; they put everyone in check," he said. "We know we need to be sensitive. We hear those concerns. People say, 'Look, we want police, but why is my son or daughter always stopped?' It's delicate and we might ruffle some feathers, but with this amount of violence, we'll be there."

"There is a segment which has a stronghold in that area."

Since October, in that neighborhood near City Hall, there have been 15 assaults, six robberies, three attempted murders, two shootings into a home, 24 drug-related cases and 25 reports of graffiti, he said.

Police are trying to prevent violence and also document gang activity knowing they might be called to testify



With a backdrop of photographs of moments before a jury found him shooting on Highway 1.

about gang members. They know they can't stereotype people as gang members simply for wearing a certain color in a certain neighborhood, he said.

Examples of signs they can use are the person's own words, he said, as sometimes they will shout at them, or admit to police they were jumped in to a gang, or they have gang tattoos.

In a recent trial of gang members accused of stabbing a man in a rival gang's territory, prosecutors sought to prove the gang crime against one 19-year-old who "acted as a backup," standing by during the stabbing, by conduct police documented during the past three years.

The man had flashed a gang sign before one attack, shouted gang slogans dur-



## PROBLEM

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ina says. "That makes me think 's one of his own kind" who tacked him.

The boy is from Clifford Avenue, neighborhood Santana says is hard to grow up in without joining a gang. An apartment complex here is a known Norteno stronghold, and within a few blocks two other gangs claim territory. Often, they fight each other in the street. The stabbed gang member was taken to a trauma center in San Jose and will recover. But four other young men have died in gang clashes in Santa Cruz and Watsonville since January, accounting for all but one of the homicides in Santa Cruz County this year.

## COMBATING VIOLENCE

Two waves of gang violence have washed over the county this year — one in January that left three young men dead and several others injured — and an outbreak of shootings and stabbings earlier this month that has injured more than a half-dozen suspected gangsters, the youngest of whom was 15.

Police attribute the upsurge to a variety of things: younger gang members trying to make a name for themselves — historically weak gangs are pushing to gain more respect — the economic downturn and simple retaliation.

"I am worried about this time right now," said Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, whose city has seen three killings this year, all gang-related. "The measurement of how well we do is the absence of crime."

Local law enforcement leaders say they're doing what they can to combat gang crime despite budget cuts that have reduced the number of officers on the street in some departments.

This spring, Santa Cruz created a three-officer gang unit, and for the summer Watsonville police have five officers assigned to their gang team. The county, meanwhile, has refocused its drug task force into an anti-crime team that will target organized crime including gangs and drug operations. Also, the District Attorney's Office established a gang prosecution unit with attorneys who work both juvenile and adult court.

"We are returning to a united front attacking the gangs," Sheriff's Office Sgt. Roy Morales said. "We're trying."

Efforts to quell gang violence, though, actually start long before the gangsters, usually young men, rack up criminal charges, and they are wide-ranging.

■ Educators are trained to watch for signs of gang affiliation in students. Increasingly, those signs are being seen at the elementary school level.

■ A host of prevention programs, from after-school activities through community groups to anti-bullying education in schools, try to reach kids before the gangs do.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Friends of Rodolfo Rivas gather the day after his 2004 murder on Spruce Street in Santa Cruz at the site where he was killed. Police evidence markers hang where his blood stained the wall.

■ School resource officers and counselors try to intervene before students get in too deep.

"We are learning the younger we can get to kids and educate parents on how to resist gang influence, we think we'll have success," said Watsonville Lt. David McCartney. "We provide tools to kids and more importantly at that age, the parents. If we don't get them before they get into the gang lifestyle, it's almost too late."

Gangs are a draw to many because kids want to belong to something and think gangs are cool, perhaps because older relatives are involved. Those involved in prevention and intervention efforts — locally, the largest organization operates about a dozen programs in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District — say kids just need positive activities, goals and role models to stay out of trouble.

At the same time, residents are banding together to do what they can to push gangs out of their neighborhoods.

■ In Watsonville, outreach to residents has led to earlier 911 calls, with neighbors alerting police when they see gang members gathering rather than waiting until violence erupts.

■ On the other side of the county, Santa Cruz Neighbors has been teaching residents about graffiti and other signs of gangs.

## PUBLIC AT RISK

The county is not gripped by daily gang violence, though Medina acknowledged the perception that in Watsonville "every kid's a gangster and there's a gunfight on every corner."

Generally, the violence is limited to gang-on-gang, but with the upsurge in shootings the public is more at risk, police admit.

"Bullets don't discriminate and typically they're not stopped by

walls and windows and trees," Watsonville police gang expert Eric Taylor said. "With this increase in the use of firearms, especially in the middle of the day or the middle of an intersection ... you could have some unintended targets."

Last year, an innocent Watsonville man was shot in the jaw when gang members going after someone else sprayed his Maple Street home with bullets.

Sometimes people are victimized by gang members because they are perceived to be gangsters. Migrant farmworkers in South County are sometimes targeted by Nortenos because they inadvertently dress or wear their hair like Surenos.

In 2004, two cousins were shot and one died when a gang member challenged them in the field at Watsonville's Rolling Hills Middle School. Neither victim was a gang member, but one was wearing a blue belt. The man later convicted of killing him claimed red.

People who interfere with gang crimes also are at risk. In March, a man on McKenzie Court in Watsonville tried to stop a group of teens burglarizing his mother's car and was assaulted.

## ROBBERIES ON RISE

Police say gang members are committing more robberies and burglaries, like armed gas station holdups.

Their motive "is really everything," Taylor said. "One of the main things is to benefit the reputation of their own gang."

Some are simply trying to get the cash needed to pay the "taxes" gang members owe their organization. Nortenos, especially, must regularly contribute money. The cash is used to buy weapons or, if a gang member is incarcerated, help his family pay legal fees or provide him with money to use at the jail commissary.

In 2004, three Watsonville gang members murdered a father of three during a botched robbery on Spruce Street in Santa Cruz for just that reason.

Anthony Gonzales, Francisco Valenciano and Juan Soto had come to Santa Cruz on a Sunday morning that July to commit a robbery to pay their gang taxes, according to court testimony. The three contemplated robbing a downtown liquor store, but moved on to a poker game in an apartment complex parking lot when they couldn't find parking at the store.

They shot and killed 29-year-old Salvadoran immigrant Rodolfo Escobar over \$20. All three men were convicted and are serving life in prison.

The armed robberies net cash, but also stoke fear. That's one of the big differences between gang activity and other crimes.

"Gang crime intimidates the neighborhoods more," said Morales, of the Sheriff's Office. "Everyone's scared."

Sgt. Mario Sulay agreed: "Gangs will commit crimes that the individual won't," like random drive-by shootings or assaulting a person on a street corner.

## CLOSING CASES

Making arrests in gang crimes and taking cases to trial is a challenge.

Gang members, even those on the losing end of a fight, typically won't cooperate with police — they'd rather sort out their differences on the street — so investigators turn to the public to report crimes and act as witnesses.

Though people now seem more likely to call 911 and report suspicious circumstances, they remain afraid of testifying against gang members for fear of retaliation, authorities admit.

Assistant District Attorney Char-

## GANG IDENTIFIERS

Law enforcement officers define active participation in a street gang through the following criteria:

- Hanging out in a known gang area.
- Spending time with other gang members.
- Wearing clothing or colors affiliated with a gang or having gang tattoos.
- Committing certain types of crimes.

## FIELD ID CARDS

Police use 'FI cards' to report a person's suspected gang involvement. The cards are filled out when an officer speaks with a suspected gang member, even if that person is not arrested. Later, the information is submitted to a countywide database to which local police agencies share access. Some of the details noted on the cards are:

- If the person admitted to being in a criminal street gang.
- If the person has been arrested with a known gang member for offenses usually linked to gang crime, like fighting or assault.
- If gang symbols or hand signs were seen.
- If the person has gang tattoos.

SOURCE: Santa Cruz Police Department

lie Baum, a member of the district attorney's gang prosecution team, said some of his witnesses have been intimidated by gangsters in subtle, unnerving ways. In one case, a police report with a witness statement was left on the witness' porch. In another, three gang members sat in a parked car in front of a witness' home.

Police hope ongoing community outreach will help people feel more secure and increase public cooperation with investigations. Most police departments in the region, including Watsonville and Santa Cruz, have anonymous phone numbers to report crime.

In Watsonville, a police-organized community outreach group hits neighborhoods after violent incidents. The Post Incident Team, or PIT, sends volunteers, city leaders and police officers door-to-door to talk to residents, inform them about resources such as the neighborhood watch programs and counseling, and to encourage them to report trouble. Medina said the visits show residents the department cares. And sometimes the effort generates new information about a case.

Mel "Cowboy" Sornberger, who works for the county Probation Department as a school resource officer, volunteers with PIT. Last week, he was among a dozen volunteers who knocked on doors along Sunny Hills Drive, close to Herman Avenue, where an 18-year-old police believe to be in a gang had been shot.

"Families in crisis feel very alone," Sornberger said. "They're afraid to reach out. Our continuing effort is to reach in."





SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

of Santa Cruz County judges, Ivan Galvan smiles in court on Feb. 10 guilty on all counts in connection with a September 2006 drive-by

ing a fight and was documented as being with other gang members wearing gang colors and having gang markings on his car, mattress, nightstand, mirror, wall and on a tree in his yard. Police even testified that he got a new gang tattoo last year.

To prove a gang is criminal and has a pattern of criminal behavior, only certain crimes qualify, Solano said, including murder, assault, witness intimidation and illegal narcotics distribution to further the gang.

"It's a lot of work," Solano said. "We have dedicated staff in enforcement and in-house who prepare gang packets. They need to meet strict criteria to be classified as a gang member and we know we might have to prove that in

court. And being with gang members or wearing red or blue or looking like a gang member is not enough. Some people are misinformed."

#### THE LARGER COMMUNITY

And there are many in the community whose primary concern with gangs is the harm they cause.

At the recent courthouse rally objecting to harsh gang sentences, one Live Oak woman who walked by with her son said gang crimes seem like hate crimes to her and maybe should carry higher sentences.

"It has to be proven, of course, but gangs don't seem to have any respect for people or for life," Elizabeth King said.

Her 23-year-old son, Kyle, said many of his friends used

to form their own small tagging "gangs," but that he has seen more violent gangs come into the Santa Cruz area in the past 18 months or so.

He said he has seen how older gang members recruit younger people to "do the dirty work."

"I know how peer pressure is, but I don't know why it has to be that way," he said. "Santa Cruz is not that kind of town; it's a fun town, a place to be outside and surf and skate and do things like that."

And while legislators and law enforcement undoubtedly hoped the longer prison terms would be more of a deterrent to gang members, that doesn't seem to be the case.

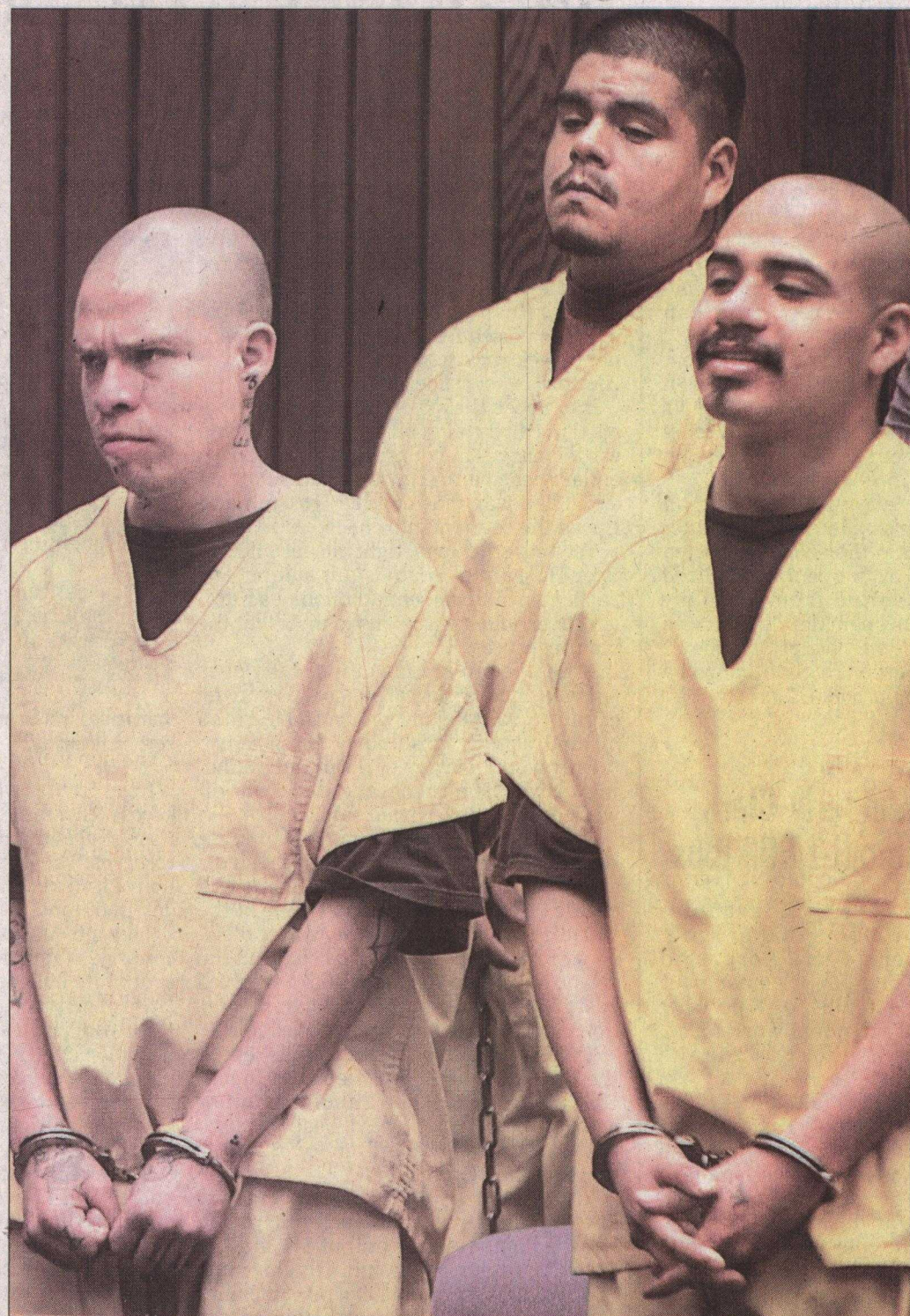
It has changed the way some gang members act when committing a gang crime, some say, with members avoiding identifying their specific gang when confronting a rival member, for instance, knowing that might make it easier to convict them of a gang crime.

But obviously, the gang culture and its violence continues.

In February, a jury convicted a young Santa Cruz man of a gang-related drive-by shooting on Highway 1 that seriously injured two men. The defendant, Ivan Galvan, smiled through the trial and remained defiant at his sentencing hearing in April. Galvan is now serving life in prison for the 2006 shooting.

"I do care; I care about my family," Galvan said at his sentencing hearing. "But I also can't show them I'm weak."

*Sentinel staff writers Joel Hersch and Jennifer Squires contributed to this report.*



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Murder defendants Jose Velasquez, Cristobal Ramirez and Alejandro Chavez appear in court April 1.