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# Gang members are scorned by other students

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(Second in a series)

Members of local youth gangs may think highly of themselves, but judging from interviews done at Watsonville High School, their peers have low regard and no respect for the gangs.

Gang members try to project a "cool" image, but students say they fail in that regard. Instead, students tend to look on violent gang members as "crazy," if not downright stupid.

"I think those guys are all messed up. They go around shooting people for no reason," said one student who didn't try to disguise his disdain. "They think if they shoot somebody, they get a big ol' head or somethin'."

"Even the lowriders don't like them," a junior said. (The students pointed out that the lowriders who belong to car clubs are not linked to the gangs, although some gang members are lowriders.)

The consensus of the 10 or so Anglo and Mexican-American students interviewed was that gang members were on a "macho" trip. "That's most of it," one student agreed.

Most of the talk centered on just one gang, the North Side Locos, the largest, most active and by far the most savage gang.

Students criticized the Northsiders on several counts. For instance, they find the gang's disrespect for private property and spray painting distasteful. "They even went and painted on our mural in the quad," one student complained.

Although gang members try to be macho, some students indicated they view them as cowardly because "they only fight in groups." Said one boy, "I've seen 20 of 'em get one little guy on the ground and jump on him, kicking him in the head, in the stomach, all over."

Most of those interviewed seemed to have a hard time relating to the motivations of violent gang members.

"If you ask a Northsider why he fights, he'll ask you why you play basketball. Fighting is their sport," one student explained with a shrug.

Several students said gang members sniff paint and "do Angel Dust" in addition to smoking pot. "That's what makes them crazy," said one. "They don't care what will happen to them," said another.

Do school-age gang members attend classes at Watsonville High? "Some do, some don't," said one boy. "Not hardly," responded a girl in her junior year.

Do most of the North Side Locos carry

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RUBEN LOPEZ — In 'constant communication' with police.

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knives? "Northsiders carry guns," retorted several students.

One of the boys said he has a cousin who is a member of the North Side Locos. "He's crazy," the boy said without hesitation.

The students' overwhelmingly negative comments about the gang members were tempered by one qualifier: some of the gang members aren't such bad guys when they're alone.

"They used to be just a bunch of punks," one girl said. "Now they're blowing Watsonville away." Her cousin was one of three boys stabbed by Northsiders in the City Plaza over New Year's weekend.

"There are a lot of students who would like to get even with them," she said.

When her cousins and his friends who were stabbed declined initially to level with police, she was angered. "People are going to have to get down on those guys," she said of the violent gang members. "They're going to try to take over one of these days and if no one stands up for their rights, they're going to."

The most prominent female gang in town, known as Las Monas, ("The Dolls"), doesn't garner much more respect than their male counterparts. They, students said, also gang up on their victims rather than fighting one-on-one. "They have to be together to start something," said the previously mentioned female students. Las Monas will pick on other girls who insult them purposely or inadvertently, she said.

How many belong to Las Monas? "There's a whole army of 'em," said one student. "About 20," answered another.

Some students say their parents warn them to stay away from the gangs — a warning that is by and large unnecessary. The students interviewed all agreed that it is possible to escape the gangs' wrath merely by avoiding or "steering clear" of them. "They only fight the people who stand up to them," one girl said.

The result is that, "Everybody lets them do what they want to do. You can't stop them unless you want to get stabbed or something."

"Steering clear" of gang members sometimes means more than not baiting or insulting them. Said one boy, "if I'm riding my bike down the street and I see a bunch of them walking in my direction, I'll take a detour."

The students were asked what they would do if they were attacked by gang members whom they could identify. Would they tell the police who assaulted them? Some said yes, others said no. Those who wouldn't said they'd clam up in fear of reprisals. A few said they'd be willing to take a chance and stick their necks out in order to see them apprehended and punished.

The students said some of the gang's recruiting efforts go on around the high school grounds. While they admit that the gangs can put a lot of pressure on students they want for members, "It's their choice," they say of the draftees.

Because of the violent street crime in Watsonville, parents are worried, some students said. "If I go anywhere, I have to be with somebody at all times," said an 11th grade girl. "My mother won't even let me stay home alone at night."

One boy, born and raised in Watsonville, said his family plans to move soon to escape the problem.

"I feel like moving away from this town, I really do," said another student.

Principal Ruben Lopez acknowledged that there have been more fights on school grounds this year than last year and that "there are some students who are members of gangs. But for the most part, they try not to be disruptive on campus. For the most part they come to school and go home."

Prior to the Christmas recess, there were rumors that there might be open gang warfare on campus. Apparently at least a few teachers warned students of that possibility. The teachers told students to follow procedures for a "yellow alert" if fighting broke out on

campus.

Those "emergency preparedness procedures" instruct students outside school buildings to head for the nearest door and walk into the nearest classroom, where teachers would keep students in class, close window curtains (to prevent injury from flying glass) and, in some instances, lock the classroom door. "We would do the same in the event of an earthquake, bombing or other emergency," Lopez explained.

Gangs in Watsonville are nothing new, Lopez pointed out. "There have always been rivalries between Watsonville, Salinas and Castroville . . . They're jockeying for position." Now the Las Lomas gang seems to constitute Watsonville's biggest outside rivalry.

Lopez said he is in "constant communication" with the Police Department to keep tabs on and try to stop drug traffic and violent gang activities. The high school even has a "liaison" person who works to keep the administration and Police Department mutually informed.

Many, if not most, of the violent attacks involve one gang's members striking at a member of another gang in retaliation for a past attack. "I don't know where it's going to end," said Lopez.

But he feels more activities for youths and more involvement from various community agencies might help to "break the cycle." Lopez also believes that more work should be done with elementary school kids to prevent them from getting caught up in gangs later. If those efforts were successful, the gangs might "fade away" eventually.

"We're concerned about it (gang activity) and would like to see what we can do. But it's kind of hard. I'd like to work with them and help them, but these kids can't quit when they want to. They're in for life and that's heavy. I know a lot of them would like to quit."

(Next: An interview with Deputy Police Chief Roy Ingersoll, head of the police task force on youth crime.)