



... CONCERNS HAVE EVEN COLORED A RECENT DEBATE ON WHETHER TO LIFT A 45-YEAR BAN ON TATTOO PARLORS IN THE CITY, WHEN COUNCILMEMBER ANTONIO RIVAS SAID TATTOOS ARE THE TOOLS OF GANGS AND WHITE SUPREMACISTS.

The Gang's All Here

There's no doubt that gang activity mars the county.

But what can be done? | by Chris J. Magyar

Gangs
The Nuestra Familia (Nortefio) gang suffered a setback late last month when FBI agents coordinated with Watsonville Police Dept. and other regional departments to arrest 30 suspects in what was called "Operation Valley Star." The arrestees were charged with conspiracy to possess and distribute cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy and marijuana.

The case originated in Watsonville as Operation Northern Exposure, led by then-Captain Eddie Rodriguez (who now works in Marina), in late 2003. As it developed, according to WPD Chief Terry Medina, the department sought coordination with area agencies in

order to spread the costs and resources necessary to tackle such a big case. "Our goal from the beginning was to arrest and imprison the upper echelon of Nuestra Familia on the Central Coast, and disrupt their operations for five years," he says. "On the local level, you can't sustain these things without money and equipment."

By partnering with the Salinas branch of the FBI, and eventually getting the case accepted as a federal organized crime drug task force, WPD was able to continue developing leads through 2006, when some of the information crossed over with another federal case out of Sacramento, Operation Valley Star. The two

efforts merged, and on June 28, a total of 30 arrest warrants were simultaneously served in Petaluma, San Francisco, Fremont, Fresno, Hanford, Greenfield, Salinas and Castroville.

Medina says this will drive drug prices even higher and further dismantle the ability of gangs to import supplies—adding he was surprised to learn that "it's harder and harder for these organized groups to get drugs across borders because of post-9/11 interdiction of ships and discovery of tunnels, as these were not only places where people could enter the country, but lanes by which drugs could flow as well. It's really not a piece of cake to get drugs across the border." However, even this high-level success doesn't directly relate to the very different, and sometimes equally violent, level of street crime most people conjure up when thinking of Santa Cruz County gang problems.

"[The arrestees] aren't people who are just running across someone and asking, 'Who do you claim?'" he says. "You know, there's no right answer to that question. You just have to run. That's happening in Watsonville and Beach Flats every day. Baseball bats come out and cars get hit, they stab somebody. We really are going to achieve the disruption at a high level, but at the street level, that's still a local problem we're grappling with in a combination of enforcement, treatment, and trying to get gang members into some life-changing patterns."

Meanwhile, the city of Watsonville is conscious of both its gang issues and the image problems that it causes. Such concerns have even colored a recent debate on whether to lift a 45-year ban on tattoo parlors in the city, when councilmember Antonio Rivas said tattoos are the tools of gangs and white supremacists, and added, "What kind of people come to tattoo parlors? This is something that scares me."

While the majority of the council seemed reluctantly in favor of lifting the ban—and city manager Carlos Palacios stated that its existence opened up the city to serious first amendment lawsuits—Watsonville mayor Manuel Bersamin says tattoo advocates in Santa Cruz should not be too quick to drop their jaws at the concerns of Rivas. "What a tattoo is for the youth of our town, predominantly Latino and immigrant, is probably different from what it is to a suburban kid in Santa Cruz," he says. "Even though we're only 20 miles away, it might as well be a world away."

Bersamin says the ban is lifting, but the council needs more time to make sure there are proper planning guidelines in place to avoid creating detrimental environments. "The position of the council is that people who want to start a body art shop have first amendment rights," he says, "and although some councilmen might have individual prejudices against a tattoo shop, we support the right to open a business." The council plans to study Monterey County's standards for businesses that offer tattooing, body modification, and tobacco accessories, since Santa Cruz County does not currently have any mandates about the distance those shops must be from schools, playgrounds, and each other.

Such standards, he says, "really depend on the culture of where that shop is located. In Santa Cruz it might be predominantly university students [getting tattooed], but it hasn't been that way here. That might be changing now, which is what the shop owners are saying, and if it's just tribal art, that's one thing. But once again, tattooing has been negatively affiliated with gang involvement here." He says arguments that banning parlors only leads to unhealthy backroom tattooing are

naïve. "That's a sign they don't understand why we have an issue with gang tattoos. It's probably cultural."

O.T. Quintero, assistant director of Barrios Unidos, agrees. "Most of your individuals that identify themselves with gangs or gang subculture do not go to tattoo parlors," he says. "Usually it's done by indigenous artists or those already involved in the gang." In other words, backroom tattoos happen with or without parlors. He also says that neighborhood concerns are valid. "Some people try to categorize Watsonville as where the gangs are, but it's the environment you're looking for, which means Beach Flats, Neary Lagoon, some parts of the Westside. It's not that all gang members are born in Watsonville. There are isolated pockets of environments for gang activity throughout the county."

Quintero says that stopping street-level gang activity depends on as much widespread involvement as possible. "If you really want an effective response, you have to include the members of the community who are on the front lines," he says, "and also the religious community and the business community. When you have all parts of the body involved, you can do things. A lot of times [efforts are] suppression driven, but for 30 years it hasn't gotten better. It's escalated. We have to try a different approach."

Bersamin says that gang activity in Watsonville comes and goes in cycles, and that the cycle is currently in an upswing. "Watsonville is traditionally a Norteño town, because there aren't enough Sureños (Mexican Mafia, La Eme) to threaten that position," he says. "But now, our gang problems are related to the populations in the prisons. Our police department and Parks & Recreation have to deal with problems that perhaps got started in Soledad State Penitentiary, where Norteños and Sureños constantly struggle. It's not just happening on the streets."

When dealing with the double-pronged environmental effects fueling street level gang activity and prison-based concentrations fueling coordinated activity from the top—coordination between municipalities and larger governmental bodies like Operation Valley Star are the natural response.

Zach Friend, spokesperson for the Santa Cruz Police Department, says that although the SCPD doesn't have a formal Gang Task Force, they have a system in place to tackle gang cases as they come up. "We work with a county-wide group to determine various dates in the year to run target operations on overtime pay," he says. "We have two trained investigators who deal with these cases when they come up, as well as our street crimes unit."

He says the most difficult aspect of breaking these cases is the code of silence. "People fear intimidation and retaliation. But there are also social issues of distrust for authority." He cites the 2003 homicide of Derek Snell as a prime example. "He was stabbed in the middle of a Memorial Day party, and we've offered a \$50,000 reward for information without any takers. So many witnesses can solve these crimes and they don't come forward."

When asked to characterize Santa Cruz gang activity vis-à-vis Watsonville, Friend says, "It depends on what you consider gang activity. There's white supremacy, Westside/Eastside conflicts, Norteño/Sureño conflicts ... I would say it's been going on much longer than the community might be willing to recognize. What you have in the last couple of years is a few high profile cases that break the fabric of what are normally quiet neighborhoods, and you see that criminal activity doesn't stop on one street or stay in one neighborhood."

Bersamin is also adamant that gang activity is everyone's issue, not just a Latino Watsonville thing. "I read about attacks in Boulder Creek, too. Racial violence. I get concerned sometimes that when we talk about Latino gangs, that's all people think about with this problem."

"We need more people to come to Watsonville and see that we're not all walking around here with bad intentions," he continues. "Myself and the mayor of Salinas have stated our biggest problem is the image caused by gangs." He says one of his favorite things to do is watch the television program "Cops" with his mother, but every time there's a Latino arrested, she says, "Oh great, now they're going to think that we're all like that."