

Turning the curve on youth violence

United Way releases statistics on county youth violence

By TARMO HANNULA

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — Youth violence was the central topic Tuesday at the Santa Cruz County Status on Youth Violence summit.

About 165 people, from judges, law and elected officials to youth counselors, parents and city workers, attended the one-day brainstorm.

The event, with a theme of "turning the curve on youth violence," began with a presentation from the Youth Violence Prevention Taskforce. Next came a data presentation of mountains of statistics based largely on research from 2012 presented by Abbie Stevens, director of assessment and evaluation at Applied Survey Research.

Following a break attendees

tossed ideas back and forth in group discussions about what they had learned and how they felt about the morning presentation.

"We hope to develop a well-balanced youth program to curb violence. Remember, we're better together," said Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano, who offered welcoming and closing remarks.

Data presented includes:

- There were 26,131 youth ages 10-17 and 39,379 young adults, ages 18-24 years old in Santa Cruz County in 2012. Forty-eight percent were identified as white, 40 percent Latino, 12 percent other. Nearly 60 percent of youth on probation were Latino, followed by 34 percent white and three percent black.

- The number of juvenile hall bookings have been decreasing

steadily in the county. For example, in 2002 there were more than 1,000 bookings, which dropped to 562 in 2012.

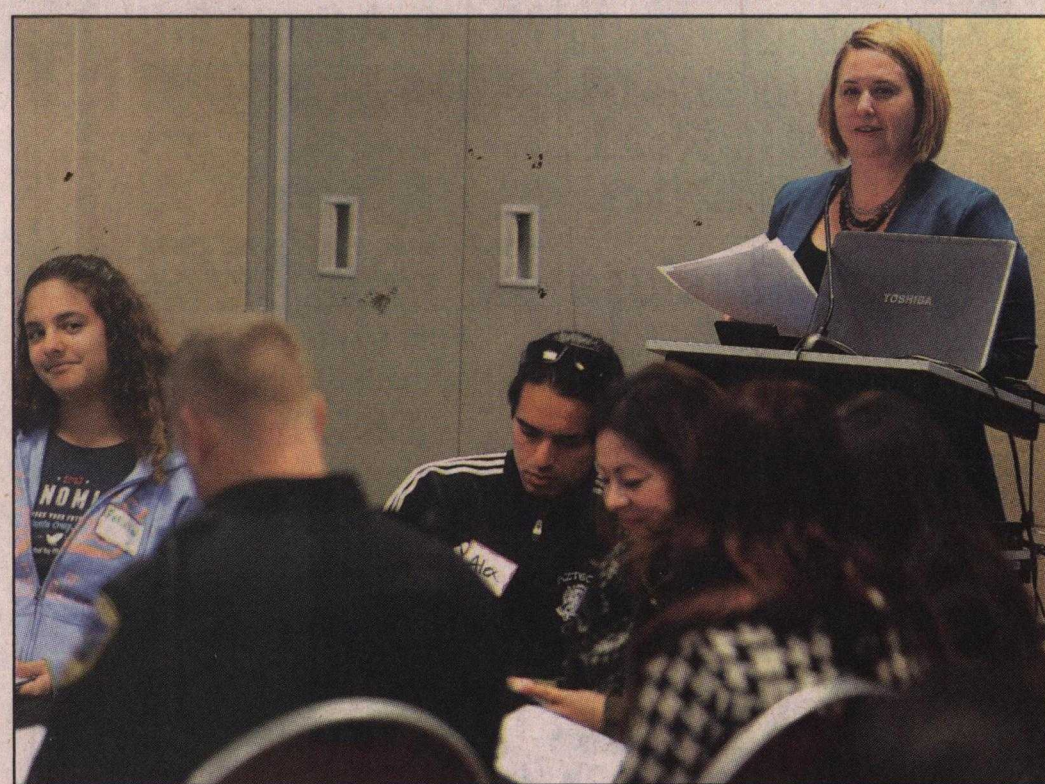
- Gang members are responsible for the majority of serious violent acts committed by youth.

- There were a total of 81 reported gang-related cases for youths 12 to 17 years old and 178 young adult (ages 18-25) gang-related cases from January through June of 2012.

- One in 10 freshmen self-reported being a gang member in the county in 2010-11.

"We need to have a look at what is getting in the way of our youth being successful," said Megan Joseph, director of community organizing, United Way of Santa Cruz County. "We

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Abbie Stevens, director of assessment and evaluation at Applied Survey Research, offers data of youth violence at the Santa Cruz County Status on Youth Violence Tuesday in Watsonville.

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want to make it easy for youth to be successful. We're taking a deep dive into our community to have a look at what is causing problems for our youth."

The next step, Joseph said, is to put together a strategic plan to find funding to implement the plan of moving from data to action.

"I feel the meeting today was very successful," Joseph said. "A big part of the community was represented."

Following the meeting, Stevens said, "It was well-received and people were excited about wanting to make change. The feeling I came away with from the people was 'Let's get together and let's work together.'"

One youth, who went by the name Juan, told the gathering

about his involvement in gangs which he mostly attributed to his parents working from sun up to sundown and the lack of guidance from elders. He unwound a tale of a life punctuated with frequent violence, stealing, drugs and eventually jail and probation. Juan said he ended up in a program headed up by Gina Castañeda in Watsonville that turned his life around to such a degree that he got back in school, got a high school diploma and is now enrolled in Cabrillo College. That admission garnered a hearty wave of applause.

"I am doing this because I want to get a good job," Juan said.

Verenise Valentin, vice mayor and city clerk for the Watsonville Youth City Council and a junior at Kirby High, was another youth who was invited to the podium.

"Though not all of the data comes as good news," she said,

"this forum is one of the first steps in the right direction. We can't fix the problems with youths unless we hear directly from them. Youths need to have a purpose. A lot of them don't feel connected with their community."

Some good news presented included:

- Alcohol use and alcohol and drug-related arrests are down.
- Juvenile arrests are down.
- Juvenile Hall bookings have been steadily decreasing.
- Most students reported having an adult outside of their home who cared about them.

United Way partnered with the Criminal Justice Council of Santa Cruz County, Probation and Applied Survey Research to pool and present the information in a 93-page report.

For information and to see the entire report, visit www.appliedsurveyresearch.org.



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Work groups were formed to explore the data on violence.