

# What can be done about the gangs?

"He's gone, oh dear Lord, hear my prayer, for I've lost another home boy today. Lord, help his mother that feels so sad. Lord help the home boys and home girls that feel so so bad. Let them learn what they are doing; help them Lord to stop their shooting. All this Lord I ask of you. Oh, dear Lord, help me too."

— Author unknown

By **KEN McLAUGHLIN** and  
**ANN CONY**  
(Last in a series)

Nobody in Watsonville has stepped forward with a specific plan of action to involve youth gang members in more constructive activities. But to hear residents from all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds talk about youth gangs, it's obvious that the townsfolk want the picture to change.

While nobody guarantees a solution to the problem, there are a number of community figures with better than average insight into the nature and causes of gangs. And some of these people offer ways to stop the brutality and start the healing.

In examining the problem, a consensus emerges in explaining the basic reasons why teenagers get caught up in gang life. They include:

- Low-income background.
- Neglect and-or lack of discipline at home.
- A need for a sense of belonging.
- Mutual protection.
- Bad experiences with the school system.
- Peer pressure and recognition.
- Family tradition.
- Lack of alternatives, e.g. entertainment and recreation.

Alfredo Nava, vice-principal at Rolling Hills Jr. High School, says the school's administration is involved in trying to keep kids IN school and OUT of gangs.

"A lot of it is economics," says Nava, commenting that many youth gang members' families "can't afford memberships to the Y."

In many such families, both parents work, often at night in the canneries. In some families, there is only a single parent, the nominal "head" of the household. "The parents are too busy making a living . . . there's no contact between parents and child," says Nava.

"They know there's a problem out there, but it's the feeling of 'It's not my child,'" he adds.

At some point, he says, parents lose control over their kids. What's worse, he says, is that many of the parents have the feeling they're alone in their plight.

Lynn Miller, a juvenile probation officer in the Watsonville office of the Santa Cruz County Probation Department, recommends that "parents be educated in what the gangs do, what they wear, the telltale signs that indicate their child is involved."



**Youth Services personnel who work with gang members are shown above. Seated, from left, are Hector Longorea, Becky Teaford and Jack Smith; standing is Juan Morales.**

"Sometimes," he says, "parents come in and are shocked to hear the kid admit he's a member of a gang."

Another probation officer, Mike Cowan, notes that "more often than not, there's no father at home," and if there is, he's usually a weak figure who may have had past criminal involvement himself.

"It's always the mother who comes in here (the probation office)," says Cowan. "The mothers seem to be stronger." When kids start getting in serious trouble, said Miller, "the father seems to fade out of the picture, not knowing how to deal with it."

The Watsonville branch of Youth Services does have programs in which counselors work with parents of troubled

youths in homes. But these programs are threatened by the loss of revenue because of Prop. 13. Youth Services has been asked to cut its revenue sharing funding by 7 percent this year and 25 percent the next, according to Pat LeClair, coordinator of the counseling program. The organization will have to scramble for funds elsewhere — or else cut services at a time when they seem to be needed most.

One of the reasons for involving parents, Ms. LeClair explains, is to make sure the youths don't become totally dependent on counselors. And this way, she says, the parents will become involved in the therapy process.



George Kypuros, executive director of La Coalicion, tries to look at the problem from the gang members' perspective: "You go through a stage when you're very hard-headed. And then you compound that with the atmosphere you grew up in, the friends you grew up with."

Adds Kypuros: "The problem is getting worse and it's really sad. It gives the whole Spanish-speaking community a bad name because of stereotypes."

Mario Carabarin, one of the most outspoken Chicano activists in Watsonville, believes that much of the gang violence is motivated by misdirected "passions."

"It's romantic, exciting to be in a gang," he says. "You prove how bad you are."

Many of the youths, he says, "don't know how to express their emotions in other ways."

Carabarin believes that not all gang members are "bad," that only a minority "are violent and causing the problems." However, he admits that the situation is getting worse. "I think what has happened is that it's kind of run away with itself and people are taken aback by the extremes the gangs have taken."

Carabarin and others link the increase in violence with a lack of constructive alternatives for Mexican-American youths in Watsonville.

"There are no programs and no places for these kids to direct their energies," asserts Carabarin, who finds it difficult to divorce the youth gang problem from politics. He points to the City Council's willingness at one time to allow demolition of the Boys' Club building on Maple Avenue to make way for a new police station. The decision, he maintains, indicated "that they really don't give a damn about Chicano youths."

Although few Chicano representatives are as vocal as Carabarin, he and others say the Spanish-speaking community as a whole is enormously concerned about the problem.

"There's a lot of frustration in the community with the City Council," he says. "We've been down there (City Hall) time and time again, but nothing happens. It's a feeling of 'Where do we go from here'."

If most of the victims of violent crime were Anglo rather than Mexican-American, Carabarin argues, the City Council would have been moved to action long ago.

Carabarin is not the only one to say that, but he is one of the few who will say it "on the record." One higher-up in the Police Department, for example, says he has "no doubt" that pressure on the department would have been applied long ago if Anglos were the victims.

Virtually all the people contacted by the Register-Pajaronian regarding youth gangs felt that the problem should be dealt with directly — and immediately.

"It's time to put the problem on the table and get together, explore the alternatives and solutions," says Vice-principal Nava. Kypuros feels that all agencies involved with youths should "mobilize and motivate a citizens' group to help them (gang members) solve their problems."

He says "we must support law enforcement in what they're trying to do — they have a hard job." While Kypuros sees the recent hiring of two bilingual youth counselors as a step in the right direction for the Police Department, he thinks the department should give more "sensitivity training" to assure that all officers will understand the roots of the gang problem. Also, he believes the department should try harder to recruit local Chicanos as officers.

Kypuros would also like to see the police "prioritize their activities," with less emphasis on things such as lowriders' mechanical violations and casual marijuana smoking.

"The Police Department has to find a way to relate to those kids and make the role of the officers known," says Kypuros.

Carabarin says some parents of gang members have met to talk about ways of eliminating the violence, and that some concerned people in the Latino community are seeking ideas from a San Jose group called Barrios Unidos, an organization that tries to stop gang rivalry.

Says Carabarin: "I don't feel the gangs are totally negative . . . If you could deter them from violence and drugs into community service or helping themselves, that would be OK."

"Anything that keeps the kids off the streets and gets their interest in any given area is good." In particular, he adds, Watsonville needs a youth center. "Curfews and those sort of things just aren't going to work," he says.

Carabarin's sentiments are echoed by others who suggest that gangs be encouraged to engage in more constructive activities such as fund-raising.

When a reporter recently asked a gang member if he would encourage his peers to put on a carwash, the youth replied: "People would look all their cars and take out all their valuables."

The boy was joking, but the statement reflected reality. Acceptance in the community would undoubtedly be an uphill battle for the gangs.

Still, "rechanneling" programs have worked well in other cities. Ted Sarbin, a UC-Santa Cruz professor emeritus, told a Watsonville citizens' committee studying crime two years ago that "pro-social direction" has been given to many once-violent gangs. In some cities, he said, former gang members are even providing escort services for senior citizens. He told the crime committee that the programs "are not too sentimental or romantic an idea." They work, he said.

Hector Longorea, a supervisor and counselor with Youth Services' PICO work project, says it's hard for the gang members to "fit in."

"When they go to places like the bowling alley, people look at them like they're from outer space," remarks Longorea, who feels that gang members are looking for "social acceptance."

The gang members in the PICO program, he says, are "real hard" workers, and he has little doubt they would work just as hard in a community effort.

Juan Morales, a program coordinator for PICO, says "symbols" are very important to gangs. "Cars, clothing — those are the things that excite and move them," he says. Morales believes that positive symbols unrelated to violence could help save them from a criminal life.

Sgt. Chuck Carter of the Police Department thinks the gangs might be reformed with the help of more positive publicity for groups like lowrider clubs, which, he notes, often come from the same "cultural background" as the gang members.

Carter says police in the past have had trouble with some of the lowriders. But now that they're in the clubs — which deplore violence — the youths have cleaned up their act, he says. Carter tells a story of a disturbance on Main Street one night in which members of the City Style car club were "invaluable" in

helping officers keep the situation under control.

Probation officer Miller feels that there's a small group of hard-core gang members ("wackos," he terms them) who "really enjoy violence." But most, he says, are decent kids.

"They're human beings," says Miller. "They walk, they talk, and sleep just like the rest of us."

"Some have a consciousness that this is really nowheresville and they want to do something more with their lives. Some of them, turn to me with questions about how to get a job or how to get into the armed services," says his colleague Cowan.

Cowan feels a youth center that has a boxing and wrestling program is needed (much like the Boys' Club before it was closed by the city), so youths can vent their frustrations in a physical manner.

The center, he says, should be staffed by people the "kids can relate to — ex-gang members, ex-cons or just macho-image guys." Cowan's "personal fantasy" is to get a couple of local fathers he knows (reformed criminals) to be involved in a program.

One ex-con, who gave his name as John, wrote the Register-Pajaronian this week to offer his suggestion on solving the gang problem. "My advice is to find one, two or three ex-cons who have given up crime to meet with the leaders and with the gangs and tell them how it really is in the pen," he says.

The reason that many gang members seem to be emulating prisoners, he says, is that they haven't got the straight story from ex-cons, who often include their fathers or older brothers.

"They told them that prison wasn't s — —," writes John. "The older ones get out and brag how they ran in groups inside (the prisons) and of killings and drugs and that it wasn't s — —."

But, he continues, "you have to take an ex-con who has been there and knows the hurt of a Dear John letter, or being made a punk, or living in a cell with one other person, or your best friend being killed by another friend from the same gang."

The same gang member who joked about the carwash says his gang, the North Side Locos, would be more than willing to get involved in a project. He suggests that the gang be allowed to paint a "big mural in the center of town — where everybody can see it." The project, he maintains, would reduce graffiti writing, which he says stems from a need to "make ourselves known."

Adds the gang member: "Give us an opportunity to do something."