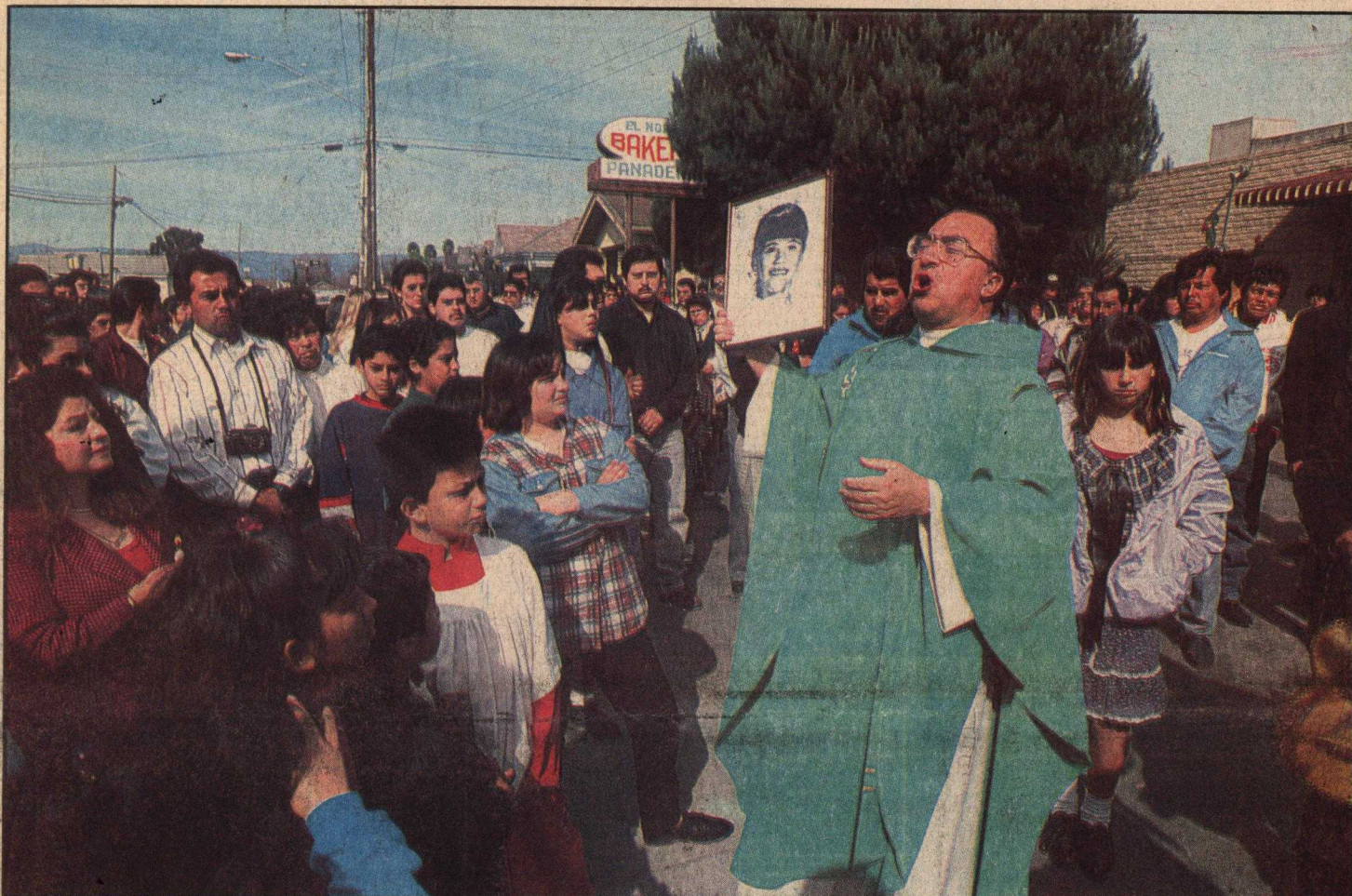


Chain of violence



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

In February, Rev. Raul Carvajal leads a procession to the bakery where Jessica and Jorge Cortez were slain.

Violence 'just keeps going on'

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

THE BODY COUNT is rising as a cycle of vengeance and gang violence spins through the community, destroying families and children.

This year four people have been murdered in gang shootings in the Santa Cruz County area — the most gang killings ever. The deaths mark a fatal escalation of violence between gangs, some of which have fought each other for decades.

"The word on the street is that the green light is on (for attacks)," said Henry Robles, Watsonville police gang investigator. "It's definitely heating up."

The gang killings, which include that of a 9-year-old Pajaro girl and her 16-year-old brother, both gunned down at a bakery in February, are connected to a string of shootings and attacks, in a cycle that began more than 15 years and a dozen bodies ago.

"It's a matter of payback to keep respect, and of anger over friends who have been shot down and hurt," Robles said. "The violent acts are deliberate."

The cycle of killing began with the Mount Madonna murders in 1980 when two teenagers were executed and their bodies dumped near the mountain park.

The victims, Ricky Romero, 16, and Lucio Garcia, 15, were loosely associated with the North Side Locos gang. They

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were forced into a car following a coming-out party at the County Fairgrounds.

The kidnapers, three members of the Las Lomas Boys — a fledgling north Monterey County gang, — drove them up the winding mountain road. They began to

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Community institutions forced to react

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

COPS ARE ASSIGNED to the school beat. Students are wearing uniforms. Campus supervisors patrol campuses with walkie talkies.

No, there aren't metal detectors, like at several Los Angeles schools, but gangs have indeed changed the way schools do business in Santa Cruz County.

Increasingly, schools and other community institutions — churches, businesses and recreation programs — are being forced to react.

In the front pews of local churches, youths boldly clad in gang attire at a funeral Mass for their friend are scolded by priests.

Public buildings and businesses are defaced as gangs mark their territory and status with graffiti.

Parks employees ask to be briefed on gang territories and rivalries by police, as they've seen gang fights and disputes disrupt their activities.

Schools

Gang members, or those who aspire to be like them, are the bullies and popular tough guys who command respect on school campuses.

J.F., an eighth-grader at E.A. Hall Middle School who requested anonymity, said he began noticing gangs "right when we

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Community institutions react

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came here in the sixth grade. Some were wearing red, others blue, hanging out in groups."

His friend, another eighth grader at that campus, said: "They'd pick on people ... sometimes they jump 'em." J.F. finished the sentence: "If you fight back, they'll take you. If not, they won't take you."

A third boy added: "If you don't pay attention to them, they'll leave you alone."

Both Watsonville and Santa Cruz high schools have added extra campus supervisors, armed with walkie-talkies and ordered to alert school administrators as soon as fights break out.

Though schools began prohibiting gang garb two years ago, stricter rules are under way at many county campuses.

In the past two years, obvious gang dress has been prohibited at several school sites — red or blue shirts, bandannas, the numbers 13,

14 or XIII or XIV or stenciled gang names. Common attire like baseball caps and sports team jackets also has been prohibited on some campuses.

High schools are even altering school colors or other symbols that could promote gangs. Santa Cruz High changed its crimson red to a burgundy color, and Aptos High is considering eliminating the color blue. And Harbor High School even changed the school newspaper's nautical name — The Gangplank.

At the Pajaro Valley district's Ohlone Elementary and nearby Pajaro Middle School, campuses in the north Monterey County town of Pajaro, school uniforms were introduced this school year to promote student safety and eliminate the need to police student attire. A new state law allows school administrators to require uniforms.

Hard-to-define "gang behavior" is being targeted at some school

sites in the county.

"We don't label students or say they belong, we just say these are the things that we see," said Luis Carrillo, former principal at Watsonville's Rolling Hills Middle School. "It's an attitude, it's a posturing, it's a grouping — all of those play for us a key role to determine whether it's gang-like behavior. We call in students, then parents, and talk to them."

Churches

Some pastors of congregations with large numbers of Spanish speakers are adding parent education classes to their spiritual teachings. Parents at both St. Patrick's and Our Lady of Assumption Catholic churches in Watsonville and Pajaro are training parents to watch for signs that their kids are involved in gangs.

Our Lady of Assumption parishioner Manual Diaz said he attended such a class after it was an-

nounced at a Sunday service.

"My son said he was afraid. I asked him why. He said his friends said the guys who were going to Rolling Hills ... were trying to put him in the gangs."

More than 100 parents listened as former gang members told how their change in behavior and dress foreshadowed their personal metamorphosis into gang life. The program was started by the Rev. Raul Carvajal after two of his parishioners, a 9-year-old girl and her 16-year-old brother, were gunned down in an apparent gang-related attack.

Diaz said after the meeting, he realized he had seen children in the neighborhood sporting colors and numbers that signify gang affiliation, "but I didn't know what it meant, or what a color means."

Businesses

Likewise, business owners and residents didn't know what graffiti

meant. The ugly scrawls were thought of as nothing but malicious vandalism costly to remove, but also damaging to leave. But in the past few years, county law enforcement officials began realizing that scribbled letters and numbers were territorial warnings, and encouraged rival groups to respond.

In the two months that a comprehensive Watsonville graffiti ordinance has been in effect, a painting contractor hired by the city has done about 200 sites. The laws encourage property owners to erase graffiti within a week, either on their own or by having the job done for free by calling a city hotline.

The ordinances also require businesses to lock up spray paint and thick marking pens, which are favorite graffiti instruments. They also mandate increased penalties for those convicted, more police supervision and require parents of convicted vandals to pay for dam-

ages.

Parks

Watsonville Parks and Recreation supervisor Debra Moonan-Churchill said to work with youths today, her program supervisors need to understand local gang turfs and rivalries, to protect the kids who aren't involved and to be able to reach those who are.

One employee said she didn't know what was happening when she saw a young boy who was bleeding being chased across the park, until kids in her program filled her in on their gang affiliations.

"Here we are in our parks, trying to promote positives for families not involved in this ... and you take this element that you care about too, and the question is how can we make it work?" said Moonan-Churchill.

"You can't influence something you don't understand."

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stab the boys in the legs.

The fight grew more violent and eventually the car stopped. The victims were taken out and forced to strip to their underwear. They tried to escape. They were chased down, stabbed more than 140 times and left to die at the edge of the woods.

"Then all hell broke loose," said Frank Fuentes, a Watsonville anti-gang counselor who once ran with the Las Lomas Boys.

Fuentes claimed the Mount Madonna killings were in retaliation for the shooting of his cousin, Pete Cavasuela, who was shot in the head in front of the Las Lomas Store and left crippled and brain damaged.

The Mount Madonna killers were arrested and eventually sentenced to lengthy prison terms after a two-and-half year trial, but the wars of retribution had begun.

Fuentes and his brother were stabbed and gang members started carrying guns and firing on cars.

The Las Lomas Boys faded away, but the killings did not as new gangs formed, such as City Hall and the Poorsiders.

Civil wars

The gang killings are a civil war that has turned family against family, and friend against friend.

"A lot of Northsiders grew up here and have family ties with Poorsiders and City Hallers," Robles said. "They are cousins. We literally have family members killing family members."

Besides the four deaths, police say there have been at least 10 other shootings and several stabbings since January.

The killings have resulted in the breakdown of traditional gang alliances as the Northside, City Hall and Poorside gangs are now all fighting each other.

"It is a spider web of ties that makes it difficult to keep up with who is fighting with whom, and who is shooting whom," Robles said.

The first victims of this year were Jorge Cortez, 16, and his sister, Jessica Cortez, 9, who had gone out after dinner to get snacks at a bakery in Pajaro.

According to law enforcement officials, Jorge and his sister were leaving the bakery when two men opened fire. The girl fell, dead from a gunshot to the head, while Jorge ran into the bakery for shelter. One of the men followed him inside the business and shot him several times, according to witnesses.

Community outraged

The community was outraged, especially that of Jessica, a third grader at Ohlone Elementary

School. More than 500 people marched in their funeral procession.

Law officers said Jorge was associated with the Northsiders gang and may have been involved in a drive-by shooting earlier in the year.

The murder of Jorge and his sister may have been in retribution for the shooting of a 14-year-old Poorside gang member in a Pajaro phone booth earlier that month, law enforcement officials said. That youth was left crippled.

Police characterized the Cortez killings as a Poorside attack on the Northsiders.

Police say a suspect has been identified in the Cortez killings, but has fled to Mexico. The suspect was arrested in Mexico on drug and burglary charges there, but later was released, according to authorities who would give no further information.

One month later, on March 6, Michael Echevarria was gunned down at a party. That killing sparked a series of revenge attacks and pitted the Northsiders against City Hall gang members.

'That split is hot'

"The Echevarria homicide splintered the relationship between City Hall, the Northsiders and everyone else," said Patricia Bazar, an assistant district attorney assigned to gang prosecution. "That split is hot and very heated right now."

About 50 people were at the party, including members of the City Hall and Northsider gangs, two groups loosely allied with each other.

According to witnesses, the affair was largely trouble-free until a group of older City Hall gang members crashed the party. The two groups began to "mad dog" each other, in which stares are exchanged. After a fight broke out between female gang members, tension escalated.

According to court testimony, Echevarria, a 22-year-old Northsider, exchanged punches with Gabriel "Perico" Velasquez Ortega, 19, a City Hall gang member.

In court, a witness testified Ortega returned with a gun and shot Echevarria once in the head at point blank range. Echevarria died at the scene.

Ortega is awaiting trial on charges of murder.

The killing led to open hostilities between the gangs, police said.

"It was a gathering of gang members that went awry," Robles said.

Violent retaliation

On March 11, the day of Echevarria's funeral, Northside gang members retaliated by stabbing two brothers, ages 19 and 15, in



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Mercedes Cortez, here at work in the Pajaro Valley fields, lost two children to the ongoing cycle of gang violence.

broad daylight behind the Employment Development Office on Arthur Road.

The victims were not gang members, police said, but had relatives who were City Hall gang members. The pair were stabbed repeatedly, but survived.

Over the next two months, a series of drive-by shootings, assaults and stabbings occurred among the three gangs, including the stabbing of two teen-agers on Pennsylvania Street and the non-fatal shooting of a gang member at Pinto Lake.

The next killing took place June 9 on San Andreas Road near Manresa State Beach after a brawl between City Hall and Northside gang members.

According to police, Antonio Valdivia, 19, was a passenger in the car leaving the scene when he was shot in the head.

Four people were arrested including Enrique Godinez, 16, a City Hall gang member who is believed to have fired the shot and is awaiting trial on charges of murder.

Quick retaliation

Less than three hours after the shooting, before police identified



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Tony Valdivia was buried in June after losing his life in the blood feuds of gangs.

the suspects, Godinez's house was hit by a drive-by shooting, and his sister and sister-in-law shot at.

Three Northside gang members were arrested in the shooting, in-

cluding a 14-year-old and a man identified as Nardo Garcia, 20.

According to prosecutors, Garcia is the brother of Lucio Garcia, the 15-year-old victim in the Mount

Madonna murders, more than 14 years earlier.

"Nardo was only 5 when his brother was killed," Bazar said. "It just keeps going on."

The son/

Childhood pursuits turn deadly

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

ALEX, 17, didn't plan to join a gang. It just happened, he says, because he was a kid growing up at Green Valley Apartments. He realizes now that sometimes you don't get out.

Four months ago, gang involvement ended the life of 19-year-old Tony Valdivia, Alex's neighbor and friend since childhood.

"Everybody is so close to everybody here," Alex said of the youths who grew up at the 200-unit subsidized apartment complex on Ross Avenue near Freedom Elementary School.

Alex, whose name and those of his family have been changed at their request for this article, feels misunderstood. He complains that people talk about "the gangs" like they were all a group of kids thirsty for violence. The public doesn't know, for example, that before Alex and his friends were called homeboys, Nortenos or Barrio Green Valley, they were kids growing up together.

"A lot of people think you wake up one morning and say, 'OK, I'm not a gang-banger any more.' It's not like that," he said. "I have other friends, but these are the people I grew up with."

As Alex spoke, he pointed to the children scattered about the lawn area, riding bikes, chasing each other and kicking balls.

"Like all these little kids here, we hung out together. Before, we used to play sports and stuff like that. We used to wear our little shirts with our numbers that said

'Green Valley.' We had our own soccer team."

"Then we got older and things started changing. They (the older kids) already had their Green Valley gang, and we were just little guys. But each new generation grew up into it," said Alex. He was 13 when he first went to Juvenile Hall for assaulting a security guard at the apartment complex.

His first year as a freshman at Watsonville High School would be his last. The remainder of his high school years have been spent in and out of jail, in group homes, drug rehabilitation programs and on the run.

Now Alex is abiding by terms of probation to avoid being locked up for an assault charge in March. He works at an Aptos restaurant, and plans to attend night classes at Radcliff Adult School. He hopes to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma, then enroll at a community college. He's also convinced that to make it out of the gang lifestyle, he'd need to move away from his old friends.

"Everything's going good for me, and now this happens. I wanted to be good, things were going good (until Tony died)," said Alex.

"I felt like giving up, going back to it. I was hurting, there was anger, hatred toward those people," he said, then paused. "I still have it inside of me — it's something that'll be there for a long time. I don't know if it'll ever go away."

"It makes it easier for me to talk to people. If I keep it inside, it'll gather up and gather up, and it'll explode."

GANG LIFE

KIDS ARE DYING

'A lot of people think you wake up one morning and say, "OK, I'm not a gang-banger any more." It's not like that. These are the people I grew up with.'

— Alex

'What do you do when you live here? Do you tell him not to talk to those kids outside? Not to leave the house? We've tried so hard to keep an eye on them.'

— Alex's father

The parents/

Street and home lives collide

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

IT'S AN unwritten code among gang members: respect your families. Leave gang banging on the streets. But as Alex's family knows, it doesn't work that way.

Seven months ago, sheriff's deputies surrounded the complex before they stormed Alex's apartment. Inside were his mother, 11-year-old sister and 4-year-old brother. Deputies' hands were on their pistols as they went from room to room. They had heard the teen-ager might be armed.

"I was in tears. I felt like I was watching 'COPS' on TV," said his mother, Ana. "They get kind of rough on TV. Now, whenever my 4-year-old sees that program, he says: 'That's what happened to us. They came in our house like that, huh, mom?'"

"One of the sheriffs came into the kitchen and asked if Alex had been here. He said, 'If we ever find him here or find out he's been here, we're taking you all in.' I took it as a threat."

When Alex isn't home, his little brother asks if "they took him away." Alex shows remorse that his street life and home life collided — that's not what they teach on the streets.

"Whatever we do out here, we don't do in there. I keep my red rags in my pocket or in my room. I'm not going to disrespect them," he said.

But it's too late.

Ana and her husband remember their

shock in June when they heard that a boy who grew up with their sons was shot dead, allegedly by rival gang members. It makes them scared.

Working in a hospital emergency room, Ana has witnessed the bloody aftermath of gang clashes and is realistic about her son's past involvement.

"That's why I couldn't understand why they wanted to affiliate with gang stuff. I was told they wanted something to do. We were told they weren't looking for violence, that they're just hanging out," she said.

But her husband, like many parents, will not acknowledge his son's gang involvement.

"I don't consider him and the other guys gang members," he said, even though his son admits it, and has been in and out of Juvenile Hall the past five years as a result.

The father has kept a steady job as a truck driver and tries to be a good example to his children. But he blames himself for not living in a better neighborhood.

"What do you do when you live here? Do you tell him not to talk to those kids outside? Not to leave the house? We've tried so hard to keep an eye on them ... " his voice wanders.

He shakes his head and says there's only so much he can do.

"It's nice to live here — we live comfortably," he said, looking around his nicely furnished, four-bedroom apartment where rent and utilities is \$700 a month. "But when you have kids here, it's time to move."