

Live Oak

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months before that where we saw a guy get his face broken with a bat," Fitzgerald said.

Sheriff's deputies raided the house of a neighbor suspected of selling methamphetamine and a while back he called 911 because he heard someone smashing a car window, Fitzgerald said.

Gang problems are not new to Live Oak. Fights and minor stabbings are not unusual, and jurors last summer convicted two teens of attempted murder for shooting a man walking near 17th Avenue and Merrill in February 2006.

A rash of violent incidents likely associated with gangs have cropped up in Live Oak in recent months, according to the Sheriff's Office.

Gang members armed with knives got into a fight on the 2300 block of 17th Avenue in September, but the guy who was hurt refused to tell deputies who he had been fighting with, according to sheriff's Sgt. Mario Sulay. In October, gang members stole a bike from a teenager during a confrontation in front of Live Oak Elementary School.

In early January, a man was attacked by a group and stabbed outside a party on 7th Avenue. Two weeks before the fatal shoot-

ing, a suspected gang member brandished a knife and a gun in the same area where Silonsochilt was shot, according to the Sheriff's Office.

The gang problems also spread into Soquel, where there have been gang-related assaults at the high school.

"I think there's always been gang activity," Plageman said. "We see it ebb and flow."

A study of the Live Oak community released last month pointed out that one-third of the violent crimes committed in the Sheriff's Office jurisdiction last year happened in Live Oak. In 2006, only 28 percent of the violence was attributed to that community.

After the fatal shooting, neighbors said they were concerned about safety — one family talked about moving out of Live Oak because of the violence — but they also said the frequent burglaries and graffiti are really frustrating.

Sarah Winterburn, the Graffiti Removal Project coordinator for the Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz, said her group has seen a three-fold increase in the amount of graffiti in Live Oak and Soquel in recent months.

"Most of it was gangs. It's just overwhelming," she said.

Some of the tags are about the fatal shooting, but a lot of it is related to a three rival gangs vying for territory in Mid-Coun-

ty, according to Sulay.

"We're starting to notice competing graffiti between gangs," he said. "The graffiti's picked up. That's something that concerns us."

Bob Farmer works with the Graffiti Removal Project to paint over or power wash off the gang tags.

"We've been having a lot," he said. "It seems like there's something going off."

In the past two weeks, tags have been painted on the blue balls in Anna Jean Cummings County Park on Soquel San Jose Road, in downtown Soquel, on overpasses and bridges, and at neighborhood schools, according to the Sheriff's Office.

"It's gang members and associates staking out their territory," Plageman said. "It's a challenge, it's bragging rights and it ultimately leads to physical confrontation and more serious crimes."

Deputies said it's only a matter of time before there is more gang-related violence in Live Oak.

"Wherever the gang members are, that's where the trouble is at," Plageman said, explaining the problems can be traced back to who is in custody in County Jail or serving a state prison sentence. "It seems to go in little spurts."

For their part, sheriff's deputies try to drive through parks and other spots in Live Oak

where neighbors report problems or where there's been trouble in the past. From Dec. 1 to mid-February, deputies performed more than 150 of these "area checks" in Live Oak, in addition to responding to crimes, according to Sheriff's Office records.

But gang members still manage to get their tags on sidewalks and rock walls.

"We can't be everywhere at once," Plageman said, suggesting residents call 911 to report any crimes they see and also organize Neighborhood Watch groups to deter gangs from hanging out on their streets. "If people in the community work together and support each other, that's a way."

That works in some areas. Last year, residents living near Jose Avenue Park organized to report crime at the park and met with county Supervisor Jan Beautz, county Parks and Recreation representatives and the sheriff's sergeant who oversees Live Oak to hash out solutions for their neighborhood.

But since the fatal shooting and spike in gang-related vandalism this year, other neighborhoods have not responded with as much gusto. So far, neither residents nor law enforcement have scheduled neighborhood meetings.

"It seems like people really aren't that into doing much,"

Fitzgerald said.

The Sheriff's Office has teamed with other county police agencies to do a couple of Joint Area Gang operations. Deputies have offered to meet with Live Oak residents interested in Neighborhood Watch and detectives investigating the fatal shooting have asked residents for help tracking past violence in the area.

But Sulay also said it's unrealistic to think law enforcement can completely eliminate the gang problem.

"The fact is, gangs have been around for generations," Sulay said. "Can we control gangs? That's the goal."

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