

## Watsonville effort reduces gang crimes

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WATSONVILLE — Police here say a three-pronged attack on local gangs using high-visibility law enforcement, a focus on students in grades 3-6 and community involvement has helped bring the problem under control.

"We've been combating this for such a long time, we're used to dealing with them and we've finally found something that is working," Watsonville Police Department Juvenile Division Detective Robert Montes said.

Watsonville police say gang-related crimes have leveled off over the past few years, and that they have had only three drive-by shootings this year, compared with six in Santa Cruz.

Bill Zaragoza, of the community-run Coalition to End Barrio Warfare and the social-services agency Youth Services, says Watsonville is clearly ahead of Santa Cruz in addressing gang problems, primarily because there is a collaboration among the police, community-based programs, schools, churches, city departments and even individual families.

"In Watsonville, we are being proactive, and not waiting until someone gets killed or hurt," Zaragoza said. "In Santa Cruz, I don't really see much communication."

Montes says five officers work directly with about 200 gang members in Watsonville daily, targeting the busiest gang areas, patting down suspected members for weapons and diligently arresting youths for gang-related offenses.

"We do whatever we have to do," Montes said.

Ricardo Carvajal is a lay worker for St. Patrick's Church in Watsonville who works with the city's Latino youth.

"A major mission of our church is to work with the young people of our community," Carvajal said.

Carvajal leads regular meetings at the church, where he says he tries to help gang members and potential members accept themselves and the community, and to provide them with a sense of connectedness and belonging.

Watsonville city officials recently approved the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program for their city, which Montes said will involve an officer spending an hour a day with a specific class for 16 weeks, becoming a friend and a leader for teens at risk.

Statistically, Watsonville has more gang members per capita than Santa Cruz — police say Watsonville has just under 30,000 residents and about 200 gang members, while Santa Cruz has about 49,000 residents and about 300 gang members.

But police say there is no question that at this point gang violence is more prevalent in Santa Cruz than Watsonville.

Montes said he sympathizes with his colleagues in the north, and said he is certain the Santa Cruz Police Department has the skills and determination to address the problem, with time.

"Santa Cruz is a bigger city, so I guess it doesn't surprise me that they have a bigger gang problem than we have," Montes said. "I guess they're just going to have to learn how to deal with it."