

GANG ACTIVITY AND ENFORCEMENT IN VENTURA COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

Recent media attention and reports of gang violence in and around our schools spurred the Law, Justice and Public Safety Committee to study the problem of escalating gang activity in the cities of Ventura County.

INQUIRY

We met with the officers who specialize in gang enforcement from the Port Hueneme, Oxnard, Ventura and Simi Police Departments and the Sheriff's Department. We met with the Superintendent of Schools and representatives from the Probation Agency and the District Attorney's Office. We attended a summit conference on school violence. We were privileged to hear a presentation by the Police Captain of Ojai and a teenage girl whose Youth Council Violence Prevention program was selected as one of ten pilot programs in California by the State Attorney General.

FINDINGS

All of the law enforcement agencies in Ventura County are actively involved in trying to keep young people from joining gangs. There is a zero tolerance policy in place by all departments when it comes to gang activity. There are special police details in place to enforce this policy.

The Sheriff's Department has created a Crime Suppression Unit to provide assistance in fighting crime in all areas. This unit has been in operation since August, 1996 and its highly trained deputies are available to help with gang-related incidents.

Gang graffiti is a problem shared by each community. Many agencies photograph the graffiti in order to identify those responsible. Most cities try to remove the graffiti as soon as possible and there are graffiti hotlines to call to report these criminal acts.

The Ventura County Law Enforcement Coordinating Committee has defined a gang as three or more people characterized by a name, symbol, special dress or territorial concerns whose members associate on a regular basis and engage in criminal, violent and/or delinquent behavior. The structure of a gang ranges from a loose group of individuals who know one another and commit criminal acts together, to a formal organization with one leader or ruling council of members having written rules and regulations which delineate the expected behavior with disciplinary actions to be taken against their own member or reprisals against a member of the community. There are three categories: hard core member, associate member and affiliates.

Gang crimes include: vandalism, graffiti, auto theft, alcohol theft, trespassing, witness intimidation, drug sales, burglary, theft, assaults with a deadly weapon, shooting at an inhabited dwelling or motor vehicle, discharging a firearm from a vehicle and homicide.

Some cities send notifications to parents of juveniles who are seen associating with known gang members to inform them of the dangers of such behavior.

A variety of tracking systems for gang activity is being utilized throughout the County. These range from simple picture identification boards to sophisticated computer systems. The stored information varies between agencies and may include picture identification with vital statistics. Identifying marks such as tattoos, street names and graffiti are also stored. In their own jurisdictions, officers are knowledgeable of gang members, but it is difficult at this time to identify gang members from other communities.

Police officers report that malt liquors and fortified wines are the drinks of choice of gang members due to their low prices, quick highs and marketing appeal to teens. Gang members are known to drink together, party and do crimes. Alcohol use increases a member's standing in the gang and reduces his or her inhibitions to violent behavior. Most fights between gangs are alcohol related. A half-filled forty ounce malt liquor bottle is often used as a weapon and found at the scene.

Underage gang members often coerce adult substance abusers and/or homeless people into purchasing alcoholic beverages for them and many gangs steal from markets or liquor stores.

The premise of the Ventura Police Department's Gang Violence Suppression (GVS) program is that a few hard core gang members commit a significant proportion of the crimes and negatively influence the behavior of other gang members. The purpose of the GVS program is to reduce the level of gang violence and to divert potentially dangerous gang activity into positive and constructive behavior. This program includes the District Attorney's Office, the Probation Agency, School Districts and the Police Activities League.

Port Hueneme has a Street Terrorism Enforcement Program (STEP) and Oxnard has a Special Enforcement Unit (SEU). The strategies of these units work to keep police officers very visible in high incident areas. They also assist the Probation Agency on gang searches and warrants, ride along with the probation officers on their visits to juvenile offenders who have been released from detention facilities and share gang information with all other law enforcement agencies in the County.

CONCLUSIONS

Gang activity has been on the rise throughout the County. Law enforcement agencies and community task forces are doing their best to contain it, suppress it and educate the public. Graffiti by gangs is a widespread

problem resulting in enormous expense for its removal. It appears that early intervention with at-risk youths is the best way to discourage gang membership. Our community must offer a helping hand to those youths who have not yet committed themselves to gangs, and handcuffs for those who participate in gang-related activities to convince them that there are consequences for their behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That a countywide gang tracking system include probation information.
- That the Board of Supervisors fund a full-time effort to coordinate gang information and implement procedures to curtail gang activity in Ventura County.
- That law enforcement agency gang task forces be considered a priority during budget considerations.
- That City Councils and the Board of Supervisors work with law enforcement agencies in developing public awareness programs and alternative recreational programs for youths.
- That programs of awareness begin with first grade students to establish respect and trust for police officers.
- That all police agencies follow the lead of the Ventura Police Department in establishing a Gang Violence Suppression program.
- That graffiti be removed within 24 hours after it is reported.
- That stiffer sentences be given to repeat juvenile offenders.
- That parents be held accountable for the expenses and/or damages caused by their child's violent or delinquent behavior, as well as the offender, either by restitution or community service.

RRSPONSE REQUIRED

Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court

Board of Supervisors