

Gang violence rises in Visalia

Advocates say early intervention is the key.

By Tim Bragg / The Fresno Bee
07/19/07 04:24:08

VISALIA -- Local gang officers said they will continue efforts to suppress an increase of gang violence in Visalia that has left 16 people wounded since July 7.

But those working to prevent gang violence said intervention programs that target children before they join gangs are the key to reducing Visalia's gang problem in the long run.

Investigators haven't been able to trace the recent outbreak in violence to a specific incident or dispute between gangs, Visalia police Sgt. Ailyn Wightman said Wednesday.

Instead, Wightman said several factors could be involved, including warm weather that brings more people outside and into contact with one another and more teenagers milling about on summer nights without the worries of school.

Much of the violence is emblematic of a conflict between Northern and Southern California-associated gang members that's happened for decades, he said.

"These are random acts. There's no difference between these incidents and most of the other gang shootings we've had," Wightman said. "These are targets of opportunity. When [gang members] see a rival flying another color, they will seize the opportunity to act."

Police continue to investigate the past two violent weekends, which featured multiple shooting victims, but the violence has continued this week.

Two shootings occurred within hours of each other Tuesday on Bridge Street in Visalia.

The first occurred just after 6 p.m. on the 2000 block of North Bridge Street and left a 17-year-old Reedley boy with a minor gunshot wound. The other took place just after 11:30 p.m. on the 400 block of South Bridge, when four teenagers and Anthony Nanez, 23, of Visalia were arrested after they allegedly shot into a rival gang member's home. Officers were not sure whether the two incidents were related.

Another gang member was wounded Monday night after he reportedly shot himself in the leg during a gang fight.

Those incidents come on top of two consecutive weekends of multiple gang-related shootings. On Saturday night, a 17-year-old boy suffered critical injuries when he was shot during a drive-by shooting on Whitendale Avenue.

Earlier that Saturday, five people were wounded when two men opened fire at the Food4Less on Dinuba Boulevard, Visalia police said.

The previous weekend, eight people were wounded, including a 17-year-old who suffered paralysis in parts of his body.

In response to the violence, the Visalia Police Department's Special Enforcement Unit, along with city and county officers assigned to the MAGNET anti-gang unit, have been stepping up enforcement efforts and increasing their visibility in areas where gang members hang out, Wightman said.

The department announced Monday that anti-gang efforts since July 8 have led to the arrest of 32 gang members or associates in the past week, along with the seizure of three guns. Assistant Police Chief Dennis Swiney said the patrols will continue this week with planned efforts aimed at gang members on probation and parole.

Swiney said the city is taking the increase in violence seriously, but enforcement efforts have been hampered by an unwillingness on the part of some victims and witnesses to cooperate with investigators.

"I wish I had an answer, but it's a difficult problem to solve," he said.

Those who work to intervene in the lives of children before they get too involved in gangs said prevention efforts are working, but they need more money and more support to succeed.

With the recent increase in violence, some children have been staying away from the city's youth centers, said Juan Guerrero, a Visalia Unified School District trustee and director of the Wittman Village Community Center in north Visalia.

Guerrero said those perpetuating the violence are a small group of people, but one with power

to cause chaos in the community.

"We're hoping it dies down, because kids are getting shot," Guerrero said.

A youth who frequents the center was shot in the hand during one of the recent incidents, said Josh Huerta, a Proteus Inc. neighborhood youth counselor, who works at the center with the Streetwise Partners program.

Huerta, a former gang member who gave up the criminal life to save children from gangs, said he hopes the boy won't use his wound to gain respect with local gang members.

"You see the younger gang members who are trying to make a name for themselves," he said. "When one person does something, the next person thinks they have to do something more outrageous."

The reporter can be reached at tbragg@fresnobee.com or (559) 622-2417.

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