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Gangs in Doña Ana County: Who are they?

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

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To view the Blog of Gilberto Cabrera, a Las Cruces teacher, national speaker and author of "Gangs in our Schools: An Educator's Guide," published in 2007, click [here](#).

To view Know Gangs, a gang photo and video depository created by police in 1997, click [here](#).

To view National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations - profiles and articles of gangs, click [here](#).

To view a Los Angeles Times article, "San Bernardino's 'Dead Presidents' murder trial exposes gang intrigue, greed", click [here](#).

Editor's note: Today is the second part of a three-part series examining increasing gang activity in Doña Ana County. Whether it's a wall tagged with graffiti, a home break-in or a drive-by shooting, gang crime plays out in some form every day in this county. We'll look closely at the scope of the gang problem here, the roots of gang affiliation and programs to help avoid — and escape — a life of crime.

LAS CRUCES — Like the neighborhood West Mesa, the business of gangs is the bottom line. Local gangs earn money dealing drugs, fencing stolen goods and trafficking people and guns across the Mexican border — selling a gun that costs \$100 in New Mexico for \$300 to \$400 in Juárez, said Las Cruces police Sgt. Pat Doyle.

"Are they on the status of the Italian Mafia? No, but they're pretty well financed," said Doyle, head of the local gang task force. "The absolute nexus is drugs, mostly coke, but weed, heroin, meth."

Gang-related crime is on the rise in Las Cruces, as it is across the country. In Las Cruces, police have flagged as many gang-related drive-by shootings in the last four months — 15 — as they reported in all of 2007.

More than 40 percent of this year's gang-related crimes occurred in the last four months of 2008 — including 17 shootings and stabbings.

Beyond being a group engaged in crimes, there are many misconceptions about gangs. "Lose the 'West Side Story' mentality," advised a 2000 North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center report on youth gangs. "Agencies must realize that not all gangs are found in poor inner-city areas and that not all gangs maintain turf or even readily distinguish themselves in some manner ... Agencies that look for the stereotypical gang and gang members may only be hitting the tip of the proverbial iceberg."

The gang member profile

The public's "perception that gang members are 14-year-old kids wearing baggy pants and wife-beaters and gold chains and spray-painting walls" is off, says Tamera Barnard, program manager for the New Mexico Gang Task Force.

"The majority of the gang members are much older, 19 to 36 years of age," she said.

In recruitment, new members first "claim" membership, then are "ranked in" or "jumped in" — a beating of interminable length. They have chores — updating graffiti ("the newspaper of the streets"), transporting narcotics to take advantage of lower

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juvenile penalties. It's the rare gang that will allow you to get "jumped out."

"Gang members often say adults don't know the first thing about gangs," said Rob Gallardo of El Paso, the man behind the one-man Operation No Gangs, which operates in southern New Mexico and El Paso.

One 21-year-old El Paso gang member, a volunteer with Operation No Gangs, said being a gang member means more than flashing a hand signal, or "throwing a set." It means, he said, "I've got to do what they tell me to. Right now, they call my cell (phone), if I say no, I get killed. They will kill me. Five, six years from now, they can kill me because I said 'no' that one time."

He asked not to be identified because he said, as a still-active gang member, he would face fatal retaliation: "If I ever tell them I'm out, they'll come, they'll kill me, they'll kill my family."

The 21-year-old said he was brought up to believe "we'll end up in prison or dead." And he said the "wannabes" bother him most, kids with good homes who pretend, especially online, to be members of borderland gangs: "They don't know what it's like to lose people in front of them."

We all pay a price

No region or level of society is unaffected by violent street gangs, according to the FBI's 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment. But a third of respondents said their communities "refused to acknowledge the gang problem" and some did only "when high-profile gang-related incidents occurred."

According to respondents, "denial by communities is a gang's greatest ally."

The FBI report found that gangs remain the country's primary drug distributors (especially of marijuana and methamphetamines in the West), often associating with organized crime to do low-level crimes and aided by computers and cell phones. Instead of just defending territory on the streets, local gang members record their fights with their cell phones and upload photos of "Original Gangster" grandfathers and babies dressed in gang colors to their MySpace and Flickr (an online photo sharing site) accounts.

Hispanic gangs and California-style gang culture are growing, with new immigrants especially vulnerable to gang activity, according to the FBI.

Gallardo said the "major factor" in most decisions to join the "barrio familia" gangs is an absent father: "Believe it or not, these kids soak up love," he said. "You have a lot of glory-seekers in this field. It wouldn't work unless you had them."

Prison factor

Putting gang members in prison "does little to disrupt their activities," according to the FBI report, and high-ranking gang members often continue to run street crimes while incarcerated.

El Paso's largest gang, Barrio Azteca, which has made inroads into Doña Ana County, has hundreds of members and its structure is the same you'd see in TV dramas such as "The Sopranos" or "The Wire," says FBI special agent Andrea Simmons, spokeswoman for the El Paso office. That includes often-incarcerated bosses, taxes on money-makers in their area and a trade in illegal products, "everything from drug-trafficking to murders, money-laundering and violent crimes," Simmons said.

There are several hundred gangs in El Paso,

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Simmons says, but some of those comprise just two or three members. Other gang activity comes from Central American members on their way through the area, often intercepted by the Border Patrol. Border gang-fighting efforts recently led to 16 gang-related arrests after a January 2008, racketeering indictment.

But even local offices, like the Doña Ana Sheriff's Office, would love to be able to break down a gang the way the FBI does. "A success would be what the FBI did with the Aztecas in El Paso," said investigator John Day. "We haven't been able to do that here because of manpower and funds."

One of the challenges in fighting gangs is the crime that's perpetrated by members already in prison, Simmons said.

"Where you really make the difference is as you are able to dismantle the organization. That's going to disrupt the money," Simmons said. "That takes away power and influence. Even in the prison system, they have access to money and they're able to use that to influence other people."

The best defense, the FBI report said, is acceptance and a united response by law enforcement and community groups.

Prevention

Prevention starts at home and at school, particularly with programs like Gang Resistance Education And Training and with well-enforced dress-codes. At one point, 13 Las Cruces schools passed a uniform dress policy, partially because of gangs. All except Loma Heights Elementary have since phased it out.

In person, from the tilt of a baseball cap, to shaved notches in eyebrows to a blue, red, black and white or green colored rosary. Gallardo says "everything

in that child is a message," which is why he's critical of parents who don't or won't see it.

Edward Miranda, chief of police in Anthony, Texas, and a retired member of the Doña Ana Sheriff's Department, agrees.

"Parents would be amazed at what their children know and what they want to tell them," Miranda says.

He and Gallardo say too many parents don't notice their children's friends, preference in music, a decision to ditch their Levi's for Dickies, even the Old English scribbles with which young gang members often cover their notebooks and backpacks.

"The children give away what they're doing," Miranda said, especially when they won't deviate from a gang color like black, green, red or blue.

"The saggy pants, the khaki pants, the flannel shirts, the checkered shirts, A-shirts, the wife-beater shirts . . . You're looking at an individual who's looking for a specific color shirt or shoelaces. You want to get your teenager white shoelaces, "No, I want black.' That should raise a red flag."

In February, Gadsden Middle School parents approved uniforms as a way to curb gang activity, said Principal David Garcia and a parent of three.

"The gang apparel? The stores sell that," Garcia said. Parents "are sometimes in denial. Kids are pretty persistent, they say "No, no, I'm not in a gang, I just want to dress this way."

When it comes to combating gangs, parents and teachers have to use some of the same tactics gangs use, like getting children to dress a certain way from an early age.

Pino was an 11-year-old from a poor California

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gang family who was causing trouble at a local middle school, says Sgt. Doyle, of the LCPD Street Crimes Task Force. His mom was using her WIC check just to pay for the electric stove that heated the house.

"We said, 'we'll get you some stuff to help you along, but we want your gang clothes,'" Doyle said. "He had like, two pairs of pants and they were like 34 (by) 34. He literally only had two outfits and both of them were gang stuff."

Wal-Mart and other stores donated some space heaters, clothing and money. Pino got his grades up in return for a crib for his baby sister. He got to be the man of the house, Doyle said: "The teacher said he was doing fantastic, actually like a little mediator between gangs."

The family has since moved back to California.

"Hopefully, he was able to see, even if for just a couple of months, that there's a glimmer of hope," Doyle said. "God, I hope so. He seemed like a good kid."

But the average gangster is not an easily malleable 11-year-old. Doyle says those who recklessly harm themselves and others are "serious predators" who know what they're doing.

"I can't say why it happens, how, or how to make it go away," he wrote in an e-mail, after returning from a National Gang Seminar in Phoenix. "It's certainly not about 'respect' — if that were the case we would not have drive-bys. It's more about fear."

Talking with colleagues in Phoenix, Doyle says local law enforcement is seeing the "exact same trends" as small and large cities across the country.

"Gangs are not a race issue," Doyle wrote. "They are

not an illegal immigrant issue. They are not a gender issue. They are not a class issue. They are a people issue."

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The cost of gangs

Treating 272 gang-related gunshot victims in Los Angeles totaled almost \$5 million, or \$5,550 per patient per day, according to a 1996 study still being used today.

A single criminal career of 10 years was calculated to cost taxpayers \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million, according to a second, also still-current 1998 study.

RESOURCES

- Weed and Seed

(575) 639-1400

<http://las-cruces.org/police/WS/>

- Operation No Gangs

(575) 346-0679

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- Las Cruces Crime Stoppers

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