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## Youth follow wrong footsteps

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES — Gangs touch every high school in Doña Ana County. Many members end up in alternative schools, like San Andres High School, or the Crossroads program. Three of them spoke to the Sun-News this spring on condition of anonymity, because of the risk of reprisal by fellow gang members.

### The 14-year-old

One 14-year-old, influenced by his older brother, began claiming gang membership in third grade, he said. In fifth grade, on his 12th birthday, he was initiated, or ranked in — "five guys jumping you for three minutes." He'd seen worse; he says he stabbed his step-dad six times with a screwdriver for beating his mom.

"My dad wasn't there for the first 12 years," he said. "If I had both my parents, I wouldn't be this way."

The 14-year-old, who wears an ankle bracelet to monitor his movements, has withdrawn a bit from gang life after a friend, 18-year-old Victor Madrid, was shot in the chest March 5 with a .22 caliber handgun. (Madrid survived.)

"I'm not ranked out, but half the stuff I used to do, I don't do anymore ... Part of me wants to put it all behind," he says, maybe focus on being an engineer.

### The 15-year-old

Another eighth-grader, age 15, also wears an ankle bracelet — his second. When he was small, he says

his dad was in prison and his mom's gang-affiliated family expected that he'd join what continues to be a family tradition.

"There was no one there to tell me not to," the 15-year-old said. He claimed membership at the end of fifth grade. He's not ranked in yet and though he's on track to graduate and has demonstrated skill in electronics and drawing, the time to sway him from gangs, he indicates, has passed.

"I don't really think about that," he says when asked about his plans for the future. "Whatever I turn out to be, I just know that I'm not a wannabe." Besides, he harbors no illusions: "No gang is good," he scoffs.

### The 16-year-old

The story from another active gang member is different. The 16-year-old sophomore said his parents divorced when he was 4 but that home life wasn't too bad — he never lacked for food or toys, just attention. He started looking up to gang members around fourth grade.

"I admired how they carried themselves," he said. "What really took me in was the respect and the street credit you could get just by being in the action, making a name for myself. It was fascinating."

He wanted to make a name for himself and he did. The summer before seventh grade, the youngest member was initiated.

"I've seen it all. I've almost done it all, from fighting in the backyard to shooting in the street," he said. The worst of it, he says, was when he had to hold someone hostage. "It was a thing I was supposed to do. They didn't have to ask me twice."

He's told his siblings he's no longer with the gang.

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He looks up to Martin Luther King Jr., wants to leave Las Cruces, get into college far away "and start from there."

"I'll be in a circle of people, 20-, 30-years-old, there'll be 11-, 10-year-old kids watching what they do," he says, frustrated. "As young men, they're blind to a future that'll consume them, just chew them up and spit them out. They don't care and they're going to care. I see kids with no hope whatsoever in their heart. It is a lot of pain. They won't listen," he says. Even a younger version of himself, he says, wouldn't listen — "he would have walked away."

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