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Gang violence increase feared

By Daniel Borunda / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- The deadly stompings, gunplay and street fighting that claimed the lives of three teenagers became the focus of three separate murder trials last week.

Each case provided a glimpse of a violent gang subculture in El Paso that is not likely to go away soon.

"It's inherent that it will increase," said Mary Lou Carrillo, a retired El Paso police sergeant, who spent most of her career investigating gangs. "There is no way we will see a decrease in gang violence with a population increase."

El Paso is not only a growing city but also a prime spot on one of the busiest narco-trafficking corridors in the nation.

On Friday, Juárez police on a domestic violence call arrested a member of Mara Salvatrucha, a notorious international street gang. Police said Santos Antonio Hernandez, 23, a heavily-tattooed native of El Salvador, was an undocumented immigrant living in Juárez after being deported from the United States.

The arrest is one of the few confirmed incidents involving Mara Salvatrucha in the borderland.

In El Paso, investigators said gang violence has decreased compared with a year ago, but they are gearing up for the start of the school year because it is traditionally a time when problems flare.

"Rivals tend to be at the same place at the same time," said Sgt. Reginald Moton of the El Paso police Gang Unit.

And next month, the El Paso County attorney is scheduled to go to civil court in hopes of obtaining injunctions against seven

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men and four women who are reputed members of the Bloods street gang.

A gang injunction is a court order barring identified members of the gang from hanging out together and conducting other normally lawful activities.

Officials said the injunction already includes six gang members who voluntarily signed and six who did not contest the county attorney's assertion that they were members of the Bloods.

Despite the recent series of murder trials, police point out that gang violence is nowhere near what El Paso experienced in the early 1990s. Gang violence also increased throughout the nation then.

In 1993, a total of 288 drive-by shootings occurred in El Paso. Then the police department formed its Drive-by Shooting Response Team to stop the cycle of gang retaliation.

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There were also 56 homicides, not all linked to gangs, in 1993. It was the deadliest year of that decade.

So far in 2009, there have been four drive-by shootings and seven homicides in El Paso.

Though violence is not as prevalent, gangs are still present, and the trials last week provided a view into a world where people die suddenly and without mercy.

Jurors convicted all three defendants in the murder trials, but only one received a prison sentence of more than seven years.

He is Marcus White, 22, found guilty in the gang beating of 19-year-old Valentin Ray Rodriguez in a dispute over a woman at a house party. Rodriguez was not a gang member.

Jurors convicted White of murder after deliberating just two hours. Then they sentenced him to 70 years in prison. He will become eligible for parole in 30 years.

Another defendant, Eddie Anthony Murrillo, 23, received a seven-year prison sentence for murder. Jurors found that he fired a gun during a fight between gangs at a party, causing a panic that led to the death of 17-year-old Brenda Brito. Brito was run over by a car in the panic and killed.

The third defendant, Victor Jimenez, 18, received a five-year sentence in the beating death of Lorenzo Favela, 19. Police said it was a fight between rival street gangs.

Jimenez said his gang was more of a neighborhood club than anything. He told the jury he did not feel remorse over Favela's death because he was defending a friend who was under attack.

"How can you justify the beating and death of an individual?" Carrillo said. "We allow our children to justify that level of violence instead of teaching them how to deal with conflict."

In White's trial, prosecutors presented as evidence photos and a video depicting his gang affiliation from his personal Internet page, a cyber twist to historical forms of gang activity.

Another video showed White and fellow gang members beating a teenager in a hospital waiting room. The violence was captured by a surveillance camera.

Gangs have been around in various incarnations for generations with activity spiking and waning over decades.

Modern El Paso gangs include traditional turf or barrio-based street gangs, tagging crews dedicated to graffiti writing, party/dance crews and some car clubs. Various members do not consider themselves part of a gang. But police regard people as gang members if they are involved in repeat criminal activity.

Gang experts say recruits often join gangs -- usually in the teen years -- because of a need to belong or for protection.

Susana Reza is director of El Paso Human Services Inc., a private nonprofit group that runs a state-funded program in the 79924 ZIP code. It tries to keep juveniles away from gangs and crime.

"If there is no supervision at home, if there is no strong family and structure, these kids will be pulled in," Reza said.

"They have a strong need for participation and acceptance. I think the problem is that kids once they are in, it may be difficult for them to get out."

The 79924 ZIP code in the Northeast was one of 15 ZIP codes in Texas chosen for the program because of high levels of youth crime.

"I believe that if El Paso continues to grow at the current rapid pace it is, we will continue to see an increase in gang membership, the number of gangs and in inter-gang violence," said Rob Gallardo, director of the youth intervention program Operation No Gangs.

"With the expected military influx, people from all over the country will arrive in our city. The city will no longer be 78 percent Hispanic and the new shifts in racial composition will likely factor prominently in what we will yet experience as a community," he said.

Carrillo, the retired gang investigator, said young people sometimes outgrow gangs but others get stuck on a dead-end path. She said parents are the most important element for keeping children out of gangs.

"In my career, I think the youngest gang member I saw was a first-grader," Carrillo said. "And that was sad."

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El Paso gang statistics:*

Active gangs: 539

Gang members: 5,665

Men: 5,072


Women: 341

Juveniles: 252

Source: El Paso Police Gang Unit.

* Figures as of July and include street gangs, tagging crews, party crews and others.

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