



[Subscribe](#) | [Manage Subscription](#)

[hollandsentinel.com](#)

[Home](#) > [News](#) > Local News

Saturday December 22, 2007

Local News

[Email this Article](#) [Editor](#) [Forums](#) [Print](#)

Saturday, August 11, 2007

Residents taking protective steps after recent violence

Gang problem mobilizes community

BY TEREASA NIMS teresa.nims@hollandsentinel.com (616) 546-4272



Macatawa Area Residents In Action board President Susan Atwood, left, and Executive Director Rebecca Verhasselt stand in front a building tagged with gang graffiti near Leisure Estates on 136th Avenue. The group will hold an ice cream social for residents of that community to talk about the recent gang activity in the area.

Dennis R.J. Geppert

RELATED STORIES

Recent gang activity reported by police in Holland has some people afraid, but it has others taking action.

"Those little wanna-be gangsters need to take their game elsewhere," said Roberta Mendoza of Holland Township.

News of recent shootings and a car firebombing in Holland has Mendoza sleeping with a baseball bat.

"It's not that I'm scared. I just want to be ready to send them a message if they come around here."

Mendoza isn't the only one taking protective steps.

Residents of Leisure Estates and Leisure Estates Village in Holland Township want to curb the constant graffiti.

"Gang activity is a big focus here," said Rebecca Verhasselt, executive director of Macatawa Area Residents In Action.

The group is planning an ice cream social Aug. 23 for residents of Leisure Estates and Leisure Estates Village. The Ottawa County Sheriff's Office is expected to attend along with Holland Township firefighters.

"We really want the neighbors to feel comfortable with the police and with each other," Verhasselt said.

In the past, Holland Police Chief John Kruithoff said that police weren't going to be able to arrest away the problem. He said it's going to take the community banding together.

"The gang violence is escalating in Holland," said Saralynn Gray, whose 2000 Pontiac Firebird was firebombed the morning of Aug. 3 at her home at 889 Montrose in Holland. The fire spread to a truck parked next to it. Both vehicles were destroyed.

What lures people to gangs?

Lisa Taylor-Austin is a gang expert and forensic mental health evaluator. She counseled Los Angeles gang members for seven years. She now works as a gang counselor in Milford, Conn.

"People join gangs for many different reasons," Taylor-Austin said. "Some people join for protection, perceived respect, the lure of fast money. Some are forced in and some are born in."

Recognition and belonging are also factors, said Holland Sgt. Drew Torres.

The Latin Kings are reportedly the largest Latino gang in Chicago, and perhaps in the United States, gang experts say. Their colors are gold and black. The gang uses a five-pointed crown as a symbol, representing love, respect, sacrifice, honor and obedience.

According to police, the Latin Kings are the oldest gang in Holland, with 60 to 140 members.

"They are the most aggressive and violent," Torres said.

Fred is a 14-year-old Latin King who lives in Holland. The Sentinel agreed to use a pseudonym to identify him because of potential retaliation by gang members. His grandfather was a Latin King and his father is one.

Standing in Washington Square with one foot behind him pressed on the brick wall, Fred is wearing a black and gold bandanna.

"I know the colors will keep me safe," Tony said. "Nobody wants to mess with the Kings."

Fred honors his family by staying in the gang. Still, he hopes for a life outside of the gang, one that includes going to college and possibly learning piano.

"I don't like doing bad stuff and acting kid-like," Fred said.

What do others think?

What do other Holland-area residents think should be done about gangs? Read their responses in the Street Talk.

There are ways out of the gang, but getting out depends on the specific gang.

Fred wouldn't say anything on getting out of a gang, saying the information is sacred.

But police who work with gangs know the procedures.

"To get out of a gang, you have to jump out," Torres said. "That means a group of gang-bangers beat you up."

There are some less-violent ways.

Some people phase out of gangs, move away or take on a job and family, leaving no time for the gang.

"Another way out is to be blessed out," said Taylor-Austin. "This is when the leader of the gang gives permission to leave the gang."

-- Tereasa Nims