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## **Gangs still a threat for bored, lonely youths**

**by Fernanda Santos**

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*Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series on the growing problem of gangs in Lawrence.*

| LAWRENCE | It's a scene that has played itself out over and over for the past six months: A ride around the city. A stop at a busy intersection. A chance encounter between undercover police and a band of unruly teen-agers. "What's your street name?" Detective Harry Maldonado asked "Casper," the young man behind the wheel of a red Honda Civic parked at the corner of Amesbury and Lebanon streets on a chilly Friday afternoon last month.

The answer is mumbled, inaudible from 5 feet away. Maldonado tries it again, sounding louder and firmer this time, and echoing the tone in every follow-up question. Casper's words are now clear and the detective wastes no time scribbling them in a notepad. "This piece of paper is critical," Maldonado said, pointing at the questionnaire police call a field interview report. The form with Casper's answers to questions that include one's given name, nickname, tattoos and gang affiliation rests amid hundreds of others stacked in white binders atop a shelf in Detective Sgt. Charles Carroll's office -- an ever-growing database that is one of the police's latest weapons in the fight against gangs.

Clipped to each form is a picture of the suspected gang members. To look at their faces is to glimpse into a world where loyalty is measured by one's level of disregard for authority. Gangs have been in Lawrence since the 1940s, when the mills still hummed with work. Then, they were made up of sons of Irish and Italian immigrants, who often settled their scores with fists and brass knuckles. But as the city's demographics changed, so did the makeup of local gangs, which are now primarily Hispanic and younger than ever before. A Lawrence gang member is likely to be between 14 and 28 years old, though the most active ones are in their late teens, according to police.

Another seismic shift from earlier years is that "there are more weapons on the streets," Carroll said. "And if a young kid has a weapon, he usually doesn't think twice before using it." And after making a dent in gang involvement, police say that gangs are once again on the rise | a problem serious enough for police to activate a new gang-fighting unit. Top target

Gangs, drugs and domestic violence are the three top targets of law enforcement in Lawrence, said Police Chief John J. Romero. Gang and drug activity are tied to other crimes, such as car theft, murders, shootings and burglaries. Police say it's hard to estimate how many gang members are in the city, but at least 500 have been classified as such by detectives in the Lawrence Police Gang Unit. To those who live in gang-infested areas, gangs are synonymous with fear, and their presence is a constant reminder that "if you don't watch what you do or what you say to them, you could be their next target," said a woman who lives on Farnham Street, an area controlled by the street gang Outlaws.

"These kids have no respect," said the woman, a single mother who asked to remain anonymous. "They do drugs, they curse and they walk around like they own the street. I'm afraid to go out at night when they're out there. I feel like I'm a hostage in my own home." Manuel Calixto said he moved his family out of Myrtle Street last summer because he was afraid his sons could get hit by a stray bullet while walking back from school or playing on the street. Myrtle, Park and other adjacent streets are ruled by the Latin Kings, according to police. "A boy was shot not too long after we moved and as bad as I felt about it, I was actually glad that I wasn't in the neighborhood anymore," said Calixto, referring to last August's drive-by shooting of a 14-year-old who was celebrating his birthday with friends outside of his home on Hampshire Street.

Drive-by shootings are gangs' trademark crime, in part because they are done in front of an audience that is both in the car with the shooter and on the sidewalk with the target, according to Lisa Taylor-Austin, who has for years counseled gang members on the West and East coasts. Lawrence gang members often fire at rivals not to take their lives, but to send a message, according to police.

Last August, Lawrence had eight drive-by shootings, all of them gang-related and all involving victims and suspected shooters ranging in age from 14 to 22, according to police. The motive behind these shootings can be as childish as a dispute over a girl, Maldonado said. "It's not a war," he said. "It's more like, 'Hey, you said something about my girlfriend that I didn't like,' and that's when immaturity comes into play."

### **Off the radar screen**

Despite the recent spike in gang activity, city gangs are not as well-organized as they were in the 1990s, when they followed a hierarchy system and used military terms such as captain, lieutenant and soldier to assign leadership powers to their members. The lack of organization, however, works against police because it makes it harder for them to identify whom they should go after when trying to dismantle a gang. "It also makes the gangs more dangerous because there's a lack of communication within the gang," said Essex County Deputy Sheriff Maurice Aguiller, another member of the Lawrence Police Gang Unit. Also in the unit are Deputy Sheriffs Carmen Purpora and Ian Taylor. To keep off the radar screen, Lawrence gang members are also less likely to wear the colors that had for long been a sign of gang affiliation and are, instead, using hand signs, a specific hair cut or jewelry to identify one another, according to police.

Despite the obstacles, police have gained much ground in their fight against gangs in the city. Through intelligence gathering and a partnership with the Essex County Sheriff's Department and a federal Gang Task Force, the Lawrence Police Gang Unit has determined which gangs operate in Lawrence, mapped their turfs and identified key members who are often behind the gangs' criminal enterprises. According to police, the six gangs in the city are Latin Gangsta Disciples, Latin Kings, Outlaws, PG-13, CANS and 187-RS -- the code police use for homicide in Los Angeles. Police say they are also watching a group that calls itself H2O and has among its members 12- and 13-year-old boys.

Although the jail gang Netas (pronounced nye-tas) has several members in Lawrence, police say its activity is mostly confined to prisons. Early in 2000, federal, state and local police swept off the streets 13 local leaders of the Latin Gangsta Disciples, a group that had been linked to a wide range of charges, including drug trafficking, illegal gun possession and shootings. Authorities said the gang was arming itself heavily and planning to wage war against its rivals -- Latin Kings, Outlaws and the police.

But even with the captured Latin Gangstas serving harsh federal prison terms, the gang hasn't ceased to exist, though it is no longer the law-breaking power it was during the mid- to late-1990s, said state police Lt. Donald Kennefick, in charge of the state troopers assigned to the federal Gang Task Force operating in the city. The Outlaws, and to some extent, the Latin Kings, took advantage of the sweep to take the Latin Gangsta's position as the city's most dangerous gang, according to police.

The constant police presence on the streets, however, has succeeded in putting a dent on gangs'

recruiting efforts among younger teens, but several of them are still sucked in, lured by the prospect of finding in the gang the respect and acceptance they sometimes can't find at home. "These kids want to hang on to something," Romero said. "They come from broken homes and to them, the gang is their family; it gives them a sense of belonging."

### Parental involvement

Police believe peer pressure and the lack of leisure options for the younger crowd in the city are also reasons teen-agers join gangs -- a process "as easy as driving through McDonald's and buying a Happy Meal," according to Maldonado. Gangs that operate nationwide, such as the Latin Kings, use the Internet to sell their message to teens and justify their criminal activities as part of a "great conspiracy going on by the powers that be to keep us in the social yoke of slavery, ignorance and oppression," according to one of many Latin Kings Web sites. Aware of the lack of leisure opportunities for local youth, leaders are eyeing an increase in the city's Recreation Department and revitalizing Lawrence's Little League program, according to City Councilor-at-Large Michael R. Sweeney. "The level of funding for youth programs in the city is embarrassing," said Sweeney, a former School Committee member. In 2001, the city allocated \$133,698 to the Recreation Department -- 50 percent less than Bellevue Cemetery's budget of \$280,349.

Teen-agers are always looking for something that's a little bit on the edge and if there isn't some creative outlet for their activities, they're going to gravitate to something illegal, like gangs," Sweeney said. In addition to a grassroots initiative aimed at developing a Little League complex, leaders are also looking into improving the quality of playing fields, many of which are not suitable for play because of a lack of care, according to Central Little League President Sy Uliano Jr. "We've got to come up with ways to engage them (youth) so we don't lose them to gangs or some other type of criminal enterprise," Uliano said. From her experience interacting with gang members from most major urban centers nationwide, Taylor-Austin said that offering recreational activities can help cities steer younger teens away from gangs. But nothing is more effective than parental involvement, said Carroll, a veteran Lawrence police officer. This very notion, he said, makes the gang problem not only a law enforcement issue, but a community issue as well. "Parents need to find out who their kids are hanging out with," he said. "Then, they should get to know these kids and get to know the kids' parents. That's the best way to find out if a kid is keeping good or bad company." Sweeney said that even though parents in Lawrence and elsewhere sometimes work "two, three jobs" to support their families, they still need to find time to get engaged in the daily activities of their children.

Some parents, he said, have a "complacent attitude." They think that "if there's food in the fridge, if my child has good clothes and a video game to play with, I've done my job." But he said that's the wrong approach. "The reality is that a child doesn't need a \$100 video game," Sweeney said. "He needs a parent to be there for him."

El Puente Editor Katheleen Conti contributed to this story.



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