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**Crackdown or Back Down?**

As violence spreads, South County officials struggle with a lack of money— or a lack of political will

By Erin Sherbert



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

**CRUISE CONTROL:** Gilroy Police Officer Geoff Guerin has been with the gang unit for more than 10 years, and says his job today requires him to "look for any legal reason to arrest" gang members.

OFFICER Geoff Guerin slams the accelerator of his white unmarked car and guns it down a narrow alley near Louis Street. A group of men huddled in the center of the alley take off running, tossing beer cans, baseball caps and cigarettes as they sprint and hop over fences.

Guerin jumps out of the car with his hand on his holster.

He yells as he runs: "Garcia! Garcia!" He is after a portly man wearing a large black T-shirt and nylon shorts hanging over his knees. The man runs toward a dilapidated two-story apartment complex tucked at the end of the alleyway. Apparently realizing there's nowhere to go, he slows down, walking back toward Guerin with his hands over his head.

Guerin and his partner, Officer Doug Remmick, snap handcuffs on his wrists. The man, 20-year-old Andrew Garcia, is a well-known parolee—according to Guerin, one of Gilroy's most hardened criminals, born into the Norteño street gang.

The two cops return to the patrol car with evidence that Garcia was in violation the terms of his parole: a San Francisco 49ers cap. Guerin, who has been working for Gilroy's gang unit since the early 1990s, explains that local Norteños wear 49ers caps as a not-quite clandestine way of identifying themselves—and Garcia is not allowed to associate with gangs or wear gang colors.

This is part of a concerted effort on the part of Gilroy police to confront a gang problem that has exploded in recent years. Guerin and his partner call for backup, and then continue with their mission this Friday night: tracking and arresting Gilroy's most notorious gang members.

"We look for the worst element of the community, and then look for any legal reason to arrest them," Guerin says, adding that, like sex offenders, gang members have to register with local police once they get out of prison. This helps police keep close tabs on affiliated gang members after they are released.

On the way back to the police station, Guerin and his partner drive past the corner of Church and Sixth streets, pointing to a cluster of candles. It's a makeshift memorial for an 18-year-old gang member who was shot to death in broad daylight on Nov. 11, the officers explain.

According to police records, witnesses saw three men running north on Church Street immediately after the shooting. "His friends carried him to that corner on the next block, and then left him there when they heard the police sirens," Remmick says.

Police have been tight-lipped about details in this case, but emphatically note that they are aggressively investigating this murder.

**Battle Fields**

Gangs infiltrated the South Bay in the late 1970s, shortly after the infamous La Nuestra Familia prison gang organized a minigovernment in Salinas. There, they collected "taxes" from gang members dealing dope in town. Salinas, the gang-murder capital of California, has seen its homicide rate double in the last year, according to news reports.

The "NF" gang quickly grew into an organized chain of command, with captains and lieutenants just like the military. Gang members soon infiltrated Gilroy, which was fertile ground for recruiting new members and collecting more drug taxes. By the 1980s, Gilroy had

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become an active base for the prison gang's drug smuggling.

"They wiped out any drug dealer that was not associated with the Nuestra Familia," Guerin says. "Look at the history of murders in Gilroy—there were Nuestra Familia hits all over town. They came in and said you can pay us taxes or we will take care of you. And that was how the message was sent."

While Nuestra Familia continued dominating Gilroy's east side neighborhoods, in the 1990s, Mexican nationals began to arrive in larger numbers to work in the fields. Many of them eventually formed their own gangs to protect themselves from the local gang members. They started calling themselves the Sureños, or the southerners.

Consequently, Nuestra Familia became the northerners—the Norteños.

Although police have worked to break up the street gangs, they continue to multiply, with various cliques of Norteños and Sureños all over town. Today, police have documented roughly 900 gang members in Gilroy.

They aren't just growing in size; Gilroy's street gangs are also becoming more violent. Since 2007, gang-related activity, violent crime in particular, has increased 30 percent. Assaults with a deadly weapon are on the rise, and last year there were three gang-related murders.

Gang violence for decades consisted of turf wars on the east side of town. That is no longer the case. Starting 10 years ago, the gangs began to spread out, with stabbings, fights and shootings in almost every pocket of town.

Police blame the recent surge in gang violence on the bad economy. Privately and publicly, they also complain that as the tide of crime rises, police budgets are being slashed, so the force is shrinking. But some public officials, including some City Council members, say it goes beyond that.

## Prevent Now or Pay Later

Gilroy has historically lagged when it comes to paying for gang prevention. While San Jose has invested about \$5 million annually in gang prevention, even in hard times, Gilroy just hasn't consistently had a strong political will—or the money—to crack down on its gang problem.

Asked to discuss the problem, Mayor Al Pinheiro tried to play it down. "We have our problems," Pinheiro snaps. "But let's not get the media hyped up and point to Gilroy as a hard-core gang kind of place."

Nevertheless, the community is certainly concerned. In an April new poll conducted by the *Gilroy Dispatch* 69 percent of those who responded said they did not feel safe going into downtown Gilroy, the city's hub of bars, restaurants—and gangs.

Violent incidents began to increase late last year. On Sept. 29, a gang member was driving down Monterey Highway and Farrell Street when he shot and killed a rival gang member who was sitting in the passenger side of a car.

Less than a month later, rival gang members got into a fight on the sidewalk at Church and Sixth streets, and 18-year-old Larry Martinez was killed [see accompanying story]. Since then, a number of gang-related drive-by shootings and stabbings have been reported.

On May 9, at about 4pm, an officer interrupted a fight along Monterey Road, where four gang members had assaulted and stabbed a 20-year-old man downtown. San Jose resident Richard Montoya, 19, was running from the scene after officers showed up. Police caught up with him and immediately cuffed him. Police then combed the area, looking for the other assailants. They found 22-year-old Celso Flores and 20-year-old Julio Larios and arrested them. The fourth alleged assailant is still on the loose, according to police.

"I think someone needs to champion these issues and create a sense of urgency around the emerging gang problem," says Angel Rios, a Gilroy resident who works with gangs and at-risk youth for the city of San Jose. "For a city the size of Gilroy, people should be concerned."

In January, Police Chief Denise Turner held one of two gang awareness forums where residents packed the room, hoping to get some answers about the upswing in gang activity.

"People are really unsettled," says Turner, who was appointed chief last year. "We are trying



**ZERO TOLERANCE:** Guerin prepares to cuff a parolee for possession of a San Francisco 49ers cap—allegedly a violation of the terms of his parole.



**FAMILY BUSINESS:** Gang prevention efforts in Gilroy have been hit hard by forced cutbacks, putting a future generation at risk for gang recruitment, according to Sgt. Chad Gallacinao.

to keep a lid on the gang problem, but it's not easy. We have to step it up."

Gilroy is no Salinas, but the gang violence hasn't been this bad since the early 1990s, when Gilroy had its first drive-by shooting. After that and other gang-related crimes, the community rallied the City Council, which later agreed to form the anti-crime unit with designated detectives for gang suppression. At the time, then-Mayor Don Gage, who is now a Santa Clara County supervisor, teamed up with the police chief to create Gilroy's first gang task force.

Gage went into the community and raised \$200,000 to buy the old Pacific Gas & Electric building on the corner of Sixth Street and Railroad Avenue to convert into a youth center. He collaborated with the Mexican American Community Services Agency, giving the nonprofit free rent and the space in that building to help at-risk youth. They've made it a priority to take kids to baseball games, to the movies or just help them with homework, Gage says.

"What it did was take care of the kids who wanted to get out of gangs and didn't have any place to go," Gage says, adding that "their fathers and grandfathers were in gangs."

Now, Gage says, Gilroy needs more than youth centers.

"The gang problem has become a lot worse because it is spreading and it's more hard-core," he says. "When it gets that hard-core, doing the things I was doing has little or no effect."

The gang task force, which has since evolved into a nonprofit group, has been a consistent presence in Gilroy. Yet critics say the task force has weak organization and leadership, and as a result it has been ineffective at truly targeting at-risk youth.

On top of that, the city, which contributed a mere \$40,000 to the youth center for salaries, lacks amenities—even adequate parks and recreation programs—that would give kids another alternative, residents say.

## No Escape

In January, the city's youth center was closed down after it was deemed seismically unsafe. Since then, the city has offered similar activities for kids at the senior center. That facility is farther away from the east side, which is where the greatest need is, says John Garcia, executive director of the gang task force. He noted that since the youth center closed, he's seen fewer and fewer kids dropping by the senior center.

Gage wants to see more commitment from the community. "You need a gang task force that has people who make decisions," Gage says. "They can't just be there because it feels good."

In the county's southernmost city, money and community groups are scarce. Physically and metaphorically, Gilroy is isolated from county resources. There isn't a strong, savvy political network to help Gilroy lobby for resources.

The city was recently rejected when it sought a state grant to help pay for a gang coordinator, similar to what San Jose has. It has also applied for federal stimulus money to help fund a school resource officer position that's currently in jeopardy, the chief says. The Police Department won't find out about the federal money until the fall.

"Gilroy is the stepchild of the county," says Gilroy Councilman Peter Arellano. At the same time, Arellano admits that the council hasn't been bullish about putting its own money and resources into gang prevention. What little money the city does get from the county, it has used to fund DARE officers, which some believe to be an inefficient use of those funds.

"The political will isn't there," Arellano says. "I think we have been out front on intervention and suppression, but I don't think we are doing enough in prevention, because unfortunately, prevention takes money and effort."

"The community needs to do something."

The downturn in the economy has put Gilroy in an especially weak position this past year. Gilroy continues to have the highest unemployment rate of all cities in Santa Clara County. In April, Gilroy had a 16 percent unemployment rate compared to San Jose's 12 percent. The city, which is 60 percent Hispanic, has also been hit with the highest percentage of home foreclosures in the county.

The council last year cut \$4 million from its budget, including police officers and parks and recreation programs. It's now considering cutting another \$4 million this year.

In January, the police chief had no choice but to cut the department's intervention probation officer—the sole person who would interface with at-risk youth and kids in gangs. This officer would take referrals from school resources officers who would keep tabs on kids in gangs. The officer would make calls and even go to their homes to talk with their parents about their kids being in gangs.

Gilroy's police gang supervisor, Sgt. Chad Gallacinao, is especially disturbed by this news. "It was the most important part," he says. "Now there is going to be a whole generation of kids we will miss regarding prevention and intervention."

## A Model Community

Back in April, Santa Clara County's District Attorney Dolores Carr stepped up to the podium outside the old City Hall in San Jose. A republican who was elected to office in 2006, Carr stood before reporters and TV cameras announcing her latest campaign to go after gangs.

The DA, who sits on San Jose's Mayor's Gang Task Force, has made gang intervention a hallmark of her tenure since she took office. Earlier this year, she rolled out a countywide resource to help parents know how to keep their kids out of gangs. Last year, her office contributed \$100,000 to San Jose's Safe Summer initiative. She's planning to do it again this year. Last year, more than 7,000 kids signed up for the 400 different activities paid for through the program, everything from art classes to baseball steams.

San Jose saw a 31 percent decrease in overall gang crimes during the summer months between 2007 and 2008. The city approved another \$500,000 for the program this year.

More recently, Carr's office shelled out \$60,000 to hang posters and tower billboards through the county with provocative anti-gang messages.

As Carr spoke to reporters, San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed as well as police chiefs and sheriff deputies at her side nodded their heads in support. Behind her was a VTA bus, with one of the freshly printed campaign posters on its side—a smoky image of a cemetery with an eerie message scribbled across: "Gangs have a place for your children."

"We are here today because, frankly, gang violence tears at the fabric of our community," Carr said, squinting into the morning sun. "We have certainly seen an increase in gang violence in the last year, and we have made a more concerted effort to deal with that."

A week later, Carr sat in a conference room on the fifth floor of the county offices. She explained that it's tricky to get underneath the growing gang violence in South County when so much of the effort has been San Jose-centric. Her goal is to stretch those efforts farther down south, starting with this anti-gang media campaign.

South County buses will have the anti-gang posters. But that's as far as the campaign will go in South County. There will be no billboards towering over roads in Morgan Hill or Gilroy, in part because her office says there is nowhere to place them.

When someone says "gangs know no boundaries," policymakers always nod in agreement. But there has been no significant push to pool local resources and form a countywide gang prevention task force.

Carr says a countywide task force isn't a bad idea, assuming there's political will. It seems that South County police chiefs are itching for some help.

In Gilroy, Chief Turner has had back-and-forth conversations with the mayor's office in San Jose, looking to copy that gang task force model. San Jose's gang prevention task force was created more than a decade ago, when then-Mayor Susan Hammer wanted to tap city resources to slow the proliferation of gangs.

At that time, her message was rather blunt: stop the gang violence. The mayor placed an emphasis on catching gang members and putting them in jail. That vision has shifted more toward stopping kids from joining gangs.

The task force now funds more than 20 community organizations. Some of the programs include tattoo removal, conflict resolution, substance abuse counseling and after-school activities aimed to keep kids busy at all hours, including midnight basketball.

At the county level, policymakers have said they plan to probe the discussion of forming a countywide gang prevention task force. Supervisor George Shirakawa, who was elected to the board this year, says as soon as the board blows through this budget crunch, he plans to start talking about gang prevention on a more macro level.

"It's no secret that gangs have no borders—it's not something we realized yesterday," Shirakawa quipped. "We know there are needs in the South County and unincorporated areas. I haven't had the chance to get everyone together. But I will."

## The Revolving Door

Guerin and Remmick met Garcia with his parole officer back at the police station, where he was being booked for parole violation. He had just been released from prison.

Next to Garcia, another Norteño gang member from Morgan Hill smiled and flexed his chest muscles as officers snapped of his mug shot. He boastfully chattered away with officers.

He was there for assault, he tells Guerin, a familiar face among Gilroy's gangsters.

That's just it. Arresting gang members and locking them up only makes them harder and stronger gang members.

"They go to prison to get schooled," Guerin says pointedly as he watches police book Garcia. "Then they come back and teach everyone what they learned."

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