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Anti-gang efforts work, police say

Authorities seek programs for youths to reduce violence

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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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At 14, Javier Quiroz was starting to take pride in his appearance. He liked to wear nice clothes, and his hair was rarely out of place. He played soccer and swam with friends, and he worked part time at a cousin's restaurant. He lived with his family in a City Heights apartment complex his mother manages.

Javier was a block from the apartment, at a friend's house, the last time his mother spoke to him. It was about midnight when she called and told him to come home.

"I'm coming back," he said. "Don't worry."

Javier never made it home.

Police said he was one of 28 people killed in gang-related homicides last year in San Diego, an increase of 56 percent from 2006. This year, there were 11 gang-related homicides through yesterday, compared with 17 over the same period last year, a 35 percent decrease.

Extra personnel for the gang unit this year has helped, police said.

Some parents want to see even more officers along with more programs for children in southern and southeastern San Diego – communities dotted with more sidewalk vigils than playgrounds. The memorials honor homicide victims, but they also remind residents that they live, work and play among gang members.

It's difficult to say how much money the San Diego Police Department invests in gang prevention and intervention because the agency doesn't track how much of its \$400 million budget is spent on individual units.

The department has added one gang suppression team, which includes seven officers, bringing the total to four teams. Three officers were added to the gang unit's graffiti strike force, bringing its total to seven officers. Extra support also has come from SWAT this summer, when gang violence usually flares up.

"The increased staffing and our relationships with federal and local law enforcement agencies, as well as with community members, has really helped us shake up some of these more violent gang sets," said Lt. Andy Mills, who oversees the gang unit's investigative arm.

Lidia Quiroz, Javier's mother, wants to see more night patrols because that is when she sees the gang members.

"I'm constantly calling the police now," she said.

Quiroz and her husband, Florentino, found their son bleeding to death on a sidewalk. He had been shot three times.

"Nobody was there but him," said Lidia Quiroz, 47. "He didn't say nothing. He was breathing slowly. He didn't move. He didn't open his eyes."

Wednesday marks the one-year anniversary of Javier's death. His parents plan to return to the sidewalk at 52nd Street and University Avenue that evening to host a candlelight vigil.

"This pain never ends," his mother said.

Because of the circumstances of the shooting, police believe Javier was killed by gang members but said he did not belong to a gang.

"He didn't want to be part of them," Quiroz said. "So I think that's why they did that to him."

No arrests have been made.

"A 14-year-kid losing his life is a horrible tragedy," said Mills, whose investigators are working on the case with homicide detectives.

Mills was careful to point out that police can't purge gang violence on their own.

"We're not the solution," he said. "We're here to keep the problems from escalating and to work with the community. The solutions rest with families, churches and schools."

Other communities are grappling with gang violence, but no other city in the county sees as many homicides as San Diego, which is home to more than one-third of the county's 3 million residents.

The San Diego County Sheriff's Department investigated six gang-related homicides in each of the past two years, and two this year.

In Oceanside, there was one gang-related homicide in 2006 – the shooting of police Officer Dan Bessant. There were no gang-related homicides last year, but there has been one this year.

The numbers are identical in Chula Vista: one in 2006, none in 2007 and one in 2008.

Danyrea Hall is the co-chair of the San Diego Organizing Project, a community organization representing about two dozen churches south of Interstate 8 in San Diego.

The group is working with San Diego Police Chief William Lansdowne, Mayor Jerry Sanders, county leaders and service providers. The goal is to increase after-school programs, including tutoring, mentoring and job training, while reducing the high school dropout rate among minorities.

"One thing that has really worked for us is we are all at the table talking," said Hall, a mother of five teenagers who lives in Bonita and attends church in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of southeast San Diego. "We're trying to create wrap-around services that would prevent any child from falling through the cracks."

Michael Brunker, executive director of the Jackie Robinson Family YMCA in the Mountain View neighborhood of southeast San Diego, said parents need to help police.

Brunker said he has noticed an increase in gang and curfew sweeps this summer.

"I'm absolutely impressed with what the Police Department is doing," he said. "This is what community-based police is all about."

During the curfew sweeps, anyone younger than 18 out past 10 p.m. is brought to an elementary school. Records are checked and some youths end up in Juvenile Hall, but all of them are greeted by social workers, pastors and community leaders like Brunker. They are there to listen, offer advice and show youths how they can join a church group or the YMCA.

Brunker believes it is easier for a child in southeastern San Diego to join a gang than a team.

"Because there's not enough safe facilities, there's not enough funding and there's not enough adult supervision," he said.

Javier's brother, Agustin Teña Quiroz, 23, volunteers at PowerMentor in City Heights, where he works with at-risk youths two blocks from where his brother was killed.

Teña, a senior at San Diego State University, also works as a substitute teacher at Juvenile Hall.

"It's my way of giving back to the community," he said. "I believe people have to take interest in our younger generation. Otherwise, our younger generation is going to be lost."

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The Jackie Robinson YMCA offers programs to keep children off the streets and away from gangs.