

Charges expose Hmong problems : Rapes of teens draw cloaked community into public eye

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WARREN -- They have kept their dealings quiet, their connections cloaked in a culture that prefers to take care of its own, for good and for ill.

But the five suspected **Hmong** gang members accused of kidnapping and raping four teen-age girls in Detroit over a 2 1/2-week period have brought out into the open a **problem** with gangs that police, school and **Hmong** community leaders are struggling to solve.

"I would say it is not a new phenomenon, but it's been one where if you don't see it, it's not there," said Warren Police Officer and **Hmong** gang specialist Jim Matheney.

Many **problems** in the **Hmong** community remain hidden because theirs is a culture that prefers to deal with its own **problems** within the strong clan, or extended family system. And when parents do try to deal with a rebellious teen, they often run afoul of an American legal system that is still alien to them.

"Generally speaking, when something's reported to the police out of the **Hmong** community, it's because it was something the police saw happen," Matheney said.

The **Hmong** are an ancient Asian ethnic group, originally from China. Many of them settled in Laos.

They number about 7,000 in Metro Detroit, largely in northeast Detroit and adjoining southern Macomb County communities.

Two suspects, Ladsamee Lee, 20, and Vang Yee Leng Chang, 17, of Warren, were arraigned Sunday on 22 counts of rape and weapons **charges** and remain jailed on \$1 million bonds. Wayne County prosecutors charged three more suspects on Tuesday, all teen-agers.

Many parents have tried to communicate with police about large numbers of teens gathering in a home, and are frustrated that police can do nothing until a crime is suspected, said Noutoua Chang of the **Hmong** Community Organization, a nonprofit group that helps area **Hmong** families who need social services.

"They'll gather 10, 15, 20 kids all at one home. We call police and they do nothing. They say these kids are not doing anything wrong," said Chang. "As parents, we are very angry what's going on."

The parents are equally confused that they cannot use corporal punishment, traditional in their culture, for fear of being charged with child abuse.

"We have different ways to discipline our children, but in this country, the laws control that," Chang said.

Neighbors of the two Warren suspects said they had no reason to link them to gang activity. The kids did wear baggy clothes, with red and blue bandanas or nylon caps on their heads -- but everyone dismissed that as typical teen-age dress.

"They (the Changs) never bothered us," said Alex Kotsonis, a restaurant manager who lives next door to the Changs on Campbell in Warren. "They were good neighbors."

Chang was a junior at Center Line High School, but withdrew Sept. 21, said Karl Kalimek, assistant superintendent.

"He's a kid who behaved himself. He's very low key. We had no **problems** with him whatsoever, and the attention he drew to himself was absolutely minimal."

Kalimek said the only thing unusual about Chang was that he was the only student who did not have his picture in the school yearbook.

Detroit News Staff Writer Hawke Fracassa contributed to this report.

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