

CITIZEN COMPLAINTS TRIGGER 200 ARRESTS AMONG YOUTH GANGS

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More than 200 unruly young people have been arrested in the last two weeks in a police crackdown on violent southwest Detroit street gangs.

The action was brought about by citizen complaints to Police Chief Stanley Knox.

"Usually you never see a cop in my neighborhood, but lately they have been everywhere," said a 15-year-old student at Western High School who said he is a member of the Cobras gang. "Last Friday, five cop cars, maybe more, were here."

Knox ordered members of the gang squad into the 3rd (Vernor) and 4th (Fort-Green) precincts, where Vernor Highway divides the territory of most gangs. Gang members there have been blamed for robberies, assaults and drug dealing.

The youth, who asked that his name not be printed for fear of retaliation, said police have been more aggressive in stopping, searching and "harassing" youths on the streets in the evening.

Under former Chief William Hart, the department was reluctant to attribute youth violence to organized gangs. But Knox said Friday that complaining residents call them gangs, so he does, too.

Knox said he attended a community meeting Feb. 25 at the 4th Precinct, where residents told him about the problems. On Feb. 28, the gang squad was sent out.

"If they do something wrong, we're going to get them," Knox said.

From Feb. 28 to March 13, police said, they arrested 209 people, ranging in age from 13 to the mid-20s.

In the 3rd Precinct, 19 arrests were for alleged felony offenses, 75 were for misdemeanors. In the 4th Precinct, there were 20 felony arrests and 95 for misdemeanors.

Deputy Chief James Younger, who oversees the gang squad, said there had been problems with the gangs before.

"They were out there last year," he said Thursday, adding that police made a similar crackdown then. "In the past two weeks, there was a resurgence."

The biggest threat in the area is a group known as the **Latin Counts**, Younger said, who are "into assaults, drugs and weaponry. . . . I wouldn't put it past them to take a life."

The gang's notoriety has forced smaller, less violent groups in southwest Detroit to band together for protection, he said.

The gang member interviewed for this article, who claimed to have stolen more than 50 cars in recent years, said he has been shot at by members of the **Latin Counts** and that he joined the Cobras because he needed their protection, and because it was fun.

He said most of the gangs on the southwest side have allied themselves with two groups -- "Folks," which encompasses most gangs like the Cobras, and "People," which includes the **Latin Counts** and a smaller group called D-Twos.

But he said the **Latin Counts** have been the most aggressive, especially since Dec. 23 when Octavio Viramontez, 16, was shot to death at a gas station on Vernor by youths driving by in a pickup truck.

Viramontez, who had arrived from Chicago just days before he was killed, is the brother of the reputed founder of the Detroit chapter of the **Latin Counts**, Anthony Viramontez.

Younger said investigators are trying to determine what connection the Detroit group has with **Latin Counts** based in Chicago.

Bill Sheets, coordinator of services for runaways at Casa Maria on Trumbull near Tiger Stadium, said that since Viramontez was killed, "they've been talking about going to war and a couple of them who have been clients of our agency have indicated that the gangs are now trying to recruit them . . .

"You never know how much of what you hear is real."

Sheets said youths have told him about the police crackdown.

"I know the police and the gang squad . . . wanted to get the **Latin Counts** . . . they were asking people to point out where they hang out," Sheets said.

Younger vowed to keep police pressure on the area. "We're not going to let up until the problem is abated."

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