

SHOOTINGS BY GANGS WORRY NEIGHBORS

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Nearly three dozen members of the **Latin Counts** gang are expected to be sentenced to prison terms in coming weeks, but southwest Detroit continues to struggle with a growing number of street gangs, law enforcement officials say.

The indictment of 43 **Latin Counts** last June left the gang without stable leadership, since most of the defendants have been jailed while on trial or awaiting sentencing, the officials say.

But other gangs are still battling for control of neighborhood turf, causing an escalation of the drive-by shootings that are of the most concern to police and neighborhood residents.

"The gang problem has not gone away," said Inez DeJesus, a member of the Council Against Gang-Related Violence. "There are still shootings. Kids are still being intimidated and harassed on their way to school."

Police investigators have identified some 50 gangs in Detroit and neighboring Downriver with more than 800 members. Not all are made up of hard-core criminals, but many of them are becoming bolder and more dangerous, say police and community leaders.

The gang most worrisome to authorities is the Cash Flow Posse, an ally of the **Latin Counts** comprising Hispanic, white and black youths. The Cash Flow is said to be engaged in a turf battle with another gang, the Detroit Kings.

One of the Cash Flow members, Gregory Ballesterio, 18, was shot and wounded Dec. 30 on Green Street in a drive-by shooting that police believe was carried out by the Detroit Kings.

"The **Counts** are laying real low," said one law enforcement official who asked not to be identified. "But it's heating up between these two gangs. They've already had a few drive-bys."

Inspector Benny Napoleon, commander of the Police Department's special crimes section, said none of southwest Detroit's gangs has been as organized or sophisticated as some of the city's more infamous drug gangs, like Young Boys Inc. and the Chambers Brothers. The gangs' battles are more over turf than profits, he said.

But investigators say some have acted as distribution arms for sophisticated Cuban drug organizations and that one gang, the X-men, has become more deeply involved in narcotics than the others.

An escalation of the neighborhood's gang problem is just what police and community leaders have been working to avoid for nearly four years.

Southwest Detroit has had gangs since the 1950s, but most were small and relatively harmless. The problem took a turn for the worse in 1989, when several members of the **Latin Counts** gang in Chicago moved to the area and began recruiting members.

The Spanish Cobra Nation, a rival Chicago gang, followed the **Counts** to Detroit a few months later. Each of the gangs since has recruited more than 100 members, sparking gang warfare in a number of neighborhoods. Among the people slain in gang disputes were three of the **Counts** ' original leaders.

The community has not sat still. A number of community agencies are working to deter gang recruitment and to discourage gang members from resorting to violence. One agency, Latino Family Services, is considered neutral ground for gangs to meet and discuss conflicts.

Officials of Latino Family Services and another organization, La Sed, declined to be interviewed about the gang problem. Inez said her group is considering establishing neighborhood patrols to make sure youths are not bothered as they walk to school.

Police have also moved aggressively against the gangs. The Detroit Police Department's gang squad has a gang-violence hot line and has staged a number of highly publicized sweeps in which large numbers of people were arrested.

The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms swept through southwest Detroit over two days last June and arrested 43 **Counts** , including several leaders. Thirty-four of the gang members since have been convicted or pleaded guilty and are headed for prison terms ranging from two to seven years.

The Cobras have also run into troubles in Detroit. Police say the gang has been driven out of the city by other gangs and is operating in several Downriver communities.

But Detroit police have their hands full with the Cash Flow Posse and a host of other Detroit-bred gangs.

Following the Chicago model, all the gangs are divided into three broad groups: people, folks and family. Both the **Counts** and the Posse are people, and thus often allied in warfare against gangs that are folks, such as the Cobras.

Each gang has its own symbols and hand-signs, and gang graffiti is as prominent on southwest Detroit signs as liquor advertisements. Two common items of graffiti are the upturned pitchfork (folks) and the downturned pitchfork (people).

"We've made a lot of progress against the gangs," Napoleon said. "That's one reason we are seeing such an explosion of gang activity Downriver. But there is still a lot more to do."

CALL FOR HELP

Among the phone numbers people can call if they are exposed to threats or recruitment by gangs are:

- * Detroit Police Department anti-gang hot line -- 224-GANG.
- * La Sed (community organization) -- 554-2025.
- * Latino Family Services -- 841-7380.
- * Council Against Gang-Related Violence (Holy Redeemer Church) -- 842-3450.
- * U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (firearms violations) -- 1-800-ATF-GUNS.

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