

Jackson County not immune to gangs

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They claim colors, sell drugs, destroy property and assault others. Though it is not common, they kill.

Gang violence in Jackson County isn't the stuff of hard-core television dramas, nor is it as widespread as elsewhere in the state. Still, gangs exist here and are taken seriously by law enforcement.

Recent crimes in Jackson County linked to gangs by police

October: Joseph Nice, 20, of Jackson is convicted of assault with intent to do great bodily harm after a jury hears testimony he shot at an alleged rival gang member. According to testimony, Nice "claimed blue," the color of Crips, and Donald Williams claimed red for the Bloods.

September: The last of eight alleged members of the Evonnie Boyz and Gyrلز gang is arrested in Jackson. All are arraigned on federal charges in Detroit. They are accused of selling drugs and using violence to collect debts or intimidate others.

April: There are four shootings or attempted shootings in three weeks in Jackson. Three people suffer injuries that were not fatal and police hear some

"Is it the level of Flint, Saginaw or Detroit? No, I don't think it is there," Jackson County Prosecutor Hank Zavislak said. "But anytime you have drugs and guns and gangs, you are going to have people die, and that is what we are trying to avoid."

In September, the last of eight alleged members of the Evonnie Boyz and Gyrلز gang were taken into custody in Jackson. Police said the move made a "significant dent" in city gang activity, which they consider a concern but not a plague.

Of the 111 aggravated assaults between January and mid-July in Jackson County, 12 were considered "gang-related," meaning a known gang member was involved or some mention of gangs was made during the investigation, Jackson Police Lt. Aaron Kantor said. Four of 32 robberies reported during the same period were considered gang-related.

During the last six months of 2007, 15 of 102 reported aggravated assaults, which include serious attacks such as stabbings or shootings, were gang-related. Eight of 42 armed robberies were gang-related.

Police consider aggravated assaults, robberies and homicides as benchmarks of gang activity and evaluate only those crimes for possible gang affiliations, Kantor said. Since the department began keeping such information last year, there have been no gang-related homicides.

Boyz and Gyrلز

Seven alleged members of the Evonnie Boyz and Gyrلز gang were arraigned in Detroit. The seven are Deondre "Dre" Mullen, 33; Sharonda "Shorty" Bailey, 23; Jarrell "Chi Town" Fullilove, 24; Dwight "Whitehead" Fullilove, 22; Dionte Reed, AKA Mike Jones, 20; Jamie Wagner, 20; and Deshawn Sweet, 20.

One other man, Delano "Lano" Tarpley, 19, is serving a sentence in the Jackson County Jail for a local conviction. He pleaded guilty in July to resisting, assaulting or obstructing a police officer and a drug charge.

mention of gangs in their investigations.

October 2007: A gang that calls itself the Stick up Kids kicks in doors at Canterbury House Apartments in Blackman Township. They frighten a Parma Township grandmother watching her grandchildren and raid two drug houses at gunpoint. Five teens plead guilty to felonies stemming from the crimes.

September 2007: Three alleged members of a gang called 11 Boys smash 10 vehicles with baseball bats in Vandercook Lake. One of three, Jordan Nelson, who has a long criminal history, goes to prison. The other two are jailed or placed on probation.

October 2005: Devin McCain dies after three gang members flushed him from a house on First Street in Jackson and shot him in the head. James Whetstone, who pulled the trigger, is now serving life in prison. Demetreon Adams and Lasonya Dempsey were convicted of manslaughter and are serving 10 to 17 years and eight to 15 years, respectively.

The 14-count indictment charges the eight with conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine and heroin, and other drug and gun offenses, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, which described them as "an armed street gang."

Kantor said their activity was centered around the 400 block of Burr Street and involved narcotics sales and the violence associated with the business, such as intimidation attacks and assaults to collect debts.

Their cases are pending in federal court.

The eight were charged as a result of ongoing efforts of Jackson police; Jackson County prosecutors; state police; the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and the U.S. Attorneys Office to combat drug, gun and gang crimes.

John Felton, resident agent in charge for the ATF field office in Ann Arbor, said the arrests eradicated an entire gang, but this doesn't mean the violence stops.

"When one gang is dismantled and taken apart by arrests and prosecution, there are more than enough young people willing to come forward and take their place, because there is so much money to be made," he said.

Not just in big cities

Gang crimes, most commonly associated with large urban areas, touch communities big and small, according to a recent National Gang Threat Assessment by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service. "Violent street gangs now affect public safety, community image and quality of life in communities of all sizes in urban, suburban and rural areas. ... Gangs affect society at all levels, causing heightened fears for safety, violence and economic costs."

Jackson County has one assistant prosecutor, partially funded by federal grants, who deals exclusively with these cases.

Many of the cases involve teens or young adults who group together to steal or deal dope, authorities said.

A Jackson County gang member was last slain Oct. 28, 2005, the result, authorities believe, of what was an increasingly violent gang culture.

James Whetstone was convicted of shooting Devin McCain after Whetstone's gang flushed McCain from a house on First Street.

A jury determined Whetstone, 27, and two other alleged Bloods members — Demetreon "Bird" Adams, 22, and Lasonya "Buffy" Dempsey, 22 — worked in concert to ambush and kill McCain.

They shot McCain in the head apparently because he had pummeled Adams over a shared girlfriend.

The three were charged in Jackson County's first grand jury in 40 years. Officials cited a widespread fear of gang reprisals for the closed grand jury, which had not been deemed necessary since authorities went after the Black Berets in the 1960s.

Adams and Dempsey are serving 10 to 17 years and eight to 15 years in prison for manslaughter; Whetstone is serving life.

Progress seen

In recent years, authorities' handle on the problem has tightened, Zavislak said. "I think we are making progress, but it is an uphill battle."

Felton, whose office works with law-enforcement agencies in seven southeast Michigan counties, said improvements have been made because his agency has a good relationship with Jackson police.

He said Jackson has been made a priority by his office, despite federal authorities' tendency to concentrate their Michigan efforts in Detroit or Flint.

Now, he would say the gang problem in Jackson is on par with or just below the level in comparable cities. "Three or four years ago, I'd say Jackson is pretty bad for a city its size."

Four city detectives have received training about gun and gang crime investigation, Kantor said. One detective works in Ann Arbor with ATF, which has an agent assigned to Jackson.

Their efforts mostly are focused inside the city, Felton said.

'With violence comes fear'

Outside Jackson, there isn't much of a gang culture, Sheriff Dan Heyns said. "It has not been a huge part of this office's work."

Heyns called the local groups "quasi-" or pseudo-gangs.

Some community members call them "wannabes."

Others fear for their safety.

"A bullet has no name," said Maureen Worthey of Jackson.

Gang violence, no matter where it is centered, affects entire municipalities, Felton said. "It destroys the overall feeling of safety," he said.

"With violence comes fear."

People fear being outside, having their homes invaded or being robbed by drug addicts.

Children who grow up exposed to such culture can take those attitudes or behavior to school, he said.