

Officials debate future of WNC Gang Task Force

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Asheville gang violence stops at neither district lines nor supposedly dangerous parts of the city. Gang members reside in different parts of Asheville and cross various socioeconomic boundaries, according to Detective Michael Lamb of the Asheville Police Department.

Involved with the Western Carolina Gang Task Force for one year and the Gang Suppression Unit for another, Lamb said citizens cannot assume that one part of Asheville harbors gang members.

"West Asheville has a bad reputation, and it was one of those areas that for a time had more stuff happening over there. But, then it moved to another area. It just goes back and forth," the Asheville native said.

Lamb credits this constantly shifting gang activity to many factors.

"Some of it has to do with them going to jail, and some of it has to do with the increased focus of (police) activity in that area. But, then it moves onto another area," Lamb said.

Improved tactics of gang members present additional obstacles in eliminating gang activity in Asheville.

"When we first went out and started doing a lot of suppression work with the violent crimes and with the drug activities, we were successful, very successful. So, they've changed their ways, and we're constantly having to adapt to those changes," he said.

The Asheville Police Department must also adapt with gangs' use of ever-changing technology.

According to the 2008 Comprehensive Assessment of Gangs in North Carolina, 32 percent, or 164 gangs, maintain a Web-based presence either through Yahoo, AOL, MySpace or have their own Internet Web sites.

"It used to be a gang member could mark their territory from graffiti and then word of mouth. Now gang members are able to go on YouTube and post video representing their gang," Lamb said.

The 34-year-old detective said he also recognizes changes within the gangs over the years.

"It used to be you could go to an open-air drug market and you could see a drug dealer, a gang member, who's standing out in the open and be able to contact them and



Ian Shannon-Assistant Photography Editor

Passersby often confuse downtown and West Asheville graffiti and tags for gang symbols. Asheville Greenworks recently created a board of volunteers removing graffiti.

investigate them," Lamb said. "They've changed methods of concealment. They use a lot more cell phones now. They changed their tactics, so we're having to change our tactics as far as being able to catch them."

Though the level of calls related to gang violence decreased in 2008 by 12 percent after a 24 percent increase from 2003 to 2007, gangs still reside in Asheville.

According to Lamb, of the 69 gangs listed in the Asheville Police Department's database, only 20 of them impact the Asheville community.

"Most of the crimes that occur are done by the street gangs," Lamb said. "As far as what we have in our street gangs, some are mixed gangs where they have African-American, Caucasian and Hispanic members. We have the historically African-American street gangs, which includes the Bloods, Crips, Folk Nation and People Nation. We also have Hispanic gangs which the majority of the members are Hispanic, Mexican, Salvadorian, Guatemalan, Cuban and Puerto Rican."

These street gangs do not limit themselves to the streets of Asheville. Gang presence occurs within school walls.

According to the 2008 North Carolina

School Violence and Gang Activity Survey, of 369 N. C. high schools, 64 percent reported a gang presence within the school.

Junior Katherine Mauterer attended Asheville High School and said she knew gangs existed within her school.

"The administration at my school definitely took measures to try to reduce the presence of gangs and gang violence within the halls of the high school, including rules about where people could be during lunch and how times before, during, between and after classes could be used by students on campus. Also, dress code was strictly enforced in an effort to reduce showing gang symbols, like the way someone wears their hat and such," the 21-year-old said.

Despite these measures, Mauterer said she didn't worry about gangs too much.

"There really isn't very much acknowledged gang presence in Asheville. It exists, but not many people know much about it, so people just try to prevent what they can guess might happen," she said.

This idea of prevention exists in the Buncombe County Gang Violence Preven-



tion Project.

With the intention of prevention, intervention and programming, the BCGVPP provides free services to youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are actively involved in gangs or are at risk for gang involvement.

UNC Asheville alumna Megan Leschak serves as the project coordinator.

"I think prevention is important, but I think if we're being realistic you have to know you can't prevent everyone from joining the gang. So with being realistic, I think you have to offer intervention and ac-