

Editorials

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FIRST IN AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

Understanding gangs

Young lives snuffed out. Others headed to prison. Gang violence has claimed nearly a dozen Bay Area lives so far this year. Clothing is often the spark.

Decoding the uniform

It's all about combinations of reds or blues, letters and numbers.

NORTEÑOS:

The most prominent umbrella gang in San Jose characterized by the color red, number "14" and letter "N" (the 14th letter in the alphabet) which refers to either Northern California or the Nuestra Familia prison gang. Shown at left is a model in a typical outfit.

SUREÑOS:

Norteños' rival, the gang uses blue as its prominent color, the number "13," and the letter "S" to represent the word South or the Southern California-based Mexican Mafia prison gang. (M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet.) Shown at right is a typical outfit.



HEADGEAR: Baseball caps are popular, as are beanies, bandannas and headbands. Some items — such as the San Jose State hat above, the Nebraska hat at left, and other sports apparel — are not produced with the intention of being gang-related, but are hijacked by gangs with their own meaning.



SHIRTS: Plaid shirts are popular, as are hooded sweatshirts and baggy T-shirts with terms "Sharks City" and "408." As is the case with many gang symbols, "Sharks City" can be sports-related, but it is often used by gang members.

BELT: Army-surplus-style with Old English "N" or "S" on the buckle.



COLORED BANDANNA: Used as headgear or, more often, as a flag on a belt.

COLORED STITCHING: Members like to use their gang color throughout their outfit in sometimes subtle ways.



SHOES: Big laces and solid colors; Converse and Nike Corteses are popular.



JOSIE LEPE —
MERCURY NEWS
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Editorial

Will wearing the wrong color get my child shot or beat up? Maybe

Gangs wear uniforms.

Nobody issues them or strictly regulates their use. But just like police or army units, kids in street gangs use clothing, colors and logos to communicate who they are.

Why is this important? Because wearing the wrong gang color in the wrong neighborhood can be deadly.

Learning how some gangs use clothes and colors is especially important in light of a recent rash of Bay Area gang violence. In the past two months alone, six people were stabbed or shot to death in alleged gang violence in Santa Cruz, Redwood City, Union City and Pinole. On July 12, four boys in Redwood City, ages 14 to 16, allegedly shot and killed a man they "believed" was a rival gang member. Two murder victims in Pinole were not gang members. Police say the gang member suspected of opening fire on them in a public park had misidentified them as enemies because one, a teenager, was wearing a red shirt.

Six people have died in San Jose since January. Thirteen suspects have been arrested, including 10 teenagers. And two 14-year-olds — from Santa Clara and San Mateo counties — are both awaiting trial this year for gang-related murders, the youngest defendants in both counties to be tried as adults.

Gangs and their colors have been around for decades and San Jose has been aggressive in addressing the problem. But this has been a particularly bloody and deadly year. And police and social-service groups need help. In the ongoing campaign against gangs, everyone has a role — parents, family members, police, politicians and

GANG PREVENTION RESOURCES

■ The Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force is hosting a parent awareness training class Thursday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the San Jose High School auditorium, 275 N. 24th St.

■ Parents concerned about children involved in gangs can contact the Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force by calling (408) 277-2741.

■ If you wish to leave an anonymous, recorded message regarding gang activity in specific neighborhoods call (408) 293-GANG (4264).

neighbors.

Part of the solution is for more people to become educated about gangs and members' lifestyles, including the subtle cues about their clothing. And, the community must become involved by alerting police when they see suspicious gang activity.

The photographs on this page focus on the Norteño and Sureño gangs because they represent some of the largest, deadliest and most active gangs in Santa Clara County and across California. San Jose police believe all six of the city's gang-related homicides this year are a result of Norteño-Sureño rivalry.

Here are a few key gang guidelines to remember:

■ Norteños generally identify with Northern California and claim the color red; Sureños, generally from Southern California, claim blue. Norteño and Sureño are umbrella names. Individual gangs often are known by their street location, neighborhood, area code, etc.

■ The uniforms can be blatant. But often the clothing is subtle and difficult to profile or ban, including red or blue baseball hats, hooded sweatshirts,

belts and bandannas.

■ Some gangs co-opt mainstream fashion, favoring name brands such as Nike, Converse, Ben Davis or Dickies.

■ Gangs add symbols, hand signals, tough talk and a street attitude to complete the look. Norteños use "14," "408" and "N" in tattoos, clothes and hand signals. Sureños use "13" and "S." Gang members also employ hand signals and head nods and immediately want to know where you're from — meaning which gang or part of town or state.

The No. 1 question from parents is: Will my child be shot or beat up for wearing the wrong color? The most honest answer: Maybe.

If a child is simply wearing a red shirt or shoes, it's not likely to generate attention from a gang. But if the child is also wearing more red or blue, the number "14" or uses gang lingo or some type of bravado when confronted by a gang member, violence can quickly break out.

Gang members are mobile and travel across the region. If you are a young Latino, you're especially vulnerable if you wear combinations of red or blue clothing in the wrong part of town. But everyone needs to be alert to clothing combinations that can be misinterpreted.

San Jose's Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force has put together an excellent class to help parents and the community learn more about gang lifestyles and clothing. This Thursday's free class (see details in the accompanying resource box) is scheduled to be the last.

But more are expected to be added — as long as there's public demand. We hope there is.

Firsthand experience: Stopping the lure of gangs starts at home

The third-period bell at Independence High in East San Jose had just rung and students were rushing to class when I saw Michael, a close friend and hardened gang member from another school.

Michael was looking for trouble. I watched him intimidate three boys he thought looked like rival gang members. They had the right clothes, but they shook their heads and stuttered as they tried to explain they were not in a gang.

Michael was prepared to teach a lesson. "You may not be in the gang, but you look like you do." He then lined them up and proceeded to kick each one in the head and face, warning them worse would happen if they cried or ran away.

That happened more than 20 years ago. Some of the gang names, clothes and colors have changed since then, but the street game hasn't. If anything, the rules are stricter today, and guns and knives are more frequently used than fists and feet.

San Jose's six gang-related deaths so far this year point to that. There were four gang-related murders in all of 2004.

Michael had been my friend since childhood and was always kind to me. But that morning at Independence, he looked like a rabid Rottweiler and I knew better than to get in his way.

When Michael, or "Popeye" as he was called because of his bulging biceps and thin forearms, dressed in gang garb, he wanted trouble. Usually



Daniel Vasquez

he wore a black bandanna on his shaved head, a black Sir Jacket and baggy karate-style pants.

Michael taught me a lot at a time when I thought it was cool to hang out with San Jose gangs. He showed me that when you hang out with gangs, you will eventually get hurt.

During my high school years, I witnessed:

■ Guns. Lots of guns. They were kept in cars, taken to house parties and school, and used to shoot a teenage boy in an early-evening gang fight at a Capitol Avenue strip mall. Luckily, no one else was hurt.

■ Drugs. Kids in gangs love drugs because they offer a way to make money and to get instant courage when you need to fight someone.

■ Fighting. You will need to fight someone if you want to be in a gang. Hell, you'll be lucky if that's all you have to do. I once watched as a couple of hard stares exchanged between two kids — one a friend of Michael's — erupted into a one-sided knife fight. It ended without injury when Michael pulled a shotgun out of his car and sent his rivals scattering into the night.

Two decades have passed and now I'm a parent. My challenge is to make sure my child doesn't hang out with the same kind of kids I hung out with. I plan to use my gang knowledge to help him navigate school yards, strip malls and neighborhood streets, without being confronted or recruited by gangs.

And that will include not letting him wear bandannas or gang colors, no matter how mean or uncool he thinks I am. I'll live with that. So will he.

DANIEL VASQUEZ is a Mercury News editorial writer.

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