

## Too Successful for Our Own Good?

By Nick Welsh (Contact)

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Paul Wellman

Sgt. Andre Feller gives a pre-shift briefing in the parking lot of the Franklin Center (August 13, 2012)

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State Doesn't Renew Anti-Gang Grant

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By [Nick Welsh](#) (Contact)

Maybe those working to combat youth gang activity throughout the South Coast were too successful for their own good; perhaps other communities throughout the state are confronting more pressing gang problems. Or maybe both. In either case, the City of Santa Barbara will have to do without the hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funds it's received over the past four years that are designed to curb gang activity throughout the entire South Coast.

What this means for the alphabet soup of public and private agencies dealing with youth violence has yet to be seen, but the Community Action Commission's Saul Serrano — coordinator of the South Coast Task Force on Youth Gangs — said it will be more challenging to provide the same degree of direct intervention and case management. In the past four years, the City of Santa Barbara has applied for and received two

two-year grants from the California Gang Reduction, Intervention and Prevention program, otherwise known as CalGRIP. Combined, they have provided the South Coast with \$760,000. This year, the City of Santa Barbara applied for a third grant, but came up empty. Serrano suggested that the state budget woes didn't help. Likewise, he speculated that Santa Barbara had a harder time making its case compared to places like Long Beach and Fresno — where gang violence is far scarier than along the South Coast.

Gang activity may be statistically hard to define, but in recent years, the general trend has been downward. "There are some spikes here and there," Serrano said, "but generally the problem is getting better, and the numbers are decreasing." While law enforcement agencies — and stakeholders in the ongoing community discussion over youth violence — debate just what constitutes a gang member as opposed to a gang associate, the county's Probation Department keeps pretty clear statistics on how many juveniles are on probation with what are known as "gang terms and conditions." These are imposed on those who plead guilty to — or were convicted of — gang-related offenses. Those who violate their terms are subject to further incarceration and longer probation.

According to the Department of Probation, there were 203 South Coast juveniles on probation with gang terms and conditions. In 2009, the number was 306. That's a drop of 33 percent. Typically, the majority of juveniles given such terms and conditions violate them. The good news is that fewer are violating the probation terms than before. In 2009, only 11 percent of all juveniles on probation managed to serve out their term without being found in violation by their probation officers. In 2012, according to the Department of Probation, that number more than tripled, jumping to 39 percent.

These statistics reinforce figures released by the Santa Barbara Police Department showing that the number of gang charges, gang arrests, and violent offenses all dropped from July 2008 to March 2011. During that time, violent offenses went from a high of 61 to a low of 37, charges dropped from 192 to 101, and arrests went from 61 to 37.

What's made these numbers drop is open to debate. "There's no one 'thing' that did this," Serrano stated. In recent years, the city Police Department's gang detail has grown in both number of officers and hours deployed. County probation officers have established closer working relationships with the local public schools. And there's been more coordination among the many organizations working on gang issues, a change from when their work went on unbeknownst to one another.

Serrano highlighted the efforts being undertaken to work with the parents of juvenile gang members. "We're meeting regularly with parents of kids who have pretty much given up to help them make some changes in their lives," he said. To date, he said about 30 groups of parents have gotten involved. About half show up at any given meeting; most are mothers. Three, he said, are dads. While impossible to quantify the impacts, Serrano said, it's made a difference.

In gang programs, progress is measured in small increments. The CalGRIP funds were used to focus on the progress made — or not made — by 120 at-risk juveniles with a focus on improving their educational achievement. Twenty out of 30 12th graders on probation managed to graduate from high school; 41 of 99 credit-deficient students on probation caught up on enough credits to be in compliance; and 18 out of 48 got jobs. How many re-offended? How many engaged in gang violence? Those statistics presumably will be ready when a final report is presented to the County Board of Supervisors on February 19. Serrano expressed sensitivity that these results might not sound dramatic enough. "That's a lot of resources to throw around at a relatively small population," he acknowledged. "But if we don't work with them, the problem only gets worse."