

# Gang members sent to death row for murder

HOUSTON (AP) — What was intended to be a night of a routine gang initiation in a field beside a Texas bayou took a ghastly twist when two teen-age girls wandered too near the young toughs.

Both were raped, viciously beaten, then strangled with shoe laces and a belt.

Last week, just 15 months after the crime, three of the youths were convicted of capital murder, joining two fellow gang members — none yet 20 years old — on the path to Texas' crowded death row.

All five await death by lethal injection, punishment meted out by a citizenry "fed up with the expense of crime, the fear of crime, the devastation of crime and just the senseless nature of it," said Billy Bramlett, a juvenile delinquency expert and professor at Sam Houston State University.

Corrections experts say they can't recall a similar case where so many people have been condemned to death for a single crime.

Peter Anthony Cantu and Derrick Sean O'Brien, both 19, were convicted earlier this year. Last week, in separate trials, jurors convicted Efrain Perez, 18, Raul Villarreal, 18, and Joe Medillin, 19, increasing the number of inmates in the nation's most populous death row to almost 400 inmates.

A sixth member of their loose-knit "Black and White" gang, a juvenile ineligible for the death penalty under Texas law, was convicted and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

On the evening of June 24, 1993, gang members gathered

along a railroad trestle over a bayou to drink and initiate Villarreal by making him fight each of the other gang members.

About 11:30 p.m., shortly after the fighting stopped, Jennifer Ertman, 14, and Elizabeth Pena, 16, took a short cut through the field, trying to get home from a party by their curfews.

Their path took them past the gang, who grabbed the girls and took turns raping them before beating them, strangling them and stomping on their necks. The girls' battered bodies were found four days later.

When one youth was arrested, he snarled obscenities at camera crews and tried to kick reporters as police hauled him away. Testimony at the trials showed they divided \$40 and some jewelry taken from the girls, then bragged about what they did.

"I think they are more or less oblivious," said Robert Lineberry, an urban crime historian at the University of Houston. "From their point of view, life is of little value."

The ages of new death row inmates in Texas are getting younger and younger, officials say.

Of the 393 inmates on death row last week, 12 committed murder at age 17, 21 at age 18, and 30 at age 19.

Among all felonies nationwide, statistics show the most common age of arrest is 16, Lineberry said. The second most common: 15.

"The composition of crime is changing," he said. "You've got 11-year-old kids or 14-year-old kids committing crimes that we would have thought were only done by deranged adults."

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"It's true that for many of the people, this will be more interesting than anything else happening in their lives," Levenson said. "But reality sets in."

If the judge decides he must sequester the jury to shield them from publicity, that would further limit the pool of available jurors. Many will not want to leave family and friends for the

isolation of a hotel where their communications are monitored and visits are supervised by bailiffs.

More recently, jurors in the Reginald Denny riot-beating trial reported disputes while they were sequestered. One alarmed her colleagues when she ran down a hotel corridor screaming "I can't take it anymore!" and demanding to see her boyfriend.

The ultimate question is whether 12 jurors and eight alter-

nates can get along with each other in close quarters and whether sequestration itself can affect their decision.

The makeup of the jury probably will not be known for at least a month as jury questioning is likely to be long and tedious.

And the public, used to watching every phase of this trial on television, is in for a period of withdrawal. On the judge's orders, jury selection won't be televised.



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