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Gangs are no strangers to Eugene, Lane County

Eugene has less gang trouble than some cities, but officials say they still cause problems

Caron Alarab
Safety/Crime/Transportation Reporter

A group of more than three people who have a common identity, remain exclusive and engage in rivalries is how onlookers describe many competitive sports teams and a variety of other organizations. But according to the Eugene Police Department, such a group becomes a gang when it is criminally motivated.

Although Lane County might not have as much gang violence as larger cities, local authorities say gangs pose a particular threat to easily influenced juveniles who quickly grow into their roles as local criminals.

"Youth think it's cool because it gives them power and prestige,"

said Lin Holmquist, the EPD gang information coordinator. "And when they join gangs, it becomes something very special to them."

Holmquist said it's generally hard for people to grasp the concept of gang activity in Lane County, an area where petty crimes and bike thefts reign supreme.

"Although they don't look like the stereotyped gangs you see on TV, at this point there are about 200 gang members in the Lane County area," she said.

One of Holmquist's biggest challenges in monitoring local gang activity is tracking their movements because they rarely stay in one spot for very long, including the University area.

The Department of Public Safety contacted two Eugene gang members on campus in late April after they refused to leave the residence hall area at the request of a resident assistant. DPS Associate Director Tom Hicks said EPD arrested one of the individuals for trespassing. However, he added that gang activity on campus is an extremely rare occurrence.

"Any gang activity on campus primarily surrounds their attempts to party on with students," Holmquist said. "They're just looking to have a good time."

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Lin Holmquist
EPD gang information coordinator

Holmquist said that prior to Measure 11, legislation that mandates a seven-year sentence for particular felonies, there was no consistent sentencing for gang-related crimes. A drop in gang activity followed the passage of Measure 11 more than half a decade ago, and within the next couple years a slew of incarcerated gang members will come back into Lane County communities. Holmquist said the release of gang members could cause an increase in violent activity.

"They have scores to settle," she added.

In her experience, Holmquist has encountered gang members in

their late 30s or 40s who have relocated from larger areas like Portland or Southern California. She said active members that age are rare, considering most either don't live that long or have been incarcerated.

"Gang life is a cycle of violence, motivated by criminal activity," she added.

"At my high school, you couldn't walk around, stand or socialize as a group of greater than three people."

Sara Banks
LCC junior

Holmquist said the average age range for local gang members is 17 to 21, although some juveniles who have minimal positive motivation emulate the gang lifestyle as early as 13.

The Oregon Youth Authority, established in 1996 as an independent department that provides decisive intervention efforts and effective rehabilitation programs for juveniles throughout Lane County, offers a variety of services to protect the public and reduce crime.

Oregon Youth Authority spokesman Greg Van Black, who transferred to Eugene from a public relations position in Portland seven years ago, said he never expected gang violence to have as prominent an influence on area juveniles as it has had during the last few years.

"I have been amazed at the evolution of it," he said.

Lane Community College junior Sara Banks has had her fill of gang violence from living in Santa Barbara, Calif., where she once witnessed a drive-by shooting.

"At my high school, you couldn't walk around, stand or socialize as a group of greater than three people," she said.

Banks said the majority of members were "gangbangers" — or people who always tried to act "hard." Considering her experience, Banks laughed at the thought of Lane County gang violence.

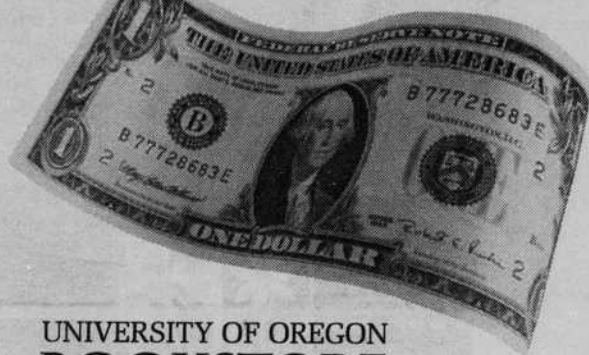
"Comparatively, Eugene gangs just don't seem as threatening," she said.

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