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A HARDER EDGE TO GANG VIOLENCE

As Sonoma County gangs become more entrenched, bloodshed more common

By **JEREMY HAY**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

On a May evening in 2003, a group of Asian Boyz Crips, aged 15 to 20 and wearing blue, drove to Rohnert Park looking for their rivals, the LOK, or Loked Out Khmer Bloods.

They found them, four young men also aged 15 to 20, wearing red and playing basketball at Sunrise Park.

Fists, feet, sticks and broken beer bottles were wielded in a fight that lasted only a few minutes. Finally, a 9mm handgun was fired.

INSIDE MOORLAND GANG TIES
Neighborhood has long history of violence / **A12**

BREAKDOWN OF GANGS
A list of some of county's gangs / **A12**

Roeun Kloat, an 18-year-old LOK member, was shot in the abdomen and died at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital.

Kloat lived his short life in a slice of

Sonoma County society in which gang culture is at once more widespread and more entrenched, where violence is more commonplace and increasingly serious.

The violence often is more public, too. It erupted in gathering spots like Sunrise Park and more recently at Santa Rosa Plaza, where two shots were fired through a door at Sears in January.

Last weekend, a 25-year-old man was shot in the leg on a South Park street, apparently by gang members who mistook him for a rival, police said.

Although the number of gang members appears to be holding steady, police and prosecutors say their caseloads are growing as gangs cleave into new factions, fostering rivalries that spur more violence. Trauma surgeons are treating more stabbing and shooting victims. The number of homicides and other serious crimes involving gang members is rising.

"The nature of our gang cases has changed," said Chris-

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SIGNS OF THE TIMES

IN THE COURTS

Prosecutions of serious gang crimes have nearly doubled in the past 6 years.

ON THE STREETS

Gangs are blamed for a growing percentage of Santa Rosa homicides. From 1991 through 1997, 27 percent of the homicides involved gang members as either victims or suspects or both. From 1998 through this month, that number has grown to 58 percent.

IN THE E.R.

At Memorial Hospital's trauma center, patients with penetrating wounds — shootings and stabbings — rose from 45 in 2000 to 96 in 2004.

TEEN AT A CROSSROADS



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Eric Rodriguez, 17, got the tattoo of the Angelino Heights gang in 2002 after he was shot in the face during an altercation with a rival gang. Rodriguez is under house arrest after spending three months in juvenile detention.

'I just don't know what I want'

Once he's free from house arrest, Eric Rodriguez says he'll be torn between a fresh start and a return to his gang

By **JEREMY HAY**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Thursday will come and Eric Rodriguez will turn 18. His house arrest, which has confined him 24 hours a day for the final weeks of a three-month juvenile hall sentence, is set to end that day.

These things he knows.

The gangs and violence and drugs that have ruled

his teenage years, helped shape his identity and nearly cost him his life, will again beckon.

That, too, Rodriguez knows.

What he doesn't know is how he will respond. "Sometimes I want to go back," he said. "Sometimes I want to make a life. Make a life with my girlfriend and my son and get out."

His mother, Jovita Rodriguez, 38, a Head Start teacher, can't imagine what more she could have done in the past four years to steer her son from the life he chose to lead.

"He wants to change," she said, sounding hopeful. "He has a good heart."

His father, Victor Rodriguez, 39, blames himself

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History of deep-rooted violence

Moorland neighborhood's gang ties have death grip on inhabitants, their families

By JEREMY HAY

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

At Santa Rosa's southern edge, amid the everyday routines of the Moorland neighborhood, the enmities and violence that suffuse gang life carry across the years.

They echo down streets like Neville Court, where Rogelio Bautista lived in a concrete-floored room off a garage; down streets like Barbara Drive, where the 16-year-old was shot dead on New Year's Eve.

It's a neighborhood of short streets, many without sidewalks, of ranch houses with faded paint jobs and a few apartment complexes crammed between the old Northwestern Pacific Railroad tracks and Highway 101, just south of the Corby Avenue auto dealers.

It once was norteño territory, according to neighborhood lore. Then a man — whom some call Mike and others Mickey — moved up from Los Angeles in the 1990s, and a gang named Angelino Heights took hold.

The gang — whose "AHTS" graffiti is found around Moorland's streets — is allied with the sureños.

With sureños growing in number, the norteños were pushed aside.

More recently, it is said, some norteño families have moved back. And pushed back.

So it goes, "generation to generation," said Gloria Lawson, who from her front door can see the driveway across the street where Bautista died.

She is 35, and says her "gang banging" days are over. The norteño tattoo on her left forearm is covered with one of a tangled rose, but she can still seem as hard-bitten as the Moorland streets where she was raised.

She has a gravelly laugh and three nephews who are charged in connection with Bautista's slaying.

She says someone else shot Bautista as he led a crowd of gang members wielding bottles and



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Friends of Rogelio Bautista, 16, hold a vigil at his home on Moorland Avenue in Santa Rosa. Bautista was shot and killed by gang members on New Year's Eve.

rocks to attack the house across the street where one of her nephews was hanging out with friends.

It was, Lawson said, just one in a string of conflicts that sureños have started with her extended family, which has long norteño ties.

"It's because we're from here and they want to take it over. That's what it comes down to," she said. "We're the last northerners who are still here. All the others have moved out."

Whatever the truth of that night, the persistent and increasingly violent reality of gangs in Sonoma County has textured life in Moorland for years.

It shades Bautista's death, the arrests of Lawson's nephews and the stories people in the neighborhood tell about what went down Dec. 31 and why.

Two of Lawson's nephews who are charged in connection with Bautista's murder are norteños, prosecutors say: Dominic Nevarez, 21, the alleged gunman, and Abraham Gonzales, who faces attempted-murder charges for allegedly firing at the crowd that gathered. The third isn't a gang member, according to prosecutors.

Authorities say Bautista, who

lived two blocks away, was on probation for a gang-related offense but, citing his age, won't say if he was an active gang member.

In Moorland, there seems little doubt that he was.

"My son was in the same gang Rogelio was in," said Michelle Southers, 51, who moved from Fort Bragg to Moorland in 1993, and now lives in the single-story, four-unit apartment house down the street from Lawson's.

Her son has a baby boy named after Rogelio, she said. The gang was Angelino Heights.

Southers spent her son's teenage years trying to keep him out of the gang and failing, so instead, she said, "I worried all the time that he would end up in jail or dead."

Her son, whom she declined to identify, is now 25 and out of the life, she said.

Others on the street say he's not. Who is and who isn't; what happened to Bautista and what didn't; who is to blame and what will happen next?

In the months since Bautista was shot, questions like these have ricocheted along Barbara Drive.

Southers doesn't know the exact chain of events that led to Bautista's death.

But she knows too well the atmosphere in which the animosities underlying it were nurtured.

"It's what gangs do to people," she said. "It makes you violent, it makes you want more power and it makes you feel safe in a way."

She remembers the day her 13-year-old son was jumped in the street for his brand new red 49ers sweatshirt, a color the norteños claim.

Soon he was rolling with Angelino Heights.

"His explanation was so that he could feel safer in the neighborhood, because he had the gang to back him up," she said.

Linda Gonzalez, 19, Lawson's daughter, knows that feeling, but from the street's other side.

"I was out running the streets here. I was gang banging too," she said.

Now, with two children of her own, she wants that past to stay in the past. When her cousins' trial is done, she said, she's moving away, to Virginia.

"I'm going to be 20, and I'm scared to walk down the street," she said. "That's so embarrassing. I'm scared to walk down the streets that I've been in forever."

Her mother, listening nearby, laughed, shaking her head.

Bautista's family, who have denied his gang involvement, moved from the neighborhood in March. Gloria Lawson's sister, the mother of her jailed nephews, has moved to Texas.

"It's torn up our family," Lawson said. "It's not like we don't feel for them, for the mother, but we think the wrong people are in jail."

One day in April, a memorial to Bautista was finally taken down from the courtyard in front of Souther's apartment.

When she turned 50, Southers recalled later, her son threw her a party. Rogelio Bautista came, she said, and gave her a jewelry box.

He was a sweet kid, she said, and a gang member who led a life that put him in danger, and in that way, she said, he shared in the responsibility for his own death.

"Just being in a gang, of course he did," she said, "and so did everyone who recruited him. I hold them responsible too."

SIZING UP GANGS

Gangs are a fluid and elusive slice of Sonoma County society. Their names and the numbers of their members change frequently, as different loosely knit alliances appear and disappear.

But police have identified a number with a consistent influence and presence in the county's gang scene. For the most part, investigators say, Sonoma County gangs attach themselves to identities not territories, but in some cases the locations each tend to cluster around are identified.

The gangs' criminal activities vary, police say. For example, white-power gangs focus on crimes such as vehicle theft and property crimes, while much of the crime involving the rival norteños and sureños is violence toward other gang members. All are involved in drug sales, police say.

WHITE-POWER GANGS

Engaged mostly in home invasions, drug sales and property crimes:

Nazi Low Riders: 20 to 30 members; ties to prison gangs; mostly in Santa Rosa

Barbarian Brotherhood: about 30 members around Sonoma County

NORTEÑO GANGS

A presence in the county for at least two decades. The membership is mostly locally born Latinos, but includes whites, blacks, American Indians and Asians. The estimated 1,400 to 1,800 members, divided chiefly among:

VS RN, or Varrio Santa Rosa Norte: The oldest Sonoma County norteño gang, with about 300 members around Sonoma County

VSP: 80 to 100 members, South Park area of Santa Rosa

Pachucos Locos: 70 to 100 members; Santa Rosa

NX4: 50 to 75 members, Santa Rosa

V.O.P. or Valley Oak Posse: About 100 members who are generally Latino or Eritrean, based on Northcoast Street, in Santa Rosa

Barrios Cliques Norte: Cloverdale

H-Town: Healdsburg, based largely along Grove Street

West Side Windsor: Windsor; members of this gang were convicted of the 1996 attack in which 16-year-old Dylan Katz was almost beaten to death

SUREÑO GANGS

Less organized than the norteños, according to police, having grown up faster and more recently. About 1,400 to 1,500 members around Sonoma County, who clustered along the Highway 101 corridor but also in the Sonoma Valley:

V.S.L., or Varrio Sureño Locos: about 300 to 400 members

W 9th Street Clique: an offshoot of V.S.L.; about 75 to 100 members

Rohnert Park Sureños

Puro Sureño Cholos: about 300 to 400 members

A.V.S., or Apple Valley Sureños

ASIAN GANGS

About 200 members, based mostly in Santa Rosa and, to a lesser extent, Rohnert Park:

Asian Boyz Crips: about 125 members

L.O.K., or Loked Out Khmer: about 75 members