



MEAN STREETS

BY ALLISON SEALE

The following article presented great challenges. Like a prosecuting attorney who seeks a murder conviction without the benefit of a body, this story must convince you, the community, that we have a gang problem in our cities without being able to show you specific evidence of the problem.

Because gangs thrive off of publicity, the police and other law enforcement officials have chosen not to release specific information relating to local gang activity. No names or numbers of crimes can be detailed. Specific shootings, assaults or theft can not be identified as gang-related. The story can not tell you how to know a gang when you see one by the colors they wear. It can only give you non-specific signs of their existence and tell you that, based on that evidence and the opinions of experts and eyewitnesses, Bryan and College Station has a gang problem. And based on the opinions of experts in cities where the problem has already spun out of control, the time to act is now.



More than 800 people will die this year on the streets of Los Angeles as a result of gang violence. On average, three people die each night. Nearly half are innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire of some 1,000 warring gangs. No one remembers how or when the situation got so out of hand; the only thing that is certain is now it is beyond control.

Mean streets may be expected in Los Angeles where police arrest 40,000 gang members every year, but the glamorization of gang life in movies coupled with societal problems relating to poverty and the break-up of the nuclear family is bringing mean streets to places where many thought it could never happen. Places like the Brazos Valley.

The Nature of the Beast

Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon in this community, or in this country for that matter. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the northeastern United States, Irish, Italian and Polish gangs, among others, were commonplace in some immigrant communities, but they were not regarded as significant threats to public safety and law enforcement. That's where today's gangs cross the lines from those of the past — as our society has become more violent, so, too, have today's gangs. They are now regarded as an extremely serious threat to public safety and law enforcement.

Over the past decade, Texas' violent crime rate has risen by nearly 46 percent. One of the most frightening aspects of that statistic is the growing phenomenon of juvenile killers, up 143 percent in Texas since 1987. In Harris County alone, more than a dozen juveniles were arrested for murder during January 1992, including a 15-year-old boy who allegedly shot another teenager who refused to surrender a Los Angeles Raiders jacket. Gone are the days of fist fights. When push comes to shove now, childish arguments turn into tragedy when juveniles seek to solve their problems through more cowardly means —

GANGS IN THE BRAZOS VALLEY

weapons. In many cases, their killings are linked to gang rivalries.

Texas Youth Commission referral records show that almost one-third of the juveniles in their custody belong to a circle of friends who at least sometimes think of themselves as a gang.

Kids get involved in gangs for different reasons. Lack of supervision and guidance at home is one of the most common reasons cited in studies. Most significant, however, is the need to feel a part of a

“Gangs kill a community as much as a bullet kills a person”

Sgt. Wes McBride,
L.A. County Sheriff's
Department

group. In their search for respect and power, that group may take the form of a gang. Children who live in impoverished areas may get involved in profit-oriented gangs to be able to buy the clothing and shoes that other kids are wearing at school, while those children living in neighborhoods where there is a turf-based gang may be intimidated into joining to keep from being beat up.

Most Texas gangs fall into one of four categories: delinquent youth gangs, traditional turf-based gangs, profit-oriented gangs and violent/hate gangs. With the exception of only one — violent/hate

gangs — evidence of all of these gangs has been found in Brazos County.

While delinquent youth gangs are what most people think of when they think of gangs in our area, local police say the two largest groups are the more violent turf-based and profit-oriented gangs.

Call in the Witnesses

The police chiefs in both Bryan and College Station, the county sheriff's department and members of juvenile services all concur: there is a gang problem in our community. Each department has sent representatives to gang seminars around the country, and each has sent a representative to Los Angeles to learn about gang intervention techniques and to witness, first-hand, just how bad the situation can become. Sergeant Mark Ricketson, team leader for the Street Crime Apprehension Team, has what is perhaps the most sobering account.

“In L.A.,” he says, “they gave instances of kids as young as eight years old ordering designer caskets shaped like a car. Kids are prearranging their own funerals.”

The Bryan Police Department is taking the gang problem very seriously. In the past six months there have been nine drive-by shootings — that's an average of one every three weeks since last July. To try to prevent any further escalation, Bryan has assigned one SCAT officer as a gang liaison officer to gather intelligence and communicate with the schools and others in the community who are concerned with the problem.

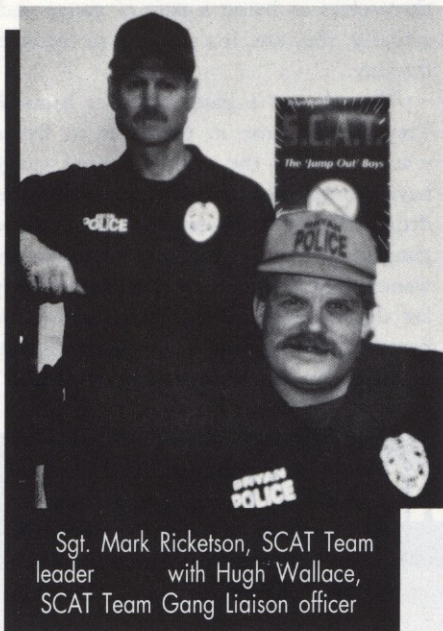
“It's a fickle situation,” Ricketson says of gangs. “Right now, we think it's stabilized.” He explained that gangs are popular all over the nation, due in large part, he feels, to their portrayal in movies directed toward the very groups who are most at risk of becoming involved.

It is during the teenage years that children begin to search for an identity. Which role models or groups they choose to identify with can mean the difference between life and death.

"So far we haven't had anybody hit," Ricketson says. "I don't know if they just want to say they did a drive-by or what but, sooner or later, one of these shots is going to hit somebody and somebody might get killed."

Once someone is hurt, a chain reaction of events can get set into action, like toppling dominos, as one gang retaliates against another. This eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth mentality, played out with a variety of lethal weapons, can leave carnage to rival any war. In fact, more people die every three months in L.A. from gang violence than all Americans killed in Operation Desert Storm.

Sergeant Larry Johnson of the College Station Police Department and Commander of the Brazos County Narcotics Task Force, says that although



Sgt. Mark Ricketson, SCAT Team leader with Hugh Wallace, SCAT Team Gang Liaison officer

College Station has seen a decrease in gang activity since its height in 1990, his department is joining with Bryan's to work towards curtailing any further development.

"It doesn't appear at this point that ours (College Station's gang problem) is at the point that is in Bryan but, because we are so close, what happens in Bryan has an effect in College Station. At the same time, what happens in College Station has an effect in Bryan."

Both school systems, too, agree that they have gang members in their schools, and both have innovative mentor programs and counselling groups set up to target kids at-risk of getting involved in

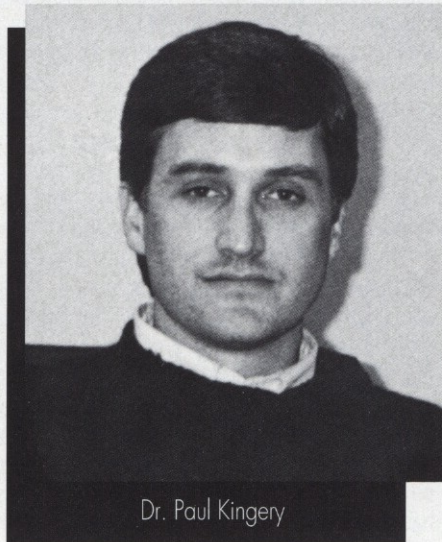
gangs. But there is an open reluctance by administrators to classify the gang situation as a problem.

Dr. Paul Kingery, the director of the Health Promotion Program at Texas A&M and a national expert on adolescent violence in rural schools, thinks that reluctance can be attributed to an unrealistic expectation from the community. Too many expect school administrators to take complete responsibility for everything that happens on the school grounds. Kingery has conducted surveys to determine violence and drug use levels in Region VI schools (schools in 15 counties including Brazos, Robinson, Burleson and Washington). His findings indicate that violence levels in this region's schools far exceed national levels — more than half of the boys he surveyed reported carrying a knife at school, twice the national average. And 18 percent of 15- to 17-year-old boys reported carrying a hand gun at school for protection or with the intent to shoot an aggressor. That figure is seven times the national average.

"The reaction of administrators when we take the survey results back to them is one of two things," Kingery says. "It's either, 'Wow! it's hard to imagine but, now that I think about it, I've had a feeling about this.' Or, on the other hand, 'It's just false bravado. It's just kids carrying pocket knives and kids bragging about guns.' Complete denial.

"The difference between those two reactions will be played out in terms of battlefields on the school grounds because those who do nothing to intervene will have serious problems in the near future."

Bryan and College Station schools →



Dr. Paul Kingery

A Glimpse In Time

Gang-Related Crime in Bryan

- ✦ January 1990 - October 1991: 14 drive-by shootings attributed to profit-oriented gangs. Average of 1 every 6 weeks.
- ✦ October 1991 - July 1992: 2 drive-by shootings attributed to profit-oriented gangs. Average of 1 every 18 weeks. (SCAT Team hit the streets in October)
- ✦ July 1992- January 1993: 9 drive-by shootings attributed to turf-based gangs. 3 cases of harassment intimidation and 3 assaults are reported and attributed to gangs. Average of 1 drive-by every 2.6 weeks.

Note: Because there is no code to flag gang-related crime in the police computer system, to date, these statistics may be incomplete. College Station has no data available.

Reports of Weapons & Violence In Our Schools

Bryan: September - December 1992

- ✦ 11 simple assaults reported
- ✦ 2 weapons violations

College Station: September - December 1992

- ✦ 18 simple assaults
- ✦ 1 weapons violation

Note: These numbers only reflect those cases reported to police and where the police were called to school campuses. A simple assault is a threat with bodily injury or physical contact where no weapon is used.

did not agree to participate in the survey Kingery conducted so there is no way to know where Bryan and College Station schools fall in the survey statistics. Both schools, however, according to police records, have had weapons violations and assaults this school year on their campuses in spite of stringent rules prohibiting weapons, fighting and extortion.

Local schools are working with the police to identify gangs and gang members and both have sought out means of intervening with gangs. The stumbling block seems to be in how you choose to define a gang or gang member. Though school officials were openly concerned about their students involved in what they describe as gang-like activity, most were reluctant to call the groups in their schools "gangs." They think of the students involved more as "wannabe" gang members who are just mimicking what they see in the movies or as nothing more than the same types of groups that cruised the streets in the '50s and papered houses.

Warning To The Jury

"Anybody who is telling you that these gangs today are the same as those gangs in the '50s is a fool," says Sergeant Wes McBride of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Operation Safe Streets division.

"I don't use the word 'wannabe' anymore," says McBride. "If a kid believes he's a gang member, he's a gang member. We can call in all of the experts and use all of the names we want to, but he knows what he is."

"It costs \$45 a day to house an inmate in the Brazos County Jail. That's \$1.6 million a year of our tax dollars going to pay for housing 100 inmates. Don't you think that money could be better spent trying to divert a few from the system? These are real dollars. If you just want to talk dollars and cents, it just makes sense."

— Bill Turner
District Attorney

"If a kid wants to be a gang member, it's a short damn trip. He may not be the same type of gang member in L.A., but he's a serious contender for Bryan/College Station."

The difference between the gangs of today and those of even 20 years ago, he says, is that violence has become an accepted part of life and kids have become desensitized to violence through the graphic displays on television and in movies. That, coupled with poor interpersonal skills, has led to the evolution of the deadly hybrids roaming the streets today.

"These kids have no problem-solving techniques," McBride laments. "If you've got a problem, kill it and it's not a problem anymore. Gangs kill communities just as much as a bullet kills a person."

Testimony From The Front Lines

"Trey" (not his real name) nods his head. "Yes. There are guys who consider themselves as being a part of gangs and, actually, they are. It's a reality in this area for sure."

Though not a gang member himself, Trey spends time in the areas in Bryan where some of the profit-oriented gangs have set up shop to sell crack and other drugs. "Basically, these guys are wannabe gangsters; they wannabe hard. They are wannabes and, from the things that they are doing around here, they're gonna be because they are making their beds real tough to back out."

OPEN LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

From The District Attorney

Drive-by shootings, turf battles, organized crime and weapons in the hands of young people have become monumental problems for large cities dealing with gangs. While Brazos County is experiencing a growth in gang activity, we are fortunate in that there is still time to act before the problem becomes unmanageable.

Tarrant County, like Brazos County, is presently facing the initial stages of gang problems. That county's Citizens Crime Commission recently completed a comprehensive study on gangs. It is their recommendation that their community take a holistic approach to solving the gang problem.

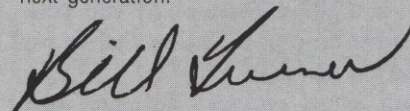
A critical question the study addressed was why young people join gangs. While 23 reasons were listed, the most notable were: too much unstructured and unsupervised time, lack of parental interest, lack of work ethic, lack of value system, peer pressure, and a need to belong.

It is encouraging to note that our community already has in place a number of programs that address these issues. Mentor programs, extended school day, and parents as teachers are only a few of the programs in our school districts that increase structured time for young people and improve family commitment to the young. As a community we must increase our support of these agencies and others like them to prevent increased gang participation.

The Tarrant County Commission also made recommendations to law enforcement. They encouraged police departments to become more community-based and recommended that all law enforcement agencies participate in a county-wide computerized gang intelligence network. While segments of law enforcement in Brazos County have significant intelligence on gang activity, improved communication is badly needed. Police departments, along with the city managers, are presently studying the

possibility of sharing computerized data on criminal activity. In a community such as Brazos County the sharing of such information is vital to combating all crime, and specifically gang related criminal activity.

In conclusion, the gang problem in Brazos County is at a manageable stage. What is needed is specialized gang training for the people working with today's youth and an increased commitment by the entire community to our young people. Such a commitment will preserve our safety and the safety of our next generation.



Bill Turner
Brazos County
District Attorney

If more people come in from other cities to sell drugs, Trey says the locals who are already selling are bound to start causing trouble for the violence-hardened newcomers.

"As the guys that are growing up out of this area are running into conflict with the guys from Houston and other larger cities, they're going to be sending in some people to take care of these guys and show them what really is hard."

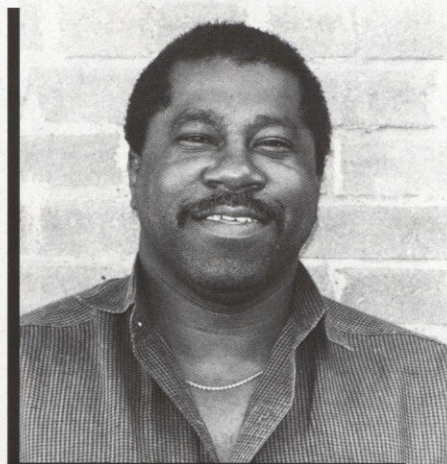
Several men are gathered around a table in a diner in northwest Bryan. They come from all walks of life. One is a minister, one a retired teacher, the others are self-employed. They are talking frankly with an outsider about the problems they are having with the gangs, or "posses" as they call them, in their neighborhoods. They don't often open up to outsiders. Too often they are misunderstood. But today they speak openly about a problem that has them fearing for the future. The sounds of gunfire are a common occurrence in their neighborhoods, and, in some areas, they say these posses have taken over.

The posses, says one man, group together to do business on the streets and, when the crowds get bigger, they move onto yards. Eventually, they even move into houses — other people's houses.

"One elderly lady was forced out of her house by the drug dealers," he says. "I stay

in my house on the weekend."

He also has a secret weapon to keep the posses out of his yard. When the cactuses didn't stop them, he started feeding the fire ants. "Those ants get the biggest and the smallest of them."



Sgt. Larry Johnson,
College Station Police

The others share similar stories. And all but one prefer not to be identified. People could get hurt. As the talk changes from the problem to what might be the solution, one man speaks up.

"The programs that have been identified as those that would help the most,"

says Steve Jones, "such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, and others, are all located outside of the areas where there is the most need.

"Many of these people who need help and who would seek help don't because of difficulties in getting to the places where these programs are held." Jones has been working to help community members get the assistance they need and to try to change the image of the northwest Bryan community. The posses are proving to be a formidable challenge to his efforts. As worries about retribution from gang members in the community increases, he worries fewer people will want to get involved.

Warning to the Jury

Experts urge that the answer lies in launching a unified, community-based attack to convey the message that gangs and the crime they commit are not going to be tolerated.

"All of the people that we're talking to who have been through this," says Sgt. Johnson of the College Station Police, "tell us the things we are experiencing are the things they went through." They have also shared some of the lessons they learned the hard way.

"One of the biggest mistakes they ⚡

RECOMMENDED GANG INTERDICTION METHODS

From The Texas Attorney General

Suppression

Primarily a police-oriented strategy, it is most effective in response to regular and hard-core members. Police actively pursue any law violations by gang members.

Tactics: Enforcement of school dress and conduct codes; monitoring, documenting and painting over graffiti; and high profile patrols in known gang areas.

Intervention

Intervention strategies are designed for less committed gang-involved youths and involve two key elements: breaking up the relationship to the gang and replacing it.

Tactics: Notifying parents; offering counseling and mentor programs in schools; offering recreational opportunities; and offering decision-making classes.

Prevention

Preventive efforts must address the educational needs of the children. Most of what children seek in gangs can be found in school and through school activities — provided that a child feels welcome, accepted and reasonably successful in school. Latchkey programs can be helpful for children of working parents. Parenting classes, too, can be helpful. All of the education and self-esteem building programs in the world will not help if a child goes home to an unstable environment.

Tactics: The community can get involved by organizing Neighborhood Watch groups to monitor and report suspected gang-related activities to police; businesses and property owners can paint over graffiti; employers can provide job opportunities for at-risk youth willing to work but just needing the chance; youth-oriented recreational groups can expand existing programs and provide leaders trained in gang interdiction; and parents can take charge of their children by providing structure, rules and limitations.

Get Involved

You Can Make A Difference.

"The gang problem is not just something the police are there to handle. When you get into gang situations, you're talking about a community-wide problem, and a lot more people need to get involved in it to really knock it down the way I think it can be knocked down. There's just a lot more that can be done in Bryan than is being done." — Mark Ricketson, Bryan Police

All of the experts agree that a community-wide approach involving police, the schools and citizens is the only way to prevent gang activity from escalating. Here are some of the youth-oriented programs in the community that accept volunteers and/or donations. Many of those that rely on federal and state monies have seen their budgets cut in recent years.

Bryan Independent School District

Extended School Day Program: An after-school care program that provides recreational and learning activities to students of Bryan schools. These programs are at all Bryan elementary schools and Sam Rayburn Middle School. The cost per child is \$75 per month, and the program is funded solely by the parents. Many of the parents of the most at-risk children cannot afford these programs. Donations are accepted for scholarships.

Parent Education Partnership Program:

This program is designed to help parents improve their parenting skills. It is funded through a combination of grant funds, local funds and the Junior League of Bryan/College Station. Donations of toys, cribs, children's books and monies to help pay for advertising costs, printing costs, consultants are welcomed.

Kemp Elementary and Milam schools have **Home School Educators** to serve needs of students. Kemp's program is funded by grant

funds. Milam's program is funded locally. These educators act as a liaison between the child's home and school.

There are a variety of mentor programs available in Bryan schools: **SOAR** (Striving for Opportunities, Academics and Rewards), co-sponsored by Texas A&M and the Bryan ISD, targets average students in the seventh and eighth grade who don't seem to be living up to their potential. It is designed to change the belief that the only kids who go on to college are straight-A students or athletes. Aggie mentors help students learn about scholarships available, and First City Bank has given savings bonds to the students.

Kemp and Fannin Elementary Schools have the **HOST** (Help One Student To Succeed) program. Volunteers are needed to read with one child for 30 minutes each week.

The **VIPS** (Volunteers in Public Schools) program is on all campuses. Volunteers go on campus and assist teachers and individual students.

If you are interested in working one on one with a child, contact a counselor at the individual schools, and they will be able to put you in touch with a child.

For more information on any of these programs or how you can help, call Suzanne Phelps at 361-5397.

College Station Independent School District

Kids Klub is a program offered on the College Station ISD elementary school campuses and at Oakwood Middle School. It is run through Community Education and the Parks & Recreation Department. Arts and crafts, as well as recreational and educational opportunities

are available to children needing supervision after school hours.

The **VIPS** program is available on all College Station ISD campuses for those wishing to volunteer.

For more information on programs offered through the College Station Independent School District, call 764-5402.

Boys and Girls Clubs of America

Last year, the Boys & Girls Club served 1,287 children throughout Brazos County. They have three facilities in the Bryan/College Station area — one on West William J. Bryan Parkway, one in public housing on Bryant street near Mockingbird Run Apartments and the Lincoln Center in College Station. They are also about to open a facility in Navasota. Boys and Girls Clubs try to develop personal and educational development, leadership and citizenship training. They serve children of all ages and have a special interest in working with kids in disadvantaged situations. They provide tutoring, athletic and social opportunities for kids. The cost per child is \$6 a year for membership. Many cannot afford the membership and often work to earn their card. A completely non-profit organization, the Boys and Girls Club receives much of its funding through the United Way. Individual donations are accepted. You may sponsor a child for membership as well as donate any unwanted recreational or educational equipment. They are also in need of folding tables, chairs, etc. Call Martha Cortes or Ron Rolett at 822-7516 for more information.

Brazos County Juvenile Services

Expanding Horizons: Volunteers are welcome to serve as mentors to children referred to the juvenile detention center. For more information, call 361-4195.

Possible Factors Leading to Adolescent Gang Involvement

- Low self-esteem
- Low grades
- Little extracurricular/school involvement
- Poor communication skills
- Poor decision-making skills
- No involvement in extracurricular programs
- Dysfunctional families
- Single parent families
- Philosophical/ethnic attractiveness of gangs
- Kids desperately seeking identity
- Poor attendance
- Significant other or sibling gang affiliation
- Deprived socioeconomic factors leading

Indicators of Gang Involvement

- Radical new hairstyle or dress
- A group of new friends who have the same hairstyles, clothing style or jewelry style (ie: same number of earrings, etc.)
- Not associating with long-time friends
- Overly secretive
- Change in places frequented with new friends
- Use of alcohol or narcotics
- Possession of firearms or other weapons
- Going out with unusually large groups
- A new fear of the police
- Phone threats to family from rival gangs
- Lower grades at school, discipline problems, and cutting classes
- Loss of interest in school, sports and other normal activities
- Graffiti on or around your residence
- Frequent injuries caused by fighting
- A false sense of bravery — brags that he and his friends are too tough to mess with

Preventing Gang Involvement

- Know your children's friends
- When your children are going out, know where they are going
- Talk to teachers and counselors at school
- Set rules and limits and enforce them
- Be aware of radical changes in attitude, behavior, friends, dress style and hair style
- Encourage hobbies and sports and other out-of-school interests

feel like they made," Johnson continues, "was not doing anything. They took the stance that kids will be kids: They are doing these types of things, they'll get tired of doing these things and then they'll go away. They didn't.

"I think history has proven that they are not going to go away. In places where there has not been a proactive approach to the situation, it has only gotten worse."

Back in Los Angeles, Sgt. McBride has a tough warning for those who haven't yet come to terms with the potential problem. "Don't sit and argue over names," he says. "It (arguing over semantics) stops proactive work on gangs."

To make any headway in preventing gang activity, a proactive frontal attack needs to take place on all fronts without pointing fingers or placing blame. Everyone, McBride suggests — the police, the schools, parents, and the community as a whole — must work together to prevent gangs from getting a foothold in our neighborhoods and getting out of control.

"Political turf wars between the press, city councils, school boards and law enforcement defeat any efforts to try to be proactive," McBride says.

"The schools have got to talk to the cops, the cops to the schools, and the politicians have got to back you up. And when you have a gang killing, the public needs to know that that's happening so they know they need to respond." At present, the policy among law enforcement officials in this area is not to release information tying specific events to gangs.

Generating statistics on gang-related crime is also complicated by the fact that neither police force has a computer code set up in their systems to flag specific incidents as being attributed to gangs. A gang-related assault is entered into their computers as simply an assault. Both Bryan and College Station police are working to add these codes into their computer systems.

"Where you have an emerging gang problem," says McBride, "you can attack it. But you can't play ostrich with gangs and bury your head in the sand."

"Gangs are like a cancer; with early detection, surgery and treatment up front, you can save your life. Or, you can decide to ignore the problem and live with the pain of the cancer for the rest of your life — and that might not be that long."

Final note: Monday, January 18, ☾

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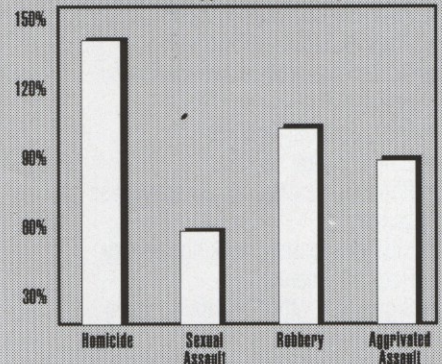
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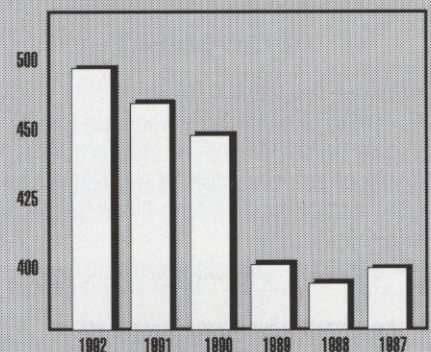
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VIOLENT CRIME BY JUVENILES RISES ACROSS STATE AND LOCALLY

Statewide (1987-1991)



Locally (1987-1992)



Total Number of Felony and Misdemeanor Referrals to
Brazos County Juvenile Detention Center

1993 — the day this article was turned in for publication — a gunman in a car passed a house in Bryan and sprayed four to five shots from a handgun at a group of teenagers who were gathered on the porch. A 15-year-old boy was hit by one of the shots in the back. It was 2:41 a.m. Holding to the policy of not tying specific incidents to gang activity, the police will not confirm whether or not this shooting was gang-related. Regardless, several questions come to mind. What was a group of teenagers, who ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old, doing out on a porch, on a school night, at 3 a.m.? Was this shooting gang-related? If so, what is next? What can be done to stop this activity? You are the jury. What will you decide?

Editor's Note: Watch for Jennifer Gordy's series on Gangs in the Brazos Valley February 9, 10 and 11 on KBTX News Star 3.

