

Gang Crimes Have Fallen In Fairfax

Officials Praise Prevention Efforts

By Amy Gardner Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, September 22, 2007; Page B01

Gang-related crime dropped by nearly one-third last year in Fairfax County and has fallen even more this year, according to a report to be presented to the county Board of Supervisors on Monday.

The report provides evidence, county officials say, that a two-year-old effort to prevent youths from joining gangs is working. It also challenges increasingly vocal concerns about the connection between the region's illegal immigrants and violent crime, they say. "It vindicates our approach in Fairfax, which is to focus on results and illegal behavior rather than posturing on federal responsibilities" such as checking immigration status, said Gerald E. Connolly (D), chairman of the county board. "What we're showing is results."

According to the report, gang-related crime dropped 32 percent from 2005 to 2006. Incidents dropped in nearly every category, including murder, rape, robbery, abduction, graffiti, theft and drug crimes. The only category in which crime did not drop was burglary, according to the report.

Produced by the county's Council on Gang Prevention, the report says that although all crime decreased over the same period, the decrease in gang-related crime was greater. It also says gang-related crime has dropped further this year, but it provides no details. Two slayings this year appear to be gang-related. Last year, there were none.

The statistics are collected by the Fairfax police department, which operates a unit that tracks gang-related crimes. Police estimate a gang population of 2,000 to 3,000 mostly age 12 to 24, but the number is fluid, and the exact number of gangs is unknown. The Latino street gang Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, is the dominant gang in the D.C. area, but police think gang activity in Fairfax involves youths of all ethnic backgrounds. The timing of the report's release could help Connolly's political career. The chairman is seeking his second four-year term in November and is cited regularly as a possible contender to replace U.S. Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), who might run for the U.S. Senate next year.

But the data have also come as the debate over illegal immigration -- including accusations of associated higher crime -- has grown louder in Northern Virginia. Neighboring Loudoun and Prince William counties have launched crackdowns on illegal immigrants, promising to start deportation proceedings against those who commit crimes. Fairfax's elected leaders have resisted calls to take similar action, in part, they say, because they view such actions as "demagogic," Connolly said. The new gang statistics prove that Fairfax's approach is better, he said.

Not everyone agrees. Phil Jones, coordinator of the new anti-illegal immigration group Help Save Fairfax, questioned the numbers and called for the county police to provide a full accounting of how crimes are determined to be gang-related.

"The whole idea that the crimes that are gang-related have gone down would require them to keep some kind of statistics on the gangs themselves," Jones said. "There's no data to support it."

Officer Courtney Thibault, a Fairfax police spokeswoman, said yesterday that no one was available to explain how the statistics are collected or to elaborate on the report's finding that gang-related crimes have dropped even further this year.

Few dispute that Fairfax's gang problem is minor, but those who helped launch the Coordinating Council on Gang Prevention two years ago say addressing gangs before they become epidemic is the best method of prevention.

"I think we did act early," said Supervisor T. Dana Kauffman (D-Lee). "I can remember there was a time in Fairfax County when the police refused to admit we had gangs. So I think this is a positive turnaround."

The county hired a full-time coordinator, Robert A. Bermingham Jr., and brought together almost every county agency, including the school system, to reach out to youths before they're tempted to join gangs. New programs include after-school activities in every middle school, a summer camp for children at risk of joining gangs and a 24-hour phone line for youths, parents, police officers and service providers.

There is strong evidence that a community-based approach to gang prevention -- reaching out to the most vulnerable children -- is more effective than heavier policing. A report issued in July by the District-based Justice Policy Institute noted that New York has lower gang activity than Los Angeles (520 gang-related crimes two years ago compared with 11,402) because New York emphasizes job training, mentoring and recreational programs over heavier police enforcement.

"We want these kids to understand what services are available to them in the communities," said Bermingham, who produced the Fairfax report. "If they want to go play basketball at 6 o'clock at night, we are able to tell them where they can go."