

To save Salinas

The city has been plagued by gang-related killings, a trend linked to lack of education. Longer library hours and youth programs just might be the answer.

Opinion

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Salinas, the small city in the heart of the salad bowl of the world, ended the decade with two distinctions: a record number of homicides, and the imminent closure of the last bookstore in John Steinbeck's hometown.

Signs at the B. Dalton bookstore read "50% off -- Non-returnable" as faithful customers stopped by to purchase one last book and pay respects, muttering indignantly about the idea that Salinans don't read. The sales clerk expressed relief that he had only four more days to watch over the near-empty shelves: "It's like dying a slow death."

In the streets of Salinas, death has been anything but slow in recent months. Gang wars have escalated as the Mexican Mafia, based in Southern California, has encroached on the home turf of Nuestra Familia, long headquartered in Salinas. Gang-related killings jumped from seven in 2007 to 29 last year. At story hour in the public library, 4-year-olds draw pictures of red shirts fighting blue shirts. Even children understand that to wear the wrong color in the wrong place can be lethal.

All of the homicide victims in Salinas last year were Latino males, most of them still in their teens. A 15-year-old died just outside the back gate to Alisal High School; a 14-year-old was shot to death near Hartnell College.

"Behind the words 'gang violence' are kids killing kids -- a horrible, unacceptable situation," the new police chief wrote in his 90-day report to the City Council. That was in July; there had been 14 killings. Ninety days and nine homicides later, Chief Louis Fetherolf's second report included an update on the city's most unusual gambit -- an alliance with military experts in counterinsurgency.

City leaders had tried task forces, gang summits, cease-fires and pray-ins. Then Mayor Dennis Donohue turned for help to the Naval Postgraduate School in nearby Monterey. Combat veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan volunteered to use their expertise in fighting insurgents to help devise strategies for the Salinas police. The military brought computer programs and spreadsheets, along with pointers on how the Police Department could begin to shed its image as an occupying force.

The Monterey team took the military's model of "social network analysis" and adapted the counter-insurgency plan for Salinas' needs. The volunteers trained Salinas' police in basic military techniques -- how to map out insurgents' turf, identify leaders, plot relationships, deploy limited resources and, above all, win the allegiance of the people.

It's too soon to know whether the approach is having an effect, but on a website called "[Small Wars](#)," military veterans debate the ideas among themselves. Do checkpoints work? Is the solution more cops, or better schools? A West Point graduate wrote about the Salinas experiment: "One firm conclusion that I've come to is that gangs are not a police problem just as insurgencies aren't a military problem. They are societal problems that must be addressed holistically."

The Monterey researchers analyzed 20 years of Salinas crime statistics and concluded that violence correlated most closely with lack of education. Their finding confirmed what people have long known in the Salinas Valley, where dropout rates are high and literacy rates are low: A lack of options for poor Mexican children has driven cycles of gang violence for decades.

So while the town fathers turn to the military, the town mothers have tried a different approach. Colleen Bailey, who recently returned to her hometown to run the National Steinbeck Center, has started a Saturday morning Kids Club; children of farmworkers, janitors, teachers and musicians create in different modes each week -- composing Thanksgiving stories, designing paper flowers for Day of the Dead or learning to play African drums. Bailey is convinced that investing in youth is the only long-term solution.

On weekends, Bailey takes her 3-year-old to the library she herself went to as a child. Today it is a very different place. Four years ago, the city's libraries nearly closed for lack of funds. The specter of shuttered libraries in Steinbeck country spurred fundraising, national publicity and, ultimately, a sales tax increase. Then veteran library administrator Elizabeth Martinez arrived to rebuild Salinas' bedraggled system.

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She opened the libraries seven days a week, increasing the hours from 15 a week to 62. She added a digital arts lab, computer center and teen lounge -- outfitted with a 52-inch Sony HDTV, Wii and Xbox. Martinez bypassed bureaucracy and issued library cards to all 32,000 schoolchildren; about 80% now use them regularly. When children are hungry after school, library staff buy them food. When homeless people come in, they are welcomed. And when the city threw a birthday party for the library's centennial in September, 15,000 people showed up -- more than 10% of the population.

With the once-crippled libraries now embraced as community centers, Martinez is thinking more audaciously about their potential to help mend the city. Why not a 10-year goal to teach everyone in Salinas to read?

"Education is the No. 1 issue with violence and gangs," she said. "If you're not educated, what are the dreams in your life going to be like?"

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