

Salinas murder rate: Low spending on gang solutions means always starting over



Joel Hernandez, an organizer with the Center for Community Advocacy and former resident of Acosta Plaza, shows photos from before and after new LED street lights were installed throughout the violence-plagued neighborhood in Salinas in October. One of the new street lights is behind Hernandez. David Royal — Monterey Herald

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SALINAS >> When gang members threw an explosive device through the window of a Salinas house, one quick-thinking resident tossed the object back outside. He sustained hand injuries, but everyone was safe.

The residents were both frightened

Fighting gang crime

Spending per resident:

Oakland, \$21

Stockton, \$5.60

Salinas, \$2.50

and angered. Thoughts of retaliation weren't far from their minds.

"It almost killed a little baby," recalls Brian Contreras, director of 2nd Chance Youth and Family Services. "We could tell immediately it was going to be full-blown warfare."

But a group of 2nd Chance outreach workers stayed with that family day after day for nearly a week.

"We have to convince people that it doesn't just affect them (if they retaliate)," Contreras says. The outreach workers remind older, gang-involved siblings about their parents or little brothers and sisters.

"They tell them that while everybody was lucky this time," Contreras says, "they might not be next time."

The revenge-bound family members calmed down, and what might have been a deadly back-and-forth cycle of violence ended right there.

For two years, the outreach workers — known also as "violence interrupters" — were a service provided by 2nd Chance aimed at lessening the trauma suffered by families of shooting victims, while also lowering the likelihood of retaliatory violence. The workers were available around the clock.

Once the program geared up in 2013, the city saw the interrupters' results were impressive.

"You saw less and less youngsters getting involved (in violence)," Contreras says. "The last year we did the program, there was a 98 percent reduction in retaliatory shootings."

Today, the interrupters are gone. The grant that paid their salaries ended this year, and the city has chosen not to invest its own money in the program.

That doesn't surprise Contreras. Salinas invests far less per resident for violence prevention and intervention than other California cities struggling with serious gang problems.

INVESTING IN SAFETY

Gang shootings are the kind of violence Salinas has known and struggled

Source: 2015-16 city budget reports for Oakland, Stockton and Salinas. Spending is for city-run gang violence offices and departments.

with for decades. Before this year, 2009 had the highest number of homicides — 29, every one of which was labeled gang related. The implications of that statistic were startling: It meant that if Salinas could rid itself of gang violence, it would be a very, very safe city.

But 2015 has been a year of anomalies. The circumstances behind many of the city's record-breaking 40 murders have veered from previous years in which nearly all homicides were gang related. This year a third or more of the murders were the "ordinary" kind experienced by other agricultural towns — crimes of passion, arguments, personal betrayals that didn't involve gangs.

Advertisement Despite this shift, it's clear that gangs and the havoc they wreak are still a serious problem. Of the year's 40 murders, 10 were considered gang related, and police suspect another 14 might "possibly" fit that category. (Police are still trying to determine a motive for the year's most recent homicide on Christmas Day.)

It's a lot of bloodshed. But thanks to decades of studies and the experience of cities around the country, a lot is now known about gang shootings. Researchers believe this kind of violence is, to a greater extent than once thought, preventable.

The Ceasefire violence reduction strategy, for example, has been shown to lower gang shooting rates around the country, including a dramatic drop in Salinas just five years ago. Gang-related murders and shootings fell by 40 percent in 2010, the first year Ceasefire was put in place.

The city officially stopped implementing Ceasefire this past July, along with a slew of other programs and services.

Meanwhile, strategies such as Ceasefire and violence interrupters are woven into the fabric of Stockton and Oakland, which have both seen significant turnarounds in youth and gang homicides.

One of the differences is those cities are investing much more to address ongoing violence. Oakland, with a population of 406,000 and in past years holding one of the nation's worst violent crime rates, now has a dedicated source of funds from a tax measure that exclusively pays for violence prevention and intervention. In that city, murders decreased by 36 percent in two years after implementing Ceasefire in 2012.

Stockton, a city of 298,000 that's emerging from bankruptcy, has made Ceasefire a permanent part of its city manager's office and quickly cut its homicide rate in half. Stockton now spends \$1.6 million — around 0.84

percent of a nearly \$200 million general fund — on its Office of Violence Prevention.

Oakland is investing even more. After voters passed the Measure Z parcel tax, the city now spends \$8.7 million on community-based Ceasefire efforts — more than 1.5 percent of the city's general fund, including Measure Z revenue.

Salinas trails far behind, with only 0.46 percent of its general fund, including Measure V and Measure G revenue, spent on its Community Safety Division.

When viewed as per-resident spending, the differences are even more drastic. Oakland spends \$21 per resident on community anti-violence programs, while Stockton invests nearly \$6 for each city resident.

Salinas, however, spends around \$2.50 per resident on its community safety programs.

“Those other cities are on the right track,” Contreras says.

Like those cities, most of Salinas' community safety funds come from local tax measures.

But the majority of that extra income doesn't go to violence intervention. Of Measure G's \$7 million in revenue, \$96,000 is allotted for the Community Safety Division. Measure V, an older sales tax initiative, contributes \$239,000 from its \$11 million.

This year's budget for the Community Safety Division is \$410,500, down more than \$126,000 from the year before.

Salinas finance director Matt Pressey says a big chunk — \$173,000 — of the 2013-14 total came from “pass through” grants the division distributed to a number of partners.

Those annual federal and state grants of more than \$100,000 ended last year.

Contreras says Salinas has for years relied on outside agencies to fund its most successful gang strategies. Typically, the grants come in two- or three-year cycles, he says. And then the money stops.

“There have been a lot of successful initiatives here in Salinas,” he says. “If any one of these initiatives continued to be funded, we wouldn't be seeing these (homicide) numbers.”

His violence interrupters were paid for by a Project Safe Neighborhoods

grant from the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Francisco.

"We're looking at it now and trying to build it back up," Contreras says, adding that it can take a year or more to train workers and rebuild community trust. "Look what happened to the year without it."

CITY PRIORITIES

Despite the example of once-bankrupt Stockton, Salinas City Councilwoman Jyl Lutes insists Salinas is spending less than other cities because "we're still coming out of a very severe economic recession. A city like Salinas is always a lot harder hit than other cities. Sales tax and property taxes are pretty low in Salinas."

Before Measure G, she says, the city spent \$515 on services per resident via its general fund, compared to "over \$1,000 in Monterey. That's really frustrating."

Still, she acknowledges the city could do more about violence. "We do need to beef up those funds."

Lutes says that as Measure G funds roll in, residents can expect more dollars going to the Community Safety Division, perhaps as early as the mid-year budget revision in February. She said she couldn't say yet how much of an increase that might be.

The same month, she said, Mayor Joe Gunter is going to Washington to seek matching grants for anti-violence efforts. "We'll be looking under every rock," Lutes says. "Now's the time to do it. We can start matching that (Measure G) money."

Councilman Tony Barrera says he would "absolutely" support increased funding for the Community Safety Division, but says the council majority hasn't made gang violence a priority.

"Bringing in more money does not mean we're going to put it into more prevention," he says. "Some of this money is going to go to (city staff) raises. We tell people there's \$20 million, and we're going to use this for good things in the community. But are we? Every department competes for dollars so instead of working together, they really don't."

Gunter notes that homicide numbers aren't the only way to measure anti-violence efforts.

"(There's) a lot of gang violence other than the high homicide rate," he says. "The effects of our youth violence reduction program have been working."

Like Lutes, Gunter also cites the economy as a factor in the city's spending.

Gang intervention "has been a priority until we went through the economic financial downturn," he says. "And now we're putting more into that program and rebuilding from a very tough time."

Regarding the higher anti-violence investments in Stockton and Oakland, he says, "They may have good results, but they still have a high murder rate."

THE COST OF WAITING

Contreras says the city knows what to do — invest its own money in the programs that have worked.

"We know the powers that be believe in us, but the powers that be need to invest in it and quit relying on grants," he says.

Ignoring the problem comes with perils — and not just sky-high murder and shooting rates. More than 10 years ago, victims' rights advocate Cheryl Ward-Kaiser estimated the cost to taxpayers of one Salinas homicide to be over \$1 million.

There's also the immeasurable toll the trauma of constant violence takes on young people — and even an entire community. While no one has completed a study of trauma levels in Salinas, researchers in Chicago, Atlanta and Los Angeles have found levels of post-traumatic stress disorder among residents of violent neighborhoods at 33 percent and higher. Cook County Hospital in Chicago saw a 42 percent rate of PTSD.

Government agencies say the national rate is around 7 or 8 percent.

When a community is traumatized this way, it can become immobilized, the researchers say, leading to what one frustrated Ceasefire organizer called Salinas' sense of "learned helplessness."

Salinas Police Chief Kelly McMillin speaks often of "staying the course" through the ups and downs of shooting and homicide rates. It means, he says, sticking to a five-year plan developed by the Community Alliance for Safety and Peace.

"Staying the course means following the CASP strategy — prevention, intervention, enforcement and re-entry," he says.

But that strategy requires a financial investment the city has until now been unwilling or unable to make.

“You don’t have to fund the programs if you don’t want to,” Contreras adds. “But this is what happens.”

Back in 2010, Jeremy Travis, president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, warned a roomful of representatives from Salinas and other Ceasefire cities about not following through on their commitment.

“The knowledge that (lowering gang violence) is possible and not see it happen is a heavy burden,” he said.

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