

REGION

Gang crimes getting more sophisticated Break-ins aim at ATMs, high-tech

By **Katheleen Conti, Globe Staff, 1/18/2004**

Local gang task forces are hoping that the patterns they have seen since the start of the new year will not define the rest of the year.

While the level of gang activity in areas such as Lawrence, Lowell, and Methuen is not as high as it was early in the last decade, local officials say that, like many trends, what was old is new again. The organization of and hierarchy within gangs has become significantly more sophisticated, like the system of the early 1990s, said Michael Pappalardo, a Methuen police sergeant and coordinator of the department's Gang Unit.

"I believe the new hierarchies far exceed that of the early '90s," Pappalardo said. "The gangs are very disciplined and structured . . ."

The new structure and discipline are most evident in the increasing number of commercial breaks-in the Merrimack Valley area, where gang members are focusing their efforts on stealing high-tech equipment and breaking into automatic teller machines, Pappalardo said.

"We've seen an increase in commercial robberies, electric and high-tech, which require more skill. We've been investigating numerous ATM-type robberies," Pappalardo said. That type of activity "requires a more structured type of effort."

That effort, Pappalardo added, requires teamwork: one person to break in, another to take care of any alarm system in place, another for surveillance, and spotters. Bottom line, Pappalardo said, "They're definitely getting smarter."

In its first meeting of the year on Jan. 9, the Essex County Gang Taskforce, which includes members from 30 agencies, including police from Lawrence, Methuen, and the New Hampshire Seacoast area, discussed other trends they have been noticing. On the task force's radar screen are an increase in firearms and semiautomatic pistols; the recruitment of school-age children; mergers, or member "buy-outs" between once-rival gangs; and an increase in the number of wannabe gangs formed by young teenagers, said task force member Alexander R. Cain, assistant district attorney for Essex County.

Lisa Taylor-Austin, a forensic gang specialist at Taylor-Austin Consulting in Bridgeport, Conn., sees a similar trend. "In the East Coast, . . . there are more kids saying, 'Hey, let's start our own gang.' Sometimes they'll use a name of a supergang like Crips and Bloods, but they're not affiliated with the gang, they just use the name for respect purposes," Taylor-Austin said.

Cain has been following trends as part of the Essex County Gang Taskforce, in conjunction with the federal Project Safe Neighborhoods program. Cain said the commercial break-ins trend was started by members of the Latin Gangsta' Deciples, whose leadership in the Lawrence area was crippled just five years ago after a major bust by federal, state, and local authorities.

"Most of them are in state or federal prison, but there's a small group right now that are out," Cain said. "They're savvy. They would disable alarms first and target warehouses."

An increase in organized commercial-property hits points to a changing mentality among local gangs, said Taylor-Austin. Pilfering computers, cellphones, and other high-tech equipment, she said, is done for two reasons: to sell the products for a good price or for the gang to use them.

"Too often, we tend to think of criminal street gangs as being young street thugs. Gangs are becoming more sophisticated; they're getting into operating more in line with what most people imagine as the Italian Mafia," Taylor-Austin said. "They're infiltrating businesses and the military and they're stealing electronic equipment because they need to use it, whether it be for their own intelligence, or equipment they can use to eavesdrop on other people -- the police or rival gangs. . . . The stereotype of the young kid being a street thug is not an accurate one."

Pappalardo likened new activity by gangs to a business trying to expand. Commercial break-ins produce easier money than dealing drugs -- a gangster's bread and butter, -- he said, not to mention lighter prison sentences.

"In any criminal enterprise there is going to be the need to make money. The crimes they're committing are a lucrative form of making money as opposed to peddling drugs on the street corner. The focus on drug enforcement . . . has made it more difficult for them to sell and make more money, but short-term [commercial breaks] are more lucrative. They can make more money more quickly."

As gangs change, so must local gang task-force units, Cain said, adding that with expected grant money, he hopes to begin a proactive program to keep youths away from gangs and to provide gang members in prison with job training. This will be called Operation Seize Fire.

"We'll be working with the Middleton House of Corrections and we're going to work with moderate offenders. . . . We'll help them with job training and substance abuse," Cain said, adding that part of the potential \$150,000 federal grant will also be used on Operation Home Front, in which authorities will target the younger family members of current gang members to keep them from joining the criminal lifestyle. "We're going to work with juvenile probation. These are preventative measures to prevent future violence."

Pappalardo said area residents should not be concerned that the current increase in gang activity will reach the seriously violent levels of the early 1990s.

"I think after the early '90s, we learned a lot, from the law enforcement perspective. [Gangs] have the ability to get organized and the ability to get very, very violent. What we learned from that is that we have to stay on top of the issue," Pappalardo said. "Every city and town that I can think of now probably has somebody who does some type of gang investigation."

But the problem cannot be fully addressed if the police don't seek help from current or former gang members, said Taylor-Austin.

"We need to involve gang members themselves in the resolution of this problem," Taylor-Austin said. "There's a lot of suppression by police, which is their job, but in order for the problem to be addressed, you need to have preventive and intervention programs and resources allocated to that, in addition to suppression."

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