



## Cops attack homegrown gang in Calif heartland

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FRESNO, Calif. -- This is Bulldog Country, or so the bumper stickers say.

But whether that identifies the home of scrappy Fresno State athletics or the deadly turf of a criminal enterprise labeled the most entrenched gang in America depends on the success of a police surge now entering its fourth year. Its goal: To take away the Bulldog gang's homefield advantage in California's agricultural heartland, to break its embrace of a new generation.

The pending trial of two members of the violent gang illustrates its insidious recruiting process: A 7-year-old boy was forcibly tattooed with the gang's emblem, a Bulldog paw, authorities say.

"I felt so... angry," said Det. Jesse Ruelas, describing the case in which Enrique Gonzalez is said to have held down his son while fellow gang member Travis Gorman allegedly applied the tattoo. "Why would you permanently disfigure your child?"

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After a pause, the detective added, "Then I felt sad, like the police and the system had let him down and allowed him to be hurt."

These days, police and the system are forcefully asserting themselves, but it's going to take time to determine the future of Bulldog Country.

Here amid the alfalfa fields and almond orchards, where Fresno State University has provided many families their first access to a higher education, the gang's co-opting of the Bulldog brand has had strange and violent effects.

Students in some local schools are banned from coming to class in sportswear showing off the college's snarling red mascot. A young woman jogging in a Bulldog T-shirt 100 miles from Fresno narrowly escaped a hail of bullets fired by a rival gang. A man was shot to death last summer after innocently greeting a gang member with this perceived insult: "What's up, dog?"

Ruelas, the detective, recalled back in high school two decades ago making the connection between the mascot and the gang when he saw some female classmates from a notorious gang neighborhood wearing Fresno State jerseys. "I thought to myself, 'What's up? I know those girls aren't going to college.'"

In an impoverished region with high dropout rates and few job options outside of agriculture, gang affiliation becomes an easy avenue for self-esteem among the undereducated. And while other U.S. cities fight Crips and Bloods, Nortenos and Surenos, Fresno's homegrown gang has developed a vicious reputation that has kept other gangs at bay.

The Bulldogs are described by authorities as the nation's largest independent street gang. Police estimate there are about 12,000 members in this city of 500,000.

For most of their 20-year existence, the Bulldogs escaped serious law enforcement scrutiny, even as they taunted cops with barks and howls. Police looked upon them mainly as wayward youth. But the gang that grew out of fights at San Quentin prison over respect eventually showed itself to be a deadly criminal enterprise. The 2006 shooting of a cop became a tipping point.

Now police are trying to bulldoze the Bulldogs, before the next generation takes over.

The Fresno police are engaged in year four of tactical warfare against the gang, sweeping through neighborhoods and making more than 12,000 arrests, including many juveniles, and even going after petty offenses such as loitering by seeking injunctions.

It's called "Operation Bulldog."

In other cities, such police pressure might have killed the beast. But with the loosely organized Bulldogs, many are independent operators who will turn on one another over territory.

"When you have structure," Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer says, "you can cut the head off the snake and it dies. You can't do that with the Bulldogs."

Although gang activity declined across America between 2001 and 2006, gang membership in Fresno County grew by 33 percent, studies show.  
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"We found that 10 percent of the people in our city were committing 50 percent of the crime," Dyer said. "If you're talking about robbery, that increases to 80 percent."

In July 2006, a motorcycle officer was critically wounded during a traffic stop by a gun-toting Bulldog, Joaquin Maltos Figueroa, 25, who was shot to death days later by police.

In Maltos Figueroa's car, officers found a magazine of bullets and a scanner tuned to police frequencies. They realized gang members were more sophisticated than they previously had believed.

That same summer, 16-year-old Courtney Rice, a prostitute whom gang members feared was snitching, was raped, tortured and murdered by seven Bulldogs and associates.

In November 2006, Chief Dyer went on TV announcing a 10-person "Operation Bulldog" tactical unit to make gang members' lives miserable. This January, he added 100 more officers to focus on intelligence gathering on the 10 percent who are most active and promised to seek longer, federal sentences when possible.

"We know the war on gangs can never be won," the chief said, "but we also know it can be lost."

Today, easily half of those incarcerated in the county jail on any given day are Bulldogs.

"The chief's directive is to arrest as many Bulldogs as we can," said Sgt. Alex Robles. "He doesn't want us to let up the pressure."

Four days a week for 10-hour shifts, Robles and his team swarm Bulldog territory, the scruffy neighborhoods on the city's east side. Armed with lists of names supplied by parole agents, they make unannounced visits.

Parolees have no right to privacy, and the officers take advantage, searching homes for drugs and alcohol - even inspecting cell phones for gang photos or insignias.

If life is made unpleasant, police figure they will either leave gang life or move away.

"I don't know if we'll ever get rid of them" says Robles. "I know the goal is to get rid of them."

In the first three years of Operation Bulldog records show that violent crime has decreased in Fresno by 14.3 percent, ahead of the 9 percent state average, and police attribute the statistic to pressure on gangs. Rape is down 43.5 percent, and there were 26.3 percent fewer vehicles stolen.

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After recording 314 shootings in 2006; in 2008 there were 226 and 231 in 2009.

"Still, it is too many, but it's a far cry from 314," Dyer says. "At least we don't have them standing on the corners barking anymore. Our goal is to take away their neighborhoods."

The figures do not capture the uptick in shootings since July 2009, when the History Channel's Gangland series featured the Bulldogs and egos swelled, prompting a summer police sweep that netted 200 arrests and dozens of confiscated weapons.

On one sweep officers arrested Naomi Copple, 27, on parole from Chowchilla State Prison for Women, because her parole agent said she tested dirty for drugs. As they searched her house, she sat on the curb, hands cuffed behind her back. With a shaved head, she could not hide the two dog paw tattoos over her right eyebrow, or the 5150 - police code for crazy person - inked on the back of her neck.

About the tats on her forehead: "It's just some stupid s--- I did a long time ago. I was a kid."

Police see it differently. "It's like a billboard on their face saying 'Hey, stop me,'" Robles said.

On Thanksgiving Eve, a year-long police investigation netted Christopher Chavez, 26, the suspect in the 1999 murder of a transvestite, his two brothers and a 16-year-old. Awaiting trial, Chavez is accused of being the shot-caller of a small Bulldog "cell." He wore a bulletproof vest and carried automatic weapons, police said.

At the arrest scene, police reported finding 50 marijuana plants in a toddler's bedroom.

"You always feel bad for the kids," said Detective Tony Gates. "We always say they have no chance."

Investigators eavesdropping on conversations learned that Chavez, who joined the Bulldogs as a young teen, sold methamphetamine to his own mother, a street dealer, and used juveniles to move drugs and guns. The electronic surveillance reaffirmed the importance of tattoos.

"One of the juveniles had a gang tattoo on his body, and it subjected him to being involved in more crime," said Gates. "Chris Chavez told him, 'You have to back that up.' As investigators, we knew it, but it was surprising to hear it."

Children in Bulldog neighborhoods live amid prostitutes and parolees, surrounded by crime and violence, unemployment and poverty. The gang offers security, a sense of identity and, for many, a livelihood. In the worst Bulldog neighborhoods, drug dealers wear the nicest clothes and drive the newest cars.

"The middle class and upper class think about and do things to plan for the future," says C. Ronald Huff, a University of California-Irvine criminologist who studies gangs. "People who don't have those things are more fatalistic because they don't believe they have a future. Parents don't imagine anything will be different for their children."

The police gang unit has confiscated photographs of infants posed in Fresno State Bulldog onesies, cuddling semiautomatic handguns instead of bottles.

A survey of Fresno County school officials in 2007 found gang affiliations begin as early as kindergarten. And a school survey this fall showed the Bulldog gang with a steady source of new recruits: Fresno County 8th graders were almost twice as likely to join gangs if their fathers were involved.

"We're seeing third generation Bulldogs now, and it's not stopping," said Robles. "It's sad that these parents don't want something better for their children."

Whether Enrique Gonzalez is the kind of parent Robles describes will be decided in court; a hearing is set for Feb. 11. The Fresno County district attorney has charged Gonzalez and his friend, Travis Gorman, with mayhem - plus gang enhancements - for tattooing Gonzalez' 7-year-old son's hip with a dog's paw. If convicted, they could serve two decades or more behind bars.

Police say the boy was an unwilling participant, held down and marked against his will. Gonzalez' estranged wife discovered the tattoo and took her son to police.

Defense attorney Douglas Foster said the tattooing was only a case of poor judgment, not a crime. He denied it was forced, saying the boy made that claim only because he was intimidated by police and upset by his angry mother.

According to the lawyer, friends who were there said the child begged for a tattoo. They quoted him as saying, "Daddy, I want to be like you."

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