

# Gang violence a 'significant concern,' Desert Hot Springs police chief says

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Written by

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DESERT HOT SPRINGS — Three years after a multimillion-dollar, military-style operation to crack down on gangs, gang violence remains a “significant concern” in Desert Hot Springs, the police chief says.

The city of 25,000 is home to more than 200 gang members, with an additional 60 known gang members living in the unincorporated Dos Palmas neighborhood nearby.

Six of the eight homicides in the last two years have been tied to gangs. The youngest suspect in the killings is 13.

Overall, statistics show that the crime rate has fallen since nearly 700 federal, state and local officers swept into the city in March 2009.

They arrested more than 120 people during simultaneous raids in what was called Operation Falling Sun.

But in a sobering written assessment to be presented to the City Council tonight, Chief Patrick Williams says that the raid wasn't enough to discourage the formation of new gangs and the recruitment of new members.

He said the city doesn't have the money or the manpower to help and educate at-risk youth and gang members.

Williams plans to ask for two City Council members to join a new youth violence and gang intervention ad-hoc committee.

They would join three public safety commissioners, who will meet monthly for the next year to create intervention and prevention outreach programs.

Williams hopes they can join with nonprofit groups, ministerial groups and county agencies.

“The ad-hoc committee provides a place to get the conversation started and a structure to shape and promote initiatives that may be a result of these efforts,” Williams said.

Williams said he wants to build on youth initiatives that have developed in the past few years, including a youth council created by Councilman Scott Matas and the Community Health and Wellness Center that is under construction and that will house the Boys & Girls Club.

Public Safety Commission chairman Russ Martin appointed commissioners Kelley Brady, Lee Eastman and Carolina Vasquez to sit on the ad-hoc committee.

Martin, a former police sergeant, said the ad-hoc committee wasn't prompted by any particular incident.

He doesn't think Desert Hot Springs has a worse gang problem than anywhere else.

“But we've had this continuing effort to approach the issue before kids get involved in gangs,” Martin said.

Last June, First Community Baptist was the target of a gang whose members tagged the church building with gang graffiti, then fired shots at teenagers who are members of a rival gang as they headed into the church to attend an art program.

The Rev. Tahlib McMicheaux hosted a town hall forum and called on the community to create a task force comprised of residents, elected leaders and police officials.

McMicheaux said Monday it was a good thing the city was finally creating such a committee, because “the city sure needs it.”

“I pray that they make the right choices as far as the people they're going to put on this committee, that they're in touch with what's going on on the streets today as well as yesterday,” McMicheaux said. “That will certainly make a big difference.”

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**It should be a concern for the parents first!!! because it is just a cycle the ones in gangs or that are in jail or have died already will be replaced with the younger kids in a few yrs or less they see their friends and family in the gangs and into trouble and they end up doing the same thing.**

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**Why does this city not have gang prevention? Teach these kids where gangs can end you up, dead or in jail. Parents need to step up to the plate too.**