

MEXICAN GANGS ON WARPATH Prey on immigrants as nabes feel threat

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Byline: This story was reported by: NANCIE L. KATZ, JOSE MARTINEZ, MICHELE McPHEE, LUIS PEREZ, BOB KAPPSTATTER, NICOLE BODE It was written by: ROBERT INGRASSIA

Body

Mexican gangs are staking claim to turf in New York, menacing fellow **immigrants** as they rack up a deadly record of crime and violence.

The **gangs** thrive on shoplifting and selling fake green cards, but they also are known to extort shop owners, deal drugs and protect prostitution rings, police said.

Their favorite exploit is barging into Baptisms, weddings and other **Mexican** family gatherings, where they threaten guests and steal alcohol.

One such raid early Sunday in the Bronx touched off gunfire that left a 10-year-old girl dead.

Police say these **Mexican gangs** are most active in Corona and Elmhurst in Queens, Parkchester in the Bronx and Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

"The **gangs** are involved in assault, robbery, weapons possession and drug-related offenses," said Pat Clark, a spokesman for the Queens district attorney's office, which prosecutes about 60 **Mexican gang** cases a year.

Gang members mark their territory on walls and signs across the city. In **gang**-infested Linden Park in Corona, the logo for the Crazy Homies has been carved in a tree trunk.

The **gangs** tend to **prey** on the city's expanding **Mexican** population, which tripled to nearly 200,000 people during the past decade. They target illegal **immigrants** because many of them are afraid to call police, authorities said.

Much of the **gang** behavior is bravado. **Gangs** with names such as Sombra Negra, Black Shadow in English, and The **Mexican** Boys attack one another in fights over territory and superiority, authorities said. 30 crews **Mexican gangs** started springing up in the city more than a decade ago. Law enforcement agencies didn't notice a proliferation until the mid-1990s, when they identified 11 **Mexican gangs** with nearly 600 members. NYPD **gang** experts estimate there are now as many as 30 **Mexican gangs** active in the city.

Police have found that many of the **gang** members, like most **Mexican immigrants** in the city, come from rural areas in the state of Puebla.

Many of the young men come to New York on their own to work construction, landscaping and restaurant jobs, said Brother Joel Magallan, director of the Tepeyac Association, a social service organization for **Mexican immigrants**.

"They are here without the guidance of parents," he said. "Most of the kids are crossing the border to work, and they find a big city with a lot of temptations."

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Without a well-established network of support, the youths turn to one another for camaraderie and security, Magallan said. Life in a **gang**, which provides access to money and drugs, can look more appealing than hard construction work, he said.

For some youths, joining a **gang** becomes a rite of passage into manhood. A former member of the **gang** Los Primos (The Cousins) in Sunset Park said young men with nothing to lose want to live "la vida loca" - the "crazy life."

"Some people do it to be brave," said the former **gang** member, who spoke on the condition that only his first name, Rene, be used.

Rene said the **gang** initiation tests a boy's courage.

"Sometimes the whole crew has to punch you, kick you, stab you, and if you do it, that's your initiation. You're in the **gang**," he said.

Gang members sport a variety of tattoos. Some put dots between their thumb and index finger, with the design indicating the type of crime they commit, such as theft, robbery and even murder.

Boys as young as 11 form junior-level **gangs** in hopes of impressing older youths.

"Parents worry about the kids, but about themselves, too," said Carmen Rodriguez, 32, a baby-sitter who lives near Linden Park. "You **feel** like you're unsafe on the street, especially in the nighttime."

Police blame Sunday's shooting on a member of the St. James Boys, named for a park on Jerome Ave. in Norwood, the Bronx, where they hang out.

A high-ranking police official said yesterday that the St. James Boys are a loosely knit offshoot of a larger **Mexican gang** - Los Traviesos (the Troublemakers) - based on the upper West Side.

Los Traviesos have been around for more than a decade, and the St. James Boys answer to them, the source said.

The estimated 100 members of the St. James Boys range in age from 16 to 26, and almost all have criminal records for petty crimes, such as fare-beating, the source said.

The source said there is not a clear leader of the St. James Boys, but that those with the most seniority in the **gang** act in leadership roles.

Around the park, neighbors and merchants said they are fed up with the **gang**.

"Late at night you don't walk on Jerome," said Jesus Fernandez, 40, who works at a bodega on Jerome Ave. "It's very dangerous out there, and if I see a bunch of kids on one side of the street, I'll just cross away from them."

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