Are Gangs In Acadiana?

Some authorities dispute the suggestion that teenagers are forming criminal gangs around Acadiana, while others confirm that there are local gangs. But the more important question is, are gang members from the West Coast setting up house here?

It's definitely picking up, is how Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Lt. Kip Judice, the regional spokesperson for the Louisiana Gang Investigators Association, describes the out-of-state gang situation here. Before, he says, it was just a phone call once every two weeks or so identifying or inquiring about the presence of a West Coast gang member spotted in Acadiana. Now, Judice says he's averaging up to three phone calls a week.

"As far as I know," he says, "we have no violent-crime gang members set up in Lafayette or in Lafayette Parish. But this guy ("Geno"), the Project Watts Crips gang member from Los Angeles who was arrested in Sunset last month) was here for 10 months, and we hadn't detected him. If it hadn't been for the warrant out for him in California, we wouldn't have known about him."

In early June, just a few days before Geno was transferred back to California to serve time for violating parole, he spoke at the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center about the local gang situation. A 21-year-old black man with beady eyes that avoided contact, Geno said he came back to Louisiana 10 months ago just to relax and get away from it all. Originally from Church Point, Geno and his mother moved to a project in Los Angeles when he was 7 years old, and he has been in a gang environment ever since.

Dressed in green jail scrubs and sitting across the table in a first-floor room of the jail, Geno chain smoked a pack of Kools, which he demanded before he would grant an interview. His arms showing through his short-sleeve scrubs were muscular, yet they looked atrophied compared to old pictures of himself pumped up to twice the size in a cherished gang photo album that he carries everywhere with him.

During the interview, Judice, who arrested Geno, remained in the room. Geno told how he wished he could stay here in Louisiana and work offshore with his uncle instead of going back to the do-or-die environment of hard-core gang life in California, a life he said he can never completely get away from unless he left that state.

According to Geno, gang activity in Louisiana is 10 years behind California. West Coast gang members are starting to move down here because Louisiana is "an opportunity to pull off some things here that was being done there." Anything dealing with organized crime, he qualifies. Everybody's trying to get a piece of the pie, he says.

As far as Geno knows, the major cities of Louisiana—Shreveport, Baton Rouge and New Orleans—already have gang members from the West Coast settled in. "They have made it," says Geno. "They have made their moves on the weaker hustlers."

If and when the West Coast gang members move into Lafayette, Geno says they won't hook up with the local gangs, because it's like comparing apples and oranges. "We come from a place where people getting killed is fundamental," he says. "And a lot of hustlers here in Louisiana aren't up to pulling the trigger. The [West Coast gang members] aren't out trying to lead, but to take over and manage what the others aren't managing as well."

About midway through the interview another officer enters the room to inform Judice that he's received a call that a Grape Street gang member, a Crips rival, has been found in Acadiana.

Geno says there are no hard-core gangs, or "sets," as individual gangs are called in the "hood. And he says the only hard-core gang members in Lafayette are those who are coming in from California. "These people out here, they wouldn't fit in [with the West Coast members] because they don't share the same mentality," he says. That's what people consider hard here is being poor and doing without. But being hard in California is dodging bullets. They'll use them [local gang members] as gofers, but won't have respect for them.

Geno has been talking for a couple of hours now and has smoked close to half his pack. Finally Judice moves to get some hard cold facts.

"So Geno, how was it you were making a living all this time you were staying in Louisiana?" he asks point-blank.

"What were you doing besides gigoloing? Selling drugs?"

"Yeah," says the home-boy with a discreet look of pride.

"Tell me," continues Judice, pressing both his hands on the table and looking at the criminal square between the eyes, "if you'd have stayed, how much more time do you think it'd have taken you to establish a set here? Within 30 days?"

"Yeah," says Geno.

—KATRINNA CHETI HUGOS