

# **SANTA CRUZ COUNTY JUVENILE HALL GANG INTEGRATION & RESIDENT CLASSIFICATION**

By Judith A. Cox and Virginia K. Olson, October 1999

## **INTRODUCTION**

Santa Cruz County, California is located on the Monterey Bay 85 miles south of San Francisco. The county is bounded by Monterey County to the south, Santa Clara County (Silicon Valley) to the east, and San Mateo County to the north. With a population of 250,000, Santa Cruz is considered a mid-sized county in California. The county has a large Latino population, with 32 per cent of the youth, aged 10 through 17, being Latino. One of the four incorporated areas, Watsonville, has been designated both a Federal and State Enterprise Zone based on the high unemployment rate. Youth in the Juvenile Justice System suffer from a high rate of gang involvement and heroin use as compared to other communities in California. In recognition of these problems, Santa Cruz is one of twelve state-funded gang violence suppression projects in the State of California.

Organized gangs and gang violence have a long history in the county. In many families there is now a third generation of gang members, making the problem very entrenched. The youth gangs are territorial, retaliative, and traditional. The local gangs are both Latino, and Anglo with Latino gangs being linked to California prison gangs, Nuestra Familia and Nuestra Raza. Within the Juvenile Hall, the alarming increase in local gang activity was creating supervision and safety problems due to overcrowding, which was directly attributed to an increase in serious, violent, gang-related offenders in the Juvenile Justice System. The following is a description of how Santa Cruz County Probation officials developed a juvenile detention facility that integrated opposing gang members, resulting in a safer environment for residents and staff.

## **BACKGROUND**

Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall is a small Juvenile Hall with 2 units and 42 beds. With the population growing and gang tension increasing, the need to solve the crowding and the gang problems became a major concern for anyone having an interest in the Juvenile Hall. For several years the issue of crowding was addressed at all levels of the interested community and county government. Committees were formed, reports were prepared, and goals and objectives were prioritized. As a result of the efforts of all involved agencies and departments, over the last few years, the population of the Hall has been dramatically reduced due to a variety of very innovative alternatives to incarceration. The gang problem, however, did not have the same level of intervention and help from others. Department officials recognized that, to address the gang issues, a meaningful system of classification of youth entering the Juvenile Hall must be employed.

After years of increasing population, growing tensions and gang fights, Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall has successfully become a Neutral Zone for juvenile gangs. A classification system for youth has been developed that works well given the space limitations which are unable to be solved at this time. Juvenile Hall is recognized by the residents as a place where they usually safe from gang attacks and recruitment. Graffiti is controlled, fights are at a minimum, and staff normally feel safe. It is now a place where the residents learn valuable life skills, can earn a high school diploma, begin the journey of self development, and discover an awareness of the harm they have done to their families, communities, and victims.

To appreciate the current status of the Juvenile Hall, it is important to understand a bit of its' history. In 1987 there was no classification system of residents. All residents stayed in "B Unit". If a resident acted out, they were transferred to "A Unit", which was utilized as a higher security unit. The population included boys and girls from age 12 through age17 and occasionally an 18 year old. There was very little programming for the youth. During recreation times, the residents normally came out of their rooms and sat at tables playing board games, ping pong, or writing letters while staff generally supervised the group from the control counter. Not much interaction with youth was encouraged, in fact, the policy was that staff was there to supervise youth, not to "play" with them. The few flag football games that staff attempted to organize resulted in injuries, so they were abandoned for safer outdoor activities, such as volley ball. As one of the staff remembers, "we basically stood around watching kids grow".

Because the population was still quite low, "A Unit" was transformed into a mental health treatment program for wards who had been ordered into placement. This was in response to escalating costs from group home placements, and the need to place youth in their own communities with family therapy and with an ultimate goal of family reunification. Unfortunately, as soon as the treatment program took over "A Unit", the Juvenile Hall population began to grow. Two residents were often placed in a room designed for one, and the secure detention beds began to encroach into the space of the treatment program. Finally, the day came when the treatment program found a new home on another part of the Juvenile Hall grounds and "A Unit" could begin to be used for the ever increasing population of new offenders.

## **DECIDING TO TAKE ACTION**

As time passed, some hardcore gang members began to increase their power within the units, intimidating other residents and staff. There were no radios to call for help and no accessible handcuffs. Tensions grew as the units became more crowded. As the number of gang related fights increased, it was decided to separate the two gangs from each other. "Surenos" were placed in "A Unit" and "Nortenos" were placed in "B Unit". The little programming which had been occurring, needed to be cut in half as there was only one secure courtyard for activities, one dining area, and there was extreme concern around bringing both groups out at the same time. Residents only ate in the dining room every other day and were fed in their room on paper or plastic plates the following day. Family visits were reduced to one time a week. Youth were locked down more than they were out of their rooms with the exception of school. However, this did not stop the violence and gangs seemed to become even more intimidating to staff and other residents.

The real tragedies were the youngest boys and girls, the neutral youth or the "wannabes". Since there were only two units, when someone was booked into the Hall, they were forced to pick where they preferred to be housed, with the "Nortenos" or the "Surenos". It is probable that the Juvenile Hall was responsible for a number of youth being recruited into gangs due to these arrangements. At the very least, it was a real

tightrope walk for these youth to get through each day without experiencing some form of gang intimidation.

Gang members were inadvertently given a great deal of “stature” due to procedures which were employed. The very act of housing and classifying residents by gang membership gave undue “official” recognition to the gangs. When a member of one gang needed to walk through a common area to get to court, to see the nurse, a probation officer, or a parent, if anyone from a different gang was in the common area, the person or group was ordered to the far end of the courtyard and told to turn around, face the wall, get on their knees and place their hands on the wall. By doing this, the gang member could safely walk through the area without being attacked or “mad-dogged” by opposing gang members.

Interesting enough, all of these cautionary procedures did not stop the violence or the fear in the Hall. Graffiti was everywhere, floor to ceiling of every room, and became uncontrollable as the staff couldn't tell new graffiti from old graffiti. Gang members started turning against each other and fighting within the unit as their common enemy was usually out of reach. Residents spent much of their time locked in their rooms, banging on the walls and flooding their toilets and generally trying to figure out how to create trouble as they had nothing else to keep them occupied. A number of serious gang fights occurred over a brief period of time which forced department officials to critically examine the gang classification system which was being used. On one occasion, during Christmas, a preplanned gang fight occurred where one unit rushed the other unit during parent visiting, throwing chairs. Fortunately, the fight was quickly contained but not before some injuries were sustained. Another time, a boy was attacked nearly unconscious in the courtyard by an opposing gang member before staff could reach him.

With staff and youth getting injured, it was apparent that the gang segregation system wasn't working. Something had to be done. Classification based on age and sophistication was discussed at length. But, how can an institution safely classify youth when there are only two units and serious gang issues? This question became the beginning of a long process. Department officials realized that in order to classify based on age and sophistication, there was no choice but to place opposing gang members in the same unit.

## **PLANNING FOR A CHANGE**

Department managers recognized that staff needed to support a new classification system or the project was at risk of failing. Staff were polled privately to find out where they stood on this issue and why. It was discovered that at least half of the staff were very afraid of integrating the gangs as they felt it would compromise the safety and security of the facility. However, there were a few people behind the idea. A key staff member, who had recently been to a training on classification, was in favor of this move and had quite a bit of influence over a number of staff. A work group was developed, employing staff on both sides of the issue to examine the problem and develop solutions. By employing staff this way to work on a solution, the work group was able to address opposing issues and find solutions with which all staff felt comfortable. The key staff person who was in favor of the change, never gave up the view that the move would actually improve the safety of youth and staff and continued to relay that view to others. His positive energy was a key element in generating staff confidence.

A classification that would work for a small, two unit Juvenile Hall has to be designed. This process was first begun by deciding that one unit would be less sophisticated (B Unit) and the other unit would be more sophisticated (A unit). Then staff listed each one of the individuals which were currently housed and rated them subjectively, using only one question; "in which unit would you place him/her?" The work group then examined the characteristics of the youth that would theoretically be placed in each unit. This process took a while, and the work group wrote and re-wrote the list several times before deciding on a final list of identifying characteristics. The list was then checked against classification criteria from other Juvenile Halls and it was discovered to be quite similar. The classification list could have been simply borrowed from another Juvenile Hall, but the process of staff involvement in designing the classification system was important to accepting its' validity. Everyone agreed to put all of the girls in with the younger boys as it was believed that they would be too much distraction to the older boys. Anyone sixteen or older would go into the more sophisticated unit unless there were specific reasons to go to a different unit. Those reasons had to be in writing and reviewed by a supervisor. A weekly review system was developed to make sure everyone was placed in the appropriate unit. Youth could also be moved between units at any given day, when reviewed by a supervisor, for emergency reasons.

It was the Department's original intent to have more programming on "B Unit" than on "A Unit" and to have a level system in which youth would "earn" the ability to move to "B Unit". It was believed that this would be an incentive for good behavior. After running the programs for a few weeks, these assumptions were found to be in error. The bolder boys, in general, did not want to work towards going to "B Unit" with the "little kids". They wanted to stay in "A Unit" and have programs of their own which would be age appropriate. They had begun to identify with the unit and had no desire to move. Fortunately, the youth were listened to and staff began to develop programs that were age and sophistication level appropriate for both units. There ended up being no less programming on "A Unit" than on "B Unit". Each unit developed programs which were relevant and which interested the specific population of the unit.

Staff were next asked to pick the unit in which they thought they would prefer to work. They were nearly evenly divided, but for reasons which did not turn out to be valid. Some staff thought it would be unsafe to work in "A Unit" because they were older, more sophisticated boys with more serious crimes. As it turned out, "A Unit" was often easier to work in for exactly those reasons. The older boys had normally been in Juvenile Hall before and knew what to expect with following rules and having consequences for misbehavior. With few exceptions, they generally had more control over emotions and didn't require constant attention as the younger boys did. They were better workers, and had longer attention spans to work on a project. The older boys also turned out to be best at "KP" and were actually easier to supervise than the younger boys. Staff's earlier fears of allowing high risk youth to go into the kitchen where many risk items were located did not become a problem as long as the boys were carefully supervised. The girls and younger boys turned out to have generally more mental health issues and the staff working in that unit needed to have a lot of energy, patience, and creativity to develop a variety of ideas on how to change and manage behavior. Staff were assigned to work on the unit in which they had the necessary talent and skills. This was very helpful in developing appropriate and interesting programs as well as good communication with the residents.

Early on, as the department began to seriously discuss the move to integrating the gangs and classification, it was recognized that the support of the Latino community was essential, as a large portion of Juvenile Hall residents were Latino. Barrios Unidos, a Latino community based organization dedicated

to gang violence reduction, had been coming to the Juvenile Hall once a week to teach students various topics of interest. They has a history of developing positive relationships with the youth. In the beginning, there had been a lot of mistrust between Juvenile Hall staff and Barrios Unidos staff. Some staff felt they were coming into their domain and telling them how to run the Juvenile Hall, which was somewhat threatening. In fact, Barrios Unidos had good ideas to offer and worked hard to develop a trust based relationship with Juvenile Hall staff. Eventually Barrios Unidos and Juvenile Hall began to have a good working relationship with each other and Juvenile Hall often depended on them to talk to the residents when gang tensions were high. Latino counselors from other community based agencies were also aware of the goals, and were very involved in working with the staff and youth on a one to one level to help with the transition. These Latino counseling agencies became the Juvenile Hall's partners in helping to prepare the residents for the transition.

For approximately 8 to 12 months Barrios Unidos worked with the youth to get them to accept the idea of integrating. This made sense because, if the Juvenile Hall was classified and integrated, programming and family visiting would be doubled. Lock downs in rooms would be reduced and youth would have much more time with their families. Barrios Unidos first identified the leaders of the different gang factions and introduced these concepts to them. They had many individual and group sessions on both units each week to get youth to begin talking about their fears relative to gang integration. Finally, Barrios Unidos talked directly with the parents of the youth, and explained to them the importance of integrating gangs for the purpose of increased activities and family visits. Once the parents and the gang leaders accepted the idea, the general population of residents had an easier time accepting that they would be living, eating, playing, and working next to their "enemy".

## **MAKING THE MOVE**

The stage was now set to move. Eight to twelve months preparation was completed. Outreach to youth and families was ongoing with Barrios Unidos. A workable classification system was in place. "Neutral Zone" or "No Gang" contracts had been developed, which the youth would sign at intake. By signing this contract, each resident would agree to give up all gang related behavior including all writing of gang words or symbols anywhere in the Juvenile Hall. Any violations of the agreement would result in severe restrictions of a youths' program. Conversely, anyone able to get along with the other residents were given full access to all programs in the Juvenile Hall. A contract such as this was a simple idea, but one which worked relatively well in introducing the expectations of the Juvenile Hall to all new residents. Hours were spent trying to work out a new daily schedule which included both units into the common areas every day, such as the dining room and courtyard. The teachers helped with school schedules and added a new "classroom" where new residents would be evaluated before entering the regular classrooms. It was also a place where someone having difficulty adjusting to a classroom could go to for special attention instead of being sent to their room. Since the teacher was bilingual, it also solved the mono-lingual student problem.

One major problem was left. Juvenile Hall was covered with gang graffiti. One end was covered with southern gang tags and the other with northern gang tags. What was going to happen when a gang youth was placed into a room covered from floor to ceiling with opposite gang writing? Predictably, this would enrage the residents and probably cause violent reactions. The Juvenile Hall wasn't scheduled to be painted for another few months. Staff were certain this would be critical to the immediate success or failure of the move. It was decided to move up the painting schedule to allow painting of the individual

rooms prior to moving any youth. The rest of the institution could then be painted, as scheduled, at a later time. Graffiti would need to be handled as soon as it occurred in order to keep on top of it. Stores of paint and brushes were given to each unit staff, and residents were given the task of painting over their own graffiti as it appeared, before they were given any privileges or unit activities. Graffiti was painted over before the end of the day and nearly all graffiti in rooms could now be traced to a specific individual.

September 11, 1995 was the day scheduled to make the move. Everyone was anxious. Some staff still believed it would end in a free for all gang fight. To make sure everything went well, extra staff were scheduled to be on both units for the entire first week. On the morning of the change, two youth at a time were quietly moved to their new rooms. Some confusion occurred during the first week around daily routines and schedules having been changed, but these problems were minor and staff and residents worked them out as the week progressed. Juvenile Hall experienced absolutely no problems around the move with regard to residents' behavior.

## CONCLUSION

It is now four years later. Although there is still gang tension from time to time, the staff believe it is under control. Youth are appropriately classified according to age and sophistication level. Residents are responsible for significantly fewer fights, flooding, and door banging. Graffiti remains under control. The entire institution was painted a few months after the move was made, and to this day all the rooms and walls remain essentially free from gang graffiti. Even though the institution is nearly 30 years old, it has a fresh, clean appearance. Probation officials make regularly scheduled unit inspections with written recommendations to the Unit Senior Group Supervisors for immediate attention whenever problems are observed.

Residents are not locked down much any more, in fact, there is so much programming occurring, the biggest problem staff now faces is finding the space and time to run all the programs they would like to have. Programming is interesting and relevant and not just a means by which to keep youth busy. Implementation of the new classification system allowed the institution to be much more flexible and creative in the types of activities presented to the youth. Because the institution is now classified by sophistication level, the youth are able to make use of large recreation areas outside the secure courtyard, to play volley ball and baseball. These areas were completely unused for several years prior to the re-classification.

Two Senior Group Supervisors were hired to work on programming for the units. Their duties included developing a weekly calendar of programs for each unit. They were responsible for finding and bringing in guest speakers, musical groups, play productions, educators, or other groups of interest as well as picking and supervising the staff who were to run the daily programs and making sure the units had any supplies they needed. Programs were expanded to include Meditation, Yoga, instruction by a Chess Master, Writing Classes, Victim Awareness, Anger Management, Job Readiness, Planned Parenthood discussions, as well as the usual programs with religious groups, Alcoholic Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous. At times, people from the community have offered to give the youth a special event such as a concert or fiesta. A particularly successful program has been students from a Community Studies class at the University of California Santa Cruz, volunteering as tutors and mentors to the youth. Another favorite program for youth has been a poetry writing class offered by a San Francisco based group called

“The Beat Within”. Youth who participate in this program learn how to express their ideas in poetic form. “The Beat Within” has published several of the youths’ poems.

Throughout the year, a number of cultural events are scheduled such as Cinco de Mayo or Christmas, where Barrios Unidos plans the day with food, music, stories, and games. For special events, both units are brought together in the larger spaces such as the courtyard or dining room. The events which are scheduled are usually fun for the residents and teaches them they can enjoy people of all ages and backgrounds. The residents look forward to an event with great anticipation and are very disappointed if they lose the privilege due to some infraction. During both special events and regular programs, it is amazing to watch boys and girls of opposite gang affiliation having discussions, studying, or playing together in harmony. Youth will often pick a partner for a game, based on the skill of the person rather than their gang affiliation.

Santa Cruz County Children’s Mental Health has provided the Juvenile Hall with extra practitioners who are now available to the residents 7 days a week. The residents can sign up to see a therapist and therapists are available any time during emergencies or crises. The therapists and psychiatrist along with the nursing staff and the Senior Group Supervisors meet weekly to discuss any behavior problems that any of the residents are experiencing during the week. Medications are reviewed, ideas are exchanged, and case plans are formed to change a youths program to help him or her be successful during detention.

The “gang free zone” philosophy has also allowed the Juvenile Hall, with the co-operation and encouragement of the County Office of Education, to go from a “one room schoolhouse” approach to education to a station teaching approach. This resembles a regular high school where students move from one classroom to another for different subjects. This has greatly enhanced the education product available to Juvenile Hall residents. It has improved the use of the facility and the strengths of the education staff. A GED accredited school program has been added, which allows youth to graduate from “Hartman School”. Whenever a resident graduates from the Juvenile Hall School, it becomes a very special event. Parents, school dignitaries, and probation officials are invited and the youth are brought together to honor the graduate at a special ceremony.

While in the Juvenile Hall, youth are continually hearing staff talk about “respect”. This is a constant theme and one with which gang members and non gang members alike seem to identify. Staff are committed to lead by example and convey the idea that respecting oneself leads to giving respect to others. Youth have an opportunity to have their concerns and problems heard during their weekly “community meetings”. When necessary, the concerns are sent to Administration in writing. Administration will respond to the request at the next weeks’ meeting. By doing this, youth feel they are being heard and the desire to get needs met through negative attention is dissipated. The motto staff have posted for all to see is “You do not need to earn our respect, just return it”.

Residents and former residents will tell probation staff that they know Juvenile Hall is a neutral zone, and they don’t have to worry about fallout from talking to or playing with a member of a different gang while they are in the Juvenile Hall. One of the best examples of this was with two older boys who were leaders of opposing gangs, who asked to be roommates in the Juvenile Hall. Staff were a little concerned over the request but after some deliberation, the request was granted. The boys spent several days together in a small room designed for one, with no conflict. The local news paper, while doing a story on gang integration in the Juvenile Hall, took a picture of these two boys, looking out their window, standing side

by side. Although many youth will not commit to getting along “on the outs” with an opposite gang member, there have been examples wherein the non violent relationships youth have developed in the Juvenile Hall have spilled over to the community. An 18 year old resident of “A Unit” recounted a time where he and his friends came into contact with a car load of opposing gang members. Instead of mad-dogging, the two boys who had been in the Juvenile Hall together, had eye contact, and shook their heads, indicating “no”. The drove off and no words were exchanged. The boy agreed that it is difficult to commit a violent act against someone once you personally knew them and had lived together in peace. This boy is currently a regular participant in the weekly chess class at Juvenile Hall.

## **POST SCRIPT**

Through the long process of changing the Juvenile Hall, the lessons Santa Cruz County officials have learned are numerous. Juvenile Hall is a continually changing entity of people; staff, guests, and residents. Most ideas have value and department officials must be open to listen to them from any source. The Juvenile Hall does not exist by itself but belongs to the community and should be available to embrace all the resources of the community. Staff must all hold the same value system of integrity, compassion, respect, and fairness. A radical change cannot occur without a great deal of preparation, staff involvement, and training. Youth must feel heard and valued in order to make lasting changes in behavior. Promises need to be kept and families should be included in the process. Gang activity must have a zero tolerance level and consequences need to be consistent and have a realistic connection to the misbehavior. Finally, there has to be some advantage in the change for the youth and their families. Our biggest challenge was to make gang integration a value which everyone wanted to achieve. We believe we have come close to accomplishing that goal.

*October 29, 1999*

*For additional information contact:*

Scott MacDonald, Chief Probation Officer  
Santa Cruz County Probation Department  
P.O. Box 1812  
Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1812



**STEPS TO ELIMINATING CLASSIFICATION BY GANG  
MEMBERSHIP IN A SECURE DETENTION FACILITY**  
**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PROBATION**  
**SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA**

- **Administrative and managerial leadership**

A strong value statement must be made by top leadership about the importance of the endeavor, and sufficient resources must be allocated to ensure success.

- **Staff involvement and training**

Leadership from key staff person(s) and staff involvement in the development of transitional steps are essential.

- **Development of new classification system**

Care must be given to develop a new classification system to replace the use of gang membership as a housing criteria while still addressing security issues.

- **Involvement of culturally competent community-based agencies and partners**

Culturally competent counselors and experts in youth violence reduction should be utilized to help prepare the plan.

- **Careful preparation of residents**

Counselors, community partners, and youth advocates who have earned the respect of residents should work with youth over a lengthy period of time so that residents understand the benefits of the new arrangement.

- **Parental involvement**

Parents can be valuable partners in supporting the plan and encouraging their sons and daughters to cooperate.

- **Use of “neutral-zone” contracts**

The use of neutral zone contracts at the time of booking can clearly identify behavioral expectations for residents.

- **Enhanced programming/mental health services**

Enriched programming and clinical services are essential substitutes for external control mechanisms. The more meaningful programming available, the less tension arises among residents.

- **Zero tolerance for graffiti and gang signs**

Graffiti must be removed immediately, and there must be certain consequences for gang signs, expressions, or gestures.

- **Constant maintenance and review**

For long-term success, staff, administration, and key partners must constantly evaluate the program and make adjustments to the changing environment.