Neighborhood under control: Police work with youths to clean up City Heights

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When the members of the Kids in Control team think about their City Heights neighborhood, troubling images can come to mind.

The teens say they sometimes see fighting and drug use on the streets, and find graffiti and garbage in the alleys of their neighborhood.

To do something about it, the teens cruise the streets on bikes on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, looking for graffiti and areas where fighting breaks out. They ride with their allies and benefactors: the police.

"We saw our community and our alleys really trashed up, and we just started cleaning," said Sesy Enriquez, a 13-year-old whose talkativeness has earned her the role of team spokeswoman.

And what started with neighborhood clean-ups has grown into a partnership between the kids and the authorities, where the youth put their street smarts to use, helping to identify problem areas in the neighborhood. At the same time they receive mentoring from the police that they hope will help them to fulfill college and career dreams.

As the team focuses on youth crime, they are also keeping themselves out of trouble, in a neighborhood where some of their peers are getting pregnant, joining gangs and doing drugs.

"These kids are sitting on the fence, and they could teeter either way," said San Diego Police Officer David Tos, who rides with them.

After Tos and his partner, Officer Corinne Hard, noticed that more youths than adults attended community meetings in City Heights, they wanted to provide a positive way for the youths to get involved in their community.

So they obtained $6,000 in grants from Mid-City for Youth, a community-based nonprofit organization, bought the bikes, helmets and T-shirts that read "Increase the peace, so violence will cease," and recruited the kids. The team began with 10 members last October and has since grown to 18.

The officers decided to target youths who are at risk but who want to stay on track, instead of kids already in trouble. The teens who participate in KIC, as the program is called, must maintain a C average, attend class and have a clean record.
"This was not designed for juvenile delinquents, but for kids who want to succeed, for kids willing to get involved and work with us. And we help them get ahead," Hard said.

Dennis Berry, drug and alcohol prevention coordinator of Mid-City for Youth Substance Abuse Momentum Team, said that teen-agers are most often the ones who know where the drug users and prostitutes hang out, and which stores sell alcohol to minors.

"Youth are better eyes and ears than adults because they're always out there, and they're actually very concerned about the area," he said.

Earlier in the year, the youths compiled a list of the graffiti tags and symbols and what they mean. Detectives use the information to help solve crimes.

Many of the teens come from broken or single-parent homes and face adult responsibilities, Hard said. City Heights is one of San Diego's most difficult neighborhoods to grow up in, she added.

Some of the kids mumbled answers like "because my mom made me do it," when asked why they joined the KIC team. But they laughed and horsed around with the officers and each other as they applied sunscreen and adjusted their helmets, preparing to hit the road recently.

The youths, 13 to 17, all live in City Heights and attend Wilson Middle School, Hoover High School, Montgomery High School, Mission Bay High School and Scripps Ranch High School. Most were strangers when they joined the team, but over the past months they have relaxed and grown more comfortable with each other.

Now they all have nicknames. Marina Cortez, a 16-year-old from Hoover High, is known as "Crash." Andrea Eriksen, 15, of Mission Bay High School, is also known as "Ghetto Girl." Buck Walsh, 14, from Hoover, is "Super-biker."

During rides, Walsh and Rudy Garcia, 16, from Scripps Ranch High School, wear bright orange vests and zoom out ahead of the pack to stop the cars at intersections.

Neighbors watched with quizzical expressions from behind their fences as the youths rode down Landis Street. In this neighborhood, fear and suspicion of the police lingers.

Tos and Hard are trying to change this. Tos recalled his own youth in New Jersey, where he said the neighborhood police officer was seen not as an intimidating figure with a gun, but as a fixture in the community to whom children could turn for guidance. With the KIC team, he said he wants to bring back this spirit of community policing.

While the police force is cracking down on youth who skip school and commit crimes, Tos emphasized the need to show a friendlier side of law enforcement as well.

"Somewhere along the line, we turned our backs on these kids, and that's why we're
having the problems we're having," he said.

Hard stopped at an alley, and the kids clustered around her. Glancing down the road, four of the girls suddenly hesitated.

A group of young men wearing baggy jeans, gold chains and baseball caps were hanging out in a park halfway down the alley.

"Can't we just go around the other way and meet you at the end?" begged Enriquez, motioning a path around the block that would let the girls avoid the youths in the park.

When the officers refused, the girls groaned and exchanged wary glances, dragging behind the rest of the group as they approached the young men. Sure enough, they were met with raised eyebrows as they rode by.

While these kids are proud of what they do and truly want to make their neighborhoods safer and cleaner, Tos explained later, they still sometimes feel pressure to hang out and look cool in front of people they know.

But sneer as they may, Tos said, "Those kids (in the park) would trade places with kids in our bike group in a heartbeat."

And despite their periodic embarrassment, the kids on the bike team keep coming back, and bringing their friends. Tos and Hard are working on raising funds to expand the program in the next year.