

Gangs growth here rooted in Southeast Asia

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Last November, gang member Serey Siev held a hand grenade before a City Heights restaurant owner and threatened to blow up his establishment unless he paid \$500 for protection.

Siev, an 18-year-old Cambodian refugee, was caught. He and his two accomplices all pleaded guilty and are serving three-year sentences for extortion.

While the incident received scant notice in the news media, it offers a window on a growing phenomenon in San Diego County: the advent of gangs composed of impoverished immigrants from Southeast Asia.

Almost unheard of five years ago, Southeast Asian gangs now make up a full 10 percent of the estimated 4,500 gang members in the county, according to city and county law enforcement statistics.

They are the newest Asian recruits to the criminal gang system, which had already incorporated youths from the middle-class Filipino community.

"Asian gangs are an emerging problem that we are very concerned about," said Margaret Iwanaga-Penrose, the executive director of the Union of Pan-Asian Communities, or UPAC, the leading social service agency for Asians.

To address that concern, Penrose has asked four of San Diego's Asian judges to speak to the issue Thursday afternoon at Horace Mann Middle School in City Heights. The panel discussion will later be broadcast on Cox Cable.

One of the participants, San Diego Municipal Court Judge Lillian Lim, said when she first took the bench in 1987 it was unusual to see a Southeast Asian in court on a criminal matter.

"Now it's nothing out of the ordinary to see an Asian defendant, including those charged with the most serious felonies," said Lim, who is of Filipino heritage. "Part of it is the increase in the Asian population in San Diego, but the increases in court I see are disproportionate to that change in population."

Between 1980 and 1990, San Diego's Asian population swelled 121 percent, from 89,861 to 198,311, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. According to Juvenile Hall booking records, 400 Asian youths were referred there last year, a 100 percent increase over the number arrested in 1984.

San Diego State University sociology professor Kenji Ima said that to understand the change, each Asian culture involved in gangs must be looked at separately.

Between 1985 and 1988, Ima saw the number of Filipino kids referred to Juvenile Hall leap by more than 100 percent.

Most of the charges involved the sort of territorial gang violence commonly associated with Hispanic gangs, rather than with black gangs, which are involved in the drug trade, Lim said.

But what stunned Ima and continues to bother judges such as Lim was that the Filipinos were not from the poor socioeconomic circumstances most commonly associated with the Hispanic gangs.

Instead, these kids lived in \$200,000 to \$400,000 homes in Paradise Hills and Mira Mesa and drove late-model sports cars.

"We were dealing with kids who were relatively comfortable, so the question was, why?" Ima said. "Clearly there was something amiss in their lives and I think it has to do with parenting."

Ima said many of the parents of Filipino gang kids hold two to three jobs and are rarely at home.

"The parents just figured their kids would grow up law-abiding if they were given economic advantages," Ima said. "Most do. But for a minority there is a clash of values between the authoritarian upbringing of the Phillipine-born parent and the American-born child who thinks of himself as an individual."

That clash, Ima said, sometimes results in the child turning to the gang for support.

Since 1988, the number of Filipino kids involved in gang activity has leveled off, but the appearance of such well-to-do children in the county's Municipal and Juvenile Courts continues to amaze the judges.

"It's really odd," said Hideo Chino, a judicial referee at Juvenile Court. "Police used to say it was that the Filipino kids were gang 'wannabes.' Now that appears to be changing. They are just as violent, and getting involved in crime. Maybe they are just getting Americanized."

Just as Ima noted a dramatic rise in the incidence of Filipino youths admitted to Juvenile Hall on gang-related charges beginning in 1985, he saw a similar increase among Laotian, Vietnamese and Cambodians, such as convicted extortionist Siev, in 1989.

"But the Southeast Asians seem to pose a greater problem," Ima said. "Even though the population of Filipinos in San Diego is two to three times that of the Southeast Asians,

the Southeast Asians are more likely to be involved in gang activity."

Ima and Bounhong Khommarath, a UPAC social worker, trace the gang involvement of Cambodians and Laotians to 1988, when Southeast Asians were being attacked by black and Hispanic gang members.

Ima said the San Diego Cambodians talked to Long Beach Cambodians, who recommended they form their own gang for protection.

But it was not until October of that year -- after a series of brawls among blacks, Hispanics and Southeast Asians at Crawford High School in City Heights -- that the Cambodians followed through.

"A couple of days later the Cambodians came up with a name for their own gang: the Oriental Boy Soldiers," said Khommarath.

Based on his interviews, Khommarath believes core members of the Boy Soldiers number 25, with an outer ring of 80 to 100.

Shortly thereafter, the Laotians formed a youth gang known as the Oriental Killer Boys.

Ironically, Ima said, the Southeast Asian gang members emulated the behavior of the American gangs that had first persecuted them: They developed hand signals, created a uniform and used graffiti to designate their turf.

That behavior is starkly different from that of Vietnamese youth, Khommarath said. The Vietnamese are involved in gang activity, but for the most part eschew the sorts of activities that will make them identifiable to police.

Still, Sgt. Joe Wood of the San Diego Police Department gang detail said his officers recognized the issue of Asian gangs early and were able to identify most of the hard-core members.

Able to act on that intelligence, Wood's detail has seen a drop in violent crimes and auto theft among Southeast Asian gangs in the last six months, he said.

"We have a firm grasp on the problem," Wood said. "That's not to say that it will disappear, but we have been able to keep it under control."

Wood said police have defied early predictions that they would not be able to penetrate the Southeast Asian cultures to break the gangs.

"Our experience is that while there are taboos and cultural differences, they don't surface enough to make our job terribly different from our work with other gangs," Wood said.

Ima said his review of cases at Juvenile Hall supports Woods' claim. But he noted that until the underlying reasons Southeast Asians join gangs are dealt with, the kids will continue to join.

Besides needing protection from other gangs, Khommarath said, Southeast Asians join because of the violent clash between their native cultures and life in America.

"Many of these families jumped a century ahead of where they were by coming to the United States," Khommarath said. "It's mentally unsettling."

In Cambodia and Laos, Khommarath said, children are raised collectively; all adults are responsible for the behavior of kids. If a teen commits a crime and is caught, parents and society gather to punish.

"Here the kid sees quickly that the society won't really punish them," Khommarath said. "And the parent is bewildered because he or she can't speak English and can't understand why the society is not looking out for their child."

The children also see that their parents are financially strapped and unable to deal with the new culture, and they tend to ignore their parents' advice, Ima said.

Adding to the financial difficulties most Southeast Asian families face relocating to America, many of the Cambodian parents are still dealing mentally with the psychological and emotional trauma of having survived the genocide of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, Ima noted.

"So even if they wanted to be good parents, they can't," Ima said. "They are emotionally distraught and don't have the energy to be parents."

Wood and Penrose said they recognize many of these underlying problems and are forming programs that target the younger kids who are at risk of joining gangs.

"We want to be proactive, to prevent them from being involved," Wood said.

Still, for judges of Asian descent, it's troubling that there's a need for such programs at all.

"Traditionally our Asian communities have never been touched by these illegal activities," Lim said. "Our traditional sense of things is strong family, strong cultural values and respect for education and law. What we're seeing now is the transition as our two cultures clash."

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