

Police: No gang 'problem' locally

By BILL FREEHLING

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The Fredericksburg area has a "gang presence" but not a "gang problem," detectives with a regional gang task force said yesterday at a presentation.

Detectives with the Rappahannock Regional Gang Task Force gave the presentation yesterday at the Fredericksburg Country Club during the annual meeting of the Rappahannock Area Council for Children and Parents.

The area has experienced gang-related crimes including rape and murder, said Detective Jim Kuebler, a member of the Fredericksburg Police Department and the task force. He said there's been a gang presence in the area for a decade, and gang-related graffiti pops up all over.

But Kuebler said gang activity has not become problematic, partly because resources have been devoted to keeping it in check.

"It won't get out of control," Kuebler said. "We're going to stay on top of it."

Detectives said most of the area's gang members are locally born and bred, although Northern Virginia gangs such as MS-13 are actively recruiting in the region. Most of the area's identified gang members are adults, not juveniles, they said.

Kuebler said the gang subculture is starting to become a part of mainstream culture through music, movies and fashion magazines. As a result, he said, there are some groups of youths who imitate gangs but aren't involved in any criminal activity.

For example, said Spotsylvania Detective Jason Dembowski, some youths throw hand signals and have a gang mentality but aren't criminals.

Kuebler said this kind of "wannabe" activity can be dangerous. He said he's handled crimes where people acting the part of gang members have been severely beaten by people in actual criminal gangs.

Stafford Detective Eric Jessee said gang membership transcends race and socioeconomic status. He said they've seen gang members who are rich and poor, white and black. He said parental inattention is one of the factors that leads to kids joining gangs.

The detectives did not address the Jan. 20 killing of Baron Braswell II in Spotsylvania. Kuebler said they could not do so because of a judge's gang order.

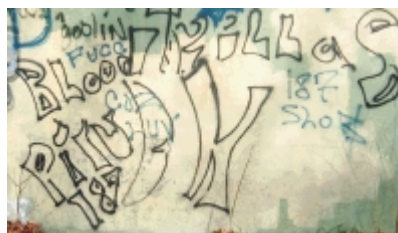
Braswell was stabbed to death at a CD-release party, and six Fredericksburg teens have been implicated. Just one is charged with murder, but they're all charged with participating in a street gang. The preliminary hearing is scheduled for April 28.

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Detectives say they regularly find examples of such gang-style graffiti in the Fredericksburg area. They say there is a gang presence in the area, but it hasn't become a major problem.

The regional task force, which also investigates drug-related crime and terrorism, was formed in July with a federal grant. The federal funding runs out at the end of the year, but Kuebler said local governments have pledged to pay for it after that.

The task force includes detectives from Fredericksburg, King George, Stafford and Spotsylvania. The Virginia State Police and Rappahannock Regional Jail are also involved and the task force works out of office space provided by the FBI.

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