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Just how big is gang problem in Duval?

Officials answer questions about perceptions and reality in Jacksonville.

When six people were shot in a drive-by shooting in the Talleyrand neighborhood, the first thing Mary McAllister brought up was gangs. Even though police didn't confirm any gang activity in the shooting, the property manager said it's well-known feuding gang members are always causing trouble in the area, and she said she's sick of authorities ignoring the problem.

"Anyone who says there isn't a gang problem in Jacksonville is lying," she said.

Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum told the Times-Union in late April that Jacksonville has more gang members than officials might like to admit, and cracking down on gangs will be one of his priorities in office.

State legislators during this year's session proposed a new anti-gang law to expand the definition of "gangs" and provide new resources for gang prevention. The bill was passed by the House but died in the Senate. There is some talk about putting the bill on the agenda during next month's special session, if there's time.

The bill has reignited discussion about gangs and whether the region has reason to worry.

Is there a gang problem in Jacksonville?

Ask law enforcement about gangs in Jacksonville and they'll say they're grateful the city doesn't have the problems that Miami or Los Angeles have. Ask community leaders and they'll say gangs are far too common in the city.

"We do have gangs in Jacksonville, but we don't have a gang problem," State Attorney Harry Shorstein said.

Shorstein said he doesn't understand why the area doesn't have many gangs because considering the drug trafficking on Interstate 95, Jacksonville could be a prime location. He said he was almost afraid of jinxing himself by talking about it.

Sheriff's Office gang unit members said gangs in Jacksonville aren't very well-organized with a leadership hierarchy like in other cities. Lt. Mike Williams said there are no national gangs such as the Crips, Bloods or Vice Lords in Jacksonville.

Sheriff John Rutherford said the gang unit has done a lot of research and "there are only a few gangs here."

But not all authorities think Jacksonville doesn't have a gang problem.

"I wouldn't necessarily agree with that," said Jennifer Pritt, special agent for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. "They [the Sheriff's Office] probably don't want to give notoriety to any gang presence in Jacksonville."

McCollum also said there's a concern. "I can assure that there are gangs here and probably a lot more than you're aware of," he told the Times-Union in April.

Rutherford said he thinks his Sheriff's Office would know better than anyone about gangs in the area.

The Rev. Mark Griffin, pastor of Wayman Chapel AME Church, said he remembers walking through the Eureka Gardens Apartments on the Westside and meeting gang members wearing matching colors. He said city officials need to wake up and admit there is a problem.

"I don't see how you can admit there are gangs in Jacksonville without saying there is a gang problem," Griffin said.

Exactly how many gangs are there in Jacksonville?

The Sheriff's Office says there are about 110 known gang members and associates in Jacksonville in about eight gangs but would not describe the gangs. Director Micheal Edwards said they don't want to reveal gang names because it would give them publicity.

Other experts, such as Pritt, say it's hard to determine exactly how many gang members are in Jacksonville and considering there are an estimated 2,500 gang members in Orlando, Jacksonville's numbers might be a little low.

How is it in other counties?

According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Clay County is the only other area in the First Coast with any noticeable gang presence, but experts say gangs are growing in rural areas.

State Rep. Adam Hasner, R-Boca Raton, a sponsor of the gang bill, said it's no longer true only Miami, Tampa and Orlando have gang issues in Florida. His Palm Beach area has been connected to violent national gangs such as Sur 13 and MS 13 and five slayings there have been connected to gangs.

After a gang-related shooting in Orange Park in February 2006, Clay County Sheriff Rick Beseler is worried his area could end up the same way. He said he's assigned detectives to focus on gang activity.

"We really want to be proactive to stop the gangs before they set up shop here," he said.

What defines a gang?

The new anti-gang law would have characterized "street gangs" the same as "organized crime gangs," but defining what a real gang is, and what is just a group of wannabes, can be difficult, investigators say.

According to Florida law, a street gang must have at least three or more people who associate themselves under a common name or identifying colors or symbols and have at least two or more members who commit crimes. There doesn't need to be an organized leadership structure, Williams said.

How can cities prevent gang activity?

Edwards said young men are attracted to gangs because they give them a sense of family and belonging. Although police need to work to break up gangs through arrests, he said it can be more beneficial to disrupt gang recruitment.

The Sheriff's Office Police Athletic League offers programs aimed at keeping at-risk youth from joining gangs by giving them positive activities, such as sports.

Griffin, the pastor, said the responsibility also lies with family, so young men don't look for belonging elsewhere.

"These kids want to feel connected," he said, "so they turn to drugs and they turn to gangs for that sense of belonging."