

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer announces gang crackdown after shootings increase (video)

By Carmen George and Andrea Castillo

As 15 children played Wednesday in Fink-White Park playground in southwest Fresno, they saw a man jogging in loose sweatpants, and they bolted for cover.

“When we see someone running who looks like a gangbanger, we run,” one girl said.

It was a false alarm, but illustrates the reality for children living in the neighborhood that borders Highway 99 near downtown Fresno. Up to 60 children attend the Boys & Girls Club next to the playground, depending on the day. One staff member, who asked not to be named for personal safety, said it’s the only nearby safe space for children.

Just a few hours before the children were on the playground, Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer announced officers will be out in full force over the next three weeks to curb an increase in gang violence.

As of Monday, there had been 29 shootings in the city over the past three weeks — the majority by gang members, Dyer said. Prior to that, there were 38 shootings in 28 days — one of the highest numbers in recent history, he said.

Dyer addressed this uptick with media gathered at the Fresno Memorial Auditorium downtown. Also in attendance were about 125 officers who will patrol neighborhoods, serve search warrants and arrest suspected gang members.

Dyer focused on the toll of violence — evident in a gang shooting early Sunday in which a stray bullet struck a 16-year-old girl in the head on the 600 block of North College Avenue in central Fresno.

“That girl is laying in the hospital right now in critical condition — may or may not survive — and if she does survive, she’s going to be paralyzed for the rest of her life,” Dyer said.

Lt. Mark Salazar said the girl, who was not named, has a cousin with gang ties, and that person was being sought by the shooter.

Dyer also talked about four shootings last week in or around Fink-White Park.

“In one of those shootings, we had an individual who was standing by the playground equipment — with kids nearby — firing rounds across the playground at a rival gang,” Dyer said.

No one was hurt in those incidents, but Dyer added “it is only a matter of time before we have a young child shot and killed.”

Enforcement begins

Outside the playground Wednesday afternoon, two cars were pulled over by police within 30 minutes. The first included five police cars, one van and a chopper circling overhead.

The kids rushed to watch, and said it wasn’t anything new. Police activity happens every day, they said.

But the Boys & Girls Club employee said that was the first time she’d seen police respond so quickly. She said her staff called police several times in the last few weeks because of the gang activity. Many parents had stopped letting their children attend the after-school program out of fear that something bad could happen, she said.

Jesus Santos, who sat with two friends on park bleachers listening to music, said he hadn't witnessed any of the shootings, but had heard about them. One of his friends almost got caught in the gunfire.

Santos, who lives two blocks away, said his neighborhood has gotten more dangerous since he moved there eight years ago. But the seasonal farmworker continues coming to the park, especially on days when he doesn't work.

"It's not fair that because of other people we should leave," he said. "This is where we go with friends."

Dyer said violence between gang rivals can and will happen anywhere. "I don't care if it's southwest Fresno or River Park (in northeast Fresno) — it's on."

The chief said he visited Fink-White after there were two shootings within one block of the playground — one of them a "running gunbattle with more than 20 rounds fired."

Dyer saw bullet holes in cars, a home and apartment, and heard stories of residents diving onto floors to keep from being shot.

"One of the things they (residents) said to me is that they are fed up and they wanted us to help."

Addressing his officers, Dyer said, "And you know what? I'm fed up, too. I'm fed up and I hope you guys are fed up."

The uptick in shootings is due to drugs, prostitution and past feuds within gangs, he said.

Dyer applauded his officers' efforts at fighting crime but asked them to "up their game" over the next three weeks as they work to crack down on gang violence. "Be in the right places, arrest the right people, and let's stop the shootings in our city."

Dyer also stressed that officers should talk to community members as they patrol areas deemed most likely to experience gang violence, based on past crime.

"I'm also asking you, as you go in these neighborhoods, to get out of your car and to make contact with these people ... making sure they know that we are standing with them against the violence that is occurring by gang members in their neighborhoods."

Dyer said he wants police to be seen not as an "occupying force" but as a "welcome presence." There are increased "tensions" in many neighborhoods for a number of reasons, he said, most notably the recent grand jury decision in the Ferguson, Missouri shooting.

"What we do not want to do is increase those tensions, or be the spark that causes something bad to happen in these neighborhoods."

Dyer reminded police that the "vast majority of the people" who live in the neighborhoods they will patrol are "good people."

Dyer also applauded officers for removing 550 guns "out of the hands of the wrong people" — including an AK-47-like assault rifle that was seized Wednesday morning from a residence on the 600 block of West Hawes Avenue, west of Highway 99.

Officers took Freddie Wilson, 22, of Fresno, into custody for alleged weapons violations and possessing a rifle near a school.

The Hawes residence was adjacent to the Edison-Bethune Charter School. Police asked the school to go into a lockdown while officers investigated. The lockdown was only temporary.

Dyer said he wants Fresno residents to know "we are there for them. That we understand that they are living in these

neighborhoods, oftentimes in fear and oftentimes they feel alone. We want them to know that we are going to stand with them.”

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