

# Shooting of Fresno girl frustrates police chief after drop in gang violence

By Marc Benjamin

A memorial service for Janessa Ramirez was held at Cornerstone Church Saturday. THEFRESNOBEE

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The day after Christmas 2002, Andrew Mitchell was playing with a “sticky hands” toy outside his southwest Fresno home. About the same time, two cars roared down his street in a gang-related pursuit, gunfire crackling from open windows. Seconds later, the 6-year-old was on the ground with a gunshot wound to his back, unable to feel or move his legs.



A tragically similar scene occurred last Sunday when Janessa Ramirez, 9, was fatally injured outside a Fresno laundromat west of Highway 99, caught in crossfire as gang members in two cars fired at each other.



Despite the publicity that accompanies horrendous incidents such as Janessa’s slaying, Fresno has become safer, with lower murder rates, even as the city’s population has grown.

But gang-on-gang violence fueled a 20% increase in murders in Fresno in 2014 and more murders were committed with firearms compared to 2013, the Fresno Police Department reported in a 2014 year-end analysis.

Not all the shooting victims were gang members. A 5-year-old girl was shot in southwest Fresno in August. A 4-year-old boy was struck by gunfire in southeast Fresno in July. A 16-year-old boy who was mistaken as a gang dropout was killed in March.

One Fresno State professor says Fresno is America’s “gang capital” because it has more gang members per capita than any other city.

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer said gang shootings remain a problem, but one that does not seem as insurmountable as 20 years ago.

As bad as it seems now, the violence has ebbed since the tumultuous early 1990s, when Fresno was a little more than half the size it is today. Fresno-area police investigators handled 480 homicides between 1992 and 1995. By contrast, Fresno homicides totaled about 252 from 2011-14.

As 2014 ended, police sweeps led to gang arrests by the hundreds and dozens of guns were taken off the streets. Dyer said shootings were dropping, but Janessa’s death only emphasizes that more work is ahead.

“It doesn’t really matter what your homicide rate is — when you get a child shot and killed in your city, nothing else matters,” Dyer said.

‘The unthinkable’

For Stephanie Adams-Mitchell, Andrew’s mother, Janessa’s death was all too reminiscent. She knows she’s luckier — Andrew survived.

He is now 18 and preparing to finish high school, but he’s had to use a wheelchair since the shooting and must go to

doctors' appointments two or three times each week. Still, Adams-Mitchell counts her blessings, calling the appointments part of the routine that is her life.

"I know the feeling, but I don't know the feeling of losing my baby," she said. "I know her hurt goes beyond that ... her is the unthinkable, every parent's worst nightmare."

And, over a gang war. "Senseless," she said.

Adams-Mitchell hasn't spoken with Janessa's mother, Stacey Gonzales. But if she could, she would advise Gonzales to "believe in God. Trust him. Even when we can't trust His hand, we can trust His word."

Andrew's alleged shooter never went to trial, because the statute of limitations expired and nobody would offer evidence in court to give prosecutors a solid enough case. But the suspect was sent to state prison for eight years in another crime. Janessa's killer won't catch the same break. Murder has no statute of limitation.

When Adams-Mitchell learned more about her son's alleged shooter, she wasn't angry with him.

"I feel sorry for him," she said. "When I heard his story I realized he didn't have a chance from birth. He still should have known better but he never had anybody to teach him."

In Janessa's case, Adams-Mitchell said, the shooter's life is ruined, too.

"I feel sorry for the gang members, they took a life and don't even know how precious life is," she said. "Now, two lives are gone, because when they catch him, he's going to get life (in prison)."

Feeling safer?

Nationwide, the murder rate is down. After peaking at 10 per 100,000 about 15 years ago, it's now about half that number.

Fresno's murder rate is higher than the national average, but still much lower than it was two decades years ago.

But as Americans are bombarded with news of the latest murders by mass media, they are left with the impression that they should feel less safe when the opposite is closer to the truth, said George Kikuchi, an assistant professor of crime mapping and statistics at Fresno State.

"Even if the society is getting safer and safer, the media features homicides and violent crime as the top news story, so people may not feel the community is getting safer and safer," he said.

Most homicides aren't random but are committed in private homes by people known to the victims, so police are unable to prevent many of them, he said.

But while homicide rates are falling, gang-involved killings are rising, Kikuchi said.

"Gang-related homicide is increasing in California," Kikuchi said. "More than 30% of homicides in California are gang-related."

A study by Temple University Professor Jerry Ratcliffe released three weeks ago found that most Philadelphia homicide cases "are the result of minor disputes that flared up with little to no warning, or are the result of disputes between participants in gangs or drug organizations who conceal their business and would never seek the intervention of the police."

His study, titled "Why we shouldn't fixate on homicide numbers," also showed that Philadelphia police spent 0.021% of their time investigating homicide cases.

Said Ratcliffe: "Homicides comprise so little of the work of a police agency, and the chances of most people being a victim of homicide are so low, that they tell us little about the experienced crime rate or the quality of life for city residents."

## Gang capital

Even though homicides are down and people should feel safer, Fresno is saddled with intractable gang problems that create the opposite effect.

"Fresno may be the gang capital," Kikuchi said. "Police in Fresno are definitely facing difficult issues."

Kikuchi compiled a list from the federal Department of Justice's Uniform Crime Report and found that Fresno's number of gang members was fourth highest in the U.S., behind Los Angeles, Chicago and San Bernardino. But on a per capita basis, Fresno exceeded those cities.

Many in Fresno are Bulldog gang members. They have very little organizational structure, Kikuchi said, which could lead to more random violence than in other cities.

Dyer said Los Angeles street gangs take their cues from prison shot callers. He said an assistant Los Angeles police chief told him that one of the edicts from shot callers prohibits shooting at homes and businesses where there may be innocent victims.

Although gang violence still occurs, Fresno today is better than the recklessly violent early 1990s.

"We had a lot of gang violence," Dyer said. "We were having multiple drive-by shootings daily."

Dyer said innocent children were frequently shot and carjackings and home-invasion robberies occurred nightly.

"We were a department under siege," he said.

Every night there were 100 calls holding, waiting for police assistance, when he arrived and 100 similar calls when shifts ended, he said.

He credits tougher laws, such as the "Three Strikes" legislation inspired by Mike Reynolds of Fresno for cutting crime into the late 1990s and into the early part of the new century. Reynolds' daughter, Kimber, was shot and killed in a robbery in 1992 in the Tower District.

But recent moves toward emptying state prisons and more lenient sentencing for such crimes as drug offenses are leading to a new uptick in crime.

It's been noticeable, especially since November's passage of Proposition 47, which allows many drug offenders to go free, said Selma Police Chief Greg Garner.

Offenders will face misdemeanors instead of felonies for nonviolent crimes unless the suspect has prior serious offenses. It also permitted resentencing of anyone in prison on felony charges that were reduced to misdemeanors.

"They (crime rates) haven't gone up drastically, but there is a trend," Garner said. "Most of it is property crime, but it's concerning."

While the rise isn't necessarily gang-related, Garner points out that drug activity often has gang connections and those using drugs commit property crimes.

Sanger also has seen a slight increase in crime recently, after the city went months without gang-related incidents or significant crime, said Chief Silver Rodriguez.

But, despite cuts to the Fresno Police Department — there were 849 officers authorized eight years ago compared with 717 today — crime remains down.

After Dyer started gang sweeps last month in response to a rise in violence, the number of shootings fell sharply.

The sweeps also led to 79 firearms seized, 81 search warrants executed and 476 felony gang arrests.

“We’ve made some impacts, but I really believe these are short-term gains and we have to look at this long term,” he said. “We have to rebuild public safety ... but we want to keep things calm until we can get to that point.”

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