

East P.A. reacts to surge in violence

Police arrest eight people in sweep for parole violators

By **Martha McPartlin**
STAFF WRITER

EAST PALO ALTO — Not since 1992 — a year synonymous here with violence and murder — has East Palo Alto seen so many shootings over such a short period of time.

Since October, there have been 13 shootings, killing five men. Most recently, two men were shot and a third bludgeoned during a drug-related robbery last Friday, leaving one dead and another in critical condition.

The crimes have prompted police to take measures similar to those employed 10 years ago, such as enlisting the help of other law enforcement agencies, to thwart criminals before they strike, and stop the trend from escalating.

It was the violence during first two weeks of the year — in which four people were shot — that convinced Police Chief Wesley Bowling that something had to be done before the situation got any worse.

Please see **Surge**, NEWS-10

Surge: 'Cavalier' nature of crimes called disturbing

Continued from NEWS-1

"This is 2002, and 1992 was a bad year for East Palo Alto," Bowling said. "That 10 year anniversary really bothered me.

"These folks here had to live in bathtubs in 1992," he said. "I'm not going to see my community live like that again."

East Palo Alto police say they have called upon a number of state and local law enforcement agencies, including the San Mateo County Sheriff's Crime Suppression team, to help corral parole and probation violators in the city.

The informal task force will also include the state Department of Justice Violence Suppression unit from the Bureau of Narcotics and, as needed, nearby police departments such as Redwood City and Menlo Park.

"We're trying to gather intelligence about the cause of the recent spate of violence to let us know why, where and who's involved," Lt. Rahn Sibley said.

Police action will include routine sweeps of the city for parole violators, of which the city made its first on Monday. It yielded eight arrests, one handgun and a "considerable" amount of narcotics, Bowling said.

"It tells us we need to look at doing this on a more frequent basis," Bowling said. "It sends a message to the community, and to the crooks."

Crime has subsided considerably since the tumultuous days of 1992, when as many as 64 uniformed officers from the East Palo Alto police and County Sheriff's departments patrolled the streets of the 2½-square-mile city.

So any significant increase is felt keenly here, Bowling said, and is cause for immediate action.

"The last several months was a pretty dramatic increase," said Lt. Gary Hoss, who until recently worked at the Sheriff's Regional Investigations Bureau in East Palo Alto. "They're a lot more brutal."

Most have been drug- or gang-related, and many are being committed in broad daylight, he said, characterizing the daytime criminals as disturbingly "cavalier."

Police say there may not be any simple factors to blame for the recent increase in crime, such as the economic recession. Although drugs are a constant problem, criminal activity by the Norteño and Sureño gangs has been on the rise, Hoss said.

The rash of crimes has resulted in a growing mood of concern and insecurity among the city's residents, said Mayor Duane Bay. Memories of 1992, when the city had the highest murder rate per capita in the nation, remain fresh in people's minds, he said.

"People are worried," Bay said. "People understandably become anxious that it's the beginning of a trend or a wave."

To ease residents' minds, the department is also planning a number of community meetings. Through them, police hope to rally residents to get interested in neighborhood watches and find out if people know anything about those involved in the recent crimes.

Police will also speak frankly to the community, specifically parents, about gangs and how to recognize if a family member or friend may be involved, Sibley said.

You can reach staff writer *Martha McPartlin* at 348-4324 or by e-mail at *marthamcp@hotmail.com*.