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TOP STORY

In light of arrests in Rodriguez murder, a deeper look at gang issue in Bennington

By Michael Albans, Bennington Banner
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The Bennington Police Department and other law enforcement agencies raid 546 Main St. in Bennington in July 2022. Authorities conducted another raid there on Oct. 12, marking Peter Aleksonis had been searched because of suspected narcotics trafficking.

Vermont News & Media file photo

Editor's note: This is part two of two on the article about the murder of Isaiah Rodriguez. Part one appeared in yesterday's Banner. This half will touch more on the disturbing pattern of gang activity, drugs, addiction and violence in the Bennington area, and what can – or already has – changed since his death.

BENNINGTON – The murder of Isaiah Rodriguez along a darkened dirt road in Danby in the winter of 2022 sheds light on how gangs operate in Vermont, and some of the brazen methods used to snare vulnerable addicts into a deepening spiral of violence, intimidation, and drug addiction.

Through FBI information, Vermont Drug Task Force investigations, Homeland Security investigator insights, witness interviews, intercepted jailhouse phone conversations, Facebook postings, cellphone data, and search warrant evidence – all obtained by an analysis of court records – we were able to, through Isaiah's murder and subsequent investigation, piece together how these gangs have operated and – in some cases – continue to operate in Bennington and beyond.



Simultaneous police drug raids net gangs, guns and cash
By Michael Albans, Bennington Banner

According to documents from an investigator with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) who has been in the Bennington area investigating gang-related activity since 2021, HSI has seen numerous suspected gang-affiliated individuals coming to Vermont from cities in Hampden County, Massachusetts, including Springfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee. A majority of those gang members and associates are engaged in the illegal distribution of heroin, fentanyl, cocaine, and other controlled substances. In addition, these gangs often seek to obtain firearms unlawfully from Vermont residents.



ATF: Bennington man allegedly bought guns in Vermont for Massachusetts gangs
By Mike Donoghue, Vermont News & Media correspondent

While some of the individuals are affiliated with national gangs like the Latin Kings, the vast number of them are affiliated with hybrid local gangs. These hybrid gangs tend to be loosely organized around small geographic sections of Western Massachusetts cities. These hybrid gangs, complete with gang hand signs and slang terms, are the more prominent organizations operating here in Vermont.

The associated individuals encountered in Vermont tend to be in their late teens or early 20s. Due to their age, many are not formally validated as gang members. Many of these gangs also lack formal structure and membership, with some affiliated with more than one gang. Some of these individuals are later validated as members of national or transnational gangs. However, even if one is not validated as a gang member, their association with gang activity or symbolism can lead to violence by others in the gang world.



Gage Street drug house raid finds a possible gang and guns
By Michael Albans, Bennington Banner

The overwhelming majority of violence involved individuals or locations associated with these hybrid gangs. Despite the lack of formalized structure, these hybrid gangs have been engaged in levels of violence never previously seen in Bennington County.

In Bennington in 2022 alone, there were numerous gang-related crimes, including two homicides, several shooting incidents, two kidnappings, and 25 aggravated assaults, and numerous robberies. Many of these crimes were interrelated, with some of the same players appearing in several different cases.



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According to court documents and police sources, these hybrid gangs find convenient residences in and around the area through drug transactions with addicts here in Vermont. A person with an addiction is commonly offered drugs in exchange for an individual or several individuals to establish a “trap,” a slang term for the use of another person’s residence as a location to distribute drugs. Often, these addicts become indebted to the gang dealers inside their residences and are forced to sell on the gang’s behalf, becoming – in essence – drug slaves on behalf of the gang. Many are threatened with violence or worse if they say anything or don’t go along.

Several locations in the Isaiah Rodriguez story served as these distribution locations, including many in Bennington, Manchester, Pownal, Londonderry, Shaftsbury, Danby, and beyond. There were at least eight known locations mentioned in court documents.

One of those locations, 1342 Route 7 in Pownal, was the scene of a rival gang shooting the week before Isaiah's murder. Police state that members of the 03 Block Gang had taken over the residence after another national gang, the Latin Kings, had left, only to return to reclaim their "trap," a slang gang term for the use of another person's residence as a drug safe-house.

Isaiah, who had soured in the eyes of his gang leadership over a dispute about a missing handgun, was at that shootout. A week later, members of his own gang allegedly kidnapped him and took him to a deserted spot along rural Danby Mountain Road and murdered him.

According to a police affidavit, another one of those locations was a single-wide trailer in Bennington – the residence of Ashley Wicks and Shawn Bulson. Wicks and Bulson, who shared the trailer with Wicks' two small children, opened their home to members of the 03 Block Gang out of Massachusetts. Court documents and several surveillance videos reveal that both individuals drove Isaiah and other gang members up Danby Mountain Road that fateful night, then shortly after drove those same individuals back, while Isaiah's lifeless body with 16 gunshot wounds lay on top of the snow where they turned around.

Wicks and Bulson are, thus far, the only individuals charged in Isaiah's homicide, each facing a single count of accessory after the fact to his murder. Several of the alleged participants, including the shooters that night, are currently incarcerated on drug and weapons charges, both by Vermont and the federal government. Prosecutors in the Rodriguez case confirm that more arrests are pending.

Erica Marthage, State's Attorney for Bennington County, feels that drug trafficking gangs follow a basic business model. Gangs bring their product to a location where there is demand but not enough risk to impact profit margins. Moving to a small community where the police do not know you creates the perfect opportunity to grow a market under the radar of law enforcement. Out-of-state traffickers move into the home of a local person afflicted with substance use disorder in exchange for supplying them with drugs. Once rooted within our local drug culture, the resident finds it almost impossible to remove the dealer.

"Violent crimes, property offenses, and interpersonal violence increase with the increased drug supply," Marthage said. "Human trafficking and overdose deaths are also part of this supply model. Virtually all local gun violence has been attributable to the drug culture. The number of children, youth, and pets abused or neglected is higher than I've seen it in the last 20 years."

Marthage says the current approach to this practice has been to interrupt the day-to-day operations of these gangs and interfere with profit margins. Search warrants, criminal charges, and a constant police presence make doing business in Bennington less attractive. The Bennington Police Department, the Bennington County State's Attorney's Office, and other state and federal agencies share enormous amounts of information and track geographic data to inform their decisions. Numerous police raids ensue.

"The cycle of drug traffickers coming from another state is still happening, but it is lower than it was two years ago," Marthage said. "Keeping the pressure on at the community level is paramount to protecting our community and its residents."



'Pedal down:' Bennington police chief says crime stats are down, but more work to be done
By Jim Therrien, Vermont News & Media Correspondent

Local police and federal law enforcement stem the flow, but more follow in the footsteps of the gang before, creating what seems like an endless loop of violence and drug addiction. Bennington is not alone in the struggle to uproot these gangs. Many small towns face the same issues.

There are no easy answers. Meanwhile, stories like Isaiah's will continue to happen as drug addiction and the drive for profit continue to drive the motivation for gangs and what they bring with them.

MORE INFORMATION



Bennington PD struggling to keep up with drug influx into the community

'Gang activity in Southern Vermont is real': Police ID in-roads from the Springfield, Mass., area

Vermont State Police arrest third suspect connected to Isaiah Rodriguez homicide

Defendant in murder of Massachusetts teen arraigned on second felony count

Massachusetts gang suspect to take plea in attempted murder case

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