

At Issue:

Do street gangs represent a growing national problem?



ROBERT S. MUELLER, III
DIRECTOR, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

FROM STATEMENT BEFORE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE, JULY 26, 2007

Violent gangs are a nationwide plague that is no longer limited to our largest cities. Since 2001, our violent gang caseload has more than doubled.

We [created] the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) in Washington, D.C., to support our law-enforcement partners on the front lines. The NGIC shares information and analysis concerning the growth, migration, criminal activity and association of gangs that pose a significant threat to communities across the United States.

In Los Angeles we have come together on a task force with the Los Angeles Police Department and a number of other federal agencies to address gang violence. There has been a substantial reduction in gang violence in Los Angeles as a result of the joint efforts.

In support of the president's strategy to combat criminal gangs from Central America and Mexico, such as MS-13, the FBI has forged partnerships with anti-gang officials in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, among other countries. We are working with the U.S. Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security to support the FBI's Central American Fingerprint Exploitation (CAFE) initiative, which collects gang members' fingerprints in [these] countries, allowing the United States to deny entry to the country even if they utilize aliases. There are many thousands of persons associated with MS-13 in the United States, in Guatemala, in Mexico, in quite obviously El Salvador and several other countries. And the threat is not just limited to Los Angeles but [extends] throughout the United States.

Approximately a year ago, some 600 MS-13 individuals were arrested not only in the United States but in El Salvador and Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras in a coordinated take-down. A gang such as this that crosses borders is a function of globalization, which requires us to work cooperatively and build allegiances and alliances with our counterparts overseas, if we are to effectively address the scourge of gang activity.

Currently, we have more than 2,800 pending investigations into gangs and gang-related activities. The number of agents working such cases has increased by 70 percent. We routinely work with our state and local partners to combat this pervasive threat. Of our 188 Safe Streets Task Forces, 135 are dedicated to identifying, prioritizing and targeting violent gangs. We now have more than 600 agents serving on those task forces, along with more than 1,100 officers from state and local law enforcement. Last year, they convicted nearly 2,200 violent gang members.



SHEILA BEDI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JUSTICE POLICY INSTITUTE

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2008

Nationwide gang membership is at its lowest level in three decades, and there is no evidence that gang activity is growing. The myth of a growing gang menace is primarily fueled mainly by media sensationalism and the misuse of law-enforcement gang statistics.

Concern has spread from neighborhoods with longstanding gang problems to communities with historically low levels of crime, and some policymakers declare the arrival of a national gang "crisis."

An effective response to the perceived "gangs crisis" requires a more realistic grasp of the challenges that gangs pose.

Research shows that despite law-enforcement reports, most gang members are not youth of color, and most young people outgrow their gang affiliation within the first year, without law-enforcement or gang-intervention programs. Gang members play a relatively small role in the national crime problem. And gangs themselves play an even smaller role, since most crime committed by gang members is self-directed and not committed for the gang's benefit.

Therefore, the objective should not be to eradicate gangs — an impossible task — but rather to promote community safety and reduce youth violence, which continues to be a problem in some communities. Experience, research and advances in criminal justice have taught us a lot about gangs, allowing us to identify effective approaches to crime reduction.

Suppression remains the most popular response to gang activity despite research showing that such tactics can strengthen gang cohesion and increase tension between law enforcement and communities. African-American and Latino communities bear the brunt of the cost of failed gang-enforcement initiatives and are targeted for surveillance, arrest and incarceration, while whites — who make up a significant share of gang members — rarely show up in accounts of gang-enforcement efforts. City and state officials have spent billions of dollars on more police, more prisons and more punitive measures, with few results. The cost of uninformed policymaking — including thousands of lives lost to violence or imprisonment — is simply too high.

Effective public-safety strategies include proven, evidence-based practices that reduce youth crime and lower barriers to the reintegration into society of former gang members. Such policies promote jobs and education and create safer, healthier communities. Rather than play to the false fears embodied in some legislative responses to youth violence, we should build upon the positive approaches that we know work with youth.