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FBI: Burgeoning gangs behind up to 80% of U.S. crime

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Enlarge By Robert Nickelsberg, Getty Images

Los Angeles Police Department officers question MS-13 members in 2007. The ubiquitous gang, which originated among Salvadoran refugees settling in L.A. in the 1980s, has spread to 42 states, with cells in suburban and rural areas.

By Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY

Criminal gangs in the USA have swelled to an estimated 1 million members responsible for up to 80% of crimes in communities across the nation, according to a gang threat assessment compiled by federal officials.

The major findings in a report by the Justice Department's National Gang Intelligence Center, which has not been publicly released, conclude gangs are the "primary retail-level distributors of most illicit drugs" and several are "capable" of competing with major U.S.-based Mexican drug-trafficking organizations.

"A rising number of U.S.-based gangs are seemingly intent on developing working relationships" with U.S. and foreign drug-trafficking organizations and other criminal groups to "gain direct access to foreign sources of illicit drugs," the report concludes.

The gang population estimate is up 200,000 since 2005.

Bruce Ferrell, chairman of the Midwest Gang Investigators Association, whose group monitors gang activity in 10 states, says the number of gang members may be even higher than the report's estimate.

"We've seen an expansion for the last 10 years," says Ferrell, who has reviewed the report. "Each year, the numbers are moving forward."

'Growing threat' on the move

The report says about 900,000 gang members live "within local communities across the country," and about 147,000 are in U.S. prisons or jails.

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MS-13 SPREADING

The violent Salvadoran gang MS-13 has cells, or "cliques," in 42 states. States reporting no MS-13 presence:

- Alaska
- Delaware
- Maine
- Minnesota
- North Dakota
- New Hampshire
- New Mexico
- Vermont

Source: FBI

"Most regions in the United States will experience increased gang membership ... and increased gang-related criminal activity," the report concludes, citing a recent rise in gangs on the campuses of suburban and rural schools.

Among the report's other findings:

- Last year, 58% of state and local law enforcement agencies reported that criminal gangs were active in their jurisdictions, up from 45% in 2004.
- More gangs use the Internet, including encrypted e-mail, to recruit and to communicate with associates throughout the U.S. and other countries.
- Gangs, including outlaw motorcycle groups, "pose a growing threat" to law enforcement authorities along the U.S.-Canadian border. The U.S. groups are cooperating with Canadian gangs in various criminal enterprises, including drug smuggling.

Assistant FBI Director Kenneth Kaiser, the bureau's criminal division chief, says gangs have largely followed the migration paths of immigrant laborers.

He says the groups are moving to avoid the scrutiny of larger metropolitan police agencies in places such as Los Angeles. "These groups were hit hard in L.A." by law enforcement crackdowns, "but they are learning from it," Kaiser says.

MS-13 far-flung from L.A. incubator

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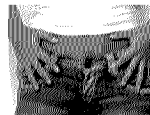
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One group that continues to spread despite law enforcement efforts is the violent Salvadoran gang known as MS-13.

Michael Sullivan, the departing director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, says the gang's dependence on shocking violence to advance extortion, prostitution and other criminal enterprises has frustrated attempts to infiltrate and disrupt the insular group's activities.

"MS-13's foothold in the U.S. is expanding," Sullivan says.

Kaiser says the street gang is in 42 states, up from 33 in 2005. "Enforcement efforts have been effective to a certain extent, but they (gang members) keep moving," he says.

MS-13 is the abbreviation for the gang also known as Mara Salvatrucha. The group gained national prominence in the 1980s in Los Angeles, where members were linked to incidents involving unusual brutality.

Since then, it has formed cells or "cliques" across the U.S., says Aaron Escorza, chief of the FBI's MS-13 National Gang Task Force.

The task force was launched in 2004 amid concerns about the gang's rapid spread. Gang members were targeted in broad investigations similar to those used to bust organized crime groups from Russia and Italy.

Among law enforcement efforts:

•**Omaha:** The last of 24 MS-13 members swept up on federal firearms charges and conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine were sentenced last year in the largest bust since the group emerged there in 2004.

The gang's strength dimmed as a result, but the nine-month probe did not eradicate the group, says Ferrell, who assisted in the investigation.

•**Nashville:** During the last two years, 14 MS-13 members pleaded guilty on charges ranging from murder to obstruction of justice.

Davidson County, Tenn., Sheriff Daron Hall, whose jurisdiction includes Nashville, says MS-13 started growing there about five years ago, corresponding with an influx of immigrant labor.

Last April, county officials began checking the immigration status of all arrestees. "We know we have removed about 100 gang members, including MS-13," to U.S. authorities for deportation, Hall says.

•**Maryland:** Earlier this month, federal authorities said they had convicted 42 MS-13 members since 2005. More than half were charged in a "racketeering conspiracy" in which members participated in robberies and beatings and arranged the murders of other gang members, according to Justice Department documents.

In one case, Maryland gang members allegedly discussed killing rivals with an MS-13 leader calling on a cellphone from a Salvadoran jail, the documents say.

Escorza says a "revolving door" on the border has kept the gang's numbers steady — about 10,000 in the U.S. — even as many illegal immigrant members are deported.

The FBI, which has two agents in El Salvador to help identify and track members in Central America and the United States, plans to dispatch four more agents to Guatemala and Honduras, Escorza says.

"They evolve and adapt," he says. "They know what law enforcement is doing. Word of mouth spreads quickly."



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AnybodyThinking (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 10/29/2009 1:10:53 PM

Does this statistic seem just a little bogus to anyone else? 80%? really? What kind of crimes are we talking about here? This certainly can't be 80% of ALL crime. I understand the city I live in is not that



big, but there is certainly crime here. Of all the people I have met in this area that have committed or been a victim of crime, almost none of it would be gang related. Unless your definition of "gang" is very, very, loose, and your definition of "crime" is very strict, this article just serves to fear monger, as that statistic cannot be correct.

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arlenejohnson57 (19 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/23/2009 3:22:13 PM

The wrong solution is to expect law enforcement to protect. Society as a whole has become evil. And when the world as a whole becomes evil law enforcement doesn't make one bit of difference.

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arlenejohnson57 (19 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/23/2009 3:19:30 PM

This is the war. I predict the underplay of crime and the drug cartels, sex trade, society falling apart, society has no moral and values, employers and corporations are corrupt, corrupt government, lawlessness. People living in fear. Elderly victims targeted. A new age.

We here more on the goings on in the middle east but the epidemic that is going on in this country. People are no longer safe. They do not go out at night because their freedoms are limited in being the target of crime.

Mexico is no longer a government but ruled by the Drug Lords with alot of rich Americans making money those drug cartels such as Allen Stanford. How many more?



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Dunn Eggink (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/17/2009 5:42:18 PM

The drug war corrupts police and instigates rebellion against the law.

The drug war doesn't work and therefore makes a mockery of our highly capable law enforcement agencies. There are too many ways that our brave police officers can find themselves caught up in borderline criminal activities while spending time policing the drug world, distracted from their real duties. We believe that if you turn drug use into a private personal issue, instead of a state issue, the black market dealers will loose the thrust of their power and all that money they've been making would be in back in the legitimate markets. Let's just focus on real crimes which pose a provable threat to public safety, like gang violence, professional thieving and sexual predators. While pot smoking is notoriously controversial among Conservatives, it doesn't deserve our attention as a primary issue in this critical time of trial and tribulation. There's no sense in sending out the swat teams for an herb that's no more mind altering than common cold medicines and is not killing anyone.

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Dunn Eggink (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/17/2009 5:39:17 PM

Effective Law Enforcement

Ending cannabis prohibition will drastically reduce wasteful government spending and corruption of law enforcement officers. Half of the police budget is spent on investigating and prosecuting non-violent drug offenders.

Law enforcement funds should be used to fight real crimes like murder, robbery, sexual abuse, fraud, assault, domestic abuse, driving while intoxicated, money laundering, cyber crimes, government corruption, vandalism, arson, conspiracy against rights, and medical and legal mal-practice. In todays socio-economic upheaval we need all the recources available to suppress gang violence, prevent home invasion and protect our citizens against real threats to their safety.

With the lessening of profits available in the street drug business, that will certainly come about with the end of prohibition, our inner-city youth will have more incentive to get an education and seek a legitimate career. No more kingpins.

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onecaguy12350 (29 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/1/2009 12:51:36 PM

"comicpro wrote: 7h 7m ago

I am less afraid of the gang members who are usually identifiable and prey on thier own than the guys in the suit and tie who have lost my entire retirement! Its the usual fear tactic used to justify the harassment of undesirable immigrants or minorities. The war on drugs under reagan did not work yet the law enforcement budgets ballooned over that period. Bottom line is there are going to be gangs, they are going to make money the way they know how and they will continue to kill each other!"

Except they don't just kill each other.

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onecaguy12350 (29 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/1/2009 12:46:13 PM
 Illegals: they do the jobs Americans won't do.

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comicpro (40 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 2/1/2009 5:43:00 AM
 I am less afraid of the gang members who are usually identifiable and prey on thier own than the guys in the suit and tie who have lost my entire retirement! Its the usual fear tactic used to justify the harassment of undesirable immigrants or minorities. The war on drugs under reagan did not work yet the law enforcement budgets ballooned over that period. Bottom line is there are going to be gangs, they are going to make money the way they know how and they will continue to kill each other!

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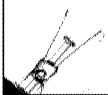
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