

PRISON GANGS

Guns, drugs, and violence lead to the belief that "life is cheap." This has become a dangerous and universal attitude adapted by many young gang members today. That lack of respect for life is an ever present danger to the public and the law enforcement professionals who work with gang members.

Being in a gang has become a way of life being cultivated and promoted by vicious prison gangs whose reach and impact extend far beyond prison walls. Prison and street gangs have become a cancer to our communities.

How do we break that cycle? At the last Chief Probation Officers Association training session the latest trends and developments involving California's prison gangs and their influence on street gangs was discussed. A working knowledge of the prison gangs is a necessary step when looking for approaches to breaking the cycle of gang involvement. What follows is a peak into the world of prison gangs.

Mexican Mafia and Sureños

Although they are not the largest in terms of numbers, the Mexican Mafia, also known as La EME, is the most influential and powerful gang in the prison system and on the streets of Southern California.

Through murder and intimidation, the Mexican Mafia has grown to be the most powerful and influential prison gang in the system. Their origin dates

back to the 1960's when 16 gang leaders from East Los Angeles barrios formed a deadly alliance to control the prison narcotics trade.

Recruitment of local Hispanic street gangs extend the Mexican Mafia grip deep into the neighborhoods of Southern California communities. La EME also taxes local Hispanic street gangs who peddle narcotics. This recruitment and taxation combine to make the Mafia a dangerous force in the underworld of prison gangs.

Within prison walls La EME "shot callers" direct Southern Hispanics, also referred to as Surenos, to assault other inmate groups and staff. Prison records indicate the Surenos are involved in many of the prison melees or mini-riots.

A recent split in the leadership of La EME has caused prison officials and jail staff to closely monitor the internal struggles to insure safe housing and double celling of gang affiliates. The wrong placement of cellmates could lead to more violence in a prison system already exacerbated with gang warfare.

Some gang experts attribute the leadership split to a recent successful federal prosecution of the La EME leadership. The shake-up has lead to several Mafia leaders being scattered throughout the vast federal prison system.

The Norteno Movement

The gangs in Northern California are organizing at an alarming rate. In years past the Nuestra Familia or NF was the dominant gang controlling crimes in Northern California and Central Valley communities. However, following a successful federal prosecution of the NF in the mid-1980's, the NF went underground. While almost dormant the NF leadership directed a younger version of themselves to commit their crimes. That younger sub-group became known as the "Northern Structure" or "NS."

Throughout the past few years the NF and NS have emerged to include what is referred to as the "Nortenos" and "Nuestra Raza." Whatever they call themselves, the emerging gangs are a new generation of warriors who are terrorizing communities in Northern California and have added to the escalating violence in state prisons and county jails.

The Norteno movement has taken on a new dimension with the advent of "GUN" (Generation of United Nortenos). This coalition has recorded music cassettes and CD's promoting the gang lifestyle.

The Norteno movement is well entrenched in Stockton, Salinas, Sacramento, San Francisco, Santa Rosa and other communities. Their regiments are actively involved in violent street crimes and narcotics trafficking.

It has been recently reported the Norteno movement, like their rivals the Mexican Mafia, may be experiencing an internal struggle for leadership. It has been said the struggle may be generational. The younger, more violent members pitted against the older, possibly battle-weary veterans. This situation is also being closely monitored by gang experts for it could lead to further violence in our jails, prisons and communities.

Aryan Brotherhood

Most of the Aryan Brotherhood members are serving life sentences and are locked away in the security housing units within Pelican Bay State Prison, the states most secure lock-up. The Aryan Brotherhood, or AB's, have continued their criminal ways by using affiliates on the outside and within the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Although locked down in one of the most secure prisons in the country the AB continue their reign of terror by killing their own. There have been several in-cell homicides attributed to the AB or their affiliates inside Pelican Bay State Prison. The strangulation's and brutal murders have caused prison officials to single cell most AB members.

The recent murders are a clear message to other AB confederates that their allegiance to the AB criminal enterprise is a life-long commitment. "Blood in and blood out" is still a concept the AB membership seems to believe in.

Nazi Low Riders

The Nazi Low Riders (NLR) are the fastest growing gang in the California prison system. According to gang investigators the NLR originated in the California Youth Authority during the 1970's. Although they never amounted to much and were for all intended purposes defunct, they have in recent years emerged as a force to be reckoned with in several Southern California counties. From this southern base they have grown at an alarming pace.

With strongholds in the Inland Empire, Los Angeles and Orange counties, the NLR has spread hate and discontent throughout California and the state prison system.

Growing rapidly, they seem to pull from other smaller, less active white gangs such as the Peckerwoods and PENI (Public Enemy Number One). Functioning as an umbrella organization they are recruiting from a growing number of disenfranchised white inmates looking for a place to park their anger, hatred and predatory ways.

The Department of Corrections has identified the NLR as a prison gang based on their origin, organizational structure, and their threat to prison security.

With over 1,000 identified members and associates statewide, and their

propensity to assault staff and other inmates, the NLR are quickly becoming a severe problem in the prison system.

Gang experts believe a number of NLR members are being used and organized by the Aryan Brotherhood. This group remains loyal to the AB's while another group or faction sees itself as a separate entity with the capacity and desire to be far more violent than the older AB's.

Black Gangs

There has been a resurgence of organized activity with the Black gangs in the prison system. It was once said that during the 1980's the Black Guerrilla Family (BGF) prison gang failed in it's mission to recruit and organize the rapid influx of Crip and Blood street gang members when they entered the system in record numbers.

It is to law enforcement's benefit that the BGF was unsuccessful, for if anyone could organize the various black gangs, they could overrun the prisons and jails and wreak even more violence on the already overburdened system.

Recent reports reveal the BGF are actively recruiting and the Crips are reforming old alliances between certain sets. The Blue Note Crip Organization (BNCO) was a coalition of Crip sets which were active in the 1980's, but fell into disarray over lack of unified leadership. The latest information indicates the BNCO has recently reorganized and conspired to assault staff and extort money and goods for other inmates.

A unified front by Black gangs could lead to a greater degree of racial warfare inside our prisons. But, if history holds true most of the Black gangs will not unite, but remain within their own territorial limits.

Asian Gangs

The Asian gangs may be the most cunning and elusive of all. In prison the Asian inmates are still, for the most part, respectful of authority and dependable workers. Prison conditions for these war-torn survivors are cushy compared to where they migrated from.

However, on the streets, the Asian gangs are mobile, intelligent, and economically driven. They are profit motivated as evidenced by the crimes they are known to commit. Computer chip thefts, credit card forgeries, telephone cloning, and home invasion robberies of other Asians are just a few of the high profit and sophisticated crimes known to be perpetrated by organized and mobile Asian gang members.

Although not currently a problem to prison officials, the Asian gangs are

becoming more organized. They are gaining in numbers and strength within the California Youth Authority. Highly sophisticated, very mobile and sometimes downright cruel when committing their crimes, the Asian gangs pose a tremendous problem to the criminal justice professionals of the future.

Plunging into the world of prison gangs warfare could be humanly costly for the Asians, who lack the strength in numbers and possibly the willingness to fight for no reason other than to die, and sometimes for even less.

Bulldogs

The Fresno Bulldogs have been described by some gang investigators as a crimewave in the Fresno area and adjacent jurisdictions. Whether myth or truth, it has been said that a NF drop-out started the Bulldogs.

The California Youth Authority (CYA) gang experts report a large Bulldog population among the wards confined in their facilities. Growth in numbers and influence within the CYA add to the Bulldog's potential for someday dominating gang activity in the state prison system. However, at this time, the Bulldogs are outnumbered and over-shadowed by the larger Hispanic gangs.

In some institutions they regularly tangle with the Nortenos and in others take a neutral stand depending on the politics of the skirmish. In any respect, they could become the swing vote in any prison melee they decide to join.

Border Brothers

The state prisons have close to 20,000 illegal criminal felons confined to it's lock-ups. The Mexican contingent refer to themselves as the "Border Brothers." Entrepreneurs by nature, most in prison for drug offenses, they tend to continue their trade inside cell blocks and prison yards. They keep low profiles, work their prison jobs and ply their trade as narcotic traffickers. Once released and deported to their native countries, many return to the United States.

Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

The motorcycle gangs really pose no real problem in the state prison system. Known to be organized and industrious on the outside, they command very little attention from other gangs or the authorities.

The motorcycle gang members tend to distance themselves from the other white inmate gangs and mostly do their own time. Their years of

Methamphetamine abuse and spurts of unprovoked acts of violence tend to keep others at bay.

As anyone can see the prison gangs thrive on recruitment of young people. The evolution of young people to street gangs and on to prison gangs is happening at an alarming rate. Ultimately young people become the expendable soldiers used by older gang members in an unending war to gain profits and control narcotics. A balanced approach of prevention and enforcement may provide some of the answers to breaking the cycle and loosening the grip of gangs over young people.