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NW HIDTA Intelligence Bulletin



Street Gangs and Drug Trafficking

By Gabe Morales, King County Jail

Street gangs have been around for a long time. By 1820, the “Forty Thieves” gang was already active in New York City. They also had a junior sub-wing called the “Little Forty Thieves”. In this way, younger brothers were groomed and fostered into the gang. Street gangs were organized primarily as social peer groups for about 150 years. Large scale money making activities, including drug dealing, were only of secondary importance until the last few decades.

There are currently over 140 documented street gangs in King County, WA, with an estimated 10,000 members. Some gangs barely have three members while others have hundreds. The FBI and National Gang Intelligence Center estimates there are approximately 33,000 violent street gangs, motorcycle gangs, and prison gangs with about 1.4 million members active in the U.S. Many are sophisticated and well organized. They often use violence to achieve their means including murder, assault, and drive-bys. They also sell drugs, guns, and run prostitution rings.

The types of gangs we have in the Northwest vary and their make-up is often multi-ethnic but primarily of one particular race. For instance, Surenos are known to have Anglo members but are predominately Latino. Some gangs also tend to deal in certain products more than others. Mexican Black Tar Heroin is imported by cartels who often deal to Hispanic gangs who deal it to street junkies. The growth of Northwest Blood and Crip gangs happened in large part due to the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980-90s. In part, due to law enforcement targeting these California-based gangs, many youth in the Seattle area joined the Chicago-based (Black) Gangster Disciples instead. Crack is still in big demand today and Black gangs often deal it.

Methamphetamine is often preferred by Whites. Aryan Security Threat Groups and Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs such as Hells Angels, Bandidos, and Gypsy Jokers are more than happy to supply it. Oxycodone has traditionally been used more by Whites, many who initially were prescribed the powerful pain medication, but later got hooked on it. Seeing the demand grow, some Black gang members decided to get in on the action. In August, 2012, Seattle Police and the FBI arrested more than 20 people in an Oxy trafficking bust that reached from Northern California to Puget Sound, including the Central District (CD). Among the groups targeted in the investigation was the 21st & Union Street Hustlers faction of Black Gangster Disciples.

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Members of prison gangs like the Aryan Family or Norteno Bigg Doggs try to control drug trafficking within correctional facilities as well as sell it out on the street. Some dealers can become very wealthy, owning flashy cars and clothes. But contrary to popular myth and hype of belonging to a street gang, the average street gang member is not wealthy, or as they say “rich rolling”. They are often poor and do not know how to manage money well. Many of them are fronted dope by homeboys, so they sell get some for free, but if undisciplined they may be their own best customer. When this happens they are cut off from any future drug loans, but if continued to be hooked, they often resort to doing thefts and burglaries to support their habit.

Street gangs are also involved in financial fraud and other crimes. A 2009-2010 investigation involving the West Side Street Mobb (WSSM) and other investigations showed street gangs are using financial fraud criminal tactics to make money and to stay out of police radar while making significant profits. Additionally, numerous informants have stated street gangs use this tactic because if caught by law enforcement sentence penalties are far less than drugs, prostitution, or violent crime. Investigations into street gangs like Down With The Crew (DWTC) during Operation Used Car conducted by Seattle PD and FBI in early 2012 show they are obtaining large amounts of firearms to sell often from committing unoccupied residential burglaries stealing unsecured firearms to sell on the street. Such lucrative activity presents dangers in the community as more burglaries will occur as gang members attempt to obtain additions firearms.



West Side Street Mobb Tattoo



Down With The Crew drawing on jail cell wall

Courtesy: Gabe Morales



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Gang members are notorious for making “dope rips”, setting up a small buy, then doing a home invasion to take money and drugs. According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), trafficking and abuse of drugs creates an enormous drain on our America's economic, physical, and social health. In 2007, the estimated cost of illicit drug use to society was about \$200 billion dollars, including direct/indirect public costs related to crime, health, and productivity.

Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) still dominate supply and wholesale distribution of illegal drugs in the U.S., including here in the Northwest. But being close to the Canadian Border; however, there are also a lot of cross border crimes committed by groups such as Asian Organized Crime who deal with their counterparts here in “BC Bud” and “Ecstasy”.

A good example of this was when Quy Dinh “The Godfather” Nguyen was sentenced in February of 2102 to more than 25 years in prison for his role as the leader of the violent street gang “Seattle Boyz” and their junior wing “Young Seattle Boyz” (YSB). Nguyen eventually pled guilty to drug conspiracy charges, in conjunction with murder charges and organized crime charges in King County, WA. The YSB criminal organization laundered millions of dollars made from marijuana grows, drug trafficking, and gambling operations, as well as being linked to numerous murders, assaults, and shootings. Nguyen was also connected to the 2007 murder of his “right hand man” in the gang, Hoang Van Nguyen. It is common in gangs for internal feuding which leads to violence and sometimes results in splits in the gang to form new factions.

While in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, warring California based gangs as well as local gangs often fought over lucrative street corners to deal drugs, it is not uncommon now to see rival gangs dealing in proximity to each other in loose truces to make money. Gang wars cut into profits and attract more police attention. Of course low income people and gang members are not the only ones purchasing illegal drugs, the largest block of purchasers are middle class.

Mid-levels distributors from Mexican Cartels usually only sell by the pound and are very selective in who they deal with. You cannot just walk up and buy some dope; you have to be introduced by a long trusted and loyal customer.

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This is sometimes a Veterano or OG (Original Gangster) who has the “street cred” to make such a purchase and is not known as working with Narcs as a “Snitch”. American informants have told me a pound of Mexican grade marijuana in the Seattle area currently goes for around \$500-1,000 a pound. If sold for \$50-100 per ounce, a dealer can make around \$300-\$600 profit. If it has higher a THC content, like BC Bud grade, it can be purchased for \$2,000-4,000 per pound and you can buy retail quantities of BC Bud for approximately \$200-400 per ounce. Dealers in ounce amounts also usually require you have to be introduced by a trusted customer and this may be a street gang member with good reputation. Small time drug dealers in downtown Seattle are usually only selling in gram-sized dime bags (\$10 worth) or pin joints. Most are not going to risk selling out in the open in larger quantities.

Modern U.S. gang expansion into trafficking operations has grown as illegal drug consumption and profits have grown. Prior to about 2006, gangs along the Southwest border would buy their drugs from the Mexican DTOs via a mid-level distributor for their street level sales. Since that time some gangs and gang members have taken on a more logistical support role for the traffickers once the shipment enters the United States. They may not only protect drug warehouses, but also launder money and protect shipments across the border, transport bulk money currency back into Mexico as well as vehicles and weapons. Eventually, gangs may also help Mexican DTOs conduct enforcement operations aimed at traffickers in the United States who owed them money, as well as target rivals attempting to encroach on their claimed territory.

This working relationship between street gangs and the Cartels has become more obvious over the past seven years as increasing violence, including beheadings and body dismemberments have occurred in Mexico. Many times these are younger street gang members working for the cartels as enforcers. An example of this was the 2010 murders in Ciudad Juarez, where Barrio Azteca prison gang members who worked directly with the Carrillo-Fuentes Organization (Juarez Cartel) murdered a U.S. Consulate employee and her husband. California Mexican Mafia members have also worked for the Arellano-Felix Organization (Tijuana Cartel). Mara Salvatrucha and Eighteenth Street members have helped traffic drugs from Central America.

Mexican DTOs have moved drugs into this country since the 1970s, including into Washington State. Prior to 2006, many Cartels were often leery of using street gang members, they were not considered disciplined or trust worthy. Most Cartels preferred to use family members to conduct business as they were less likely to snitch to law enforcement and disrupt their distribution networks.



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But, as Mexican President Felipe Calderon increased pressure on the cartels with far more frequent arrests and successful interrogations of family members which led to more arrests and fatal shootouts with authorities, they changed tactics.

In order to better insulate themselves, as hostile takeover groups like Zetas moved in, they hired young guns, even teens. Street gang members also had good distribution networks and customers to move their product fast.

In short, the future outlook of Mexican DTOs and other organized crime groups working relationship with American street gangs is likely to increase, not decrease, in the future.

Gabe Morales was born in Yakima, Washington, which has a large number of Hispanic gangs. He's worked with at-risk kids in Seattle, Washington and became familiar with many emerging gangs. Gabe worked at Folsom State Prison for six years as a Corrections Officer, where he became very familiar with prison gangs and worked with gang affiliated youth in Los Angeles, California. Gabe has worked at the King County Jail in Seattle for over 18 years in the Classification Section where he specialized in Security Threat Groups and is considered a Subject Matter Expert. He is a past Advisor for the International Latino Gang Investigators Association (ILGIA) as well as being one of the Event Coordinators for the ILGIA 2012 International Conference held in Seattle.

Questions regarding this bulletin and requests for additional information can be directed to the Northwest HIDTA, Investigative Support Center (ISC) at (206) 352-3679 or deconfliction@nw.hidta.org.