



# Department of Justice

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**STATEMENT OF**

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM, HOMELAND SECURITY, AND  
INVESTIGATIONS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**AT A HEARING ENTITLED**

**“GANGS IN OUR COMMUNITIES: DRUGS, HUMAN TRAFFICKING,  
AND VIOLENCE”**

**PRESENTED**

**JULY 20, 2017**

**Statement of Kenneth A. Blanco  
Acting Assistant Attorney General  
Criminal Division  
Department of Justice**

**Before the House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations  
July 20, 2017**

Chairman Sensenbrenner, Vice Chairman Gohmert, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and Members of the Subcommittee. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Department of Justice's efforts to combat violent crime, and particularly, gang violence.

It is a top priority of the Department of Justice to reduce violent crime in America. As Attorney General Sessions has stated, violent crime is on the rise in certain areas. In 2015, the nation suffered the largest single-year increase in the violent crime rate since 1991, and the largest jump in the murder rate since 1968. Preliminary data for the first half of 2016 shows further increases. Gang violence has dominated news cycles far too often in recent months, and too many of our citizens live in fear of the violent criminals who threaten their safety and well-being.

But as Attorney General Sessions has also made clear, the Department of Justice cannot and will not accept these levels of violence. The Department will not concede a single block or street corner to the violent criminals threatening our communities and the public security of this nation. All Americans have the right to be free from violence, and to be safe in their homes, schools, jobs, and neighborhoods.

To stem the increase in violent crime plaguing our cities requires a multifaceted approach. We must balance strong enforcement, which takes violent offenders off our streets, with prevention measures, which stop youth from entering gangs in the first place. This approach requires that federal prosecutors use all available law enforcement tools in federal prosecutions. It requires the collaboration of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement leaders; victim and community advocacy groups; and crime policy experts to support and replicate successful local violent crime reduction efforts across the country. And it requires our continued commitment to support and work together with the dedicated federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement officers who provide the safe spaces where our communities can thrive.

**I. Overview of Gang Activity in the United States**

Gangs pose a serious threat to the rule of law and our nation. Approximately 33,000 street gangs, prison gangs, and criminal motorcycle gangs with about 1.4 million members are criminally active in the United States and Puerto Rico today. All pursue two common goals—to generate

revenue and to gain control over territory—and all use violence to boost illegal money-making activities and maintain control of their territories.

Street gangs pose a persistent and significant national threat. Some—such as Mara Salvatrucha, known as MS-13—have featured prominently in our national news in recent months.

MS-13 is a highly organized, transnational gang with an estimated 40,000 members worldwide, including an estimated 10,000 members here in the United States. It operates in at least 40 states and the District of Columbia, as well as the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. MS-13 is involved in a host of criminal activities to support its operations, including drug distribution, kidnapping, human smuggling, sex trafficking, murder, assassinations, racketeering, blackmail, extortion, and immigration offenses. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Treasury (Treasury) designated MS-13 as a transnational criminal organization in an effort to aid law enforcement efforts to target the gang's leadership and seize assets.

Although MS-13 is the only criminal street gang to bear this designation, other large, national criminal street gangs also inflict violence on our communities. Gangs such as the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang, the Latin Kings, the Bloods, the Crips, and the Gangster Disciples commonly participate in assaults, auto thefts, homicides, and burglaries, among other violent crimes, to advance gang objectives. Smaller, local neighborhood crews, too, commit violent crimes in furtherance of gang activities.

One of the most common money-making schemes of any gang, whether international, national, or local, is drug distribution. Large national street gangs smuggle, produce, transport, and distribute large quantities of illicit drugs throughout the country, often aligning themselves with international criminal organizations and drug trafficking organizations to obtain access to the global illicit drug market. Local street gangs and neighborhood crews in rural, suburban, and urban areas increasingly transport and distribute drugs in their areas, and often imitate larger national gangs to intimidate and gain the respect of their rivals. And as law enforcement knows all too well, drug trafficking is an inherently violent business. Drug dealers do not meditate disputes; they do not file lawsuits to collect past due payments. Drug dealers collect debts by the barrel of a gun. Drug trafficking that emanates from the U.S. southwestern border affects cities across the country, as gangs engage in violence to defend and increase their drug distribution territories.

Prison gang activity parallels that of street gangs. Prison gangs commit acts of assault, racketeering, extortion, murder, robbery, witness intimidation, and prostitution. Prison gangs across the nation also participate in smuggling contraband, including drugs, weapons, and cell phones, into prisons, because drugs generate money, weapons mean power, and cell phones connect prison gang members to street gang members on the outside. This nexus to street gangs constitutes one of the most significant threats posed by prison gangs, who have the ability to direct street gang members to commit violent crimes on behalf of the prison gangs. Prison gangs also pose a significant institutional threat because they often attempt to corrupt prison officials to accomplish their goals.

Lastly, criminal motorcycle gangs—who often recruit from street gangs and prison gangs—engage in various types of violent crimes to further the gangs' objectives. These crimes

commonly include weapons possession, assault, robbery, homicide, threats, intimidation and drug distribution.

The dangers posed by gang activity in our communities are clear. One of the principal challenges in combatting gangs, however, is their lack of uniformity. Many gangs are sophisticated and well organized, but levels of sophistication vary, as do size and other factors that influence gangs' criminal potential. Gangs are also adaptable and opportunistic; they often adjust to shifting circumstances and change behaviors to protect their interests. For example, gangs increasingly use technology and social media platforms to spread their messaging and recruit new members. Ultimately, each gang is a product of its unique environment, rules of conduct, and methods of operation. This means we must fight gangs city by city, neighborhood by neighborhood, and block by block.

## **II. Law Enforcement Response to the Threat Posed by Gangs**

Attorney General Sessions recently directed the Department to prioritize violent crime cases, identify the most violent offenders in each jurisdiction, and ensure that those criminals are both prosecuted fully and sentenced appropriately. This directive will help the Department to meet its core responsibility to advance public safety by reducing violent crime, and forms the backbone of the Department's strategy to target and reduce violence, including gang violence.

On March 8, 2017, Attorney General Sessions directed the United States Attorneys' Offices to identify the most violent offenders in their districts and to work closely with their federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement partners to determine which venue is best suited to ensure immediate and appropriate penalties for these violent offenders. When federal prosecution is appropriate, federal prosecutors must use all of the tools at their disposal to hold these violent offenders accountable and ensure appropriate sanctions under federal law. Attorney General Sessions directed federal prosecutors to consider, for example, charging these offenders under federal statutes designed to target violent crimes, including firearms offenses, Hobbs Act robbery, carjacking, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), violent crime in aid of racketeering, and drug offenses.

And, on May 10, 2017, Attorney General Sessions issued a memorandum revising the Department's sentencing and charging policy. This memorandum reestablishes the core principle that, consistent with the longstanding practices of the Department, prosecutors should charge the most serious, readily provable offense. This practice allows prosecutors to faithfully discharge their duty to uphold the law, while simultaneously allowing prosecutors to exercise discretion to deviate from this principal where good judgment would lead them to conclude that strict application of the policy would lead to injustice.

With this guidance in mind, the Department is committed to reducing violent crime and criminal activity across the country, including gang violence and drug and firearms trafficking. To do so, the Department relies on the expertise of the Criminal Division's Organized Crime and Gang Section (OCGS) and Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section (NDDS); United States Attorneys' Offices; four of its law enforcement agencies—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); the Federal

Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS); other federal law enforcement partners, including, for example, the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI); and its state, local, and tribal law enforcement partners.

At the national and international level, OCGS leads investigations and prosecutions of gangs and organized crime groups of regional, national, and international significance that operate in several different districts simultaneously. OCGS attorneys serve as subject matter experts on RICO, a statutory tool used to prosecute gangs and organized crime groups. Additionally, OCGS coordinates cases and investigations with U.S. Attorneys' Offices and law enforcement agencies across the country, promoting the sharing of information, leads, and best practices in gang and organized crime prosecutions.

At the federal level, United States Attorneys' Offices across the country have designated anti-gang coordinators, who are charged with developing local anti-gang strategies, in conjunction with state and local law enforcement partners. The experienced prosecutors in the United States Attorneys' Offices also handle multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional investigations and prosecutions of gangs and groups of regional, national significance, often combining with their partners at OCGS and with funding from the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) program.

Federal prosecutors, together with their law enforcement partners, have successfully targeted and dismantled criminal gangs throughout the United States, including the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas, the Gangster's Disciples, MS-13, and the Nine Trey Gangsters. In many of those cases, prosecutors obtained convictions and lengthy prison sentences for leaders and gang members alike. Below are just a few examples of the Department's successful investigations and prosecutions of these violent gangs:

- To date, federal prosecutors have indicted at least 68 members of the Gangster Disciples gang—a highly organized gang with a presence in more than 25 states, and which operates under national leadership—in multiple cases in three federal districts. Most recently, in June 2017, a federal grand jury in Nashville, Tennessee returned a 40-count racketeering indictment against eleven gang members, whose crimes included multiple murders and drug trafficking. This investigation is being conducted by the ATF and the DEA, in conjunction with multiple local law enforcement agencies. The OCDETF case is being prosecuted by OCGS and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Tennessee.
- In May 2017, in another OCDETF case, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California announced the takedown of MS-13 leadership operating in Los Angeles, California. As the result of a three-year investigation conducted by a violent crime task force led by the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department and comprised of DEA agents, ATF agents, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers, and state and local officers, prosecutors indicted 44 MS-13 members on various federal charges, including racketeering conspiracy charges. The OCDETF-investigation targeted the former head of the entire gang and 12 of the

gang's most senior leaders, who were responsible for directing the operations of the majority of the gang's Los Angeles-area cliques, and resulted in dozens of arrests.

- Also in May 2017, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of North Carolina indicted 83 members of the Nine Trey Gangsters faction of the violent United Blood Nation gang on federal racketeering conspiracy charges and charges related to murder, attempted murder, violent assault, narcotics distribution, firearms possession, and other crimes. More than 600 federal, state, and local law enforcement officers executed a coordinated takedown to effectuate arrests of these violent gang members in locations across North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina, New York, and Virginia, as part of an extensive OCDETF investigation conducted jointly by the FBI, ATF, the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, various state and local law enforcement agencies, and other federal agencies.
- OCGS also worked with its United States Attorney partners in a multi-regional OCDETF investigation and prosecution of the leadership and other members of the prison and street gang known as the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas, whose crimes included murders in four districts of Texas, two districts in Oklahoma, and two districts in Mississippi. Between 2008 and 2016, prosecutors indicted and convicted more than 70 people in this investigation, including senior gang leadership, in eight federal districts for six murders and numerous fire bombings, attempted murders, and significant cocaine trafficking and other crimes. The cases were investigated by FBI, DEA, ATF, HSI, USMS, the Bureau of Prisons, and state and local law enforcement, and prosecuted by OCGS and the U.S. Attorneys' Offices for the Southern District of Texas, the Northern District of Oklahoma, and the Northern and Southern Districts of Mississippi.
- Federal prosecutors have indicted and convicted multiple MS-13 leaders who ordered murders and coordinated criminal activity in the United States from their cells in a Salvadoran prison. For example, in June 2015, OCGS and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia secured the convictions of three MS-13 members, each of whom received sentences of life in prison, for the murder a 14-year-old boy and other individuals, committed at the instruction of an MS-13 leader incarcerated in El Salvador. HSI and the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department led that investigation, with assistance from multiple other federal, state, and local law enforcement partners, including the OCDETF program. Likewise, in the District of Maryland, in 2008, a grand jury indicted two international MS-13 leaders who are currently incarcerated in El Salvador and who ordered Maryland-based MS-13 clique members to commit murders. ATF, FBI, ICE, and state and local law enforcement investigated and OCGS and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Maryland prosecuted the case.
- OCGS and its U.S. Attorney's Office partners have also indicted and convicted multiple MS-13 leaders and gang members in Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Tennessee. For example, in 2010, in metropolitan Atlanta, OCGS and the U.S.

Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia charged 26 MS-13 members and associates with engaging in multiple violent racketeering acts over the course of a five-year period. The charges included seven murders, attempted murder, a dozen non-fatal shootings, and dozens of armed robberies. Of the 26 defendants charged in the case, 15 pleaded guilty; seven defendants pleaded not guilty and were convicted in three different trials in 2013; and four defendants remain fugitives. In 2015, these gang members were sentenced for their crimes. Four of the defendants convicted at trial received mandatory life sentences for multiple murders, and many defendants received prison sentences of between 11 and 30 years. Ultimately, during the course of this investigation, more than 75 MS-13 members were arrested, charged, or deported, thanks to the hard work of the HSI, FBI, and USMS agents who investigated the case, along with their state and local colleagues.

Prosecutors across the country continue to target new and emerging gang threats, and to bring RICO charges where appropriate. For example, federal prosecutors recently announced takedowns and indictments of the Vagos Outlaw Motorcycle gang and the Baltimore-based Trained to Go gang, both of whom engaged in violent racketeering acts, including murders.

The Department also works tirelessly to staunch the flow of dangerous drugs that domestic gangs use to generate income and exert control over vulnerable communities throughout the United States. Using a federal law "long arm" statute, NDDS works with foreign law enforcement to prosecute foreign drug kingpins in South America, Central America, and Mexico and to interdict controlled substances, including heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine, before they enter the country. NDDS and its partner U.S. Attorneys' Offices have successfully prosecuted multiple major international drug traffickers who have been extradited to the United States to stand trial. For example:

- In April 2017, a federal court sentenced Alfredo Beltran Leyva, a former leader of the powerful Beltran Leyva Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) in Mexico, to life in prison for his role in a conspiracy to import large quantities of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana into the United States. From the early 1990s until his indictment in August 2014, Beltran Leyva led a global criminal enterprise responsible for importing multi-ton quantities of drugs into the United States. Beltran Leyva and his DTO produced multi-ton quantities of methamphetamine and heroin in Mexico for importation into the United States, and obtained ton quantities of cocaine from South American suppliers, which was destined for the United States. The DTO used weapons and carried out acts of violence, including murders, kidnappings, tortures, and violent collections of drug debts, to sustain their operations. NDDS and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York prosecuted the case, which was investigated by the FBI, in partnership with DEA and HSI through OCDETF. The Criminal Division's Office of International Affairs (OIA) also provided substantial assistance with the international aspects of the prosecution.
- In March 2016, NDDS obtained the convictions of Eliu Lorenzana-Cordon and Waldemar Lorenzana-Cordon, Jr., leaders of a major Guatemala-based drug

trafficking organization responsible for distributing hundreds of tons of cocaine to the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel for importation into Mexico, and ultimately the United States. NDDS established at trial that the Lorenzanas owned warehouses in Guatemala that were used to receive and store cocaine upon its arrival from South America, which they then distributed both to Mexican cartel representatives as well as to their own customers. As a result, Treasury designated the Lorenzanas as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act. The DEA investigated this case in conjunction with the Guatemala City Country Office, with funding through OCDETF; the Chicago Police Department and the governments of El Salvador and Panama also supported the prosecution. OIA provided substantial assistance with the international aspects of the prosecution.

The Department also has specialized task forces hard at work in cities with the highest concentration of firearm violence. For example, on June 30, 2017, Attorney General Sessions announced the establishment of the Crime Gun Strike Force, a permanent team of special ATF agents, task force officers, intelligence research specialists, and ATF Industry Operations investigators, who have been deployed to Chicago to assist Chicago Police Department task force officers, Illinois State Police task force officers, and ballistics specialists in targeting the most violent offenders, including gang members, wreaking havoc on the city.

This task force complements other, long-standing Department task forces focusing on reducing violent crime, including, for example, the FBI's 169 Safe Streets Task Forces, consisting of 800 Special Agents, approximately 1,375 federally deputized state and local law enforcement personnel, and 58 other federal law enforcement agents. The Safe Streets Task Forces leverage resources to investigate violent gangs, crimes of violence, and the apprehension of fugitives across the country. Other examples of the Department's work with and through long-standing task forces focusing on violent crime include ATF regional task forces, DEA regional task forces, High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) task forces, USMS Regional Fugitive and Local Fugitive Task Forces, and the OCDETF Co-located Strike Forces in Atlanta, Boston, New York, South Texas, and San Diego.

Task forces like these permit the Department to share information and leverage its resources to support and strengthen its relationships with state, local, and tribal officers. This work is critical to the fight against gang violence because state, local, and tribal officers account for more than 80 percent of law enforcement officers in this country—they are truly the front lines in this fight.

### **III. Intervention and Prevention Programs**

Federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement efforts to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate violent gang members have a significant impact on the quality of life in our communities. But enforcement alone will not end gang membership and gang violence. We must also address the



social factors that cause youth to join gangs in the first place through effective intervention and prevention programs.

The Department's grant programs, including the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), are essential to these efforts. OJP awards grants to a wide range of programs to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement departments; prosecutors' offices; court and corrections systems; juvenile justice agencies; victim service programs; and a variety of youth violence and gun crime prevention initiatives. OJP also serves as the Department's research and statistical arm, and continues to explore how existing grants, training and technical assistance, and research programs can better ensure officer safety and bolster law enforcement efforts targeted at high-crime communities.

OJP-supported programs assist law enforcement to disrupt gang activity and to discourage juveniles from becoming involved with gangs in the first place. For example, OJP and the Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention partner with ATF to offer ATF's Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program to middle and elementary school students. GREAT seeks to help students avoid gang membership, violence, and delinquent behavior, and teaches tactics to resist gang pressure and develop positive attitudes toward law enforcement. From its inception in 1991 through 2015, GREAT graduated more than seven million students and certified as GREAT instructors more than 14,000 law enforcement officers and professionals from more than 2,700 agencies. Such programs merit continued support.

Similarly, COPS assists state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in enhancing their effectiveness and advancing public safety through the implementation of community policing strategies. Many COPS-supported programs touch on issues related to gang violence.

For example, the COPS Hiring Program directly supports the Department's goal to reduce violent crime, especially gun violence. The COPS Hiring Program supports the hiring of sworn law enforcement personnel nationwide by providing grants to hire and re-hire entry-level career law enforcement officers in communities most in need. Program applicants may choose from several problem crime areas to target funding to improve public safety in their communities. This year, program applicants who choose certain problems as their areas of focus—including criminal gang violence—will receive additional consideration for funding for officer positions. Likewise, COPS Community Policing Development (CPD) funds are used to advance the practice of community policing in law enforcement agencies through training and technical assistance and the development of innovative community policing strategies, applied research, guidebooks, and best practices that are national in scope and responsive to the solicitation topic requirements. Through the 2017 CPD Microgrant Initiative, law enforcement agencies were invited to pick from several specific topic areas, one of which was "violent crime and/or gang reduction," to propose demonstration or pilot projects that offer creative ideas to advance community engagement, problem solving, or organizational changes to support community policing. The Department is currently considering applications for funding under these two specific programs.

In addition to these specific grant programs, COPS also supports partnerships among law enforcement agencies, schools, parents, youth, and community- and faith-based groups to reduce the influence of gangs in communities across the United States. To that end, COPS has developed

a toolkit of resources for law enforcement agencies to address various gang problems specific to their communities. Among other topics, resources include information on school-related crime, bullying, drug dealing, and gun violence; COPS also offers gang reference cards for parents, which identify warning signs that a child might be involved with a gang, and steps parents can take to prevent gang involvement.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Countering and reducing gang violence is, and will continue to be, a priority for the Department. The Department remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting our state, local, and tribal law enforcement partners in achieving this goal, and to continuing to work with Congress to address these important issues.