



**An LAPD gang officer
patrols the city's
tough 77th Division.**

DAVID BUTOW—REDUX FOR *US&WR*

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TERROR ON THE STREETS

The FBI prepares to help beleaguered police chiefs fight a new brand of gang violence that's spreading like wildfire

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN
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The thunderous show of force shattered the quiet dawn: Flash-bang grenades exploded, doors were battered down, and dozens of men were taken into custody. But the setting wasn't Fallujah or Ramadi; it was Southern California, where last January 400 armed Los Angeles police officers and FBI agents targeted the ultraviolent Bounty Hunters gang, which was terrorizing the residents of the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Watts.

The LAPD-FBI collaboration—which included federal indictments of 15 people—was at the leading edge of a quiet sea change inside the FBI: Three years after the September 11 terrorist attacks made counterterrorism the FBI's top priority, the bureau is slowly returning in part to its traditional roots: crime fighting. The FBI is preparing a broad new attack against gangs, *U.S. News* has learned, based on frightening intelligence assessments of the changing face of the problem. FBI Director Robert Mueller will soon unveil the strategy and the reasoning behind it in "A Report to the American People on Gangs." The bureau, Mueller told *U.S. News*, is obligated to respond to the growing "barbarity and the willingness to utilize homicide, torture, and assaults in furtherance of violent gang activities."

Sleeping tigers. Mueller's decision to step into the fray stems in part from the entreaties of police chiefs like the LAPD's William Bratton, who described gangs as a "sleeping tiger" to Mueller in a conversation last year. "Outside of New York, al Qaeda isn't killing people [in the United States]; gang violence is," Bratton told his old friend. After dropping dramatically in the late 1990s, gang-related killings have again reached alarming levels (chart, Page 23). And not just in cities like Los Angeles that long have had gang problems. Stunning levels of violence are also afflicting areas like Denver, Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham in North Carolina, Long Island, N.Y., and Washington, D.C.'s Virginia suburbs.

As a former federal homicide prosecutor in Washington, D.C., Mueller didn't need much convincing. "I've seen firsthand the devastation that gang activities and homicides can have in a community," Mueller told *U.S. News*, which obtained exclusive details of the FBI's new strategy. As part of the initiative, the bureau will:

- Centralize gang investigations at FBI



headquarters, setting priorities that are "intelligence driven."

- Reclassify gangs from "violent criminal offenders" to "criminal organizations and enterprises," placing them on a par with the traditional organized crime families. "Our job is to identify the biggest and baddest, and go after them," Assistant Director Chris Swecker, chief of the FBI's criminal investigative division, told *U.S. News*.

- Use federal racketeering statutes and tough federal sentences successfully employed against the Mafia to systematically dismantle entire gang organizations.

- Create new field gang task forces nationwide and convert most of the 140 Safe Streets violent crime task forces into units that specifically target gangs.

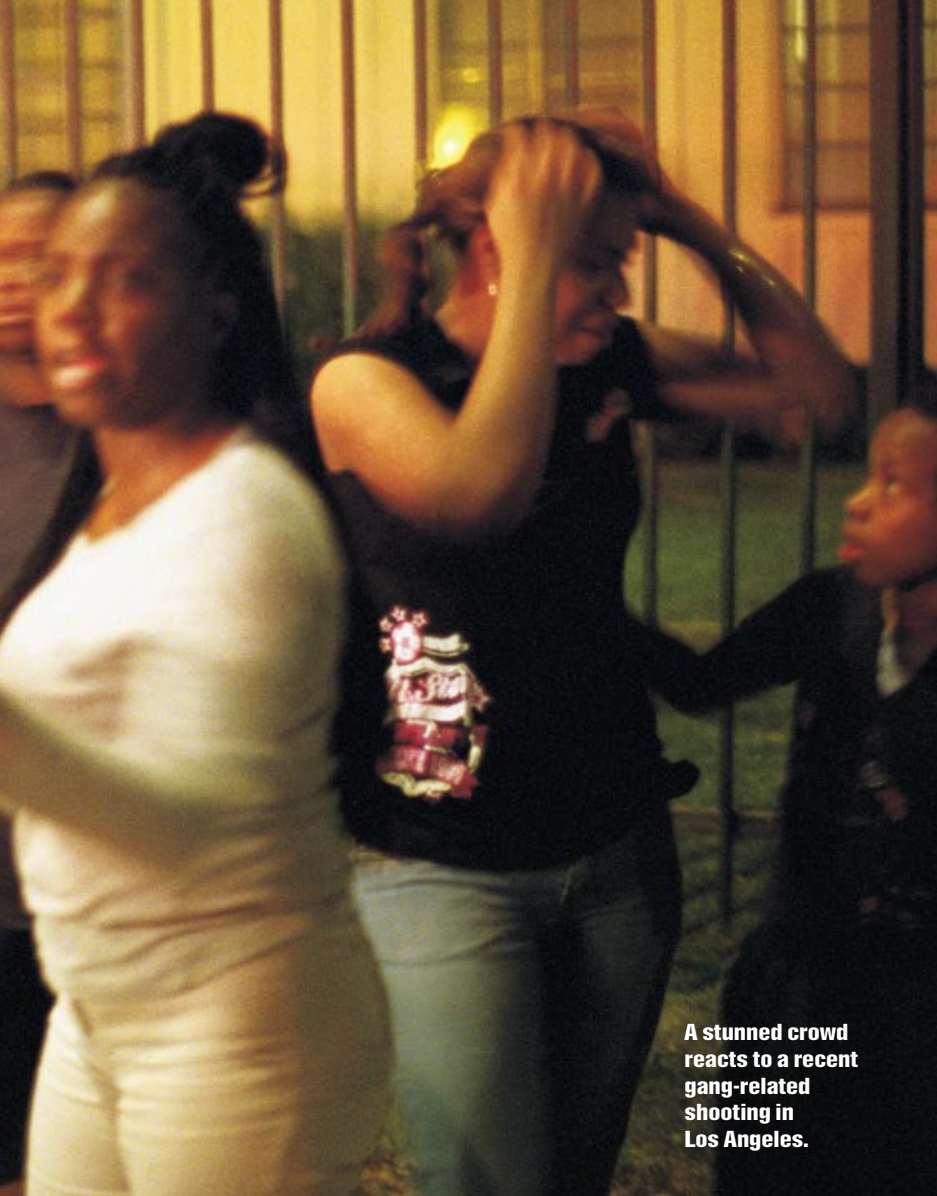
- Establish a \$10 million national gang intelligence center at FBI headquarters next year.

- Create a national gang task force to decimate one major gang—Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, a Latin gang that is "spreading like a virus" up and down both coasts, says FBI gang intelligence analyst Don Lyddane.

Federal authorities have moved against gangs before, but the effort has a checkered history. The bureau used federal racketeering statutes in the 1980s to hit the Hells Angels motorcycle gang and has used the statutes in other big gang cases. In 1988, the Drug Enforcement Administration took down major drug gangs in L.A. by creating a multiagency drug gang task force, but the FBI was not a big player. A 1994 National Drug Intelligence Center report described federal antigang efforts as "fragmented and ineffective."

By 2002, the FBI had created 73 specialized gang task forces, but the September 11 attacks diverted many agents.

The MS-13 gang is "spreading



A stunned crowd reacts to a recent gang-related shooting in Los Angeles.

Now the pendulum is swinging back, at least a bit. Homeland security consultant John Cohen, a former police officer involved in that DEA task force in Los Angeles, says the FBI has a tough job ahead. "These gangs are often decentralized and do not have a clearly defined system of leadership like the mob," he says.

But Cohen agrees with Bratton and Mueller that the FBI now has a key role to play—because of the violence level and the geographic spread of gang activity. The Justice Department estimates there are 21,400 gangs nationwide with 731,500 members who are engaged in drug and weapons trafficking, prostitution, alien smuggling, counterfeiting, burglary, forgery, welfare fraud, arson, motorcycle thefts, money laundering through tattoo parlor operations, bank robberies, and murder. The FBI's 2003 Uniform Crime Report released this fall showed violent crime continuing its

downward spiral, even as juvenile gang murders had shot up 25 percent since 2000. "Gangs have become sort of a cancer in this country," says FBI Special Agent David Bowdich. A new survey by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations finds there are now gangs "in every state but Vermont," says the group's president, Wes McBride.

Spreading. More than a year ago, Rep. Frank Wolf—who has been a driving force behind many of the new initiatives—saw troubling signs in his suburban Northern Virginia district. "When I told people there was a problem," says Wolf, "they just didn't believe me." The FBI has now identified 1,500 to 2,000 MS-13 members and 15 Asian gangs in Northern Virginia alone. Hispanic gang members and gang graffiti are even proliferating throughout the bucolic Shenandoah Valley, known for its quaint bedroom communities and bed-and-

GANG-RELATED HOMICIDES



Source: FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976–2003

breakfast inns. In July 2003, the body of a former gang member and FBI informant, Brenda "Smiley" Paz, was found by the Shenandoah River in Virginia. Paz, 17, pregnant, had been repeatedly stabbed, her throat slashed so violently that her head was nearly severed. Paz had left the federal witness protection program against the FBI's advice. Authorities allege that an MS-13 leader, Denis Rivera, 20, commissioned the killing from his jail cell—while awaiting trial in another federal murder case—to prevent Paz from testifying against him. Rivera has pleaded not guilty. Another eye-opener was the attack last May by three teenage Virginia MS-13 members, who cornered a 16-year-old rival gang member and slashed him with machetes, nearly severing four fingers on one of his hands and a thumb on the other. He survived. "We haven't had the volume of violence of, say, Los Angeles," says Thomas Kinnally, who heads the criminal division in the FBI's field office in Washington, D.C. "But our goal is to make sure it doesn't reach that point here."

Some Justice officials are concerned that these high-profile incidents in the FBI's and Congress's backyard are triggering a cookie-cutter approach. "We don't want to create a response that only targets the incredibly brutal, headline-grabbing event, and leave the prevention measures and other nuts and bolts of gang activity untouched," said Robert Flores, administrator of the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Malcolm Klein,

like a virus," says an FBI analyst.

an emeritus professor specializing in gangs at the University of Southern California, agrees. "It's shortsighted," says Klein, author of *Gang Cop*. "To define the gang problem as a crime problem is just working on the tip of the iceberg."

But FBI officials say a group like MS-13—now their biggest target—shows why a coordinated national strategy is necessary. MS-13 was created in Los Angeles by the children of immigrants who fled the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s, to protect themselves against a rival Mexican-American gang. As MS-13 members were convicted of crimes, they were deported from the United States, taking their violent gang culture deep into El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. As those governments began cracking down, MS-13 members illegally re-entered the United States and proliferated along the U.S. coasts. MS-13 is now a major problem even in southern cities like Charlotte and Durham, N.C., where Hispanics are the fastest-growing minority. "Anytime there's an increase in a demographic," says Lt. Mark Bridgeman, president of the North Carolina Gang Investigators Association, "we have a negative portion of the population that goes with it."

New wave. Between 2000 and 2003, 20 MS-13 gang members were charged with murder in Charlotte and surrounding Mecklenburg County; Charlotte police estimate that about 200 MS-13 members live in and around the city. In Durham County, police say there may be 40 to 60 gangs, with 3,500 to 4,000 members. "I didn't expect to see any gang activity here," says Durham County sheriff's deputy Elliott Hoskins, who former-

ly worked in San Diego. "I moved from California to get away from gangs, and I got here and ended up running into them again." Last August in Durham, a 19-year-old Honduran native named Franklin Manacer-Herrera was arrested and charged with stabbing Chanda Brown Mwicigi, 26, to death. The construction worker then allegedly stomped on Mwicigi's skull and carved "MS-13" into her thigh. Authorities contended in court that he confessed to the crime. Public defender Mark Edwards says his client is not affiliated with U.S. gangs, but police allege Manacer-Herrera is definitely a gang member.

Even hardened cops are rattled by gang members' seemingly casual embrace of violence. Just this year, a Virginia gang member was convicted of conspiring to murder a police officer, and Charlotte, N.C., and Prince George's County, Md., police got death threats after arresting MS-13 gang members. Two purported gang members, one with an AK-47, allegedly murdered an off-duty Los Angeles County police captain during an apparent robbery attempt.

Many cops are still trying to fight the good fight, but they're badly outnumbered. Last month, Los Angeles County residents defeated a half-percentage-point sales tax hike that would have put hundreds of new cops on the street. And on a recent cold evening, two LAPD officers were observed trying to chase nearly three dozen gang members on foot. Chief Bratton hopes more federal assistance will help even the score. But 10 months after that much ballyhooed LAPD-FBI gang raid at Nickerson Gardens, the City of Angels is still a city under siege. ●

With Jon Elliston in Durham, N.C.

MARKED. Young gang members showing off their tattoos in a Honduran prison



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