

September 1996

# VIOLENT CRIME

## Federal Law Enforcement Assistance in Fighting Los Angeles Gang Violence





**General Government Division**

B-260641

September 6, 1996

The Honorable Janet Reno  
The Attorney General

Dear Madam Attorney General:

In announcing the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Anti-Violent Crime Initiative in March 1994, you emphasized that violent crime had traditionally been left to state and local governments and that the federal role would be to form a partnership with state and local governments. To learn more about the partnership concept and federal assistance to local governments in fighting gang violence, we reviewed how the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other federal investigative agencies worked with local law enforcement agencies to target gangs in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This review, done on a self-initiated basis, evolved from our earlier efforts on DOJ priorities in eight selected U.S. Attorney districts. Those efforts included the Central District of California, which covers Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup>

Our review objectives were to determine and describe

- how and what federal law enforcement assistance was provided to local law enforcement in the Los Angeles area to fight gang violence,
- how useful Los Angeles area local law enforcement officials believed federal assistance was in fighting gang violence, and
- what results Los Angeles area local law enforcement officials believed were achieved from joint efforts to fight gang violence.

While limited to one metropolitan area, what we learned about federal law enforcement efforts targeting gangs in Los Angeles—one of the areas in the country with the most gangs and gang members—may be useful as the administration seeks to direct federal efforts targeting gangs elsewhere.

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**Scope and  
Methodology**

To obtain local views on the usefulness of federal assistance, we conducted structured interviews with 37 members of local law enforcement agencies that participated in the principal federal anti-violent crime task force for metropolitan Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> We interviewed 3 levels of

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Attorneys: More Accountability for Implementing Priority Programs Is Desirable (GAO/GGD-95-150, June 23, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Local law enforcement agencies that participated in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Task Force at the time of our review included the Compton, Inglewood, Long Beach, and Los Angeles Police Departments and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

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employees within the local law enforcement agencies that participated in the task force: 24 participating line officers, 8 supervisory officers, and 5 agency heads or agency representatives. For reporting purposes, we combined the responses of the 8 supervisory officers and the 5 agency heads or representatives into 1 category of 13 responses, which we refer to in this report as responses from local officials.

We also conducted structured interviews with representatives of nine local law enforcement agencies that did not participate in the task force to obtain their views on federal anti-gang assistance.<sup>3</sup> In addition, federal and local law enforcement agencies provided statistics on the results of task force efforts. A detailed description of our objectives, scope, and methodology is contained in appendix I.

We performed our work in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, CA, from March 1995 through April 1996 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We requested comments on a draft of this report from the Attorney General. Responsible Department of Justice officials provided comments, which are discussed at the end of this letter.

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## Results in Brief

On the basis of discussions with federal and local law enforcement personnel in the Central District of California, we determined that federal law enforcement assistance provided to combat gangs during the time of our review consisted primarily of the use of federal laws and authority not otherwise available to local law enforcement agencies (e.g., prosecutive and wiretap authority); funds; equipment; and personnel. Such assistance was provided principally through task forces of federal and local law enforcement officers—mainly the Los Angeles Metropolitan Task Force on Violent Crime (LA Task Force). This FBI-led task force consisted of several squads, most of which targeted gangs that committed violent crimes, with each squad usually focusing on a different gang.

Five of the 47 local law enforcement agencies that we identified in the Los Angeles metropolitan area participated in the LA Task Force. According to the head of the LA Task Force, given its resource constraints, the FBI, in the wake of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, tried to target those localities that had the greatest gang problems and where it believed its resources could have the most impact. The majority of local law enforcement

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<sup>3</sup>The local law enforcement agencies we contacted that were not participating in the LA Task Force at the time of our review were the Gardena, Hawthorne, Irwindale, Pasadena, San Bernardino, Santa Monica, and West Covina Police Departments and the Riverside County and San Bernardino Sheriff's Departments.

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officials we contacted, including agencies that were not participating in the task force, believed the FBI had selected the appropriate targets. Representatives of seven of the nine nonparticipating agencies we contacted stated that either their gang problems did not warrant the agencies' participating or that they did not have the resources to participate. According to the head of the LA Task Force, nonparticipating agencies generally did not receive the amount and types of FBI assistance on gangs generally available to task force participants.

Fifteen of the 18 local line officers we interviewed who expressed an opinion believed that the task force met their overall needs to a great extent. The line officers were most satisfied with wiretap assistance, money received to pay informants, and funding for drug or gun purchases in undercover operations.

Eight of the 13 local law enforcement officials we interviewed who expressed an opinion believed that task force efforts had reduced gang violence. While they differed as to the extent of the impact, six of the eight officials believed that task force efforts had a significant or great impact overall. FBI statistics showed that from February 1992 through September 1995, the LA Task Force was responsible for 156 federal convictions and 119 state convictions, about three-fourths on violent crime charges. Some local officials also credited the task force with reducing the crime rates in certain neighborhoods. Others credited the task force with making it safe for children to play outdoors again.

Of the 24 line officers we interviewed, 21 stated that their agencies could not obtain similar results without using federal task forces. In this regard, most of the line officers mentioned long-term, proactive investigations of entire gangs as an advantageous element differentiating the federal task force approach to violent crime from local law enforcement's approach, which generally involves short-term, reactive investigations of individual gang members.

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## Background

Violent crime, which had been a DOJ priority since 1989, became the Department's top priority in March 1994 with the announcement of the Anti-Violent Crime Initiative—a nationwide program to establish partnerships among federal, state, and local law enforcement to address major violent crime problems, including gangs. Moreover, in his State of the Union Address on January 23, 1996, the President cited taking back

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our streets from gangs and drugs as our nation's fourth great challenge. Specifically, the President said:

"Our next step in the fight against crime is to take on gangs the way we once took on the Mob. I am directing the FBI and other investigative agencies to target gangs that involve juveniles in violent crime and to seek authority to prosecute, as adults, teenagers who maim and kill like adults."

Members of Congress also have expressed concern over youth and gang violence. For example, at February 1994 hearings held to formulate an effective federal response to the gang problem in America the Chairman, Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Senate Committee on the Judiciary stated:

"Not too long ago, the Federal Government believed that street crime was not its business, but today, we recognize that violent gang crime is a national problem and one that we must do our share to address."<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, Title XV of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, P.L. 103-322 (1994), strengthened federal laws dealing with criminal street gangs. Also, Congress has funded federal efforts to assist state and local law enforcement in fighting violent crime.

According to DOJ, the nationwide growth in violent crime can be tied closely to the development of gangs. Although definitive statistics were not available, law enforcement professionals believed that gang violence was a factor—and perhaps the primary factor—in the increase in violent crime during the past decade. DOJ's 1995 report<sup>5</sup> on its anti-violent crime initiative emphasized that violent gang members threatened the safety and stability of neighborhoods, inflicted fear and bodily harm on others through the commission of crime, and robbed residents of the ability to enjoy their streets and homes. Many jurisdictions had focused their efforts on dismantling violent criminal gangs.

The Los Angeles District Attorney's Office estimated that in May 1992 there were 1,000 gangs with 150,000 members in Los Angeles County. The District Attorney also reported in 1992 that gangs had been responsible for virtually all growth in the number of homicides since 1984, and that half of

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<sup>4</sup>The Gang Problem in America: Formulating an Effective Federal Response: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 103d Cong., 2d Sess. 1,2 (1994).

<sup>5</sup>Anti-Violent Crime Initiative: The Attorney General's Report to the President—The First Year (March 1994 - February 1995), U.S. Department of Justice (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 27, 1995).

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all gang members participate in violence.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Los Angeles-based gangs have migrated to other communities around the country, according to studies sponsored by the National Institutes of Justice and the National Drug Intelligence Center.<sup>7</sup>

The LA Task Force grew out of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 as federal and local law enforcement combined resources to address gang violence. According to the FBI and other sources, much of the damage caused in the riots could be attributed to acts instigated by specific gangs. Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, the FBI made the development of a joint federal, state, and local effort to fight gang violence a major emphasis of its anti-violent crime strategy for the Central District of California, which includes Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> This strategy, which was developed primarily by the FBI agent in charge of the LA Task Force, emphasized targeting violent gangs in neighborhoods with high rates of violent crime.

The LA Task Force was formalized in October 1992 by written agreement between the FBI and participating local law enforcement agencies covering, among other things, roles and responsibilities. An FBI representative was to assume the role of program manager for all task force operations and was to receive input from leaders of the participating agencies. The FBI was to provide necessary resources for the task force, including vehicles, when requested and if possible. The original agreement included the FBI; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); the Immigration and Naturalization Service; the Compton, Inglewood, Long Beach, and Los Angeles Police Departments; and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

The original mission of the LA Task Force was to identify and prosecute those individuals responsible for committing violent crimes during the 1992 riots. There was particular emphasis on perpetrators associated with violence-prone street gangs, especially gang leaders and core members. After completing its efforts related to the riots, the LA Task Force's mission was broadened to include the identification and prosecution of the most criminally active and violent individuals and enterprises in the

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<sup>6</sup>Gangs, Crime, and Violence in Los Angeles: Findings and Proposals From the District Attorney's Office, the Office of the District Attorney, County of Los Angeles, May 1992.

<sup>7</sup>Prosecuting Gangs: A National Assessment, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, February 1995; Bloods & Crips Gang Survey Report, National Drug Intelligence Center, May 20, 1994.

<sup>8</sup>The Central District Court of California includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties, which have a combined population estimated at over 16 million.

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Los Angeles metropolitan area, but the emphasis on gang-related violence was maintained.

The total authorized fiscal year 1996 budget for the LA Task Force was almost \$394,000. This did not include undisclosed confidential expenditures for specific investigations.

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## Federal Assistance to Local Law Enforcement in the Los Angeles Area Was Provided Mainly Through the LA Task Force

According to the various federal and local law enforcement personnel in the Los Angeles area whom we interviewed, federal law enforcement assistance targeted directly at gangs in the area consisted primarily of the use of federal laws and authority not otherwise available to local law enforcement agencies, funds, equipment, and personnel. Such assistance was provided principally through task forces of federal and local law enforcement officers—mainly the FBI-led LA Task Force. This task force consisted of several squads, each of which targeted a specific crime problem, such as fugitives, or a specific crime, such as bank robbery. Within their areas, most squads targeted gangs that committed violent crimes, and each squad usually focused on a different gang. Five of the 47 law enforcement agencies we identified in the Los Angeles metropolitan area participated in the LA Task Force.

Assistance provided through the LA Task Force included the use of federal laws and authority (including prosecutive, wiretap, and witness security assistance); overtime pay; office space; various types of equipment; personnel; and money for undercover drug/firearms purchases and informants. For example, according to DOJ and FBI officials, FBI expenses approved (in September 1995) for fiscal year 1996 in support of state/local officers participating on the LA Task Force included the following.

- Rental and maintenance expenses for 36 automobiles at a total cost of \$298,350.
- Rental expenses for 120 pagers at total cost of \$8,740.
- Rental expenses for 48 cellular phones and associated airtime at a total cost of \$77,760.
- Expenses of \$9,052 for the operation of covert telephone lines and the maintenance of various task force equipment.

In addition, the FBI reimbursed about \$80,000 to state/local agencies in the Los Angeles area to provide for the payment of overtime to officers participating on the LA Task Force.

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The FBI agent in charge of the task force said that nonparticipating agencies generally did not receive the amount and types of FBI assistance available to the five agencies formally participating in the task force. However, according to other FBI officials, training, forensic services, fugitive apprehension, and various other specialized types of assistance could be made available to any local law enforcement agency through less formal, “as needed” arrangements.

Besides the assistance provided directly through the task force, 7 of the 13 local law enforcement officials we interviewed said their agencies received other federal law enforcement assistance, such as training. Six of the seven officials indicated that obtaining such assistance was facilitated directly by their agency’s participation in the task force.

As previously noted, 5 of the 47 local law enforcement agencies in the Los Angeles metropolitan area that we identified participated in the LA Task Force. The FBI agent-in-charge of the LA Task Force stated that given its resource constraints, the FBI, in the wake of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, tried to target those localities that had the greatest gang problems and where it believed its resources could have the most impact. According to the agent-in-charge, the five participating agencies were selected on this basis.

The majority of local law enforcement officials we contacted believed that the FBI had selected the appropriate targets and expressed no concerns about not having been invited, or being able, to participate. We contacted representatives from nine agencies in the Central District whose jurisdictions had relatively high rates of violent crime but were not participating in the task force. Seven of the nine agencies’ representatives stated that either their gang problems did not warrant federal task force involvement or that their agencies did not have the resources to participate in a task force even if they would have been invited, or had wanted, to participate. The remaining two agencies’ representatives indicated that they had gang problems and expressed interest in participating in the task force, given the opportunity. Also, seven of the nine representatives expressed the belief that if their agencies needed federal assistance on a gang problem, it would be available from the local FBI office on an as-needed basis. The remaining two agency representatives had no opinion.

Even those local agencies that were involved in the LA Task Force could not always participate fully because of resource constraints. For example,

one local law enforcement agency said it had to reduce the personnel committed to the task force from 60 officers to 15 officers. A representative of this agency stated that this reduction represented tight budgetary conditions in the agency, not dissatisfaction with task force results, and that many of these officers had been reassigned to community policing<sup>9</sup> efforts, which were a higher priority for the agency. Another local law enforcement agency intended to completely withdraw from the LA Task Force due to budget restrictions, but the FBI persuaded the agency to continue because the agency's participation was critical in completing an anti-gang effort.

In addition to the FBI-led LA Task Force, ATF, according to agency officials, provided direct assistance, such as personnel and equipment, to local law enforcement agencies combating gangs, using federal firearms laws and other laws against gang members. ATF's efforts, according to the officials, were smaller than the FBI's and less formal in that they did not always involve formal task forces. In this regard, they said that ATF-led task forces, in contrast to the FBI's LA Task Force, usually targeted a specific local gang problem and consisted of one or two ATF agents working with local police.

## Los Angeles Area Law Enforcement Personnel Found Federal Assistance Very Useful in Targeting Gang Violence

Fifteen of the 18 local line officers we interviewed who expressed an opinion felt that the LA Task Force met their overall needs to a great extent. We questioned them about the usefulness of specific categories of federal assistance provided through the task force. About three-fourths of the line officers indicated that the assistance was very useful in 8 of 11 categories of assistance. (See app. II for the line officers' perceptions of the usefulness of the specific categories of assistance.)

Of all the types of assistance received through the task force, the line officers were most satisfied with wiretap assistance, money received to pay informants, and funding for drug or gun purchases in undercover operations. The 16 who received wiretap assistance said they found it to be very useful. They cited the value of information gained through

<sup>9</sup>Community policing has been generally defined as proactively working with residents to prevent crime. This represents a shift in police efforts from a solely reactive response to crime. Citizens, police departments, and other agencies work together to identify problems and apply appropriate problem-solving strategies.

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wiretaps and the difficulty of doing them at the state level.<sup>10</sup> Some line officers stated that their investigations could not have been completed without wiretaps.

The line officers we interviewed expressed some concerns about the personnel assistance and equipment they received, as well as about federal prosecution of targeted gang members, although more than half believed that such assistance was very useful. In regard to personnel assistance, 10 of the 23 line officers who received such assistance believed that the number of FBI agents assigned to their squads was insufficient, and 5 believed that turnover in FBI agents assigned to their squads hindered task force operations. For example, one line officer reported that some FBI agents were assigned to his squad for only 6 months, which was not long enough for an agent to gain an informant's trust and work effectively with him. Eight line officers also said FBI agents' lack of street experience hindered task force operations.

Four line officers expressed concern that some of the FBI agents who participated in the task force were not interested in working gang cases. When we asked Los Angeles FBI officials about task force agents' interest in anti-violent crime work, they said the FBI tried to assign agents to areas that interest them, but it was not always possible to give them their first choice. They acknowledged that new agents may not always be suited to violent crime work and that the office was attempting to recruit agents who were interested in gang work from other FBI offices. The FBI officials noted, however, that it is important for new agents to gain some task force experience so that they can effectively replace experienced task force agents who "burn out." The officials also told us that although new agents are limited in the tasks they can perform, they can contribute to task force operations by assisting in arrests or completing paperwork.

Although, overall, line officers believed the equipment they received through the task force was very useful, several felt that some of the

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<sup>10</sup>We did not independently confirm officers' perceptions of the differences between California and federal wiretap requirements. However, we did identify some differences between the two procedures. Both California and federal wiretap authorizations can be granted for 30 days and can be renewed in 30-day increments. However, under California law, officers must report on their progress as the judge may require, but not less than every 72 hours, whereas federal law requires agents to report at such intervals as the judge may require. Only officers who have attended a special 2-day training course are allowed to run a California wiretap. Prior to establishing a federal wiretap, all agents and deputized local officers are to be briefed by an Assistant U.S. Attorney and instructed on the federal guidelines for conducting a wiretap. Local officers, when participating in a federal wiretap, are not required to receive additional wiretap training. Also, prior to January 1, 1996, and during the time of our review, California wiretaps were available only for major narcotics violations (involving at least 10 gallons of liquid or 3 pounds solid) or the conspiracy to commit major narcotics violations. Federal wiretaps, on the other hand, were available for a variety of federal criminal offenses.

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equipment they received did not fully meet their needs, either in terms of quantity or quality. For example, they believed that cellular phones—which were critical to their work because they provided a constant and reliable means of communication with informants and other task force members—were not available in sufficient quantity. In this regard, one local officer noted that task force members were on call 24 hours a day and that cellular phones allowed informants to call them at home during off hours without requiring task force members to give informants their home phone numbers, which might compromise the officers' personal safety. Another line officer told us that the lack of a cellular phone caused him to miss an opportunity to apprehend a murder suspect. Some line officers said they had either bought their own cellular phones or that phone costs often exceeded the FBI's reimbursable limit.

FBI officials acknowledged that the lack of cellular phones was a serious safety issue, but they said that the FBI lacked the funds to equip every task force member with a cellular phone. One official stated that the FBI Los Angeles Office was following FBI guidelines, which called for providing one cellular phone for every three FBI agents and task force members. In fiscal year 1996, the Los Angeles Office was funding 48 cellular phones for use by 143 task force members—a ratio of 1 phone for every 3 members. The official believed one phone for every two task force members would be a better ratio, but that, either way, more phones would be needed in the future due to an expected increase in the number of task force members.

Eleven of 19 line officers who worked with the U.S. Attorney's Office to prosecute gang cases in federal court said that federal prosecution was very useful. Five said that federal prosecution was important to them because federal sentences are much longer in actual time served than state sentences. However, some line officers were critical of the length of time the U.S. Attorney's Office took to prosecute cases, the amount of evidence they required, and the high district prosecutive thresholds.<sup>11</sup>

In response, the Violent Crime Coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Central District of California commented in September 1995 that local law enforcement officers were more familiar with the state prosecutive system, and in contrast federal prosecutions may seem overly slow and require excessive evidence. He said that federal cases often required more preparation time and better evidence to meet federal court standards. Regarding the prosecutive thresholds, he said that the

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<sup>11</sup>Prosecutive thresholds are guidelines used by each U.S. Attorney's Office to determine whether cases should be accepted or declined for prosecution.

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standards for accepting violent crime cases in Central California for federal prosecution generally had become less stringent during the last year and a half and that the U.S. Attorney's Office was accepting more cases for prosecution.

Six of the 13 law enforcement officials we interviewed from agencies that participated in the LA Task Force said that joint federal and local task forces led to better relations and increased cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies in general. Eleven of the 13 officials we interviewed said that they had good relationships with the FBI. Many said that current relations with the FBI were the best they had ever been, partly as a result of the LA Task Force.

With regard to the previously noted direct assistance provided local law enforcement officials by ATF, the officials we interviewed who worked with ATF were generally satisfied with the assistance they received.

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## Los Angeles Area Law Enforcement Personnel Generally Believed That Task Force Efforts Reduced Gang Violence

Eight of the 13 local law enforcement officials we interviewed generally believed that LA Task Force efforts had reduced gang violence, while 5 believed it was too early to measure the impact. Of the eight who said LA Task Force efforts had reduced gang violence, six believed that task force efforts had had a significant or great impact on gang violence. One official said that his agency could not have achieved the same results without the assistance of the LA Task Force.

Local law enforcement line officers who participated in the LA Task Force were also quite positive about current or future task force impact on gang violence. Sixteen of the 22 line officers who expressed an opinion spoke positively about current or future task force impact. Twelve of them believed that LA Task Force efforts had reduced violent gang crime to a great or very great extent. Six others said it was too early in their investigations to say what impact task force efforts would have on violent gang crime, but three of them expected positive results.

The 21 local line officers who expressed an opinion stated that their agencies could not obtain similar results without using federal task forces. Twenty-two officers mentioned long-term investigation as an element differentiating the federal task force approach to violent crime from local law enforcement's approach. Several line officers indicated that long-term investigations permitted local law enforcement to deal more effectively with violent criminal gangs.

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Federal and local officials also provided us with statistics on the results of task force efforts. These statistics focused on arrests, indictments, and convictions that officials attributed to the LA Task Force's efforts.<sup>12</sup> FBI statistics<sup>13</sup> showed that from February 1992 through September 1995, the LA Task Force was responsible for 2,086 arrests (918 of which were for violent crimes), 239 federal indictments (161 involving violent crime), and 156 convictions (116 involving violent crimes such as bank robbery). According to FBI statistics, the LA Task Force was also responsible for 119 state convictions, 25 of which involved narcotics violations such as the sale and transportation of cocaine and 94 of which involved violent crimes, such as robbery, murder, and assault with a deadly weapon. Overall, three-fourths of the federal and state convictions were on violent crime charges. The FBI also credited the LA Task Force with drug and firearm seizures and the recovery of assets.

Some federal and local officials also credited the LA Task Force with reducing the crime rates in certain neighborhoods. Others credited the LA Task Force with making it safe for children to play outdoors again.

We also obtained examples of specific federal anti-gang investigations targeting Los Angeles-based gangs, including five LA Task Force investigations and one ATF investigation. The examples indicated that the LA Task Force had an impact on gangs in Los Angeles and in other communities to which Los Angeles-based gangs had migrated. The examples are described in appendix III.

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## Agency Comments

We requested comments on a draft of this report from the Attorney General. A representative of DOJ's Office of the Assistant Attorney General for Administration informed us at a meeting on July 24, 1996, that comments were requested from the Department's various headquarters and field office units with responsibility for its operations combating violent crime as described in this report. The representative and officials from DOJ's Criminal Division, the Executive Office of U.S. Attorneys, and the FBI said that the general consensus of the officials representing those units was that the report, by and large, accurately represented these operations. However, the officials provided additional information concerning DOJ's monetary commitment to support the LA Task Force

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<sup>12</sup>We did not independently verify the statistics provided by federal and local officials and cannot attest to their validity.

<sup>13</sup>These statistics applied to all squads within the LA Task Force, not just those targeting violent gangs.

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during fiscal year 1996. We incorporated the information in this report, where appropriate.

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We are sending copies of this report to the chairmen and ranking minority members of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Governmental Affairs; the chairman and ranking member of the House Committee on the Judiciary; the Secretary of the Treasury; the Director of ATF; the Director of the FBI; the Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration; and the heads of the local law enforcement agencies that participated in our study. We also will make copies available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV. If you have any questions concerning this report, please call me on (202) 512-8777.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norman Rabkin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Norman J. Rabkin  
Director, Administration  
of Justice Issues

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## Abbreviations

ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms
DOJ	Department of Justice
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GREAT	Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking database
PCP	phencyclidine

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# Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of this self-initiated review was to examine the Department of Justice's (DOJ) anti-violent crime initiative in the Central Judicial District of California, which covers the Los Angeles area, as it pertained to gang violence. We focused our review on the Los Angeles area because it was one of the areas that had the most gangs and gang members in the country. We focused on the Los Angeles Metropolitan Task Force on Violent Crime (LA Task Force) because it was the primary federal anti-gang effort in the Los Angeles area. Specifically, we wanted to determine and describe

- how and what federal law enforcement assistance was provided to local law enforcement in the Los Angeles area to fight gang violence,
- how useful Los Angeles area local law enforcement believed federal assistance was in fighting gang violence, and
- what results Los Angeles area local law enforcement officials believed were achieved from joint efforts to fight gang violence.

Our scope was limited to law enforcement assistance and did not address social programs aimed at preventing or reducing gang violence.

To obtain general information on anti-violent crime efforts, we interviewed officials from DOJ headquarters offices, including the Criminal Division, Executive Office of the U.S. Attorneys, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). We also interviewed representatives from the Department of the Treasury and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) headquarters offices. We reviewed DOJ and ATF policy statements on violent crime, including the Attorney General's National Anti-Violent Crime Strategy<sup>14</sup> and DOJ's Report on First-Year Accomplishments: Anti-Violent Crime Initiative.<sup>15</sup>

We met with representatives from the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California and the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office to discuss federal and local investigative and prosecutive strategies for fighting gang violence. We discussed how federal investigative efforts were coordinated with local efforts, how prosecutive decisions were made on gang cases, and the differences between state and federal approaches to prosecuting gang cases. We also reviewed the Central District's strategy for fighting violent crime, as directed by the Attorney General's National Anti-Violent Crime Strategy. In addition, we interviewed the U.S.

<sup>14</sup>The Attorney General's National Anti-Crime Strategy, U.S. Department of Justice, (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 15, 1993).

<sup>15</sup>Anti-Violent Crime Initiative: The Attorney General's Report to the President—The First Year (March 1994 - February 1995), U.S. Department of Justice (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 27, 1995).

Attorney's designated Violent Crime Coordinator to determine how state and local law enforcement agencies participated in the development of the strategies and to discuss the Office's policy for accepting task force cases for prosecution.

To understand how and what federal law enforcement assistance was provided to local law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles to fight gang violence and what results were obtained from joint federal and local efforts, we interviewed representatives from the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and ATF who oversaw federal task force efforts. Our review, however, focused primarily on the anti-gang efforts of the FBI, and to a lesser extent ATF, since federal law enforcement assistance for gang enforcement in Los Angeles at the time of our review came mainly through the FBI-led LA Task Force. We also reviewed data from the FBI and U.S. Attorney's Office on LA Task Force operations during fiscal years 1992 through 1995, including the number of state and federal arrests, indictments, and prosecutions that resulted from task force operations. We did not independently verify these statistics and cannot attest to their validity.

To obtain views of local law enforcement personnel on the usefulness of federal law enforcement assistance in fighting gang violence, we conducted structured interviews with 37 members of the 5 local law enforcement agencies that participated in the LA Task Force.<sup>16</sup> Because local law enforcement personnel's perceptions on the usefulness of federal assistance varied according to their position and relationship with the federal agencies, we interviewed 3 levels of employees within the local agencies that participated in the task force: 24 participating line officers, 8 supervisory officers, and 5 agency heads or agency representatives. For reporting purposes we combined the responses of the 8 supervisory officers and the 5 agency representatives into 1 category of 13 responses, which we referred to as responses from local officials.

We identified a universe of 44 officers who participated in the LA Task Force at the time of our review. In doing so, we counted only those local task force members whose squads specifically targeted violent gangs. Although the squads that we excluded also investigated violent gang members, gangs were not the primary focus of their investigations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Local law enforcement agencies that participated in the LA Task Force at the time of our review included the Compton, Inglewood, Long Beach, and Los Angeles Police Departments and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

<sup>17</sup>These squads focused on categories of crime, such as bank robbery, rather than gangs.

According to FBI officials, approximately 60 local law enforcement officers were participating in the LA Task Force at the time of our review.

From the universe, we judgmentally selected 24 line officers. To do so, we interviewed all participating officers from three of the five police agencies: the Compton Police Department, the Inglewood Police Department, and the Long Beach Police Department. For the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, the two local agencies that dedicated the most personnel to the task force, our selection of officers was based on several factors, including geographic areas of interest, the gangs they targeted, and the officers' availability.

We also reviewed local law enforcement records on crime rates and task force costs, procedures, and accomplishments during fiscal years 1992 through 1995. We did not independently verify these statistics and cannot attest to their validity.

We identified nine local law enforcement agencies in the Central District of California—eight of whose jurisdictions had relatively high rates of violent crime—that did not participate on a federal task force. We conducted structured interviews with agency representatives to determine (1) what types of federal assistance, if any, they requested and received from the federal investigative agencies; (2) how satisfied they were with that assistance; and (3) why their agencies did not participate on a federal task force.

# Local Los Angeles Area Law Enforcement Officers' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Federal Assistance

We conducted structured interviews with 24 local law enforcement line officers who participated in the LA Task Force. We interviewed at least two officers from each of the five local agencies participating in the task force, except the Inglewood Police Department, which had only one officer on the task force. As shown in table II.1, most officers were quite positive about the assistance they received from the LA Task Force.

**Table II.1: Summary of Local Los Angeles Area Law Enforcement Officers' Views of Federal Assistance**

Assistance	Assistance received?			If yes, how useful was the assistance?				
	Yes	No	Don't know	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Of limited use	Of no use	Don't know
Overtime pay	23	0	1	18	4	0	0	1
Manpower	23	0	1	14	6	3	0	0
Office space	22	2	0	17	1	2	2	0
Wiretaps	16	8	0	16	0	0	0	0
Equipment (cars, computers, cellular phones)	23	1	0	18	4	1	0	0
Money for drug/gun purchases	14	7	3	13	1	0	0	0
Money for informants	17	1	6	17	0	0	0	0
Federal Witness Protection Program	7	15	2	4	1	1	0	1
Coordination between law enforcement agencies <sup>a</sup>	19	5	0	14	4	1	0	0
Training	18	6	0	14	2	0	0	2
Federal prosecution of cases	19	5	0	11	4	3	1	0

<sup>a</sup>Includes coordination and cooperation on criminal investigations between federal and local agencies and/or between local agencies.

Source: GAO analysis.

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# Summaries of Several Anti-Gang Investigations

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FBI and ATF officials provided us with information on several federal anti-gang efforts. The following briefly describes five LA Task Force efforts and one ATF investigation. Some of these efforts targeted specific factions or “sets” within a gang or were part of larger investigations directed at a gang over time.

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## Investigation #1

This operation was part of a long-term investigation of a Los Angeles gang that figured significantly in the 1992 riots. The FBI began investigating the gang in 1989 and established a joint investigation with a local law enforcement agency in 1992, after the riots.

After over 2 years of joint investigation, the FBI and the local agency initiated a widely publicized 1-day anti-gang operation involving about 800 FBI agents and local law enforcement officers, covering a 30-by-30-block neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. According to the local agency, the gang faction targeted in the effort accounted for less than 1 percent of the community population but was responsible for over 80 percent of the community’s violent crime.

The 1-day operation resulted in four federal indictments on charges such as felon in possession of a firearm and possession with intent to distribute. Task force members also seized 67 firearms, about 2,000 rounds of ammunition, and 2 kilos of methamphetamine. Local law enforcement officials also credited the operation with reducing violent crime in the targeted area by 57 percent in the 2 months following the effort. According to police statistics, violent crime (including robbery, attempted murder, rape, kidnapping, aggravated assault, and assault with a deadly weapon) dropped from 262 crimes in the same 2-month period of the preceding year down to 112 crimes.<sup>18</sup>

The operation received widespread media attention, with some community residents quoted as being pleased with the Task Force’s efforts and others as being upset with them. FBI officials believed that these efforts were successful, citing, as an example, that gang members went into seclusion after the operation. The officials justified the large amount of personnel resources expended as necessary to ensure officer safety, protect evidence, and apprehend suspects. The local agency that took part in the operation felt that the results of the effort, in terms of the reduction of violent crime, were more significant than what could have been

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<sup>18</sup>We did not independently verify these statistics.

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achieved by a local anti-gang squad in 6 months for the same amount of money.

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## Investigation #2

One LA Task Force investigation involving gang migration received the 1994 Attorney General's award for excellence. The investigation involved a gang member who used his Hollywood music studio to facilitate an interstate drug trafficking network. Working with the Denver, CO, FBI office, the LA Task Force was able to wiretap the gang member's home, business, and cellular phone. Through the wiretaps, the task force learned that the drug trafficking network extended to Milwaukee, WI; Cleveland, OH; Knoxville, TN; Atlanta, GA; Birmingham, AL; Denver; and Seattle, WA.

The drug trafficking network was able to make substantial profits by selling its drugs in other cities. For example, rock cocaine that would sell for \$20 to \$25 in Los Angeles could be sold for \$100 in Birmingham. An ounce of cocaine that would sell for \$500 in Los Angeles would sell for \$1,000 in Birmingham.

The LA Task Force's efforts led to the arrest of the ring's associates in the cities in which they operated. Two of the gang's ring leaders and at least four other gang members have been convicted of conspiracy to distribute drugs and of possession and distribution. All are awaiting sentencing. The ring leaders are likely to receive 20-year sentences, while the other four gang members face sentences ranging from 14 to 30 years.

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## Investigation #3

This investigation was one of several task force efforts directed against one of Los Angeles' most notorious and violent street gangs. In this effort, the LA Task Force squad apprehended 2 gang members who led a ring responsible for more than 175 "takeover" bank robberies<sup>19</sup> in the Los Angeles area. The two gang members used juvenile gang members to commit the robberies, supplied them with weapons and plans for carrying out the heists, and kept the bulk of the money for themselves. By showing that the two gang leaders had directed and organized the robberies, the U.S. Attorney's Office was able to successfully prosecute both ring leaders on federal charges of carjacking, armed bank robbery, and conspiracy to commit armed bank robbery. Both members pled guilty to the charges; one received a 25-year sentence, and the other received a 30-year sentence.

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<sup>19</sup>A "takeover" bank robbery is an especially violent form of robbery in which one or more armed individuals seize control of a bank and physically and verbally assault customers and employees. Physical intimidation can include the display of weapons and the firing of shots into the air.

FBI officials told us this was an “enormously successful” case because it showed gang members that the federal government was serious about prosecuting gang cases. The number of takeover bank robberies in the Central District was increasing until these gang members were arrested in June 1993; over the next few years, the number of such robberies decreased approximately 57 percent. According to an FBI official, the apprehension of these two gang members was a major factor in the decrease in takeover bank robberies in the Los Angeles area.

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## **Investigation #4**

The fourth effort we reviewed focused on a prison-based gang that also had control over gang activities in local communities. This effort represented a combined federal/local effort to prevent a gang from consolidating and gaining more control over street narcotics sales in the Hispanic community. The effort reflects the federal task force’s proactive approach to gangs, that is, investigating a gang overall to help prevent crime from spreading rather than reacting to the crimes of individual gang members on a case-by-case basis.

This effort not only led to federal indictments against 22 defendants but also, according to both FBI and local officials, led to the prevention of over 40 homicides. The U.S. Attorney is pursuing further indictments on the basis of organized criminal activity as well as individual criminal acts.

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## **Investigation #5**

Another investigation by the LA Task Force involved migration by gang members from Long Beach, near Los Angeles, to Spokane, WA. According to a task force member, Long Beach, Compton, and Los Angeles gangs had spread to Spokane, where they faced little or no competition and could make tremendous amounts of money from drug trafficking. When a detective with the Spokane Police Department saw an influx of gang members into Spokane, he accessed the Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking (GREAT) database<sup>20</sup> and discovered that many of the gang members were from Long Beach. He contacted the Long Beach Police Department and was referred to the LA Task Force. Task force members arrived in Spokane within 3 or 4 days after being contacted.

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<sup>20</sup>The GREAT database is based on arrest reports, personal interviews, probation reports, and field inquiry cards filled in by law enforcement officers throughout Los Angeles County. In those jurisdictions that have joined the system, all persons identified as gang members go into GREAT, along with basic information (birth date, gender, race, physical description, address, etc.); gang information (“monikers,” gang affiliations, tattoos, and other distinguishing marks, etc.); and information on police contacts.

According to the Spokane Police Department detective, the LA Task Force's assistance was invaluable. Task force members were very familiar with gang members from Long Beach and were able to provide information on these gang members, including photographs. An LA Task Force member said that task force efforts helped to indict 9 gang members in Spokane on federal charges, while the Spokane Police Department detective said 40 or more indictments were obtained on 7 to 9 gang members, with most indictments being handled at the state level. According to another Spokane law enforcement officer, gang members were given sentences of up to 20 years.

According to the Spokane Police Department detective, after the federal indictments, many of the Long Beach gang members fled and gang activity in Spokane dramatically decreased. However, gang activity has gradually increased since then as the LA Task Force squad targeting the Long Beach gang was temporarily discontinued and as gang members adjusted their strategies. An LA Task Force member reported that since termination of the task force squad, the Long Beach gang was suspected of once again sending major amounts of cocaine to Spokane.

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## **Investigation #6**

In another effort, ATF agents worked with local police to target one of the most violent and criminally active street gangs in Los Angeles. This gang distributed phencyclidine (PCP) in California and other states. ATF initiated the investigation by making drug buys from lower level gang members. ATF was able to gain the cooperation of those who had sold them drugs and others charged with firearms violations in targeting higher level gang members. Ultimately, ATF was able to target not only the gang but also the organization that manufactured the PCP.

During the 3-year investigation, law enforcement personnel seized 44 firearms, \$120 million (street value) worth of PCP, the largest PCP lab site ever seized by law enforcement in the United States, and other assets. Charges against eight defendants, who were gang members or affiliates, included running a continuing criminal enterprise, conspiracy to manufacture a controlled substance, aiding and abetting the manufacture of PCP, and distribution/ possession of a controlled substance. The defendants pled guilty or went to trial and were convicted. Sentences ranged from 17-1/2 to 45 years. Two of three defendants who had not yet been sentenced were scheduled for sentencing in April 1996 and were expected to receive life sentences.

# Major Contributors to This Report

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General Government  
Division, Washington,  
D.C.

Daniel C. Harris, Project Director  
Barry J. Seltser, Supervisory Social Science Analyst  
Katrina R. Moss, Senior Evaluator  
Seto J. Bagdoyan, Evaluator  
Pamela V. Williams, Communications Analyst

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Office of the General  
Counsel, Washington,  
D.C.

Ann H. Finley, Senior Attorney

---

Los Angeles Field  
Office

Richard R. Griswold, Project Manager  
Barbara A. Guffy, Site Senior  
James R. Russell, Evaluator

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