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CARTELS AND GANGS IN CHICAGO

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JOINT
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REPORT



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Executive Summary

Chicago has a long history of organized crime and is home to numerous street gangs that use the illegal drug trade to build their criminal enterprises. Although the murder rate in Chicago has declined significantly since the 1990s, recent instances of gang-related homicides have placed Chicago's crime situation in the national spotlight. Compounding Chicago's crime problem is a steady supply of drugs from Mexican drug cartels, most notably the Sinaloa Cartel. Illicit drugs flow from Mexico to Chicago via a loosely associated network of profit-driven intermediaries, with Chicago street gangs serving as the primary distributors at the street level. The profits earned through drug trafficking increase the staying power of both street gangs and drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), thereby influencing levels of violent crime in both the United States and Mexico. Of particular concern is the trafficking and distribution of heroin, which has increased significantly in recent years and caused significant harm to communities in Chicago and throughout the United States. This report provides background on the gang-related crime situation in Chicago and offers insight on the nexus between Mexican DTOs and Chicago street gangs.

Details

CHICAGO'S DRUG SITUATION

The drug trafficking threat in Chicago encompasses virtually every aspect of the threat facing our nation—wholesale supply, transshipment, distribution, use, and money laundering—all of which are occurring at very high levels. The vast majority of illegal drugs distributed in Chicago are supplied by Mexican cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel, Beltran-Leyva Cartel, Gulf Cartel, La Familia Michoacana, the Guerreros Unidos, and the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación. At this time there do not appear to be any viable competitors to Mexican DTOs for control over the wholesale-level supply of illegal drugs to the Chicago area.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) 2016 National Drug Threat Assessment, Mexican DTOs control all drug trafficking across the Southwest Border (SWB) and continue to expand their presence in the United States. Mexican DTOs are poly-drug in nature and are responsible for the vast majority of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana trafficked into the United States. These organizations maintain a very large network of family and friends throughout the United States who often help facilitate drug trafficking operations. Mexican DTO members actively seek to maintain a low-profile to avoid detection by law enforcement entities.¹ In Mexico, the competitive advantages of the cartels are influenced heavily by geography. For example, the Sinaloa Cartel controls large swaths of territory in western Mexico where the majority of poppy cultivation and heroin production take place. By comparison, the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas control lucrative smuggling corridors into south Texas.²

To move their drug shipments to Chicago, Mexican cartels often employ a series of intermediaries who oversee the shipment of drugs across the SWB and facilitate sales to wholesale and mid-level customers. These key intermediaries are most often based in the United States but maintain close relationships with family members or associates in Mexico involved in cartel operations. For cartel leadership, these individuals are very beneficial because of their ability to broker drug deals and facilitate smuggling operations, and because they help insulate cartel members in Mexico by assuming a majority of the risk and thwarting law enforcement's efforts to directly trace the supply of drugs back to sources in Mexico.

The vast majority of drugs entering the Chicago area continue to be smuggled across the U.S.–Mexico border and transshipped via various transportation methods to Chicago and surrounding areas. The Chicago area's extensive highway, train, and air transportation systems (including mail and parcel delivery services) make it an ideal transportation hub to

move drugs from the SWB to Chicago and throughout the Midwest, as well as the subsequent collection of drug proceeds in Chicago and movement of bulk currency to the SWB. The most common transportation method remains by vehicle—typically tractor-trailers, trucks, buses, and/or personal vehicles. The transportation routes and smuggling methods used often depend on the amount and type of drug being trafficked. Drugs may be transported directly from Mexico to Chicago, or from Mexico to staging points inside the US where the shipments are broken down for onward transport to distributors in other areas of the country. Chicago serves as both a staging point and a final destination for drug shipments arriving from Mexico.

Along with many other cities in the United States, Chicago has seen a remarkable increase in the availability and abuse of heroin in recent years. This increase is evidenced by heroin seizure data, an increasing number of heroin-related overdoses, and the number of individuals seeking treatment or medical care for heroin abuse. The vast majority of the heroin consumed in Chicago is supplied by Mexican cartels that have expanded their role in the U.S. heroin market by producing more heroin and supplying markets throughout the country.³ Large, multi-kilogram seizures of heroin are increasingly common and occur on a relatively frequent basis. Typically, seizures of this magnitude would be expected to cause some disruption in the supply of the drug to the street, with fluctuations in price, purity, or both. However, despite the increase in seizures and the volume of the drug seized, the price and purity of retail-level heroin in Chicago has remained relatively low and stable in recent years, indicating that the overall increased supply has allowed the gangs to continue selling relatively low-purity heroin to maximize profits. The distribution of fentanyl, either in place of or in combination with heroin, has likely helped stretch the overall supply of heroin and has increased the lethality of drugs sold on the street.

Regarding heroin abuse trends, the percentage of individuals seeking treatment for heroin abuse in Chicago is among the highest in the nation. For example, in 2012, the percentage of treatment admissions for heroin in the Chicago Metropolitan Area was more than double the national average (35.1 percent vs 16.4 percent). From 2007-2012, there were significant increases in treatment admissions despite a significant decline in treatment capacity in Illinois. In 2011, the most recent year for which data are available, the Chicago Metropolitan Area also ranked first in the country for the total number of emergency department visits related to heroin use (24,627)—nearly double the number for New York City, a city with more than three times the population of Chicago.⁴

It appears that heroin availability in the Chicago area is being driven equally by both supply and demand, given that increases in production and seizures are occurring simultaneously with a steady and growing demand for the drug. Overall, the threat that heroin poses to the Chicago area is significant not only for the many dangers it brings to public health, but also because it provides criminal groups and violent street gangs with a means to generate significant profits through numerous and recurring street-level sales, which in turn may bring additional harm to the community through subsequent disputes or turf battles over this highly lucrative illegal trade. The increase in heroin trafficking, availability, and abuse is influenced by a number of factors, including an increase in the number of abusers who switch to heroin from prescription opioids, and a more concerted effort by Mexican DTOs to produce and distribute heroin. The latter is likely influenced by a general decline in the availability and use of cocaine in the United States since 2007.

CHICAGO'S MOST PREVALENT STREET GANGS

Chicago is home to several street gangs that are heavily involved in drug distribution, violent crime, and other criminal activity. The primary street gangs that pose the greatest threat in the Chicago area are the Gangster Disciples, Black Disciples, Black P Stone Nation, Vice Lords, and Latin Kings. Other significant street gangs that are active in Chicago, each with an estimated membership of over 1,000, include the New Breeds, Four Corner Hustlers, Two Six, Maniac Latin Disciples, Satan Disciples, Spanish Cobras, and Mickey Cobras. Although gang

membership is difficult to pinpoint, local authorities estimate that there are over 100,000 active gang members in the Chicago metropolitan area. Collectively, Chicago street gangs serve as the primary mid-level and retail-level distributors of drugs in the city and are responsible for a significant portion of the city's violent crime.⁵

- **Gangster Disciples:** The Gangster Disciples represent one of Chicago's largest and most-established street gangs. The gang was formed following a split from the Black Disciples in the mid-1970s. The Gangster Disciples have members in various states mainly in the Midwest and Southeast, and maintain significant influence in the U.S. prison population. The conflict between the Gangster Disciples and its rivals in the People Nation, namely the Black P Stones, Latin Kings, and Vice Lords, generates a significant amount of violence in the Chicago area.
- **Black Disciples:** The Black Disciples were initially formed in the late 1960s and operated jointly with the Gangster Disciples under the Black Gangster Disciple Nation until the two groups split in 1972. Following the split, the Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples engaged in a violent dispute for control of street territory that continues to this day.
- **Black P Stone Nation:** The Black P Stone Nation (BPSN) is a street gang that originated on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1950s. The gang, originally known as the Blackstone Rangers, grew rapidly in numbers and influence. Following a disagreement between the gang's leaders, the majority of the gang re-branded as the Black P Stone Nation in 1968, drawing on the influence of the Black Power movement. Following the gang leader's release from prison in 1975, he attempted to instill principles of Islam into the gang's culture and renamed the gang "El Rukns" (Arabic for "Stones"). Several Black P Stone members disagreed with the gang leader's style and separated themselves from the gang by forming new gangs or factions, such as the Mickey Cobras. Eventually, El Rukns changed their name and unified with numerous other factions under the name of the Black P Stones. Although the gang has experienced significant infighting over the years, the BPSN remains strong with members in Chicago and elsewhere.
- **Vice Lords:** The Vice Lord Nation was founded in 1958 and currently has thousands of members dispersed throughout the country, with the greatest presence in Chicago and the Great Lakes region. Within Chicago, the Vice Lords are most active on the West Side of the city. In the mid-1960s, the leaders of the gang labeled themselves the "Conservative" Vice Lords and became more involved in community development to generate a more positive image. This positive image eventually eroded as gang-related crime increased. Today's Vice Lord Nation consists of several factions, with the

FOLKS VERSUS PEOPLE NATION

In 1978, individual Chicago street gangs formed two major alliances—the Folk Nation and the People Nation—to better protect their individual interests within the penal system. The leader of the Gangster Disciple Nation spearheaded the creation of the Folk Nation from within the Illinois State Penitentiary. Notable gangs in the Folk Nation include the Gangster Disciples, Black Disciples, Maniac Latin Disciples, La Raza, and Spanish Cobras. In response to the creation of the Folk Nation, the Vice Lords, Latin Kings, and El Rukns (now known as the Black P Stones) joined together to create the People Nation. The alliances formed through the creation of the Folk and People nations remain in place to this day. Although their importance on the streets of Chicago has waned somewhat over the past two decades, their most significant influence can still be observed in prisons, where protection from rivals is an immediate, vital, and pressing concern.

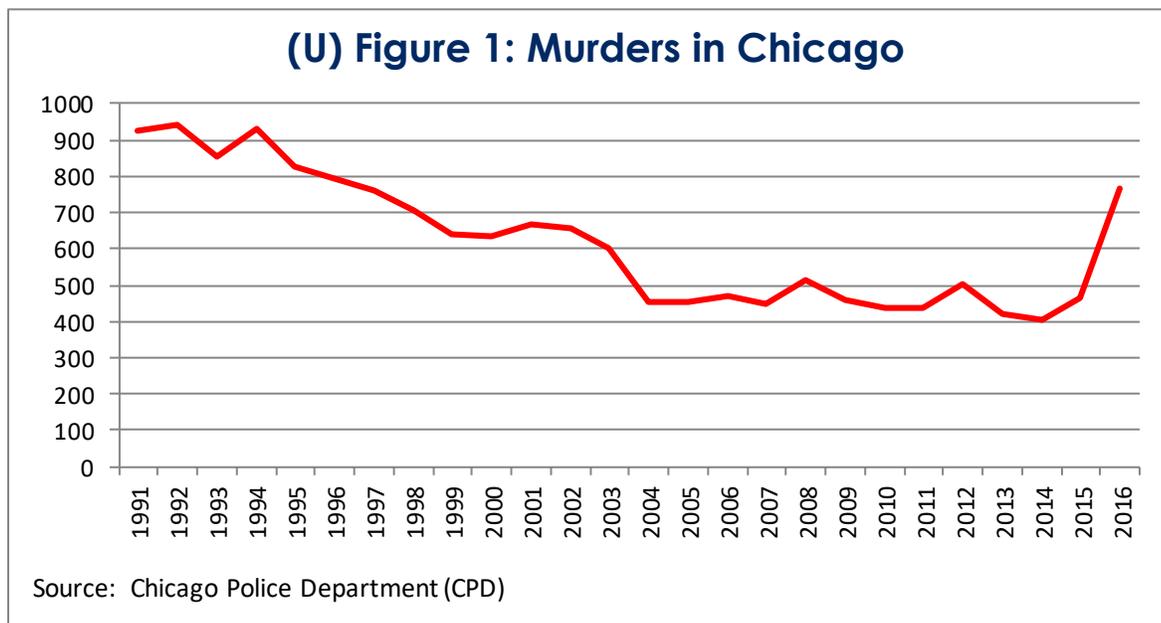
Source: DEA

Conservative Vice Lords and Traveling Vice Lords (TVL) being the largest of the factions. The Vice Lords are allied with other elements of the People Nation, such as the Black P Stones and Latin Kings, and its main rivals are the Gangster Disciples and other gangs in the Folk Nation.

- Latin Kings:** The Latin Kings were established in Chicago in the mid-1960s and maintain a strong presence in the city, primarily in Hispanic neighborhoods, as well as the prison system. The Latin Kings have members in several states and are most active in Illinois, New York, Texas, and Florida. The Latin Kings are made up of two main groups—one Mexican and the other Puerto Rican—but operate under the same guidelines. The group is heavily involved in the sale of illegal drugs and reportedly has links to Mexican drug cartels. The Latin Kings follow a well-defined organizational structure and hierarchy, and its constitution and by-laws are strictly enforced. The Latin Kings are part of the People Nation, and its main rivals are the Gangster Disciples and other Latin gangs in the Folk Nation.

VIOLENT CRIME IN CHICAGO

In recent years, Chicago has received national attention from various media outlets for its violent crime situation. Much of this attention has come in the wake of a rising homicide rate over the past 2 years and incidents of violence affecting innocent citizens. In 2016, there were 764 homicide victims in Chicago—the highest number since 1998—along with more than 4,000 shooting incidents. Prior to the sharp increase in homicides in 2016, the homicide rate in Chicago for the past decade had been significantly lower than previous decades. In 2015, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) reported 465 homicides, about half the 928 homicides reported in the peak year of 1992.



A recent study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab analyzed several data sets related to violent crime in the city and concluded that, though the spike in shootings and homicides was sudden and sustained, the cause of the increase in violence is unclear. Although the study was not able to pinpoint a specific cause, it did document several trends pertaining to gun violence and the characteristics of homicide victims and offenders. According to the study, 90 percent of the 764 homicides in 2016 were committed with a firearm. Of Chicago's homicide victims in 2015 and 2016, approximately 80 percent had been previously arrested, and 54 percent had

either a current or prior gang affiliation. Approximately 64 percent of homicides in Chicago in 2016 were due to some type of altercation and likely involved street gangs. The average age of homicide offenders arrested in 2015 and 2016 was 26 years old and approximately 25 percent were adolescents. In addition, approximately 90 percent of arrested offenders had at least one prior arrest, with around 45 percent having over 10 prior arrests and almost 20 percent having over 20 prior arrests. Approximately 50 percent of offenders had a prior arrest for violent crime and around 40 percent had a prior gun-related arrest. Approximately 67 percent of homicide offenders in 2016 had a current or prior gang affiliation, down from 73 percent in 2015. The number of non-gang affiliated homicide offenders rose by 25 percent from 2015 to 2016.⁶

The Chicago Crime Lab study found that the overall number of arrests by the Chicago Police Department had declined by 24 percent from 2015 to 2016, primarily due to a 44 percent drop in drug arrests. Although arrests for shootings and homicides increased slightly in 2016, the sharp increase in shooting and homicide incidents caused the clearance rate to drop from 36 percent to 26 percent for homicides and from 7 percent to 5 percent for shootings. It is possible that the increase in violent incidents coupled with the decline in clearances may have both increased the likelihood for retaliatory attacks and also lessened the fear of arrest for some offenders. Furthermore, as has long been the case, gang-related murder investigations are often difficult to clear due to the fact that many witnesses are often reluctant to share information with police out of fear of retribution from the offending gang.

Disputes between rival gangs or individual members are a contributing factor in Chicago's recent rise in violent crime, with the majority of incidents occurring on the South and West Sides of Chicago where gang presence is high. Local authorities in Chicago have attributed much of this rise to the fracturing of Chicago's street gangs into multiple factions that lack hierarchical authority. This fracturing has been the result of decades of internecine warfare among and within gangs, as well as the removal of many key leaders through incarceration or death. Consequently, previously agreed upon gang rules or social mores have dissolved and internal discipline has eroded.⁷ As a result, much of the violence in Chicago has become less controlled by gang leaders and more disorganized. While a gang member would need to get approval from a gang leader to execute a rival gang member twenty years ago, today that gang member simply commits the murder without compunction or need to ask for approval. Today, disputes involving gang members may start off as something personal in nature and unrelated to gang activities. Once a gang member resorts to violence, retaliatory attacks against the offending gang are common and prolong the conflict.

Most murders in Chicago occur outdoors or in public spaces, which is consistent with the fact that most retail-level drug transactions take place on street corners where altercations among unknown and untrusted people likely would occur and potentially lead to violence. This violence also is highly concentrated in distinct areas within the city, with the vast majority of homicides and shootings occurring on the South and West sides of Chicago where gang presence and drug activity are high. Gang-related violence tends to spike on anniversary dates celebrated by the respective gangs, as well as on the days of wakes or funeral services for deceased gang members. Rates of violent crime are also typically higher during the summer months and on days when local schools are out of session; however, as noted in the Chicago Crime Lab study, weather is not believed to have played a major factor in the increase in homicides in 2016.

According to a 2011 CPD study that analyzed data on homicides in the city from 1991-2011, "Street Gang Altercation" has consistently ranked highest over "Gangland Narcotics," "Armed Robbery," and "Domestic Altercation" among the four most common motives for murder.^a

^a The identified motives of "Street Gang Altercation" and "Gangland Narcotics" both pertain to homicides associated with street gangs. The difference between the two is that with "Gangland Narcotics" the homicide was committed by gang members and determined to be drug-related, while for "Street Gang Altercation" the perpetrators/victims were gang members but there was no identifiable drug nexus in the motive for the homicide.

However, while the proportion of Street Gang Altercation murders rose gradually over the past two decades, the proportion of Gangland Narcotics murders stayed relatively low and stable.⁸ This suggests that a smaller proportion of murders are the result of conflicts among drug traffickers.

Overall, as reflected in both the Chicago Crime Lab and CPD studies, although the level of violence in the city has increased in recent years, most of the trends associated with the demographics of the parties involved and the characteristics of the crime are similar today compared to previous decades. As summarized by the Chicago Crime Lab, the core problem of violence in Chicago continues to be “violence concentrated largely in a moderate number of our most disadvantaged neighborhoods, carried out by teens and young adults in public places with illegally owned, and perhaps increasingly lethal, firearms.”

SIGNIFICANT CARTEL-GANG CASES

DEA's Chicago office has conducted numerous investigations involving the drug trafficking and violent criminal activity associated with Chicago street gangs. Several of these cases have successfully linked the supply chain from individual gang members on the streets all the way back to senior cartel members in Mexico. These cases illustrate the links between drug distribution and violent crime, as well as highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics at each level of the supply chain to identify critical “choke points” necessary to disrupt the flow of drugs. As evidenced by the cases described below, identifying each component of the supply chain requires several months of investigative effort, but doing so often yields quality results.

- In February 2007, DEA Chicago initiated an investigation targeting narcotics trafficking by high-ranking members of the Conservative Vice Lords street gang on the West Side of Chicago. By continuously working up the supply chain, the investigation ultimately centered on the Chicago-based leaders of the DTO who maintained direct ties to senior leadership of the Sinaloa Cartel and the Beltran-Leyva Cartel in Mexico. The DTO received thousands of kilograms of cocaine and multi-kilogram loads of heroin for distribution in Chicago and other cities across the United States. On average, the DTO received 1,500 to 2,000 kilograms of cocaine per month, at times obtaining all or a large portion of that quantity from Sinaloa Cartel leaders Joaquin Guzman-Loera aka El Chapo and Ismael Zambada-Garcia aka El Mayo and the factions of the Sinaloa Cartel they controlled, while also at times obtaining a substantial portion of that quantity from the Beltran-Leyva Cartel. In turn, the DTO packaged and returned to Mexico (through Los Angeles) approximately \$4-10 million in U.S. currency (USC) every week to 10 days. In total, the investigation resulted in the seizure of 2,061 kilograms of cocaine, 411 pounds of methamphetamine, 58.5 kilograms of heroin, 22 weapons, and approximately \$26 million worth of assets including 27 vehicles and 25 properties. The investigation was the basis for the indictment of numerous senior Mexican cartel figures, including Guzman-Loera and Zambada-García, by the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois.
- In January 2010, DEA Chicago and the CPD initiated an investigation into the drug trafficking activities of a Chicago-based drug trafficker who was a member of the Black Disciples street gang. The investigation revealed that the trafficker was purchasing multiple kilograms of heroin from Mexican drug traffickers on the North Side of Chicago and supplying the heroin to street gang members from both the Gangster Disciples and Black P Stones on the South Side of Chicago. The investigation also revealed that the trafficker was supplying heroin to customers in Madison, Wisconsin, and Cincinnati, Ohio, including one customer in Madison who was a known member of the Gangster Disciples. The trafficker was working with Mexican heroin brokers associated with the Sinaloa Cartel to receive kilogram quantities of heroin on a monthly basis from Mexico.

At its conclusion, this two-phase investigation resulted in the arrest of 56 individuals on federal drug charges and the seizure of approximately 71 kilograms of heroin, 18 kilograms of cocaine, \$1.23 million USC, 5 handguns, and 19 vehicles.

- In October 2012, DEA Chicago initiated an investigation targeting the illegal drug trafficking and money laundering activities of high-level members of the Sinaloa Cartel and their drug trafficking associates in Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the United States. Over the course of several years, the investigation led to the identification of a drug supply chain that begins with senior members of the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico and ends with members of the Black P Stones and Gangster Disciples street gangs in Chicago. The investigation revealed that Chicago-based drug traffickers were obtaining drugs from associates in California via commercial express mailing services. One of the main recipients of the drugs in Chicago was affiliated with the Black P Stones street gang and is suspected of having served as a source of supply to other Chicago gang members. To date, the investigation has resulted in indictments of 32 domestic and international targets and the seizure of approximately \$4.28 million USC, 904 kilograms of cocaine, 8 kilograms of heroin, and 24 pounds of methamphetamine.
- On June 24, 2015, agents from DEA Chicago—with assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Internal Revenue Service, and CPD—arrested 47 individuals associated with the TVL gang. The TVL controls heroin and cocaine sales at several locations on the West Side of Chicago; one of which is believed to be the largest open-air heroin market in the city, which intelligence indicates generates \$2.5 million USC per year in revenue on its own. This particular distribution cell of the gang has been linked to individuals in Reynosa, Mexico, who are affiliated with members of the Gulf Cartel. In Chicago, the TVL has been involved in several shootings at and near corners controlled by the gang. These shootings are believed to be related to the fight between gangs for control of the heroin sales. Overall, this 11-month investigation resulted in the arrest of 47 individuals and the seizure of 3 kilograms of heroin, 850 grams of cocaine, \$193,153 USC, 5 firearms (including 3 assault rifles), 2 luxury vehicles, and jewelry valued at \$119,000.
- On July 16, 2015, 15 individuals were arrested and charged with federal and state drug charges after a lengthy investigation uncovered their roles in trafficking wholesale amounts of cocaine and heroin on Chicago's South and West Sides. The main target of this investigation was a member of the Black P Stones street gang. He and several other targets arrested in this investigation were violent offenders who had been incarcerated multiple times for crimes such as murder, armed robbery, and firearm possession. Members of this organization reportedly had relationships with drug sources of supply in Texas and Arizona.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several interesting conclusions can be drawn by looking at cartel and gang-related cases within DEA Chicago's area of responsibility, particularly those cases described above where a continuous supply chain from Mexico to Chicago has been established.

Identifying the key middlemen who link the distribution organization back to Mexico offers the greatest chance for investigative success. In most cases, it is unlikely that Chicago gang members will have direct lines of communication with high-level cartel members based in Mexico. Rather, their business dealings are more likely to be limited to a U.S.-based distributor who is one or more levels removed from Mexico. Targeting these intermediaries frequently leads to additional seizures linked to the organization and provides a better understanding of the scope and breadth of the routes and methods used to transport drugs from Mexico to Chicago and other U.S. cities. Although this strategy typically requires several

months or years of investigative effort, it has proven effective in obtaining evidence against major drug traffickers in Mexico and their U.S.-based associates for prosecution in the United States for their role in the conspiracy beyond the local crime.

There is no formal, direct partnership in place between any particular Mexican cartel and any particular Chicago street gang. Rather, wholesale drug distributors and logistical coordinators, who often have ties back to Mexico, will establish a business relationship with whoever buys their product at the right price, regardless of any gang affiliation. This has been observed in CFD cases where distributors working on behalf of Mexican DTOs have often sold their product to members of rival gangs.

The criminal activities of Chicago street gangs are not isolated to Chicago and its suburbs. To the contrary, numerous investigations have shown that Chicago street gangs are actively involved in drug transportation and distribution to associated gang members in other states. For example, in June 2015, DEA's Milwaukee District Office arrested several members of the Four Corner Hustlers street gang who were actively involved in heroin distribution in the Milwaukee area. The leader of the organization was a native of Chicago and had recently been promoted within the Four Corner Hustlers to oversee heroin distribution in Milwaukee. This subject obtained his heroin supply in Chicago and transported it back to Milwaukee for street-level distribution.⁹ In a March 2015 case, authorities in Mississippi disrupted a heroin distribution cell in Clarksdale, Mississippi, that was led by members of Gangster Disciples. The group was overseen by Gangster Disciples based in Chicago and had a strong propensity for violent acts such as aggravated assault, arson, robbery, and homicide resulting from gang activities.¹⁰ Furthermore, in February 2016, authorities in Williston, North Dakota, arrested four individuals in connection with the distribution of a batch of heroin containing fentanyl that resulted in several overdoses. Two of the individuals arrested in Williston were from Chicago, including the suspected supplier of the heroin who is reportedly a member of the Vice Lords street gang.¹¹

Street gangs are the primary criminal organizations involved in retail drug distribution in Chicago. Although they have diversified their criminal activities, Chicago street gangs continue to generate significant profits from street-level drug sales. Their involvement in the distribution of heroin is particularly concerning due to rising levels of heroin abuse in Chicago and surrounding communities. With a growing number of heroin addicts and an increasing supply of the drug from Mexico, street gangs are well-positioned to generate significant profits from heroin sales, and by doing so, bring additional harm to the community. The 2006 fentanyl outbreak in Chicago serves as a prime example of how street gangs directly harm the community through drug distribution. In this case, the Mickey Cobras street gang was found to be one of the primary recipients and distributors of a large quantity of heroin containing fatal doses of fentanyl. The fentanyl originated in Mexico and its addition to heroin resulted in approximately 1,000 fatal overdoses in Chicago between April 2005 and February 2007. Although fentanyl-related overdoses declined precipitously following the seizure of the clandestine laboratory in Mexico and the arrests of those responsible for the 2006 outbreak, distribution of the drug within the heroin market in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States resumed within the past three years. In early October 2015, a heroin and fentanyl mixture was reported to have caused more than 100 overdoses in the Chicago area over a 5 day period. Two members of the Vice Lords street gang were arrested in connection with the distribution of the heroin and fentanyl that caused this outbreak. Subsequent investigations have revealed that the new sources of fentanyl also reside in Mexico, strongly suggesting continued interest in fentanyl distribution by Mexican cartels.

Cartels and Chicago street gangs have become increasingly involved in a more diverse array of criminal activity apart from drug trafficking and violent crime. According to the CPD and FBI, gang members have been involved in criminal activity such as human smuggling, prostitution, credit card fraud, and mortgage fraud.^{12,13,14} In a dated but significant instance, a Chicago gang was linked to terrorism in 1987, when the leader of the Black P Stones attempted

to acquire high-powered weapons from Libya in order to commit terrorist acts against the U.S. Government.¹⁵ By developing additional methods to generate income and establish their influence, Chicago street gangs have increased their resiliency and created a more complex problem for law enforcement officials to counter. In a parallel development, a similar trend has been observed in Mexico as cartels have become more involved in activities such as fuel theft.¹⁶

Strict adherence to gang territory and allegiance to specific gang leaders appears to have declined since the early days of Chicago street gangs. In previous decades, Chicago street gang members showed great deference and respect to the gang's leaders and founding members. Gang leaders yielded supreme power and influence over their respective gang's activities. Gang members were mindful of the repercussions of going against the will of gang leadership and were unlikely to have any sort of association with members from rival street gangs. Present day gang members are more inclined to collaborate with individuals outside their gang if doing so offers the opportunity to generate financial profit. Today's street gangs in Chicago have reportedly permitted outsiders to sell drugs in their territory on the condition that they abide by the rules established by the gang and provide the gang with a portion of the drug proceeds earned, essentially a form of tax. A similar system is in place in Mexico and at the SWB where plaza bosses or "gatekeepers" working for a particular cartel oversee smuggling operations and charge a tax to outsiders who wish to move drugs through their territory. Occasionally, members from different gangs—even traditional rivals—will join to form new criminal groups. For example, in the early 1990s, the New Breeds street gang was formed from a mix of Black Disciples and Gangster Disciples who opposed actions taken by the Gangster Disciples' leader.¹⁷ Hispanic street gangs, such as the Latin Kings, are the exception to this development and continue to follow a strict hierarchy and limit collaboration with other gangs.

Gang members are increasingly using social media as a platform to promote gang culture, facilitate criminal activity, and disrespect their rivals.^{18,19,20} The emergence

RESPECT FOR ELDERS: A THING OF THE PAST?

One possible explanation for the recent uptick in violent crime in Chicago is that younger, more brazen members of Chicago's African American street gangs are more prone to act independently without the explicit authorization of their gang's leadership. Compared to their predecessors, Chicago's African American gangs are more loosely organized and lack a defined, hierarchical structure, arguably making it more difficult for leaders to control the actions of individual members. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent today's younger generation of gang members respect the guidance of their gang's founding leaders. In November 2015, two formerly powerful leaders of the gangs responsible for much of the violence in Chicago issued a statement from prison urging Chicago gang members to "stop the killing." Given that the homicide rate has risen significantly in Chicago in 2016, it appears as if these pleas have not been honored by Chicago's criminals. By comparison, Mexican cartels are highly organized and have leaders who are better positioned to enforce internal policies that govern criminal activity. Nonetheless, recent intelligence indicates that some cartel leaders in Mexico may be having difficulty controlling the activities of certain members. In Northeastern Mexico, some regional commanders of the Gulf Cartel reportedly wish to focus more on drug trafficking and abandon activities such as kidnapping and extortion; however, some cells have refused to comply due to the profits generated by such activities. In response, Gulf Cartel leaders offered rewards to citizens who report kidnappers and extortionists to the cartel so that they may investigate. Although not directly connected, these parallel developments indicate that the wishes of senior members of street gangs and cartels may increasingly conflict with the attitudes and actions of younger members.

Source: DEA

and popularity of social media over the past decade has contributed to gang activity and violent crime. Using a variety of social media platforms, today's gang members can easily communicate and disseminate photographs, videos, and commentary to brag about their gang involvement and collaborate with other members. Through a practice labeled as "cyber-banging," gang members can also initiate disputes with rival gang members over social media, which in turn can lead to violence on the street. Previously, taunts and tagging would only be observed by a few people, but signs of disrespect can now be observed by hundreds of people, thus intensifying the resulting backlash.²¹ On a related note, the emergence of a new genre of rap music known as "drill" in recent years has fueled disputes between rival gang members, which in turn have led to several homicides in Chicago. In drill music, rappers who are often affiliated with street gangs use violence-themed lyrics to taunt or disrespect their rivals, and then disseminate their videos and messages to thousands over social media.^{22,23}

Prison plays an important role when it comes to gang allegiances, as well as in developing connections between gang members and potential sources of supply. Street gang members and drug traffickers make up a significant portion of the U.S. prison population. Because of this, the U.S. legal system can serve as a common connecting point for gang members and drug traffickers. Within the prison system, gang affiliation and loyalty remain particularly important for incarcerated gang members seeking to establish power inside the jail and to defend themselves from rival gangs. Gang members who successfully complete a prison sentence and remain loyal to the gang will often earn respect from other gang members and sometimes be promoted in the gang hierarchy upon their release. Other times, gang members who have completed a lengthy sentence may find themselves out of touch with the present day gang and its leadership, which may influence their continued involvement with the gang. Incarcerated gang leaders have been known to remain involved in criminal activity and maintain their role in the gang's decision-making process by passing messages from prison.

Chicago street gangs are firmly entrenched in Chicago after decades of criminal activity. With roots dating back to the 1950s, and despite decades of law enforcement efforts, changes in gang leadership, and recurring violent gang disputes, the major street gangs in Chicago have demonstrated resiliency. Chicago's gang problem influences a wide range of socio-economic and political issues, mainly due to the sheer number of active gang members in the city and the deep roots of the major street gangs. Gang leaders are well aware of their influence on the community and have been known to attempt to extend this influence into the political arena as well. With decades of involvement in criminal activity, along with a steady supply of drugs to generate profit from sales to a large and growing user base, it is unlikely that Chicago street gangs will dissolve any time soon.

Outlook

When viewed together, the steady flow of drugs from Mexico; high and rising rates of heroin abuse; and the continued, heavy presence of violent street gangs have created an environment in Chicago that is conducive to criminal activity. Heroin is likely to be the primary drug threat encountered in Chicago for the foreseeable future due to ample supply of the drug from Mexico; the presence of a very large user population in Chicago; and the persistent, long-term nature of heroin addiction. As a result, heroin sales are likely to generate significant profits for street gangs and DTOs operating in the Chicago area. Although it is difficult to establish direct correlations between the increase in heroin trafficking and gang-related homicides, heroin trafficking at a minimum plays an indirect role simply due to the fact that heroin sales are the primary source of profit for most of the gangs in the city. Such lucrative sales locations could spawn disputes and turf wars as rival gangs vie for control over them. Although the homicide rate has declined considerably over the past two decades, recent spikes in violent crime and the continued propensity for violence and disregard for life exhibited by Chicago street gang members is cause for serious concern.

As history has shown, street gangs and DTOs continuously evolve and adapt to further their criminal enterprises. As they have evolved, new norms have emerged in some aspects of these organizations, such as the use of social media to communicate and promote criminal activities. It remains to be seen whether other, more dangerous occurrences—such as the targeted killing of innocent family members of street gangs—may also become more commonplace in the future. Law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and policy makers charged with combating these organizations must remain keenly aware of the evolving situation on the street to develop sound strategies for crime reduction.

In terms of investigative strategies to reduce the flow of illegal drugs, focusing on the mid-level drug traffickers or intermediaries that link street gangs to Mexican sources of supply is likely to have the greatest potential for long-term impact. The removal of these intermediaries helps interrupt the gang's drug supply and increases the potential to obtain evidence against sources of supply in Mexico. Success in this area could potentially lead to changes in how gangs and Mexican DTOs conduct business with each other. For example, Mexican DTOs may demand that street gangs take on more risk by having them assume control of drug shipments closer to the SWB to lessen the vulnerability of transporters working on behalf of the DTO.

Since Mexican DTOs control the wholesale level of the U.S. drug market, authorities should be cognizant of how trends and changes in the drug trafficking situation in Mexico may impact the Chicago area. For example, with the arrest of the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquin GUZMAN-Loera, and the growing power of organizations such as the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, new sources of supply and drug routes may emerge in Chicago over time. Although heroin is likely to remain the primary drug of abuse in the Chicago area for the foreseeable future, changes in levels of drug availability could emerge should a competitor replace the Sinaloa Cartel as the primary organization responsible for supplying drugs to the Chicago area. For example, seizure and investigative intelligence point to a possible resurgence in the availability of cocaine within the Western Hemisphere which may provide some cartels a competitive advantage over others depending upon the level of their relationships with South American suppliers. Furthermore, though territorial disputes and power struggles among cartels in Mexico have generated significant violence south of the border over the past decade, the same levels of violence have not been seen in the United States. Nonetheless, the potential exists for violence to occur any time these criminal organizations struggle for control, whether it is a plaza in Mexico or an open-air sales location in Chicago.

As Mexican DTOs continue to solidify their position in the United States, tradecraft employed by cartels in Mexico may also emerge in the United States. For example, cartels in Mexico frequently use ranches and rural spaces as storage sites for drugs and money and as locations for cartel gatherings. Although the majority of local stash houses continue to be in the city or surrounding suburbs, rural locations used by Mexican DTOs have been encountered. If this trend continues, it could draw some gang members out of the city of Chicago to maintain their supply lines and may leave them more vulnerable to identification by law enforcement entities.

Due to the complexity of Chicago's crime problem, it is clear that no single or simple solution exists. Combatting the threats posed by violent crime and drug trafficking will require a long-term, multi-faceted approach with involvement from a variety of sectors, to include law enforcement, public health, academia, public education, and community organizations. One option for developing a better understanding of the current situation and identifying possible solutions is to compare Chicago's crime situation and history with that of other major U.S. cities that face similar challenges. New York and Los Angeles, for example, are two cities where gang activity and drug trafficking pose major threats. Although the situation in each city has its own unique dynamics and characteristics, understanding the strategies employed by each city and their effectiveness in combating drug trafficking and violent crime may yield valuable lessons for the future. Community engagement, conflict resolution, and prosecutorial and investigative strategies are among the tools that could be useful to compare.

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(U) This product was prepared by the DEA Chicago Field Division, FBI, and the Chicago Police Department. Comments and questions may be addressed to the Chief, Analysis and Production Section at dea.onsi@usdoj.gov. For media/press inquiries call (202) 307-7977.



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