

Testimony of
The Honorable Debra Yang

United States Attorney
Central District of California
September 17, 2003

STATEMENT

OF

DEBRA W. YANG
UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
UNITED STATES SENATE

CONCERNING

COMBATING GANG VIOLENCE

PRESENTED ON

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Concerning

Combating Gang Violence

Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Leahy, and Members of the Committee, I am Debra Yang, the United States Attorney for the Central District of California. It is an honor to have the opportunity to appear here today to describe to you my District's problem with organized criminal street gangs and my Office's coordinated attack on such gangs.

Violent crime and narcotics distribution by street gangs is a significant, long-term problem in the Central District of California. In Los Angeles County alone, conservative estimates put the number of separate street gangs at approximately 1,000 and the number of individual street gang members at approximately 150,000. In addition, there are approximately 20,000 gang members in Orange County and comparable numbers of street gangs and street gang members exist for Ventura and San Bernardino Counties. Gangs are considered the driving force for the homicide rate in my District, and it is believed that fully half of all gang members in my District participate in violence and/or the use and distribution of illegal narcotics. Indeed, the homicide rate in Los Angeles was probably one of the highest in the nation last year. Furthermore, Los Angeles is what is known as a "source city" for both illegal narcotics and gangs, meaning that Los Angeles-based gangs have migrated to other communities across the country, as well as to Central America. For example, members and cliques of the Los Angeles-based 18th Street Gang have migrated all over California, the Southwest Border and Pacific Northwest states, New Jersey and even Mexico and El Salvador. My Office's prosecutors have also tracked Los Angeles-based gang members to cities all over the United States, including Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, Omaha, Raleigh, and St. Louis, to name only a few.

My District has focused on the investigation and prosecution of gangs and gang crime since 1992, commencing in the wake of the Los Angeles riots. This intense focus has continued unabated during the time I have served as the United States Attorney. We have found that the street gangs based in Los Angeles County are some of the most organized and violent of any in the country. As a result, I have sought to make our District a leader in targeting criminal street gangs as criminal enterprises and focusing on the gang leaders, where appropriate, while at the same time continuing to target individual gang members, the so-called soldiers, for their federal crimes and criminal conspiracies, where appropriate. To do so, I have encouraged my Office's prosecutors to use every available federal tool, including the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO), Violent Crimes in Aid of Racketeering Activities (VICAR), and money laundering statutes, in addition to the more traditional narcotics and firearms statutes.

A prime example of the Central District's long term investigation and prosecution strategy for organized street gangs are the recently completed 18th Street Gang and Mexican Mafia investigations and prosecutions, which spanned more than four years from beginning to end and which led to the convictions of more than 75 Mexican Mafia and 18th Street gang leaders and associates. To be specific, my Office employed the RICO statutes against the 18th Street Gang for the first time. This is a primarily Hispanic street gang that claims upwards of 10,000 members in California and other states, as well as Mexico and El Salvador. The 18th Street Case was a joint effort of the United States Attorney's Office, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local law enforcement, and it relied on the full arsenal of federal and local investigative weapons, with wiretaps being the most prominent tool in the arsenal. The first wiretap in the case was approved in October 1998, and the wiretapping continued unabated over several phone lines, for

over a year, culminating in July 1999, when the federal grand jury returned a superseding indictment and the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) executed a large-scale, multi-defendant, multi-county takedown. A total of 19 search warrants were executed during the take down, and a total of 26 defendants were charged with racketeering, narcotics, violent crime in aid of racketeering and money laundering offenses. This group of 26 defendants included the entire leadership structure of the gang, all of the major narcotics suppliers to the gang, and even the Mexican Mafia "godfather" of the gang. The FBI pursued the case vigorously, even tracking one fugitive to Honduras, where he was arrested and extradited to the United States to stand charges. The case climaxed with a ten-week, high-security, federal trial of the lead defendants before the Hon. Ronald S.W. Lew. The trial ended on May 2, 2002, with the conviction of all defendants on all counts, including three murders, five additional attempted murders, one conspiracy to murder a government informant (a murder plot which the FBI foiled), RICO charges, narcotics distribution charges, and money laundering charges. The two leaders of the gang and the Mexican Mafia Godfather received life sentences under the RICO laws.

As I noted, the case marked my District's first use of RICO against the highly organized, highly mobile and extremely violent 18th Street Gang. The result was 24 federal convictions, crippling the Columbia Lil' Cycos ("CLCS") clique of the 18th Street Gang. In addition, approximately \$2,000,000 in narcotics proceeds were seized and forfeited to the government, including luxury cars and homes, as well as caches of cash and jewelry. Most importantly, these efforts had a positive effect on the quality of life in the MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles, a large, two-mile square, multi-ethnic community in the heart of the city where the CLCS engaged in their criminal activities.

An even more recent example of a joint effort by federal and local law enforcement to target a violent organized street gang as an enterprise is my Office's current effort, in coordination with the FBI and LAPD, to target the powerful criminal partnership between two rival street gangs in the neighborhoods of the South Central and Central areas of Los Angeles. Using wiretaps and surveillance, among other techniques, the FBI, LAPD, and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department conducted this investigation in coordination with my Office for nearly two years, leading to a federal and state take-down on June 26, 2003, that netted over 28 leaders, members and associates of the twin gangs. These members of these gangs had terrorized their respective communities, such as the Pueblo Del Rio housing project in Los Angeles, for years with a vice-like grip on the drug trade in their communities. The gang members backed up that iron grip with the ever present shadow of violence, both real and threatened. The 28 defendants are now charged with federal and state crimes, including drug distribution, conspiracy charges and felon in possession charges, as well as fraud and identity theft violations. My Office anticipates extensive litigation on these cases for the next several months.

Because gang violence is such a serious and complex problem in the Central District of California, my Office has not only targeted organized street gangs as criminal enterprises, we have also grouped our efforts to combat this problem under the national Project Safe Neighborhoods program, which addresses gun violence through multiple approaches involving various levels of government working cooperatively with each other and with the community.

In our district, we have found that the most successful approach is to focus our efforts on certain geographical areas that have high rates of gun and other violent crime, which is typically related to street gang activity. Within those areas, we are pursuing a five-pronged approach to investigating and prosecuting gun and gang violence. First, because federal sentencing guidelines often provide for longer sentences for firearms offenders, we are prosecuting federally appropriate gun cases arising from arrests by local police officers and sheriff's deputies. Second, we are pursuing with federal and local investigators proactive gang investigations and prosecutions designed to disrupt gangs and imprison gang members who generate so much gun violence. Third, we are working with other prosecutorial agencies to prosecute felons and others who lie on background check forms. Fourth, we have begun what we call our "Untouchables" program, which combines the efforts of white-collar criminal investigators from a number of federal agencies with those of local police officers to undertake financial investigations of known high-level gang leaders who are otherwise escaping prosecution, with the expectation that federal prosecutions of these gang leaders may result. Finally, we are working closely with intensive federal law enforcement initiatives that flood high-crime areas with federal agents from time-to-time.

My Office also is expanding its efforts to prevent gang and gun violence by increasing our involvement with community organizations and providing support to community efforts to combat the problem. Our prosecutors participate in community meetings to solicit community input and to demonstrate our office's commitment to improving the community. We meet with school administrators to identify ways in which to address the violence problem and we send prosecutors into classrooms to meet with students on a variety of topics. Each of these activities is designed to communicate important messages to community members or to assist us to be responsive to community needs. But in addition to these benefits, and together with Weed and Seed programs that allow us to create positive programs in the community, this kind of community outreach helps to lessen the mistrust and hostility that sometimes exists between community members and law enforcement in some of the areas of my district most affected by gangs and violent crime.

In addition to investigating and prosecuting gang-related crimes, we are also working to facilitate and strengthen efforts by government and non-governmental groups to prevent and deter violence. These efforts include efforts to deter gun crime by communicating the consequences of gun violence for offenders, victims families, and others, as well as efforts to give juveniles the motivation and tools to avoid involvement in gun violence.

The recent twin gang indictments, which I mentioned earlier, like the 18th Street and Mexican Mafia convictions, were the product of an intensive dedication of human and technological resources. Gang cases and anti-gang programs of the size and scope I have described provide Assistant United States Attorneys in my District with the most rewarding opportunities for public service imaginable. As always, state and local authorities will continue to prosecute the gang soldiers for their violent crimes, but they inform me that they are operating at full capacity. At the Federal level, we will continue to reach beyond the soldiers and target the gang leaders, captains, shot-callers and self-styled Godfathers who control and profit from the gang menace, and we will continue to provide much needed support to the hard-working law enforcement personnel who are dedicated to eradicating the problem of gang violence.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for your time and attention. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have.