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Feds chase Mexico cartels' U.S. partners



Texas Department of Criminal Justice

Pressure is mounting against Texas prison and street gangsters who help drug war

By DANE SCHILLER, HOUSTON CHRONICLE, April 5, 2010

Texas prison officials routinely take photographs of gang tattoos to add to a Web-based database.

With Mexican drug cartels now operating in more parts of the United States than any other trafficking syndicates, federal agents and police are trying to cut them down by going after their American partners and foot soldiers.

After U.S. Consulate employees and their families were recently gunned down in Ciudad Juarez, an army of American police and federal agents raided the homes and hangouts of the Barrio Azteca gang, based across the border in El Paso.

The gang — known for tattoos of Aztec Indian heads — has done plenty of work in the U.S. and Mexico for the cartels.

Law-enforcement officials contend the Texas-based gangsters had a hand in the mysterious killings for motives that remain unclear.

In the past three years, officials from Houston to Laredo have prosecuted at least 77 upper-echelon gangsters and associates for ongoing conspiracies of moving drugs, weapons and cash in connection with Mexico's cartels.

Some of the more well-known organizations that are aligned with cartels and have been taken on by authorities include the Mexican Mafia; the Texas Syndicate; Tango Blast; *Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos* (Brotherhood of Latin Gunmen); and *Raza Unida* (People United).

The pressure, the feds contend, is forcing the gangsters to think twice before using flashy cars or showing their infamous tattoos that might draw the attention of law enforcement.

“They may be proud they are members, but they are not wearing it like they once did,” said Brian Ritchie, who leads the Multi-Agency Gang Task Force located at the FBI's Houston Division.

Ritchie isn't declaring victory in the drug war, but said the groups were sent a message that they can't openly operate in this city and the surrounding area.

“We are taking out leadership at the top of the food chain,” he said, noting almost every major gang has been targeted.

Local killing connected

Two dozen Laredo-based gangsters pleaded guilty as part of what federal authorities contend was an ongoing operation to bring at least 1,000 pounds a month of cocaine into the United States.

While the group's Laredo leader was sentenced to 25 years in prison last year, the murder of its Houston captain — whose headless torso was found floating in a trunk in Galveston Bay six years ago — remains unsolved, but is believed to be a payback for skimming drug proceeds.

There are so many crimes and so many organizations that authorities concede it is tough to keep a scorecard.

The relationships building between Mexico's cartels and Texas gangs are in many ways a natural progression since the Mexican drug cartels took over for the Colombians back in the late 1980s. They began pushing more and more drugs across the U.S.-Mexico border rather than trying to sneak them in from the waterfront edges of the country.

And they did it with U.S.-based gangs.

All told, 15,795 gang members have been identified in Texas, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety, which maintains a Web-based database to help police agencies share information. Last year, the system, known as TxGang, was enhanced to add photos of gangsters faces and tattoos.

The Brotherhood of Latin Gunmen gangsters are known for guns tattooed at their waists; Texas Syndicate members for the letters TS; and Tango Blast's Houston members for Astros type insignias and the 713 area code.

They've got nicknames, like Butcher, Clown, Sleepy, Green Eyes and Jacker.

All over the Southwest

The Lone Star State isn't alone, as gangs primarily in Southwest border states are gaining more clout — including cash and power — by working directly with Mexican cartels, according to a Justice Department's National Drug Intelligence Center report released last month.

Gangs now are trafficking at the wholesale bulk level, instead of just the retail plastic-bag level, notes the report, titled the National Drug Threat Assessment 2010.

The bond has helped Mexican cartels to be more active in more U.S. cities than any of their rivals.

“Wholesale-level drug-trafficking organizations, especially Mexican (groups) constitute the greatest drug trafficking threat to the United States,” notes the intelligence center report.

Play by their own rules

The use of street and prison gangs has worked over and over for the cartels.

The relationship means big money — and it also puts the fear of God into gangsters.

The cartels don't play by traditional rules about peace treaties between gangsters or not killing families, said Emil Garza, who focuses on gangs for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

There have been more than a few stories of hard-core U.S. prison gang members scrambling for their lives to escape a cartel after having drugs or cash seized by police.

“These guys get a lot of pressure from the drug cartels themselves — ‘If we tell you to take care of business, you need to take care of business,’” Garza said. “There are no questions asked.

“Right now that is one of the biggest dynamics law enforcement is trying to deal with — all bets are off when you are dealing with a drug cartel,” he said. “Some of our domestic groups are scared of them,” he said.

dane.schiller@chron.com

