



## Fact Sheet



The Violent Crime Bureau

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[www.atf.gov](http://www.atf.gov)

### COMBATING GANG VIOLENCE

#### Purpose

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is the principal federal law enforcement agency within the U.S. Department of Justice dedicated to reducing violent crime. Many ATF agents exclusively investigate violent crime and criminal street gangs. ATF agents currently participate in approximately 175 ATF-led joint law enforcement operations targeting violent crime or gangs in more than 120 locations throughout the United States with other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

#### Authority

Since its creation as a bureau in 1972, ATF has established itself as a lead federal agency in the investigation of violent gang-related crime. ATF has unique statutory authority over the “tools of the trade” that make gangs a threat to public safety. These tools include guns in the hands of felons and prohibited persons, and weapons and explosives used to further criminal activity. ATF targets and dismantles criminal organizations like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), the Latin Kings, outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hells Angels and the Mongols, national gangs like the Crips and Bloods, Asian gangs, white supremacists, and innumerable neighborhood-based gangs that individually and collectively pose a great threat to the public safety. ATF’s anti-gang strategy includes enforcing federal statutes such as the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act and the Armed Career Criminal statute.

#### Mission

The mission of ATF’s Criminal Groups and Gangs Branch is to reduce firearms-related gang violence. The Branch, a unit of ATF’s Firearms Operations Division, develops and implements enforcement, prevention, and education programs to disrupt and diminish the violence and related fear and intimidation associated with criminal groups, gangs, and loosely confederated individuals who illegally use firearms as tools of their violent criminal enterprises.

In 2011, ATF referred 1,606 gang-related cases involving 5,230 defendants for prosecution. As of Dec. 31, 2011, 2,164 of those defendants have been convicted; 1,768 have been sentenced to an average of 252 months (just over 21 years) incarceration.

Since fiscal year 2003 (Oct. 1, 2002 to Dec. 31, 2011), ATF referred 13,602 gang-related cases involving 33,593 defendants for prosecution.

### **Strategy**

ATF has been the lead Federal law enforcement agency for the Department of Justice's Project Safe Neighborhoods program since 2001. ATF participates in over 170 joint law enforcement operations targeting violent crime and/or gangs in over 120 U.S. cities, including Violent Crime Impact Teams (VCITs) strategically situated throughout the country. ATF has participated in the Gang Targeting, Enforcement, and Coordination Center (GangTECC) since its inception in 2006. GangTECC, realigned under the Drug Enforcement Administration's Special Operations Division in October 2010, targets the nation's most violent and far-reaching gangs by bringing together representatives from federal law enforcement agencies (ATF, FBI, Bureau of Prisons, Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the U.S. Marshals Service) to coordinate and deconflict gang-related investigations. The goal is to maximize law enforcement's impact against America's most violent regional and national gangs. An ATF special agent served as the first deputy director of GangTECC from 2006 to October 2010.

ATF, in response to gangs and the violent crimes they commit, has partnered with the Regional Information Sharing System to host the ATF GangNet Intelligence Database for the benefit of all law enforcement. This database houses all ATF gang-related information and is capable of compiling gang information provided by ATF's law enforcement partners at the local, tribal, state, and federal levels.

- ❖ Criminal gangs are active in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and the American Commonwealths. Approximately 1.4 million gang members belong to more than 33,000 gangs.
- ❖ Gangs are responsible for an average of 48 percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and up to 90 percent in several others, according to the 2011 National Gang Intelligence Center analysis.
- ❖ In 2009, the National Gang Threat Assessment reported that 94.3 percent of gang-related homicides involved the use of a firearm.

*“Law enforcement officials in 34 jurisdictions report that the majority of gang-related crime is committed with firearms... Gang members are acquiring high-powered, military-style weapons and equipment, resulting in potentially lethal encounters with law enforcement officers, rival gang members, and innocent bystanders. Law enforcement officials in several regions nationwide report gang members in their jurisdiction are armed with military-style weapons, such as high-caliber semiautomatic rifles, semiautomatic variants of AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and body armor.”*

Source: The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment

ATF utilizes complex investigative techniques and develops tailored strategies to dismantle armed violent organizations and to target the “worst of the worst” offenders. ATF-led violent crime task forces such as VCITs target nationally significant hot spots of firearms related violent crime and use undercover operations, surveillance, wiretaps, and the controlled purchase of drugs, guns, and explosives to identify and attack the violent offenders and the gangs’ hierarchy. ATF efforts target, investigate, arrest, and recommend for prosecution the “worst of the worst” criminals.

- ❖ In the 31 VCIT cities since 2004, the teams have obtained convictions of 4,950 defendants. Nearly 84% were sentenced to prison, with an average sentence of 19.7 years.
- ❖ In FY 2011, ATF referred 5,206 gang related defendants for prosecution.
- ❖ In fiscal years 2003 through 2011, an average of 12% of all ATF cases and 21% of all ATF defendants referred for prosecution (13,585 cases and 33,563 defendants) involved allegations of gang-related criminal conduct.
- ❖ Many of these cases involve firearms and RICO violations, as well as violations of explosives laws.

Although VCIT has been ATF’s signature violent crime enforcement initiative, it is actually a small portion of ATF’s overall strategy against violent criminal groups and gangs. ATF currently leads approximately 175 joint law enforcement operations targeting violent crime in over 120 U.S. cities. Each of these operations involves other federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel and each is designed to address the unique violent criminal environment present. ATF’s vision is to incorporate best practices and lessons learned into all ATF-led joint law enforcement operations and to further establish ATF as the primary DOJ component addressing violent crime.

ATF has played a significant role in reducing violent crime in the United States:

- Between fiscal years 2003 and 2011, across all of ATF’s violent crime programs, ATF recommended 110,650 cases and 162,577 defendants for prosecution.
- Over 61 percent of these defendants are previously convicted felons and 84 percent have prior arrest records.
- Of those recommended for prosecution, approximately 84,000 of the cases resulted in the indictment of about 121,200 defendants. Of those, almost 66,200 cases resulted in the conviction of about 92,000 defendants.
- Nearly 74,600 defendants were sentenced to an average prison term of 170 months.
- From FY 2003 through FY 2011, ATF recommended prosecution of 15,613 cases and 30,388 defendants for firearms trafficking-related offenses involving an estimated 494,562 weapons.

ATF is the leading federal law enforcement agency participating in the Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative, which impacts gangs as well as other violent firearms offenders. Through the creation of grassroots partnerships in communities where gun

violence has been identified as threatening the quality of life, Project Safe Neighborhoods has served as a catalyst to develop localized strategies, vigorously enforcing existing firearms laws and providing critical firearms enforcement training to law enforcement personnel. In FY 2011, ATF conducted an integrated training program focusing on firearms tracing, trafficking, and enforcement strategies for 3,632 federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel.

Through innovative partnerships and instituting effective enforcement strategies, ATF will continue to ensure and protect the safety of the public from violent criminal acts committed by gang members.

For more information on ATF and its programs go to [www.atf.gov](http://www.atf.gov).

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