



PART I Gangs and Antigang Interventions in Three American Cities

The big American crime story for more than a decade has been the happy news that crime rates are on the decline. Notwithstanding recent media reports of an uptick in violent crime in certain cities, crime rates are still at a 30-year low.

Residents of New York City have enjoyed more than a decade and a half of exceptional crime rate reductions, breaking historic records for declines in lethal violence, as well as record declines across the entire range of index crimes¹ that are roughly double the rates of decline for the nation as a whole (Zimring 2007). In March 2007 New York City's police commissioner, Ray Kelly, announced that over the first three months of the year the murder rate had fallen to a low not seen since the early 1960s, when the first reliable homicide statistics were recorded (Moore 2007).

In areas of the country where an increased number of homicides *were* reported, street gangs were frequently identified by law enforcement authorities as a causal factor. The media eagerly picked up the theme in some cities (including some where homicides continued to trend down), with lurid depictions of heavily tattooed gang-bangers and claims that violent gangs were spreading from coast to coast.

Gang crime is spreading “like a cancer,” according to Federal Bureau of Investigation director Robert S. Mueller III. The FBI boasts of its national antigang strategy, involving local police in a network of 131 FBI-led task force operations across the country, coupled with a national “gang targeting enforcement and coordination center,” a national “gang intelligence center,” and a national task force based in Washing-

ton, D.C., that is focused on Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13,² working to merge some 100,000 criminal records from Central America with the FBI's criminal history database (FBI 2007).

While overall crime rates in Los Angeles have been declining for the past half-decade, gang crime is reported to be rising. Citing a 15.7 percent increase in gang crime over 2006, Los Angeles police chief William Bratton declared a crackdown on gangs in January 2007. By the end of March more than 800 people had been arrested by gang enforcement officers. Almost half were said to be members of 11 gangs Bratton designated as “the worst” in Los Angeles. Many arrests were for very minor charges—curfew violation, drug possession, vandalism, noncompliance with probation conditions.

Public defenders in Los Angeles said that court dockets were flooded with cases where prosecutors were overcharging—filing felony charges and seeking gang enhancements to invoke harsh prison sentences in cases involving minor nonviolent incidents that could have been charged as misdemeanors (McGreevy 2007a). Charging that the Los Angeles Police Department is “outnumbered” by gang members, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa sought funding to hire 780 new police officers over the next fiscal year, a move he said was essential for efforts to control gang violence (McGreevy 2007b).

Meanwhile, in America's other “gang capital,” where

1 The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports are based on a national set of crime statistics that focus on “index crimes”—murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson—collected by the FBI from law enforcement agencies across the United States.

2 Mara Salvatrucha was formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by immigrant Salvadoran youth whose families fled a civil war and U.S. military intervention in their homeland.

the police department reports that nearly half of all murders arise from gang activity, a 278-page report published by the Chicago Crime Commission contended that gangs posed an increasing threat in Chicago's suburbs (Chicago Police Department 2005; Chicago Crime Commission 2006).

No media coverage of national crime trends has failed to note that New York City stands out from the pack in terms of its exceptional crime decline. High rates of chronic gang-rated violence in Los Angeles and Chicago are also noted by the media, yet an important contrast that lies within the exceptional New York crime experience has escaped media notice.

Gang crime makes for occasional—sometimes sensational—news headlines in New York, and no sea-

soned New Yorker would deny the existence of street gangs. Yet gang-related offenses represent just a tiny blip on the New York crime screen, and even conservative gang expert Walter Miller concluded that the serious problem with street gang violence experienced some 45 years ago in New York City had, by and large, faded away by the end of the 1980s (Miller 1990).

The next section of this report briefly recounts a 50-year history of gangs and antigang interventions in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The accounts reveal a sharp contrast between the experience in New York, where the primary strategies were informed by social theory and grounded in traditional social work practice, and in the other cities, where police suppression held the upper hand.