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LAW ENFORCEMENT

Information on the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System

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LAW ENFORCEMENT: INFORMATION ON THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT GANG REPORTING, EVALUATION, AND TRACKING SYSTEM

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT OF HAROLD A. VALENTINE
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U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department maintains a computerized database system to track Los Angeles area street gangs and their members. This system, the Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System, known as GREAT, contained as of June 3, 1992, information on about 1,500 street gangs and over 105,000 street gang members. Over 130 law enforcement agencies nationwide had access to GREAT through their computer systems.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have proposed joint development of a national gang information network. Their effort, still in the proposal stage, in effect would link state and local gang databases through a federally operated clearinghouse network. As possibly the largest gang database in the nation, some features of GREAT are being viewed as a model for the federal network.

At the request of the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, House Judiciary Committee, GAO identified or examined various aspects of the GREAT system, its records, and its controls and safeguards. To fulfill the request, GAO interviewed Sheriff's Department officials and randomly selected and reviewed records on 181 gang members of 3 street gangs. GAO emphasizes that because of its sampling methodology, the results apply only to the records reviewed for the three gangs.

GAO found that most of GREAT's controls and safeguards appear generally adequate. However, GAO identified certain issues that ATF, FBI, and the Subcommittee may want to consider in determining the design and scope of a national network. First, requests for gang member information by off-line law enforcement agencies generally were not recorded by officers responding to such requests. GAO believes that recording off-line requests would provide (1) an audit trail for information disseminated and (2) information that could be accessed to track the movement of gangs and gang members across the country. Second, GREAT has never been audited to determine if adequate controls were in place and being followed. GAO believes independent audits to assure that system controls and safeguards are in place and functioning as intended are essential for establishing and maintaining a system's integrity. And third, while GAO found that most of the GREAT records it reviewed did not indicate what criteria had been used to establish gang membership, the new system software now requires the criteria to create a record. GAO believes this requirement should enhance the accountability for creating records in GREAT and should be an integral part of any national system.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to testify about work we did at the Chairman's request on the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking (GREAT) system. GREAT is a computerized database used by LASD as an investigative/intelligence tool to identify and track Los Angeles County area street gangs and their members. About one-third of the estimated 300,000 to 350,000 street-gang members in the United States are contained in the GREAT database.

Concerned about the civil liberties implications of national gang investigation/intelligence databases, the Subcommittee requested that we review selected aspects of GREAT and describe the types of information it contains. This effort was requested to assist the Subcommittee in assessing the various gang databases that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are proposing to link through a national gang information network. Although this network is in the proposal stage, some features of GREAT are being viewed as a model for the national system. As currently planned, the network in effect would link state and local gang databases nationwide. It would contain, among other things, a master index of street gang members' records that participating law enforcement agencies could use to identify and access information on subjects from each other's databases.

To fulfill the Subcommittee's request, we (1) attended a GREAT training session (2) interviewed LASD officials responsible for GREAT, and (3) interviewed and observed LASD gang unit specialists at four Sheriff's substations who input to and use GREAT. We did this work to obtain a description of the system--including sources of information used to create GREAT records, information verification procedures, and criteria for record purging--and to learn how the system operates. We also observed the physical security of the system at the locations visited and the controls and safeguards for accessing and disseminating data from the system.

In addition, we used random sampling techniques to select and review 181 GREAT records of 3 gangs at 3 LASD substations to examine the (1) gang membership criteria used to create GREAT records, (2) currency (age) of information in the records, (3) completeness of identifying information, (4) extent that the records indicate criminal activities, (5) accessibility of records of gang members' associates, and (6) extent to which records are accessed. The substations selected were located in Industry, Lynwood, and Temple City, California. Each gang's records selected were indigenous to one of the substations. We sampled the records during the week of May 11, 1992. Because of our sampling methodology, we emphasize that our results apply only to the records we reviewed for three gangs. A more complete description of our scope and methodology appears in Appendix I.

FINDINGS

In short, we found that most of GREAT's controls and safeguards appear generally adequate. However, we identified certain issues that ATF, FBI, and the Subcommittee may want to consider in determining the design and scope of a national network. These issues relate to (1) the adequacy of the audit trail for identifying off-line users, (2) the need for independent audits of the system, and (3) the need for requiring that the criteria used to create gang records be documented.

The LASD Coordinator for GREAT reviewed a draft of our testimony and agreed with our findings and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

LASD began developing GREAT in 1986, with funding from the California Office of Criminal Justice Planning's Gang Violence Suppression program. This program provides grant funding to criminal justice agencies to fight gang-related violence. GREAT became operational in 1987. Office of Criminal Justice Planning funding for GREAT expired in February 1992, and GREAT is now being funded exclusively by LASD. Eventually, GREAT is expected to be included in a statewide information system, which will enable California criminal justice agencies to share information about gangs and drugs. For example, the Office of Criminal Justice Planning is currently funding another system similar to GREAT to be based in the Oakland Police Department. That system will provide San Francisco Bay area criminal justice agencies with on-line access to GREAT in Los Angeles.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT SYSTEM

GREAT is a computerized database system that maintains selected information on identified street gang members principally in the Los Angeles area and to a lesser extent in areas of participating law enforcement agencies nationwide. These agencies have access to data in GREAT records through their computer systems for use in investigating criminal activities by gang members in their areas.

For example, earlier this year in Los Angeles two youngsters were wounded in a drive-by shooting. Los Angeles Police Department officers responding to the incident were informed by witnesses that one of the perpetrators yelled out his gang nickname and the city he was from in Los Angeles County as the car fled the scene. The officers also obtained a description of the vehicle. Using this information, the Police Department contacted LASD which queried GREAT. The system identified a suspect's record which also provided the names of known associates. From these data the suspect and an associate, believed to be the driver of the vehicle, were arrested. The suspects are both juveniles.

In January 1992, LASD began converting GREAT to a new database applications software program called Advanced Revelations. The conversion is completed, and users can no longer access GREAT without this new software. The software is intended to be more user-friendly than the previous version and offers additional capabilities, such as automatic report generation, security and password encryption, and photo imaging. The imaging feature allows users to view available gang members' photographs when their records are queried.

GREAT Database

As of June 3, 1992, the GREAT database contained information on 1,494 street gangs. According to LASD, 942 gangs, predominantly black and Hispanic, are active in Los Angeles County. The other 552 gangs are active primarily in Southern California and in the areas of law enforcement agencies nationwide who participate in GREAT. The database also contained 105,619 gang member records. In addition, the Los Angeles Police Department is expected to download about 51,000 gang member records from its own gang database into GREAT this summer. LASD estimates that once the police department's records are downloaded, about 5 percent of the records in GREAT will be duplicates. LASD is developing a software program to eliminate duplicate records.

Each gang member record in GREAT contains 150 data fields with such information as gang member name, gang moniker (nickname), gang affiliation, physical description, residence address, prior arrests, vehicle information, and gang member's associates or acquaintances. Gang member records in GREAT are queried through sets of search words, such as name, gang affiliation, and vehicle description.

System Access and Controls

The GREAT central computer is located in a secure area in LASD's Operation Safe Streets Unit, which is responsible for antigang operations. As of June 3, 1992, LASD had authorized 132 law enforcement agencies nationwide on-line[1] access to GREAT. To obtain access, agencies are required to write LASD requesting authorization. According to LASD, department policy restricts on-line access to GREAT to law enforcement agencies authorized to receive information in criminal justice records, as defined in federal regulations. Agencies that request access are contacted by the LASD Coordinator for GREAT who determines their need for access based on the extent of the gang problem in their jurisdictions. Once reviewed and approved, agencies can obtain

[1]On-line refers to law enforcement agencies who have direct access to GREAT through their computer systems.

on-line access to GREAT. The Coordinator stated that not all agencies who have requested access have been granted authorization.

In addition to LASD, on-line GREAT users include the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the Dallas Police Department, the Honolulu Police Department, the Massachusetts State Police, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the FBI, and ATF. Within the on-line users, about 700 gang unit officers and clerical staff had access to GREAT. LASD estimates that the number of on-line user agencies will decrease by about 50 percent because smaller participating law enforcement agencies may find purchasing the new applications software too costly, currently about $1,500.

On-line users access GREAT through their computer systems, using a series of confidential system access codes and individual passwords. In addition, off-line[2] law enforcement agencies can obtain access to GREAT by calling on-line users. The on-line users are required to verify the identity of off-line requesters and determine their right and need to receive information from GREAT.

Although GREAT has a feature to record requests from off-line users, it requires users to exit from the gang member record and switch to another screen. According to LASD officials, officers generally do not record such requests, due to the laborious process required and the officers' time constraints. We believe that recording off-line requests would provide an audit trail for the information disseminated. An audit trail is important as a safeguard to protect against possible misuse of the disseminated information. Through its report generating capability, the system also could provide information to track the movement of gangs and gang members across the country by using the location of the agency contacting the GREAT on-line user.

In commenting on a draft of this testimony, the LASD Coordinator for GREAT believed that recording off-line requests was a good idea. He said that he planned to follow-up with the designer of the GREAT software to determine whether off-line requests could be recorded directly on the gang member record.

Each record contains a data field called "audit trail" that automatically captures and displays information on record creation, data modifications, and record query dates; it also captures the names and agency numbers of on-line users who accessed the records for these purposes. The audit trail, which can be queried but cannot be altered, becomes a permanent part of the record and, according to LASD officials, is intended as a

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[2]Off-line refers to law enforcement agencies who do not have direct access to GREAT through a computer system.

deterrent to unauthorized access to GREAT and the misuse of its records. Each record also contains a message to users emphasizing that the information is never to be used as probable cause to arrest.

While we believe these are good features, an LASD official told us that, due to financial constraints, the GREAT system has never been audited to determine if adequate controls were in place and were being followed. Further, there are no plans to audit GREAT in the future due to anticipated funding constraints. We believe that independent audits to assure that system controls and safeguards are in place and are functioning as intended are essential for establishing and maintaining a system's integrity. Such audits should be mandatory for any national system.

A design feature of GREAT is that records are to be purged automatically if they have not been modified or updated for 5 years. However, each time a record is modified or updated, the 5-year countdown is to start anew. An LASD official said that no records have been automatically purged to date because none have reached the 5-year purge milestone. The first automatic purges are expected to occur later this summer. On occasion, according to LASD officials, records also may be purged manually as a result of a court order, or when LASD receives new information and through investigation determines that the existing record is inaccurate.

Information Sources and Record Creation

GREAT's new applications software requires three specific data entries to create a record: the gang member's name, the gang affiliation, and the criteria used to establish gang membership. Prior to the use of the new software, only the gang members' names and gang affiliations were needed to create a record. According to LASD officials, information in GREAT records comes from arrest reports and field interview cards submitted by LASD patrol officers and detectives, and from informants supported by other corroborating information. The information is first recorded on LASD street gang information cards and then entered into GREAT to create a record. The gang cards serve as backups to the GREAT records. We observed that the cards at the substations we visited are stored in filing cabinets that have combination or bar locks and are located in secure areas.

Information Verification Procedures

To the extent determined necessary by the specialists, the information obtained from arrest reports, field interview cards, and informants is to be investigated and verified. The investigation may include checking the alleged gang members' police and probation records and interviewing relatives, friends, and associates to determine the alleged members' involvement in

gang activities. The gang specialists at the three substations told us they often must use their judgment in determining the sufficiency of the information available and the extent of investigative work needed to establish gang membership and create a record in GREAT.

RESULTS OF OUR RECORDS' REVIEW

As agreed with the Subcommittee's staff, we reviewed randomly selected records from three gangs. We reviewed 181 gang member records at 3 LASD substations to determine the (1) gang membership criteria used to create GREAT records, (2) currency (age) of information in the records, (3) completeness of identifying information, (4) extent to which the records indicated criminal activities, (5) accessibility of records of gang members' associates or acquaintances, and (6) extent to which records were accessed. Because of our sampling methodology, the results apply only to the records we reviewed for these three gangs. The following sections present the results of our review.

Gang Membership Criteria

While LASD has criteria for determining whether individuals are gang members, in most of the records we reviewed we were not able to identify which criteria were used to make that determination. LASD developed six criteria, any one of which can be used to establish an individual's membership in a gang and create a record in GREAT. LASD officials told us that they prefer to use at least two of these criteria to more concretely establish membership. We have summarized the six criteria as follows:

-- An individual admits membership.

-- A reliable informant identifies an individual as a gang member.

-- An untested informant identifies an individual as a gang member, and this is corroborated by other information.

-- An individual resides in or frequents a known gang area and displays a gang's clothing style, hand signs, and/or tattoos.

-- An individual is arrested several times with known gang members.

-- Strong indications exist that an individual has a close relationship with a gang.

Furthermore, the LASD Coordinator for GREAT said that where informants, even reliable ones, identify a gang member, LASD

tries to corroborate that information. Appendix II contains a more detailed explanation of LASD's gang membership criteria.

Of the 181 records we reviewed, 56 records, or 31 percent, showed the membership criteria used to create them. In all 56 records, the only criterion used was the individual admitting membership. As table 1 shows, the extent of admitted membership ranged from 3 percent in Industry to 71 percent in Temple City.

Table 1: Individuals Admitting Gang Membership

Substation	Percent admitting gang membership
Lynwood	14
Industry	3
Temple City	71
Total sample	31

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

However, in 69 percent of the 181 records, we could find no indication of what criteria had been used to establish gang membership. One of the reasons for this rate, according to LASD officials, was that the previous GREAT software did not require membership criteria to create a new record. As noted earlier, the new software requires the criteria to create a record. We believe that this requirement should enhance the accountability for creating records in GREAT and should be required in any national system.

Currency of Information

According to LASD officials, there is no specific requirement to periodically review and update gang member records. To assess the age of the data in the records, we reviewed the dates of the most recent data modifications. On average, the information in the records we reviewed was somewhat dated and varied in age among the three gangs. As table 2 shows, the records we reviewed had been created an average of 3 years earlier. Also, on average, the records had not been modified during the previous 27 months.

Table 2: Currency of Information in Records

Substation	Average number of months since	
	Creation	Last update
Lynwood	42	27
Industry	50	42
Temple City	19	11
Total sample	36	27

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

Moreover, about 72 percent of the records had not been modified within the previous year. LASD officials explained that the information in the records may be dated because the gangs we selected currently were not among the most active and, thus, were less likely to receive much law enforcement attention.

Completeness of Identifying Information

With some exceptions, information that could be used to identify gang members was generally complete. As table 3 shows, all the records we reviewed contained the gang members' names and genders. Also, over 95 percent of the records contained a date of birth and almost 90 percent contained a physical description--height, weight, and eye and hair color.

Table 3: Percent of Records Containing Identifying Information

Identifier	Lynwood	Industry	Temple City	Total sample
Name	100	100	100	100
Gender	100	100	100	100
Date of birth	100	95	95	97
Physical description	98	75	94	89
Scars, marks, tattoos	39	47	57	48
Photograph	18	52	20	30
Driver's license number	25	18	25	23
Social Security number	14	10	15	13

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

The identifying information used varied among the records we examined. For example, the percentage of records that contained physical description information ranged from 98 percent in Lynwood to 75 percent in Industry. Only about 30 percent of the records had the gang members' photographs on file with their respective street gang information cards. We believe the degree of completeness of identifying information is important to avoid the possibility that individuals with names similar to those of gang members may be misidentified.

Information on Arrests

Over half of the records we reviewed indicated that the gang members had been arrested at least once for felony violations. About 56 percent of the sampled records indicated that gang members had been arrested; however, as table 4 shows, the percentage varied among the three gangs from 45 percent in Industry to 79 percent in Lynwood.

Table 4: Gang Members With Arrest Records

Substation	Percent with arrest records
Lynwood	79
Industry	45
Temple City	46

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

We reviewed the reasons for arrests in the records. Table 5 shows the distribution of the five most frequent reasons for arrests by gang.

Table 5: Most Frequent Arrests by Percent

Arrest type	Lynwood	Industry	Temple City
Controlled substance	64	31	5
Assault/battery	30	45	25
Larceny/theft	35	30	35
Robbery	20	10	70
Burglary	25	50	25

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

These arrests accounted for 62 percent of the total arrests in the records we reviewed. In 22 percent, the reasons for the arrests varied and included carrying concealed weapons, vandalism, and attempted homicide. In 16 percent of the arrests, the reasons could not be identified. While GREAT records do not indicate the disposition of arrests, according to the LASD Coordinator for GREAT, LASD officers rely on state and local systems for more complete criminal history information.

Access to Records of Gang Members' Associates

According to LASD officials, individuals who were identified as associates or acquaintances of gang members could not have their names accessed from the system unless they, themselves, had been identified as gang members. We tested the system to determine whether records containing gang associates' names could be accessed.

Seventy seven records, or 43 percent, contained names of gang members' associates. These records showed a total of 223

associates, their dates of birth, and their ages. We searched the system to determine whether these associates had a record in GREAT, or, if not, whether they could be found in any other gang members' records. Our test showed that about 82 percent of these associates had their own records in GREAT. The remaining 18 percent did not have GREAT records, nor could we access any record listing them as associates by searching the system using their names.

Number of Record Queries

While most of the records we reviewed, as noted earlier, were on average 3 years old, the majority of them had never been queried. As shown in table 6, we found that a total of 114 of 169 records we reviewed previously had not been queried. (In 12 records, the number of queries, if any, could not be determined.) We also found that for the other records that had been queried, a total of 110 queries had been made. In addition, the number of queries varied among the three substations. About 51 percent of the queries were made in Temple City, compared to 37 percent in Lynwood and 12 percent in Industry.

Table 6: Number of Queries

Number of queries	Number of records	Total queries
0	114	0
1	29	29
2	13	26
3	6	18
4	2	8
5+	5	29
Total	169	110

Source: GAO analysis of sample GREAT records.

Conclusion and Matters for Consideration

As currently devised and applied to the sampled gang records, we found most of GREAT's controls and safeguards generally appear adequate. However, we have identified certain issues that ATF, FBI, and the Subcommittee may want to consider in determining the design and scope of a national network to track gangs and gang members. First, requests for gang member information by off-line law enforcement agencies generally were not recorded by officers responding to the requests. We believe that recording off-line

requests would provide (1) an audit trail for information disseminated and (2) information that could be accessed to track the movement of gangs and gang members across the country.

Second, the GREAT system has never been audited. We believe independent audits to assure that system controls and safeguards are in place and functioning as intended are essential for establishing and maintaining a system's integrity. Thus, such audits should be mandatory for any national system.

And third, we found that most of the GREAT records we reviewed had no indication of what criteria had been used to establish gang membership, but the new system software now requires entering the criteria to create a record. We believe that this requirement should enhance the accountability for creating records in GREAT and, thus, should be an integral part of any national system.

The LASD Coordinator for GREAT reviewed a draft of this testimony. He agreed with our findings and conclusions and believed our observations regarding the GREAT system were worth pursuing.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. In closing, I would like to acknowledge LASD's cooperation during the course of our review. LASD's willingness to allow us access to GREAT, and in many cases its unsolicited assistance, enabled us to obtain the information we needed in a very timely manner. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To fulfill the Subcommittee's request, we (1) attended a training session on GREAT, (2) interviewed LASD officials responsible for GREAT, (3) interviewed and observed LASD gang unit specialists at four substations who input to and use the GREAT system, and (4) reviewed GREAT system documentation. We did this work to obtain a description of the system--including access and dissemination controls and safeguards, sources of information used to create GREAT records, information verification procedures, and criteria for record purging--and to learn how the system operates. We also observed the physical security of the GREAT system at the locations we visited and the controls and safeguards for accessing and disseminating data from the system. We did not verify the accuracy of the data in GREAT.

In addition, as agreed with the Subcommittee's staff, we used random sampling techniques to select three LASD substations from a list of 11 substations with gang units. The substations selected were located in Lynwood, Industry, and Temple City, California. Also, using random sampling techniques, we selected a black gang from a list of 43 such gangs in Lynwood, one Hispanic gang from a list of 28 such gangs in Industry, and one Hispanic gang from a combined list of 17 Hispanic, Vietnamese, and black gangs in Temple City. Finally, as shown in table I.1, we randomly selected gang member records from each gang to compile a sample of 181 records, and we analyzed the information they contained. Because of our sampling methodology, we emphasize that our results apply only to the records we reviewed for the three gangs.

Table I.1: Records Sampled by Gang

Substation	Gang membership	Records sampled	Percentage
Lynwood	387	56	14
Industry	410	60	15
Temple City	130	65	50
Total sample	927	181	20

Source: GAO.

To obtain information on how GREAT was being operated and used by law enforcement agencies participating in the LASD system, we interviewed officials in the Garden Grove and the Long Beach, California Police Departments and the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department. We also held discussions with the Bureau

of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to identify its plans for and progress on a national gang information network.

We did our work between March and June 1992 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. The LASD Coordinator for GREAT reviewed a draft of our testimony and we have included his comments where appropriate.

APPENDIX II

LASD GANG MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA

The LASD gang membership criteria are derived from Field Operations Directive 86-39, issued in August 1986. The specific criteria are as follows:

(1) The individual admits membership in a gang.

(2) A reliable informant identifies an individual as a gang member.

(3) An informant of previously untested reliability identifies an individual as a gang member, and this is corroborated by independent information.

(4) An individual resides in or frequents a particular gang's area and affects a gang's style of dress, use of hand signs, symbols or tattoos, and associates with known gang members.

(5) An individual has been arrested several times in the company of identified gang members for offenses consistent with usual gang activity

(6) There are strong indications that an individual has a close relationship with a gang but does not fit the above criteria. In this case the individual is identified as a gang "associate."

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