



CRS Issue Statement on Organized Crime and Gangs in the U.S.

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Terrorists and other organized criminal groups pose a threat to the United States. Over the past year alone, two shootings and one attempted bombing of an airliner occurred that have been considered terrorist attacks. Individuals claiming allegiance to groups that wish to do harm to U.S. interests continue to be of concern to Congress. Also of concern to Congress are criminal activities of other organized groups and the potential nexus between them and terrorist organizations.

Combating terrorists in the United States. Following the 9/11 attacks, Congress passed landmark legislation to establish a new department focused on securing the homeland, reorganizing the Intelligence Community, and refocusing the mission of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In its oversight role, Congress may be interested in the efforts of federal agencies with counterterrorism responsibilities to work with their counterparts at all levels of government to prevent and disrupt terrorist threats, combat terrorist travel, disrupt terrorist financing, and prevent radicalization within the United States. This is especially the case with the principal federal organizations with core homeland security missions—the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the FBI.

The Homeland Security Act assigned to DHS the mission of preventing terrorist attacks within the United States and reducing the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism. In order to achieve this mission, what progress has been made in integrating the 22 separate agencies that were transferred to DHS when the department was established? To what extent does the department successfully collaborate with the FBI, which shares the terrorism prevention mission within the homeland? To what extent have the various programs implemented by DHS to disrupt terrorist travel, including US-VISIT, the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, and the Automated Targeting System, been effective, and what vulnerabilities still exist that may be addressed by Congress?

The FBI is responsible for preventing terrorist attacks and for investigating acts of terrorism. Congress may be interested in how organizational changes (e.g., the establishment of the National Security Branch) and intelligence reform have enhanced the Bureau's ability to detect and prevent attacks. They may also examine the role of interagency elements led by the FBI, such as the Joint Terrorism Task Forces and the Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force.

Combating other organized criminal groups. In recent years, there has been an increase in violence directed at Americans and American economic interests from other organized criminal elements—many with transnational connections—such as drug trafficking organizations, gangs, and criminal syndicates.

Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are a domestic criminal threat and a significant concern to federal, state, and local law enforcement. Mexican DTOs smuggle and distribute 90% of all illegal drugs entering the United States. They have become increasingly violent as they compete to extend their influence in U.S. drug markets. DTOs have used their vast resources to expand southward into Central and South America and northward into the United States, where they have reportedly penetrated at least 195 U.S. cities. There have been reports that Mexican and Asian DTOs continue to develop and strengthen their working relationships with many street gangs and prison gangs, some of which have extensive transnational relationships and are engaged in numerous cross-border smuggling operations of drugs, illegal aliens, and firearms, and numerous other crimes, including human trafficking. There continues to be interest in the increase of violence at or near the border with Mexico, along with the numerous criminal activities ranging from drug and contraband smuggling to human trafficking.

A number of street and prison gangs work closely with Mexican DTOs and drug cartels, including the Sureños 13, 18th Street, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), the Mexican Mafia in California, the Texas Mexican Mafia (Mexikanemi), Hermanos de Pistolerros Latinos, and the Texas Syndicate in the south Texas area. A number of regional and national gangs, including Asian gangs, are also reported to have transnational connections and be criminally active along the U.S.-Canada border. Growing gang involvement in smuggling operations has long been a concern as a potential domestic security threat.

The potential nexus between DTOs, organized crime, and terrorist organizations may be of interest for Congress. Terrorists may collaborate directly with organized crime groups to secure funding for their operations. Terrorist organizations may also use the structure and activities of organized crime groups as models for structuring their own organizations and financing their operations. With the potential nexus between organized crime and terrorism, Congress may look at federal law enforcement allocation of resources to combating terrorism and fighting organized crime. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, national priorities shifted away from more traditional crime fighting and toward counterterrorism and counterintelligence. If there is increased collaboration between organized crime and terrorist organizations, Congress may use the oversight process to ensure that resources are allocated and utilized most effectively.

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[Organized Crime in the United States: Trends and Issues for Congress](#)

[International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress](#)

[The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threats?](#)

[RICO: A Brief Sketch](#)

[RICO: An Abridged Sketch](#)

Drug and Human Trafficking

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[Merida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues](#)

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[Terrorism Information Sharing and the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Report Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress](#)