



Everything New Orleans

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Cops: Recovery may include gangs But most workers seeking honest living

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Hurricane Katrina blew most of New Orleans' drug dealers and violent criminals out of the city, but law enforcement officials said at a news conference Thursday that it will take a watchful eye from the public and police to keep a potentially more dangerous crop of thugs from invading the city's streets.

They said the writing already is on the walls, scrawled across the city's landscape in graffiti spray painted by gang members and others eager to announce their arrival.

Weighing their words carefully, New Orleans Police Superintendent Warren Riley and FBI official James Bernazzani, the special agent in charge of the New Orleans office, said that the potential for hard-core gangs to root themselves in the city is real -- particularly notorious Latino gangs arriving amid a massive influx of workers. But so far, they said, the potential far outweighs the reality.

Of the handful of Latino gang members arrested in recent weeks, police said, all have acknowledged their gang affiliation but maintained they had come to New Orleans looking to earn an honest living. Three members of a violent South American gang were arrested recently in St. Bernard Parish, not for violence or drugs but for property crimes unrelated to their gang affiliation, authorities said.

"All the graffiti we're seeing is not gang-related," Riley said. "But there is some indication that there are a number of Hispanic gang members in town working, part of the work force brought to this city by the storm. At this point, there is no indication that they are criminally active."

Meanwhile, as gang members and street artists continue to mark their territory a block at a time, members of Operation Clean Sweep, a nonprofit program supported by the city and Police Department, has dedicated itself to scrubbing away graffiti as quickly as it goes up, gang-related or not.

"Quality of life is a very important unit to reducing crime," said Operation Clean Sweep leader Fred Radtke. "Graffiti is the beginning of the broken window syndrome. And we want to keep that (out of the city)."

Radtke said he and his team have eliminated more than 10,000 tags and reduced graffiti in the city by 65 percent.

Residents' fear of violent Latino gangs such as MS-13 and the Latin Kings has spread with an influx of Latino workers. Around the city, Latino work crews are gutting homes and repairing rooftops. Many are day laborers who gather daily at spots such as Lee Circle, looking for work.

Though there may be a gang element within the larger group, Riley said, without many of those

workers the city would be moving even slower through the rebuilding process. Bernazzani said most of the Hispanic gang members in town are skilled craftsmen, electricians, plumbers and carpenters "who just happen to be gang members."

"We don't have the numbers," Bernazzani said. "We have a few individuals here trying to make an honest buck."

Bernazzani, however, warned that history has dictated that once the seeds of gang culture are sown, the bloom of violence typically follows. Bernazzani said local law enforcement will routinely meet and compare data they've gathered and consult the National Gang Intelligence Center in Washington, D.C., to identify various gangs through tattoos and tags logged into a national gang database.

Riley said the Police Department has joined forces with neighboring parishes to share intelligence and resources, and also to keep tabs on crime trends that often cross parish lines.

"We certainly don't want citizens to believe that there is some significant gang problem," Riley said. "The story here is that we are ahead of the curve."

Riley said that with killings in the city down 80 percent and overall violent crime down 90 percent, law enforcement has a unique opportunity to keep criminals out of the city and to pounce on them when they return. Riley said police have noted the return of individual members from two of three local drug gangs and a few criminals who were on police radar before the storm. They are not organized, he said, and largely seem to have remained outside of the city.

One exception is Jerome "Man Man" Hampton, 20, an alleged member of the "3 'n' G" gang who was arrested Sunday on suspicion of being involved in killings in Houston and New Orleans.

Riley declined Thursday to acknowledge the names of any of the hometown gangs because police "simply don't want to give them any credence to what they do." Riley said internal strife among three gangs, two from Uptown and one from Gentilly, seems to be compromising their activities, which include selling drugs and strong-arming rivals for turf.

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