FBI plans a database system to focus on gangs

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Tracking cases across many jurisdictions could reduce conflicts in investigations

The FBI is looking to build a system that would correlate information from about 20 databases across more than a half-dozen agencies as part of an effort to curb gang activity.

The bureau is reviewing proposals submitted earlier this month to build the system to support the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC). Congress provided $10 million for the system in fiscal 2005.

The new systems and tools would have, among their several functions, the job of helping to prevent conflicts among investigations carried out by various law enforcement agencies that might be probing crimes committed by the same gang. The center brings together law enforcement workers from several agencies.

The system design the bureau described in detailed procurement documents states that the deconfliction function is to be carried out by a case tracker database that will provide a high-level overview of several agencies' gang crime investigations.

The bureau recently unveiled the first phase of its new investigative case management system, called Sentinel. But the FBI's record in building large-scale case databases has been marked by conspicuous failures, such as the $100 million Virtual Case File debacle (GCN.com, Quickfind 810).

The as-yet-unnamed NGIC database support systems are intended to help the center provide gang intelligence to law enforcement agencies at the federal, state and local levels.

The new system is designed to correlate information provided by a collection of different networks and databases NGIC already uses:

- FBI Automated Case Management System
- FBI Investigative Data Warehouse
- National Crime Information Center
- Violent Gang and Terrorist Organization File through NCIC
- Treasury Enforcement System maintained by Homeland Security Department’s Customs and Border Protection
- Law Enforcement Online maintained by FBI
- RissGang secure Web site
- GangNet and CalGang
- Regional Data Exchange
- Illinois Citizen Law Enforcement Analysis and Reporting System
- EPIC-Online.

The data flowing through those systems supports the anti-gang work of several Justice Department agencies, including the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Drug
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Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Prisons Bureau (BOP) and others, including outside organizations such as DHS.

Each partner agency contributes information from its own system. Some of those native organization-based systems are:

- Homeland Security Information Network
- ATF’s NFORCE system
- BOP Sentry
- BOP Automated Intelligence Management System
- BOP Inmate Telephone System
- DEA’s Narcotics and Dangerous Drug Information System
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement network
- U.S. States Marshals Service (USMS) Warrant Information Network
- USMS Prisoner Tracking System.

The procurement documents direct bidders to rely on specified commercial products. The FBI also requires that the new system, like all being ordered by Justice and the law enforcement agencies that it funds through grants, comply with the National Information Exchange Model.

The NGIC technology upgrades would include tools that crime analysts could use for link analysis — detecting and mapping connections among crimes, vehicles, weapons, drugs, money, locations and people — according to the procurement documents.

The planned intelligence system will consist of several elements intended to work together to improve information sharing across the intelligence community on gang-related topics.

**Limits on sharing**

However, the design of the intelligence system, as described in FBI procurement documents, provides a potential stumbling block to information sharing.

One requirement of the system’s design mandated by the bureau states: “No information obtained from the system may be used in any official investigative report, affidavit or paper without the specific permission from the originating agency.”

That sentence expresses the essence of the Orcon — or originator control — policy that formerly governed the use of many documents and other forms of intelligence in the national-security sector of the intelligence community.

Senior intelligence community technology officials have emphasized repeatedly in interviews since 2001 that traditional intelligence agencies, such as the CIA, National Security Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency, have worked hard to stamp out the use of Orcon limits on information sharing.

Such limits have long hampered the effectiveness of intelligence information sharing in both the national security and law enforcement fields, according to specialists inside and outside the government.

In addition to that policy stumbling block, organizational resistance to information sharing remains a factor in the gang intelligence world, according to criminologists.

Randall Paul McCauley, former criminology professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and an expert witness in gang trials, said, “The key to criminal investigations is information, and that has been true since Robert Peel created the Metropolitan Police in London on Sept. 29, 1829.

“Sharing of information means we will increase the availability of information, but the issue is fraught with political and jurisdictional problems,” McCauley said. “People protect their turfs.”

As for information technology systems, McCauley added, “Sometimes the systems work, and sometimes they don’t.”

McCauley and other specialists in criminal gang matters repeatedly and independently responded with the phrase “garbage in, garbage out” when asked about the likely impact of an upgraded gang intelligence
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**Fresh info needed**

Michael Munoz, who also is an expert witness on gang matters and worked as a Los Angeles police officer for more than 20 years, spent many months working undercover and infiltrating gang organizations in several cities.

He cautioned that the level of usefulness of a gang intelligence computer system would depend on the freshness and quality of the information entered.

“It is going to depend in part on the personalities of the people who choose to share the information,” Munoz said. “The more you develop a rapport with them, the more they are going to understand the legitimacy of your goal.”

Munoz added, “There is [another] potential drawback — that there has be some specific method as to how a person can be removed from the database if they are no longer a gang member.”

He said that in many cases, people who may have joined gangs of various kinds, including the "baby gangs" for children that serve as portals to full-fledged gangs, decide to reject the gang lifestyle as they mature.

“This process [of rejecting gang life] can occur as an individual's original reasons for gang membership — including the advantages of protection, camaraderie, acceptance, livelihood, esteem and excitement — give way to the influence of other mentors or religious faith,” Munoz said.

Lewis Yablonsky, a former professor of sociology and criminology at California State University at Northridge, was skeptical of the prospective value of the upgraded gang intelligence system.

“I think this [computer system] would be almost totally ineffective,” said Yablonsky, who has participated in more than 250 cases involving alleged gang-related crimes. "The assumption here is that street gangs are coherent organizations with consistent leadership. That’s just not the case. It’s more accurate to call them a 'near group.' "

Yablonsky said, typical criminal gangs, apart from the most well-regimented organizations such as the Italian or Mexican mafias, are highly informal organizations.

“You have to consider the [gang members] you are dealing with here. They are scatterbrained...idiots.” He went on to say that in half the cases he had seen, the crimes that were being prosecuted as gang-related offenses, such as robberies, were independent acts of criminals who had no intention of delivering any proceeds to the gangs.

“The police have an exaggerated view of the gangs,” Yablonsky said. He noted that in some instances, adding the factor of “gang related” to a given offense can lead to a heavier sentence for a convict, which gives prosecutors an incentive to stretch the definition of gang membership.

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**Sidebar | Another management system?**

**Gang intelligence system to sift data from many sources, but stops short of case management**

The FBI’s planned system to support the National Gang Information Center won’t have an investigative case management system like those planned for the succession of unsuccessful projects that have culminated in the bureau’s Sentinel system [GCN, July 2, Page 5]. But it will have case tracking and deconfliction features that come close.

The NGIC system’s Case Tracker database is intended to provide a high-level view of various law enforcement projects so as to prevent conflicts among cases and focus investigative resources.

The bureau described that function in the following example in the NGIC system concept of operations: “For example, if the FBI opens a Latin Kings case in Los Angeles and [the Drug Enforcement Administration] already has an open investigation with that group, the case tracking capability will bring the
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two agencies together to discuss strategies for expanding the case or leaving it alone."

But that goal could be hindered by limits on the types of information the Case Tracker database will be
allowed to handle under federal laws and rules that govern access to classified data.

The bureau has struggled for years with how to make sure that special agents pursuing leads on a given
gang don’t interfere with existing law enforcement agencies’ projects targeting the same criminals.

The law enforcement community has established procedures for deconflicting cases, say law enforcement
officials. To support that effort, the FBI already operates an independent system to help protect undercover
agents and controlled sources inside criminal gangs from criminal probes, according to vendors familiar
with the FBI’s work.

The database operates at multiple levels of classification, according to vendor sources. That feature
shields the most sensitive counterterrorist and counterintelligence information in the database from law
enforcement officials who lack the proper security clearances.

The procurement documents the FBI released publicly about the new NGIC system state that the
databases generally will operate at the sensitive but unclassified (SBU) level.

That classification, and even the higher secret classification, can fall below other information the bureau
uses. The SBU information is less classified not only than some information in the existing investigation
deconfliction databases but also the information in the FBI database used to track Foreign Intelligence
Surveillance Act (FISA) warrants, say law enforcement officials.

That FISA Warrant System, used to track the process for requesting warrants from the FISA court,
contains information at several levels of classification, the law enforcement officials said. The FISA panel
meets in secret every week to consider requests for wiretaps and communications intercepts that the
bureau seeks for counterintelligence purposes.

Some information in the FISA warrant requests is very highly classified, according to federal law
enforcement sources. The database that handles it allows users with low-level clearances to access parts
of the system, while granting wider access to users with higher clearances, the sources said.

Another part of the planned information technology system for gang intelligence includes a GangNet node,
which will store information from the FBI’s existing Violent Gang and Terrorist Organizations File.

The planned gang intelligence system also will include a Signs, Symbols and Terminology database,
including images of gang tattoos, graffiti, hand signs and symbols. It will have gang codes, terminology and
gang literature.

Prison gang images denote various aspects of a gang member’s status (see chart, Page 12). FBI officials
deployed to provide images of gang tattoos, and the Los Angeles Police Department also refused to divulge
any gang tattoo information. California’s freedom of information law contains a special exemption that
shields gang intelligence from public release.

The planned NGIC support system’s RISSNet node will use capabilities of the Regional Information
Sharing System Network to store intelligence products, according to procurement information. An
associated work-in-process database is planned to help compile raw data for intelligence analysis and help
create intelligence products.

Sidebar | On the inside: Prison gang tattoo symbols

Cell window with sun or bird showing: waiting to get out.

Eight balls: behind the eight ball or bad luck.

Face of female crying: has someone on the outside waiting.

Granite block walls: time in Folsom prison.
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Clock faces without hands: doing time.

One laughing face, one crying face: play now, pay later.

Prison block wall with bricks falling outward: inside waiting to get out.

Spider or cobwebs on arms or shoulder: doing time.

Tombstones with numbers on them: the years they were inside.

Tombstones with numbers and RIP: mourning the death of a friend.

Source: U.S. Marine Corps. The corps provides guidance to its leaders about how to deal with possible infiltration of the service by gang activists bent on recruiting additional members.

Graphic | Weaving a net of information

Weaving a net of information The FBI's planned upgrades for the National Gang Intelligence Center will mesh information already available via agency databases and networks that do not directly connect. They include Law Enforcement Online, the Regional Information Sharing System Network, the One DOJ network and others.