Los Angeles County report confirms that deputy gangs are rampant in Sheriff's Department

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On March 3, a special counsel charged with oversight of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) issued a report that documents deputy gangs engaging in "egregious conduct such as violations of law, the excessive use of force [and] threats to the public or Department members."

According to the special counsel, deputy gangs operating over the last 50 years in patrol stations located in predominantly working class and minority neighborhoods, including the Banditos, Executioners, Regulators, Spartans, Grim Reapers, Rattlesnakes and Vikings, recruit male deputy sheriffs based on their ethnicity and willingness to engage in violence and coverups.

The report states that among the 80 or so people interviewed, "several witnesses would only testify anonymously and some did so remotely, using a voice distortion device out of fear of physical or professional retaliation. Several witnesses who had agreed to testify withdrew, often the night before the proposed testimony, out of similar fears."

The report accuses prior Sheriff Alex Villanueva, who lost reelection last November, of "appointing known tattooed members of Deputy Gangs and Deputy Cliques to leadership positions in the Department" and "permitting the revival of emblems signifying membership in such groups."

"The claim that Deputy Gangs no longer exist in the Department is flatly and inarguably false," according to the report.

The Rand Corporation reports that 15 to 20 percent of LASD deputies join gangs. Membership is usually confirmed by a leg tattoo, frequently bearing a sequential roman numeral. "Inking parties" are held to initiate new members at the gang's chosen tattoo parlor after a deputy-involved shooting or other act of brutality. Deputies have been observed using language, gestures and even graffiti associated with the street gangs they are supposedly policing, while aggressively targeting co-workers they deem "rats."

Deputy gangs were originally dominated by white men, but, like the LASD itself, are now increasingly Latino. African American and female deputies are generally excluded.

The population of Los Angeles County is almost 10 million, one out of every 35 people who live in the United States today. The county alone is more populous than 40 of the 50 states. Riven by extreme social inequality, with 30 billionaires and almost 70,000 people unhoused, Los Angeles County consists of pockets of ostentatious wealth, mostly concentrated in Westside communities such as Malibu, Beverly Hills and Bel Air, alongside massive working class communities that include large populations of recent immigrants crammed into neighborhoods circling downtown, and fanning south to the San Pedro harbor and east to borders with San Bernardino and Orange Counties.

The LASD employs 15,000 people, about half of whom are sworn deputies, and runs the country's largest jail system, with an average daily inmate population also numbering about 15,000. Typically, after several years in the jails, deputies are assigned to patrol at one of the 23 substations that cover unincorporated county communities and the 42 cities that contract with the LASD rather than operate their own police department. With an annual budget of $3.6 billion, the LASD is one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the United States.

Deputy gangs arise out of the need for force to maintain social inequality. They epitomize the thuggery rampant in such "special bodies of armed men"—the apt description Engels and Lenin used for law enforcement agencies under bourgeois rule, which captures their essential role as defenders of capitalist exploitation.

LASD deputy gangs date back at least to the "Little Red Devils" formed in the early 1970s by white deputies assigned to the East Los Angeles substation, nicknamed "Fort Apache" after the John Wayne movie that glamorized a cavalry outpost in the genocidal wars waged against Native

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Americans.

As spearheads in the suppression of mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War during the "Chicano Moratorium," the Little Red Devils' most prominent casualty was *Los Angeles Times* commentator Ruben Salazar, who died after being struck in the head by a teargas canister fired into a bar where he sought refuge from rampaging deputies. A subsequently 1973 report on these events identified 38 deputies from the East Los Angeles substation with sequentially numbered tattoos of a devil, the first official acknowledgment that deputy gangs were "inking."

In the early 1990s media reports and litigation exposed the Vikings, a particularly violent deputy gang at the Lynwood substation, the existence of which was confirmed in the 1992 report of an earlier special counsel, James G. Kolts. In a federal civil rights lawsuit, District Judge Terry J. Hatter accurately labeled the Vikings "a neo-Nazi, white supremacist gang," and the county subsequently paid $9 million to settle injury claims asserted by dozens of the Vikings' victims.

Although never proved in court, Vikings were suspected to have perpetrated the still unsolved drive-by shooting of Lloyd Polk, after he brokered a peace meeting among rival Lynwood street gangs.

As detailed in the recent special counsel report, deputy gangs have metastasized throughout the LASD. A tattooed founding member of the Vikings, Paul Tanaka, rose to the rank of undersheriff, second in command, and was noted to have actively promoted several Vikings and Regulators into higher management positions. Tanaka and former Sheriff Lee Baca were convicted of conspiring to block the FBI from investigating jail abuses. Tanaka was sentenced to five years federal imprisonment and Baca three.

Baca's successor, Jim McDonnell, took down the "Fort Apache" logo at the East Los Angeles substation, but Villanueva restored it after defeating McDonnell in 2018 with the backing of prominent Democrats, who openly campaigned for a sheriff "of color." (Villanueva is half Polish and half Puerto Rican. He speaks Spanish fluently.) Villanueva also rehired and elevated to his inner circle Carl Mandoyan, a tattooed member of the Grim Reapers, the deputy gang formed at the South Los Angeles substation, whose emblem is a faceless, black-robed figure carrying a scythe, the symbol of death.

At the East Los Angeles substation, the Banditos grew to replace the Cavemen, a deputy gang that had replaced the Little Red Devils. The tattoo is a skull with a thick mustache, wearing a bandolier and sombrero, and brandishing a gun. According to one witness, "Banditos had to be Mexican American, Central Americans could not become Banditos." As is the practice in other deputy gangs, a shooting allowed the member to embellish the barrel of his tattooed firearm with smoke.

One deputy gang, the "Jump Out Boys," actually formed within the LASD's own anti-gang detail, "Operation Safe Streets" (OSS). The tattoo depicts a red-eyed skull wearing a bandana adorned with the letters "OSS" and holding a revolver next to an ace and eight of spades, symbolizing the "dead man's hand" in poker.

Even helicopter deputies formed a racist group, the "Ghetto Birds," founded by a deputy with a Viking tattoo. The report suggests that the gang has been successful over the years in excluding African American deputies from the Aero Bureau.

According to the report, there are at least a half dozen deputy gangs currently active at LASD patrol stations in working class areas. The official tattoo of one, the Compton-based Executioners, is a skeleton with a German World War II helmet holding an automatic rifle.

These gangs, or "cliques" as the report sometimes soft-pedals them, "run the stations or units where they exist ... often decide assignments and shifts, training, and overtime; exclude deputies from the Deputy Cliques, often based on race, ethnicity or gender; intimidate deputies that are not part of the Deputy Cliques; give orders not to provide backup to disfavored deputies who are not members of the Deputy Cliques," and "order work slowdowns if management of a station attempts to rein them in."

"Most troubling," the report explains, "they create rituals that valorize violence, such as recording all deputy involved shootings in an official book, celebrating with 'shooting parties,' and authorizing deputies who have shot a community member to add embellishments to their common gang tattoos."

The deputy gangs "operate in secrecy; lie in reports to protect each other; and threaten the public with use of excessive force without justification and belittle deputies unwilling to engage in such acts," the report concludes.

Like their more overtly neo-fascist counterparts, such as the "Oath Keepers" who spearheaded the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, deputy gangs cannot be eliminated by reforms because they are organically tied to the class struggle the deputies are employed to suppress. That is why deputy gangs can only be eliminated through the overthrow of capitalist property by the international working class.

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