

Operation Sudden Impact: The Effective Use of Federal and State Resources to Combat Gang Violence

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I. Introduction

On January 11, 2017, Jimmy “Shyboy” Valenzuela, the leader of the Southside Montebello (SSM) gang’s “Killer Squad,” was sentenced in California state court to two life sentences without the possibility of parole in connection with two separate execution-style murders of rival gang members. The jury had previously found the special allegation that these were murders committed in furtherance of the activities of a criminal street gang, and at sentencing the judge described the murders as “unprovoked” and “senseless.”

Valenzuela is a member of the SSM gang, which is aligned with the Mexican Mafia. For generations now, members and associates of the SSM gang conducted criminal activity in Montebello, a city less than ten minutes away from downtown Los Angeles. Valenzuela was arrested in 2012 as a result of cooperative efforts by federal and local law enforcement working under the oversight of the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Los Angeles. Their goal was to combat gang crime in the city of Montebello, and solve a number of “cold-case” gang-related homicides. Also arrested was Joe John Dorantes, who was charged with the 2008 killings of Albert Garcia and his 12-year-old son, neither of whom had any gang affiliation. As a result of the agents’ joint efforts, thirty-eight gang members and associates, including Valenzuela, were arrested on a combination of federal racketeering, drug, and weapons charges, as well as state charges, including murder.



Pictured on the left is Joe John Dorantes, and on the right is Jimmy “Shyboy” Valenzuela—the leader of the SSM Killer Squad.

Law enforcement seized twenty handguns, three fully automatic handguns, one sawed off bolt-action rifle, and more than half a kilogram of methamphetamine in total, from various street-level drug dealers.



Firearms that were seized during Operation Sudden Impact.

Law enforcement dubbed the investigation “Operation Sudden Impact.” The investigation targeted “gang members who [had] been terrorizing [the city of Montebello] and the surrounding communities for years,” according to Montebello Police Chief Kevin McClure.¹²⁹ The Operation was designed to bring some measure of relief for the residents of the city of Montebello and adjacent communities, who had been terrorized by escalating gang violence. The operation culminated with arrests in May of 2013.

A year after Operation Sudden Impact ended, violent crime data for the city of Montebello revealed a record low number of homicides, with not a single homicide during the first half of 2014.¹³⁰ This was a decrease from the two homicides in 2013, four in 2012, and seven in 2010 (prior to the initiation of the investigation).¹³¹ The Montebello Police Department attributed the significant decrease in homicides to Operation Sudden Impact, which resulted in many of the city’s most violent gang members, including Valenzuela, being incarcerated.¹³²

The success of Operation Sudden Impact is credited to the creative use of a wide range of investigative techniques, and the efforts of federal and local law enforcement to work together to achieve their common goal of making the city of Montebello a safer place to live. As a result of this operation, the SSM gang has been effectively dismantled. The lead agents believe the gang is unlikely to rebuild any time in the near future.

II. History of the SSM Gang

The SSM gang is believed to have been formed in the 1960s, and is one of scores of gangs in Southern California that has been aligned with and has answered to the Mexican Mafia for decades. The Mexican Mafia, often referred to as “La Eme” (derived from the Spanish pronunciation of the letter “M”), is a criminal organization that operates from within the California state prison system, the streets and

¹²⁹ Brian Day, *Feds nail South Side Montebello street gang and ‘killer squad’ clique* (May 15, 2013, 12:01 AM), <http://www.whittierdailynews.com/article/zz/20130515/NEWS/130519382>.

¹³⁰ Nancy Martinez, *Montebello Credits Focus on Gangs for Drop in Homicides* (Jul. 10, 2014, 8:46 AM), <http://egpnews.com/2014/07/montebello-credits-focus-on-gangs-for-drop-in-homicides/>.

¹³¹ *Id.*

¹³² *Id.*

suburbs of large cities throughout Southern California, and elsewhere. Hispanic street gangs aligned with the Mexican Mafia typically signal their allegiance to the Mexican Mafia by displaying the number 13 after the gang's name, in tribute to the letter "M" the thirteenth letter in the alphabet.

Federal gang prosecutions within the Central District of California have repeatedly proven that the Mexican Mafia exerted tight control over Hispanic criminal street gangs for years, including by establishing a code of conduct with which each of these gangs, including the SSM gang, must comply. The Florencia 13 (F13) gang is one of the larger Hispanic criminal street gangs in Los Angeles that answers to the Mexican Mafia. In 2007, prosecutors in Los Angeles, in *United States v. Vasquez, et al.*, CR No. 07-202-DOC, alleged that, more than a decade ago, a Mexican Mafia member issued from his prison cell a set of "reglas" (rules) for all F13 gang members to follow. These rules established a formal process for electing F13 gang leaders to oversee the gang's criminal operations on the streets, and directed members of the F13 gang to extort or "tax" all drug dealers who sell drugs in F13 gang territory, such that members of the gang would enjoy a profit of all drug sales in the areas controlled by F13.

The Azusa 13 gang controlled the city of Azusa, approximately twenty minutes from downtown Los Angeles, until it was the target of another prosecution in the Central District of California, in *United States v. Rios, et al.*, CR No. 11-492-MWF. In the *Rios* case, prosecutors alleged that as early as 1997, a senior member of the gang authored an explicit "business plan" that the members of the gang were to follow consistent with Mexican Mafia directives regarding how all Hispanic criminal street gangs in Southern California were to conduct gang business moving forward.¹³³ The senior Azusa 13 gang member stated that per Mexican Mafia orders, the gang "reserve[d] the exclusive rights to control [sic] the underground drug market in the city of Azusa."¹³⁴ The "business plan" instructed members of the gang to "imagine the 'varrio' [gang territory] as a company, [and] imagine the homeboys as employees of this company . . . [and that the] company provides security services, protection and exclusive sales rights [for drug suppliers] within the Azusa City Limits."¹³⁵ Azusa 13 gang members were instructed to select a "representative" to speak to all individuals selling drugs in the City of Azusa in order to explain to those drug distributors that the Azusa 13 gang would act as enforcers that would protect the dealers' drug business in exchange for a share of the profits from their drug sales.¹³⁶ According to the business plan, the gang would "offer and guarantee full protection, that the [gang members] will collect from their customers that are refusing to pay, and [that the Azusa 13 gang] w[ould] deal harshly with anybody who is interfering with their business."¹³⁷ Members of the gang were also instructed to warn all drug distributors in the gang's territory that "anybody refusing to cooperate with the company policy w[ould] not be allowed to conduct business within the Azusa City limits, and [would be] subject to severe punishment." *Id.* Pursuant to the "business plan," the gang was to send its "wrecking crew" to steal non-compliant individuals' drugs, money, and valuables, or to kidnap a family member of the drug distributor in order to display the unyielding authority of the gang.¹³⁸ Finally, the "business plan" required the gang to invest in "company supplies and equipment" and to maintain "top of the line artillery, A-K's, SKS's, Tec-9's, mini 14's, bullet proof vests, [police] scanners, walkie talkies, [and] binoculars."¹³⁹ The senior leaders of the gang instructed Azusa 13 gang members that the gang's "main objective" was to "monopolize the entire drug market in the City of Azusa," and reminded the gang's members to make "contributions" of extorted drug proceeds to the Mexican Mafia.¹⁴⁰

Twenty years since they first began to issue their rules, Mexican Mafia-aligned gangs continue to

¹³³ *United States v. Rios, et al.*, CR No. 11-492-MWF (CR 1 at 24-25).

¹³⁴ *Id.*

¹³⁵ *Id.*

¹³⁶ *Id.*

¹³⁷ *Id.*

¹³⁸ *Id.*

¹³⁹ *Id.*

¹⁴⁰ *Id.*

operate under the same or very similar “business plans” as that described in the Florencia 13 and Azusa 13 prosecutions. Because these gangs have operated the same way for generations, the organizational rules of the road are now second nature to members and associates of southern California Hispanic criminal street gangs. This was how members of the SSM gang operated prior to the conclusion of Operation Sudden Impact.

The SSM gang claimed a portion of the city of Montebello, including a housing project located in the south side of the city. Members of the gang marked their “territory” with their gang name or abbreviations, such as “SSM” or “VSSMTB” (an abbreviation for Varrio Southside Montebello) so that both rival gang members and innocent citizens alike were aware of the gang’s control over the area. The gang graffiti also regularly contained explicit threats to law enforcement as well as rival gang members in the city.



Examples of graffiti that the SSM gang used to mark its territory in Montebello

Per Mexican Mafia directives, members of the gang “patrolled” the territory, “taxed” drug dealers who sold drugs in the portion of the city that the SSM gang claimed, and answered to the Mexican Mafia. Members of the gang, themselves, also sold drugs, usually methamphetamine and crack cocaine. Most troubling, though, was the escalating violence. Over the years, members of the gang stockpiled weapons, and engaged in murders, attempted murders, and gang-related shootings.

III. Local Law Enforcement Strikes Back

Gang violence in SSM gang territory began to escalate around 2000. On November 10, 2004, in *People v. Southside Montebello*, (Los Angeles Case No. BC324344), the attorney for the city of Montebello filed an injunction against the SSM gang. While gang injunctions have commonly been used to combat gangs in Southern California, the city of Montebello was one of the first cities outside of Los Angeles to obtain an injunction against a criminal street gang.¹⁴¹ Several law enforcement officers with the Montebello Police Department submitted declarations in support of the injunction that documented the gang’s increasingly violent activities in the city.

¹⁴¹ *Injunctions curbing gangs said ‘quick fix,’ San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, (Nov. 12, 2005).

Specifically, officers with the Montebello Police Department noticed that members of the gang committed the majority of their crimes, including street robberies, shootings, and carjacking's, in an area of Montebello that would later be designated the city's "safety zone" under the terms of the injunction. The injunction prohibited SSM gang members from associating with one another, carrying guns or other weapons, dealing or using drugs, recruiting children, and tagging or carrying spray cans or tools to create graffiti. SSM gang members were also prohibited from showing gang signs and harassing people within the "safety zone." Additionally, SSM gang members were prohibited from being in the "safety zone" from 10:00 p.m. through sunrise.

After the city obtained the injunction, officers with the Montebello Police Department could serve SSM gang members who were engaging in conduct prohibited by the terms of the injunction. Officers were required to document the fact that they served SSM gang members with the injunction, as well as any statements made by the SSM gang member upon being served. These documented admissions normally included either explicit or tacit admission of SSM gang membership. These admissions later became useful evidence against individuals charged federally as a result of Operation Sudden Impact. Once served, if the SSM gang member then again violated the terms of the injunction, law enforcement had the authority to arrest that gang member for a misdemeanor charge.

In the first year after the city of Montebello obtained the injunction, local law enforcement arrested approximately twenty-five SSM gang members.¹⁴² The city of Montebello experienced some measure of relief, and citywide, "all crimes but rape decreased slightly in the first six months of 2005, compared with the first six months of 2004."¹⁴³

Unfortunately, while the injunction did help with the crime rate, it did not prevent all gang violence in Montebello. Soon after the injunction was in place, SSM gang members created an even more violent subgroup of the gang: the "K-Squad" or "Killer Squad" clique of the gang. Members of the SSM gang who committed several shootings or at least one murder were elevated to this elite level of the gang.

After the injunction was in place, members of the gang committed a number of murders. For example, Jimmy Valenzuela, who was a founding member of the "Killer Squad" clique, committed the execution-style slayings of two rival gang members in 2007 and 2010. On July 4, 2008, SSM gang member Edward "Evil" Dewey killed Jose Cassillas, who was shot while attending an Independence Day celebration with his family. Members of the SSM gang helped Dewey to flee the scene and dispose of the murder weapon. On June 21, 2008, Juan Garcia and his 12-year-old son, Albert Garcia, were shot to death as they attended a graduation party in Montebello, where a fight broke out between SSM gang members and their rivals. Neither the father nor the son were believed to have any gang ties.

In April 2011, the Montebello Police Department formally tasked a team to investigate these and other gang-related homicides, and to obtain sufficient evidence to bring them to prosecution. This was the beginning of Operation Sudden Impact. What began as a discrete mission to resolve a handful of cold-case homicides morphed into an investigation that ultimately dismantled the gang.

IV. Operation Sudden Impact

The success of Operation Sudden Impact is credited in large part to the extensive experience that law enforcement officers assigned to the operation had gained in earlier investigations, where they conducted undercover operations, handled confidential informants, and gathered evidence regarding the activities of criminal enterprises. During the operation, the agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), gang detectives with the Montebello Police Department, and a Major Crimes Detective with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department used the techniques that they had

¹⁴² *Id.*

¹⁴³ *Id.*

honed over the years in previous investigations of violent criminal organizations, including criminal street gangs.

To meet its initial goal of solving a discreet number of gang-related homicides, law enforcement needed confidential informants as well as intelligence related to these murders.

A. Confidential Informants and Undercover Operations

In the first quarter of 2011, gang detectives with the Montebello Police Department identified an SSM gang member who ultimately provided invaluable assistance during the first phase of the operation. The cooperator was a relatively high-level SSM gang member who had risen through the ranks of the gang quickly, but had recently been shot and permanently wounded by his fellow SSM gang members, who were jealous of his rising success in the criminal world. Local law enforcement officers developed an opportunity to approach this individual, and were able to ascertain not only his willingness to cooperate against the gang's shot-callers, but, more importantly, his willingness to be closely controlled throughout his cooperation. His role in the investigation, unlike other confidential informants used during the investigation, was focused on obtaining video and audio-recorded confessions of homicides and attempted murders from enforcers for the gang. After he obtained this recorded evidence, his proactive cooperation was terminated, and he was relocated away from SSM gang territory in anticipation of any trial testimony that would be necessary.

Early on, law enforcement directed the confidential informant to obtain a confession from Valenzuela regarding the murders that he was suspected of committing. At law enforcement's direction, the confidential informant was able to persuade Valenzuela to come to an undercover warehouse supplied by the ATF. The warehouse was covertly equipped with audio and video recording capabilities. The operation involved a ruse meeting initiated by an experienced ATF undercover agent. While at the undercover warehouse, sitting together in a break room eating lunch, the confidential informant asked Valenzuela to describe details of the two murders that he had committed. Unaware that he was being recorded and that law enforcement was monitoring his conversation from another room, Valenzuela casually bragged about the two execution-style murders he had committed—evidence that ultimately led to Valenzuela's convictions and life sentences.

Similarly, the confidential informant was able to persuade another of the SSM gang's most hardened members, Corina Castellanos, to speak with him regarding the 2008 shooting committed by Edward Dewey. Castellanos described in graphic detail the shooting, and bragged about jumping over the dead body while laughing, and helping Dewey evade capture by law enforcement. Based on her recorded admissions, Castellanos was convicted on both a state accessory to murder charge, and a federal racketeering charge related to her involvement in this murder, and has remained in custody since 2012. As individuals such as Valenzuela and Castellanos admitted their role in homicides to the confidential informant, law enforcement worked to take them into custody as quickly as possible in a manner that would not jeopardize the ongoing operation.

B. Recorded Jail Calls

In addition to the use of this confidential informant, during the early stages of Operation Sudden Impact, law enforcement began reviewing hundreds of jail calls made by incarcerated SSM gang members and associates, particularly those suspected of having information related to the gang's violent crimes. Though tedious, the review of jail calls provided not only invaluable intelligence regarding gang-related homicides and other violent crime, but also explained the various roles that members and associates of the SSM gang held in the criminal organization, including the identities of the gang's hierarchy.

Operation Sudden Impact was atypical of other large gang investigations because it never relied on a Title III wiretap, which is generally a primary and useful investigative tool used in large-scale gang

investigations. The recorded communications of SSM gang members and associates consisted entirely of body recordings generated by undercover law enforcement officers or confidential informants when they interacted covertly with the targets of the investigation, undercover recordings from, for example, the ATF undercover warehouse, or recorded jail calls. Obtaining the recorded communications in this manner was relatively more efficient and cost-effective than overseeing a lengthy wiretap investigation, and had the added benefit of being valuable evidence of the gang’s violent crimes that could not be challenged by a motion to suppress post-indictment as would be the case with Title III recordings.

Additionally, even after the proactive phase of the investigation was over, law enforcement continued to review and make strategic use of information that SSM gang members provided casually over recorded jail calls. For example, in November 2012, prior to the conclusion of the operation, law enforcement arrested two SSM gang members on federal drug charges, and purposefully provided them with discovery related to the larger gang investigation. The discovery revealed that law enforcement was investigating the SSM gang as a whole. Immediately after the production of the discovery, one of them placed a recorded jail call to his father, who was also a SSM gang member, describing the strength of the evidence that had been obtained during Operation Sudden Impact:

DEFENDANT 1	[00:01:00 START] ... I got my discovery today, dad.
DEFENDANT 2	Huh?
DEFENDANT 1	I got my discovery. I got all... everything that they have. Everything... [VOICES OVERLAP]
DEFENDANT 2	What does that mean?
DEFENDANT 1	It’s all the—all the... everything they have against us. Everything they could use against us. All the f**kin’ material. All the f**kin’... You need to get a copy of it. They sent me a video of all kinds of paperwork. You need a copy of it. You need to see this. You really need to see this. It’s very serious. It’s... It... [VOICES OVERLAP]
DEFENDANT 2	Why?
DEFENDANT 1	...it could get real serious very fast. More serious than what it already is. It’s a lot worse.
DEFENDANT 2	Is it?
DEFENDANT 1	Yeah, dad. Yeah.

DEFENDANT 1	Well—well—well, listen to this, dad; They’ve also threatened Marcus that in a... later on down the line in a about a year or so, they’re gonna hit him with a RICO Act and there’s about 35 people, 40 people involved. A lot of these names are in our indictment and—and... in our discovery. If you go to the discovery they have a lot of people’s cases a lot of things that they’re not even getting hit with. They’re just sitting on ‘em. For whatever reason they’re building cases. Whatever they’re doing there’s a lot of s**t you need to see. The people... you need to see the f**kin’... You need to look at everything and f**kin’ know what’s going on around you. Believe me when I’m telling you this, dad. I can’t say it...I can’t say much in letters or on—on phone. You need to see it for yourself. You need to see it, dad. You need to see. Stay away! Just do your own thing and don’t worry about us... [VOICES OVERLAP]
DEFENDANT 2	I am and I’ve been doing my own things. Marcus [U/I] at ‘em?

DEFENDANT 1	Tell Melissa and tell Karina just f**kin', just you know? Just keep away, take care of the kids, and just don't even f**kin' get involved in anything. We're f**kin'... I'm gonna have to fu... We're gonna have to sit this out and just see what happens. And a...and about a year or so there's about... in... When you get RICOed [PH] it's not a joke. It's not really a joke in here. There's about... there's about 4 different areas where there's a gang of people in the RICO Act and they're bringing in 20 of them at a time.
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C. Controlled Buys

While the high-ranking SSM gang cooperator was working to obtain evidence of the gang's violent crimes, in 2011, law enforcement began using other confidential informants to purchase drugs and guns from SSM gang members. These buys were recorded, and, occasionally, an undercover law enforcement officer was able to make these controlled purchases directly from the dealer. Towards the end of the operation, these controlled buys included the purchase of multiple fully automatic rifles by an ATF undercover officer from an associate of the SSM gang.

The strength of the evidence yielded from these controlled purchases caused multiple SSM gang members to cooperate post-indictment, and to provide law enforcement with information regarding the gang's violent crimes after the conclusion of Operation Sudden Impact.

D. Evidence of the Conspiracy

By 2012, Operation Sudden Impact had grown substantially, and law enforcement had identified individuals involved in the gang's crimes that could be prosecuted federally on racketeering conspiracy, drug conspiracy, or weapons charges. Of importance to the federal prosecution of these individuals on conspiracy charges was evidence that SSM gang members were acting together as a criminal organization, as well as evidence of those individuals' association with the SSM gang.

In order to obtain that evidence of association, law enforcement officers used various tactics. First, they exploited the social media posts of SSM gang members, particularly on Facebook. Law enforcement obtained current photographs of SSM gang members displaying gang signs, pledging allegiance to the gang, and holding weapons. They also obtained social media posts from one co-conspirator to another discussing the gang's activities or their common membership in the gang.

Next, near the end of the operation, law enforcement officers conducted parole searches of the residences of SSM gang members and seized gang letters, photographs, and gang-related art and music lyrics. During one parole search, law enforcement recovered a letter written by one SSM gang member to another describing his suspicion that federal law enforcement was presently working with the Montebello Police Department to conduct a federal wiretap investigation of the gang.

Finally, local law enforcement officers retrieved historical law enforcement reports documenting the crimes that SSM gang members had committed dating back at least fifteen years. These historical reports contained admissions by SSM gang members of their membership in the gang, including admissions when they were served with the SSM gang injunction, admissions concerning the possession of firearms, distribution quantities of drugs in the SSM gang's territory, and admissions concerning violent conduct committed by SSM gang members over the years. This historical evidence, combined with evidence seized from social media and parole searches, all became part of the federal conspiracy cases against SSM gang members that was the culmination of Operation Sudden Impact.

V. Conclusion

Between 2011 and 2013, federal and local law enforcement worked together to use their collective experience and resources to engage in a variety of investigative techniques to target, and

ultimately dismantle, a violent criminal organization. Operation Sudden Impact ultimately resulted in solving six “cold case” gang-related murders, and obtaining convictions against dozens of individuals affiliated with a violent criminal street gang. The collaborative and strategic efforts made by federal and local law enforcement working together to bring cases against SSM gang members and associates, left the city of Montebello, even years later, a safer place to live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

□ **Reema El-Amamy** is an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Central District of California in Los Angeles, having joined the office in 2008. Over the past decade, Ms. El-Amamy has prosecuted hundreds of gang members in connection with racketeering, drug and weapons-related offenses, as well as civil rights violations, and has overseen multiple large-scale investigations targeting violent criminal street gangs. In addition to Operation Sudden Impact, Ms. El-Amamy successfully prosecuted dozens of members of the Azusa 13 gang, a notoriously criminal and racist organization that terrorized African-American residents in the city of Azusa for decades. In addition to the gang’s racketeering and weapons-related offenses, Ms. El-Amamy prosecuted the leadership of the gang in connection with their conspiracy to “racially cleanse” the city of all African-Americans. The Azusa 13 prosecution effectively dismantled the gang, and, even years later, Azusa remains a safer place to live. Ms. El-Amamy has also tried several complex multi-defendant cases against members of criminal street gangs. These trials included the RICO convictions of two Mexican Mafia members who also led a violent gang with hundreds of members linked to murders, attempts to kill law enforcement, and a mass stabbing at a Southern California restaurant. Ms. El-Amamy has served as an anti-gang coordinator for her office, and has regularly served as a lecturer at the National Advocacy Center on trial advocacy issues, as well as on issues related to racketeering and complex drug investigations and prosecutions.