COMBATING GANGS

Better Coordination and Performance Measurement Would Help Clarify Roles of Federal Agencies and Strengthen Assessment of Efforts

What GAO Found

Various DOJ and DHS components have taken distinct roles in combating gang crime, and at the headquarters level, DOJ has established several entities to share information on gang-related investigations across agencies. However, some of these entities have not differentiated roles and responsibilities. For example, two entities have overlapping responsibilities for coordinating the federal response to the same gang threat. Prior GAO work found that overlap among programs can waste funds and limit effectiveness, and that agencies should work together to define and agree on their respective roles and facilitate information sharing. At the field division level, federal agencies have established strategies to help coordinate anti-gang efforts including federally led task forces. Officials GAO interviewed were generally satisfied with the task force structure for leveraging resources and taking advantage of contributions from all participating agencies.

Federal agencies have taken actions to measure the results of their gang enforcement efforts, but these efforts have been hindered by three factors. Among other measures, one agency tracks the number of investigations that disrupted or shut down criminal gangs, while another agency tracks its gang-related convictions. However, agencies’ efforts to measure results of federal actions to combat gang crime have been hampered by lack of a shared definition of “gang” among agencies, underreporting of information by United States Attorneys Offices (USAOs), and the lack of departmentwide DOJ performance measures for anti-gang efforts. Definitions of “gang” vary in terms of number of members, time or type of offenses, and other characteristics. According to DOJ officials, lack of a shared definition of “gang” complicates data collection and evaluation efforts across federal agencies, but does not adversely affect law enforcement activity. DOJ officials stated that USAOs have underreported gang-related cases and work, in part because attorneys historically have not viewed data collection as a priority. In the absence of periodic monitoring of USAO’s gang-related case information, DOJ cannot be certain that USAOs have accurately recorded gang-related data. Further, DOJ lacks performance measures that would help agencies to assess progress made over time on anti-gang efforts and provide decision makers with key data to facilitate resource allocation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ reexamine roles of headquarters anti-gang entities, establish performance measures for anti-gang efforts, review USAO gang-related case data, and, along with DHS, develop a common definition for “gang.” DHS concurred with the recommendations; DOJ is considering whether to establish measures and a common definition and concurred with the other recommendations.

View GAO-09-708 or key components.
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