California Nuestra Familia

Institutional affiliation:

Date:

**Abstract**

An organization or a group formed by prison inmates with the intention of operating within the prison is referred to as a prison gang. Almost all gangs want to be deviant of the social norms and to be perceived differently by the community. Some of the gangs originate from the streets and at times outgrow their activities. Prison gangs operate as corporate entities in that they are run like businesses, their membership is restricted and at the same time is exclusive requiring their members to be committed as the gangs exist into perpetuity. Most prison gangs are oriented by race making the inmates to rule or be ruled through racial order. One prison gang can be an ally to another gang while at the same time can be very hostile with another gang. Mixing of inmates of rival gangs in the same cell may result to grisly fights which have in the past led to murders Skarbek & Michaluk, (2015).

In California’s oldest correctional facility i.e. San Quentin State Prison, there are about 701 medium and maximum inmates housed in four cell blocks which are manned and supervised by more than one thousand staff. Despite the high end security enforced put by the government laws, penitentiary guards have less power over the inmates as many prisoners are killed in the hands of their fellow prisoners due to gang orchestrated crimes Skarbek & Michaluk, (2015).

Prison life environment in U.S.A can be violent, chaotic and at the same time very brutal. Over the past years U.S.A has experienced a massive changes and reforms in the criminal justice. Due to the harsh environment in prisons, one can conclude that it is only nature for prison gangs to emerge but this is not the case as a prison gang in one penitentiary can have influence over other prisons. There is need to know about prison gangs so as to solve criminal justice problems and I am covering California Nuestra Familia gang by looking at its origin, growth, crimes and the progress the police are making to end the gang’s activities Skarbek & Michaluk, (2015).

**Origin of the gang**

California Nuestra Familia gang is believed to have originated in September 1967 using the name La Familia which means ‘the family’ at Duel Vocational Training institute in California. In September1968, the founders of the gang changed the gang’s name to ‘La Nuestra Familia’ (Our Family) while at the California Soledad Correctional Facility. The aim of the gang founders was to unite all the Mexican-American inmates through the gang. Haero Morgan, Bobby Joe Barkley, Robert Joseph Gonzales and Freddy Gonzales were the founders of the gang and their main goal was to compete with the southern California gang called the Mexican Mafia. The gang was and is still a huge threat and its racial composition is the Hispanics. California Nuestra Familia has alliances with the Nuestra Raza, the Northern structure as well as other street gangs in northern California. The gang uses symbols such as Norteno, Norte, 14, cartorce, ENE and Huelga eagle ‘XIV’ Prison Offenders, (2016).

Nuestra Familia is made up individuals called the Nortenos i.e. northerners. As of today, the gang is headquartered in California. Between 1965 and 1967 many prisons were controlled by the California Mexican Mafia (EME) especially those under California Department of Corrections. Mexican Mafia victimized the Northern California inmates and restricted inmates from the Southern California from joining the ENE. Some EME members were against victimization of Mexicans by fellow Mexicans. The members of the Maravilla were brutal in doing this as at the time it was the largest gang in east of Los Angeles. The Mexican Mafia also wanted to curb the Nuestra Familia so that it could not grow once its members started being transferred to the San Quentin Maximum Prison Morales, (2008).

As a result, there was the killing of Nuestra Familia member called Sonny Pena by the Mexican Mafia. Through this killing the Mexican Mafia sent the message that there were in control of the prison and that new gangs were neither be allowed nor accepted. The Mexican Mafia gang was backed by the Aryan Brotherhood gang who also murdered Nuestra Familia gang member known as Fred Charles Castillo. The murder happened on 3rd February 1972. Prior to this, a California Nuestra Familia member had been stabbed and killed by the Mexican Mafia in Folsom State Prison Prison Offenders, (2016).

As a result of these murders, the California Department of Corrections prison officers had no choice but to segregate all Mexican northern California inmates from the California Nuestra Familia members. This was a blessing in disguise to the California Nuestra members as they had the perfect opportunity to bond, unite and strategize as to how to expand their group. This was the no turning point for Nuestra Familia and the Mexican Mafia gang as their territories became clearly divided Prison Offenders, (2016).

The California Nuestra Familia members retaliated by killing the Mexican Mafia members such as Leonard Arias who was killed on 19th October 1972 at the California Correctional Institution. Alejandro Moreno, a Mexican Mafia member was killed by the Nuestra Familia members on 13st December 1976 Prison Offenders, (2016).

The first California Nuestra Familia constitution was written within a legal framework and the draft of the constitution was smuggled and sneaked to other members of the gang who were concerned and worried about Mexican Mafia (EME) activities in Los Angeles. The objectives of the group were social, economical, cultural and political. The California Nuestra Familia had an alliance with the Black Family which later came to be called the Black Guerilla Family. This alliance was formed against the Mexican Mafia and the Aryan Brotherhood Morales, (2008).

The operations of California Nuestra Familia were done and are done in a paramilitary way. The gang has a structure in that there is the Supreme Leader or Commander, Generals, Captains, Lieutenants as well as Soldiers. The Pelican Bay State Prison was the command center for the California Nuestra Familia as well as the home to its high ranking members. In the penitentiary, the gang operated a drug trade and at the same time had control over street gangs in northern California. It was so unfortunate for the Mexican Mafia member inmates who were transferred to the Pelican Bay Maximum Prison as they were brutally murdered by the Nuestra Familia members. The gang was now growing and its crimes became diversified. Nuestra Familia was involved in burglaries, murders, drug peddling and assault in the streets of town such as Fresno, Bakersfield, Sacramento and San Jose Prison Offenders, (2016).

The blood in blood out policy was adopted by the gang in 1974 and this meant that any unloyal members of the gang were murdered. Daniel Ramos and Jose Cobos, members of the California Nuestra gang were ordered by the gang’s top leaders to murder their fellow member by the name George Tenario. This was because George Tenario was suspected to be a FBI informant by the senior Nuestra Familia members. In cases where a Nuestra Familia member refused to murder another member as ordered, he was too murdered. Flavio Garza was a victim of this case as he refused to murder a fellow member. He was killed on 22nd March 1977 Prison Offenders, (2016).

The California Nuestra Familia gang organized a structural division known as Nuestra Raza (Northern Structure) that would serve individual wishing to join the gang. Anyone wishing to join the gang had to earn the gang’s membership by proving themselves to the gang activities and its leaders. All the sponsored individuals with the urge to join the gang had to know California Nuestra Familia constitution which is called the ‘XIV Bonds’. The ear of the top most Nuestra Familia leaders was now the Northern Structure especially in the sale of drugs and acquisition of the money earned Prison Offenders, (2016).

**Growth of the gang**

Between 1970 and 1980, any Hispanic inmate entering the California Prison System was treated either as Northerner (Nortenos) or a Southerner (Surenos) depending on where the inmate lived before joining the prison. The Northerners were mostly from north of Bakersfield in California. The other towns they were from were Sacramento and San Jose. Nuestra Familia was involved in burglaries, murders, drug peddling and extortion in the prisons and in the streets of towns hereby aforementioned. California Nuestra Familia was the first prison gang to be charged under the federal Racketer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) due to its increased activity in drug peddling as well as the increase in the number of the gang members to be prosecuted National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

Nuestra Familia top leadership was prosecuted and this made the gang to split into two groups. One group assumed the gang’s leadership while the other group was composed of the gang’s workers/soldiers thereby acting as a subordinate. The two organizations were structured in accordance with the XIV Bonds making the groups’ members to be tiered in three classes. There was a category for new members, experienced and crime oriented members as well as the board of directors. The board of directors was known as La Mesa (the table) and had exclusive control of the gang National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

Many of California Nuestra Familia members were transferred to the then newly constructed maximum security prisons; Pelican Bay and Corcoran State Prison by the CDC in1989. It was hard for the gang members to communicate therefore their operations were derailed. It is good to note that the illegal activities of the gang continued through the control and co-ordination of Nuestra Raza. In 1990s, the distribution of drugs by Nuestra Familia and Nuestra Raza had increased and continued to increase by day. This made Nuestra Familia to disband Nuestra Raza so as to avoid prosecution under RICO Act. The disbandment was done through amending the XIV Bonds National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

Nuestra Raza members now became Nortenos in the soldier category but retained the same standard they had with the Nuestra Raza. All inmates from Central and Northern California who neither join Nuestra Raza or Nuestra Familia are now known as Northsiders by the two gang members. However the Northsiders are often forced to join Nuestra Familia. California Nuestra Familia originally had it base and headquarters in Central and Northern California but the gang is moving to other States establishing more gang activities. As such, the membership of the gang has been growing. Nuestra Familia was certified as disruptive group in 1994 by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The gang still remains a concern to BOP due to its constant conflicts with the Mexican Mafia and the role it plays over its members National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

Thirteen members and associates of the California Nuestra Familia were indicted under the federal RICO Act in April 2001 on thirty four counts of murder, attempted murder, drug trafficking and racketeering charges. Six members of those indicted were incarcerated at the Pelican Bay State Prison. The senior ranking gang members were among those indicted. The Nuestra Familia members are still in federal custody awaiting conclusion of their trials. In 2003 CDC held the view that Nuestra Familia had strong presence in prisons but had trouble retaining its members who have been released. BOP authorities on the other hand say that the gang’s activities are reducing. As the federal RICO trial comes to an end, the Nuestra Familia members may be moved from CDC to BOP. This will increase the role California Nuestra Familia plays within the Bureau of Prisons National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

California Nuestra Familia has grown due to the alliances it has with other gangs such as the Black Guerilla Family, incarcerated blood street gang members as well as African American street gangs and prison gangs. Fresno Bulldogs were originally allied to Nuestra Familia but they defected because they disagreed with Nuestra Familia’s policy of taxing street gang members outside the prison National Drug Intelligence Center, (2003).

**Crimes committed by California Nuestra Familia**

California Nuestra Familia operates in and out of penitentiaries thereby influencing a lot of criminal activity in California. The gang is involved in sale and distribution of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine within prisons and in street communities. Distribution of drugs is one main source of income for the gang. Nuestra Familia is also involved in the extortion of drug distributors in various streets. The gang has been involved in murders and home invasion burglaries in towns of Sacramento and San Jose. Additionally, the gang has been involved in witness intimidation and homicides. The gang has been able to commit these crimes due to the control it has over street gangs. Some of the gang’s members are in custody due to felony possession of firearms which are unregistered. A lot of violence witnessed in the streets of California has been orchestrated by Nuestra Familia Willis, (2013).

Nuestra Familia has been involved in murders of the rival gang members as well as its own members who are deemed to be unloyal. Most of these killing have happened in prisons and in streets. The gang members who refuse to kill their fellow members as ordered by the gang’s top leadership are also killed. Nuestra Familia has also been involved in assault crimes Willis, (2013).

Many of the gang members have in the past and some are still being charged with these crimes in various courts. It is good to note that if, say Nuestra Familia attacks a rival gang, the rival gang will retaliate and this causes crimes to increase. These crimes are a threat to public safety especially the youths who fall prey to criminal gang activities. In Los Angeles, statistics show that 15 to 24 year old murders in the State were a result of gang related violence. Los Angeles California communities have continued to face crime related activities due to gang activities, homelessness and poverty Willis, (2013).

**The progress the police are making**

California Nuestra Familia has been operating since 1970’s and has been ruthless in its activities. With its Hispanic- American inmate membership, the gang has had control in prisons and exercised the same control in streets. Through mobile phones and coded messages the gang members have been able to communicate. Bearing in mind that most criminal violence in Central and northern California can be linked to Nuestra Familia activities, the police have been after this gang members in a bid of ensuring law and order. The crimes hereby aforementioned prove that the gang is indeed dangerous and a threat to communities U.S Attorney’s Office, (2013).

California Nuestra Familia members have been committing crimes in prisons and in streets and as such some of the members in prisons have had more charges against them. The police and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) have been hunting down the gangs members so as to prosecute them. The police and the FBI have been working with the court systems to ensure that the gang members are prosecuted U.S Attorney’s Office, (2013).

In June 2007, 25 members of California Nuestra Familia were indicted through two trials. Five defendants were successfully prosecuted on counts of drug peddling. In 2009, one of the remaining un-convicted defendants requested fast trial and given a 20 year sentence. Four members of the gang’s top leadership were convicted on counts of indictment in 2010 after a contentiously hard trial U.S Attorney’s Office, (2013).

Manuel Gauna, Nuestra Familia member was given a more than 21 years sentence in prisonment on 21st April 2010 while Richard Mendoza was to serve 17.5 years in prison as at 13th December 2010. A 28 years imprisonment sentence was given to Bismarck Ocampo on 22nd February 2011. Larry Amaro, Ernest Killinger, Gerardo Mora and John Stewart Hanson, all Nuestra Familia members, were sentenced to 40 years, 36.5 years, 33 years and 25 years in prison respectively on 25th May 2011. All these sentences were as a result of police progress in curbing the gang’s activities U.S Attorney’s Office, (2013).

Other Nuestra Familia gang members who have been sentenced to many years in prison are Gabriel Caracheo, David Ramirez, Fernando Villalpando, Faustin Gonzales and Oscar Campos-Padilla. 09/24/2012 saw the sentencing of Rebecca Guzman to 14 years in prison. Danny Pereda pleaded guilty to all his crimes on 04/23/2012. To retaliate again, all these cases have been a success due to police and FBI investigation. Nuestra Familia is under investigated by FBI because the bureau believes that prison gangs have a lot to do with terrorism. Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) has also played a key role in the prosecution and sentencing of Nuestra Familia members. Members of the criminal and violent prison gang are sentenced under the federal court rules which are harsher than the state court laws U.S Attorney’s Office, (2013).

**Conclusion**

Prisons are facilities where convicted inmates are housed so as to ensure their criminal behaviors are corrected ensuring they are no longer a threat to the society. Prisons therefore need to be safe and secure environments to foster a correctional attitude to the inmates. It is a shame that from prisons, most cruel gangs have been formed leading to more crimes in and out of prisons. Some of the most notorious prison gangs are Neta, 415 KUMI, Dead Man Inc, Nazi Low Riders, Texas Syndicate, Mara Salvatrucha MS-13, Black Guerrilla Family, Mexican Mafia, La Nuestra Familia and the Aryan Brotherhood Dufresne, (2010).

In the past the prison departments had been transferring prisoners of the same gang to different prisons so as to derail their communication but this at times has worked in favor of gangs since they re-established themselves in the new prisons. Right sizing has been done in prisons so as to ensure they are less crowded as new prisons facilities have been opened. The prison guards also do random cell checks to ensure that there are no contrabands in prison. Inmates who are very violent are confined in single cells away from other prisoners to reduce fights. The number of prison guard has to be reasonable so as to provide maximum security to prisoners. Clearly, the criminal justice department in US had a lot to do to curb prison gang activities Campbell, (2014).

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