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JERRY LARSON/AP

A shootout erupted among rival biker gangs in Waco, Texas, on Sunday.

By Matt Rocheleau and Evan Horowitz

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On Sunday, at an outdoor shopping plaza in Waco, Texas, a shootout erupted among rival biker gangs, killing nine people and injuring another 18. It's a shocking event, not just because of the horrific death toll but also because before Sunday the notion of a biker battle seemed more like fiction than reality, better fit for the climax of a big budget action film.

Yet, biker gangs are very real, and in some parts of the country they are considered a major threat to law and order. While they account for just a small fraction of all gang members nationwide, they are considered to be particularly dangerous in certain parts of the country — including being labeled a significant threat as nearby as New Hampshire and New York, according to surveys of law enforcement officials.

Some groups, including the Hells Angels, the Outlaws, and the Mongols, are known to have a presence in Massachusetts, although biker gangs are not considered to be a major threat here.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs — not to be confused with motorcycle clubs that gather bikers simply for the joy of riding — are involved in a wide range of crime, from selling and transporting drugs and weapons to identity theft and credit card fraud to child prostitution and murder. Many act alone, but they also sometimes partner with other gangs and criminal enterprises.

The groups are often recognizable to law enforcement by symbols stitched on their leather jackets and decals affixed to their bikes, but they conceal their criminal activity and have even infiltrated law enforcement and military agencies.

What happened this weekend in Waco?



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Officials warned about growing feud

The deadly weekend shootout began with someone running over a gang member's foot, police said Tuesday.

Shooting latest chapter for Bandidos

Police are still piecing together the details, but it seems that friction between several motorcycle gangs burst into outright war Sunday afternoon, as gang members not only began shooting at each other but also fighting with knives, clubs, chains, and other weapons.

Police were already in the area, apparently having gotten word of likely troubles. About 170 people are said to be facing charges related to the melee.

One bit of positive news is that no bystanders were injured.

Back up, what's a gang anyway?

The Department of Justice has a more complete definition, but basically it boils down to this: If a group of at least three people embraces a collective identity (like a gang name) and burnishes this identity in order to sow fear and pursue criminal activities, then it's a gang.

You may have heard of at least one motorcycle gang, the Hells Angels, famous from their role in 1960s counter-culture.

Today, the Hells Angels are an international criminal organization, with operation on every continent except Antarctica. In the United States, there are approximately 800 members, and the group is involved in drug trafficking, extortion, money laundering, and other illegal activities.

Sunday's violence is not the first shootout between biker gangs. In just the last few years there have been smaller but still deadly shootouts in Arizona, Florida, California, and beyond.

Tempting as it may be to write this off as a Texas problem, motorcycle gangs can be found all over the country. Add in street gangs and prison gangs, and it turns out gang membership is just as common in Massachusetts as in Texas.

Far from a unique or unaccountable event, Sunday's shootout might better serve as a reminder that every region

of the country has its own gang problem.



Source: [National Gang Report](#)

How big a problem are biker gangs?

There are more than 300 active outlaw motorcycle gangs in the United States, according to a [2013 report](#) from the National Gang Intelligence Center, which comprises officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of Defense, and several other federal law enforcement agencies.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs — known as OMGs for short — account for just 2.5 percent of gang membership in the United States, while street gang members account for 88 percent and prison gang members account for 9.5 percent, the report says.

Survey responses identifying motorcycle gangs as a significant threat



Source: [National Gang Report](#)

The report identified parts of New Hampshire, upstate New York, and the New York City area as places where police consider that outlaw motorcycle gangs pose a “significant threat.”

In 2010, a teen was wounded by gunfire during a motorcycle gang fight at a pizza shop in Manchester, N.H., leading to indictments against seven biker gang members, including a prospective member of the Outlaws gang who pleaded guilty to second-degree assault and other charges and was sentenced to 10 to 20 years in prison, according to the [New Hampshire Union Leader](#).

The newspaper also reported that a member of the Outlaws was sentenced to 45 years to life in prison after being convicted of charges that he murdered a man who was wearing a Hells Angels shirt in 2006.

The national survey of law enforcement also found that the biker gangs pose a particular threat in parts of the Southwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Northwest regions of the country.

In a similar survey the center conducted in 2011, about 35 percent of law enforcement agencies reported that biker groups posed a moderate threat, 42 percent said the groups were a low threat, and 13 percent of law enforcement agencies reported that outlaw motorcycle gangs do not exist in their jurisdiction.

“In regions of the United States where OMGs are attempting to expand into rival territory, the threat posed by OMGs increases,” the report says.

Partnering with organized crime groups, infiltrating law enforcement

Biker gangs have been known to collaborate with organized crime groups, the gang intelligence center report

said. Police have seized violent weapons from outlaw biker gang members, including machine guns, silencers, assault-style rifles, semiautomatic pistols, revolvers, and pipe bombs, the report said.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs are also a particular problem along the northern border of the United States, the report said, smuggling drugs to and from Canada.

Gang members of all types have managed to infiltrate law enforcement agencies and the military, landing jobs in an attempt to “acquire training, and access to weapons and sensitive information in order to impede gang investigations.”

The report highlighted a pair of recent crackdowns on outlaw biker gangs:

- In June 2012, 20 members and associates of a Hells Angels group in South Carolina were indicted on a litany of charges and 19 of them were convicted for crimes including drug dealing, money laundering, gun trafficking, attempted armed robbery, and arson.
- In December 2012, seven members of the Wheels of Soul biker group were convicted in federal court on charges including murder, attempted murder, and racketeering conspiracy.

So who was involved in the Waco, Texas, shootout?

The groups involved in Sunday’s shootout in Texas include the Bandidos, the Cossacks, and the Scimitars, according to media reports.

The Associated Press reported that the Texas public safety department last year classified the Bandidos, a group that formed in the 1960s, as a “Tier 2” threat, the second highest level, which also included the Bloods, Crips, and Aryan Brotherhood of Texas.

The Bandidos are believed to be one of the two largest outlaw motorcycle groups in the country, according to the Justice Department. There are an estimated 900 members nationwide across 93 local chapters, and the group is particularly active along the West Coast, in the Southwest, Southeast, and Central regions of the United States, the department says. Altogether, there are more than 2,000 Bandidos members across 14 countries.

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