

THE CHALLENGE OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Organized crime continues to extract an enormous financial and social cost from society by supplying underworld markets and targeting victims for extortion, theft and violence. It jeopardizes the free enterprise system, and its influence over government and unions undermines our way of life.

Although accusatory law enforcement agencies have successfully prosecuted many organized crime figures and, in particular, have devastated some of the leadership of La Cosa Nostra (LCN), two indisputable facts point to organized crime's perpetuation: 1) the markets for illegal services, such as narcotics, illegal gambling, prostitution, pornography and loansharking, are intact; and 2) many groups that previously received scant law enforcement attention remain a growing and not well understood problem.

One of the most persistent markets for organized crime's services is illegal drug trafficking, which has surpassed illicit gambling as the top moneymaker. Problems spawned by cocaine addiction have mushroomed far beyond anything foreseen by police officials and social scientists. The violence endemic to narcotics trafficking has become a public safety hazard in many New Jersey communities, and those suffering the most immediate harm are often persons already at the bottom of the economic and social ladder. Citizens despair over the seeming inability of government to protect them. Embittered young people who see no opportunity to escape from their problems opt for the lure of quick money to be made selling drugs. They are exploited by elder "survivors," who often become adept at insulating themselves from detection and prosecution by law enforcement authorities. The medical problems caused by drug addiction, especially the projected costs of lifetime care of infants born addicted because their moth-

ers are drug users, threaten to overwhelm the public health system.

Trafficking in heroin and its powerful synthetic substitute, Fentanyl, is again on the rise. The National Drug Abuse Warning Network reported that in Newark alone during a six-month period in 1990, 951 people were admitted to emergency rooms for problems resulting from heroin. During the first six months of 1993, the same hospitals treated 2,344 people with heroin emergencies, according to the Network. Meanwhile, new synthetic drugs, such as Rohypnol (the "Quaalude of the '90s") and "Euphoria," are coming to the illicit marketplace; and LSD is making a comeback, especially among youth. Use of amphetamines, methamphetamines, steroids and marijuana persists. "Ice," a smokable stimulant that is more potent than crack cocaine, has also debuted in New Jersey.

In the 1920s era of alcohol prohibition, a similarly lively illegal marketplace provided the most fertile breeding ground for criminal syndicates in history. Several grew, aided by harrowing violence and systematic efforts to corrupt officials, into powerful and enduring La Cosa Nostra crime organizations. Unlike liquor Prohibition, however — and for what most would consider to be good reasons — the current era of narcotics prohibition will continue indefinitely, along with its lucrative, crime gang-spawning marketplace. The periodic rise of drug dealing organizations will continue unabated until society devises more successful methods of curtailing the narcotics trade. The Commission can be expected to play important roles, not only in exposing the machinations of these groups and undermining their ability to achieve power, wealth and durability, but also in devising ways for society to be less accommodating of

drug abuse.

It is now generally recognized, for example, that the “war on drugs” will amount to nothing more than a holding action unless demand for drugs is substantially reduced. As a respected, impartial participant in society’s efforts to confront the drug problem, the Commission is a creditable evaluator of New Jersey’s drug interdiction and demand reduction programs and their impact on organized crime operations.

Numerous other unlawful activities persevere in New Jersey. Burglary, robbery and auto theft rings are often connected to larger organizations that include fencing and chop shop operations. As a corridor state with extensive port facilities, New Jersey continues to experience a good deal of truck hijacking (cartage theft). Organized crime’s vice operations, including prostitution, pornography and liquor law violations, continue despite intensive law enforcement efforts. Entrepreneurial enterprises still pay protection money, known as “street tax,” to larger organizations for the “privilege” to run various illegitimate, as well as questionably legitimate, businesses. Illegal gambling thrives — particularly that involving sporting events and video machines — in spite of the fact that the state lottery and casino gambling have been legalized. Accordingly, extortionate credit practices stemming from illegal gambling also flourish. All of these activities are sustained by an extensive underground economy in which taxes of all types are evaded. Each one of these endeavors must be thoroughly understood by policy-makers and the public before society can devise strategies for reducing them. The Commission plays a crucial part in achieving such understanding.

Besides thriving markets, other factors forewarn of the durability of traditional organized crime groups that have experienced large scale prosecutions. Intelligence indicates that LCN underlings have stepped into the hierarchical positions vacated by organization leaders as the result of death, retirement and incarceration. Recruitment from the ranks of “connected guys,” “wanna-bes” and “clientele” is

relatively simple. Although some groups have lost their grip on certain illicit markets, those markets have not evaporated. Rather, they have come within the span of control of other LCN groups or so-called “non-traditional” organized crime groups (also sometimes called “emerging,” “non-LCN” or “previously neglected” groups). Recently, substantial cooperation between LCN and non-LCN groups in many illicit enterprises has been demonstrated.

Throughout its history, the Commission has given early warning of non-traditional organized crime groups. It is important that such groups be understood, recognized for what they are, and controlled before they become too powerful and their leaders have a chance to shield themselves from prosecution and establish lasting organizations.

While many of the successes against La Cosa Nostra in New Jersey seem to the lay observer to have occurred within the last decade, they resulted from at least three decades of intelligence building and constant pressure from the Commission, as well as a large variety of federal, state and local charging agencies. A similar combined, long-term effort is necessary to make comparable inroads against non-traditional organized crime.

Simply listing some of the non-LCN organized crime groups that are or may be operating in New Jersey can give pause to the most ardent believer that mobsters are in twilight. They include offshoots of Italian groups such as the Sicilian Mafia, Neapolitan Camorra and Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta; the Colombian Cali and Medellin drug-trafficking cartels; José Battle’s “Corporation” (Cuban); other Latino groups such as those composed of members largely of Dominican and Puerto Rican ethnicity; Jamaican posses or massives; African-American groups; Nigerian fraud and drug-trafficking rings; Asian triads, tongs and Yakuza; African-American, white, Latino and Asian youth gangs; crime syndicates composed of resident aliens and emigres of former Iron Curtain and Middle Eastern countries; motorcycle gangs; and hate groups. The Commission has developed a great deal of intelligence about such non-traditional crime

organizations and continually shares it with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. It has begun to notify policy makers and the public about the extent of the threat posed by these groups and to recommend means of curbing them.

Of particular interest are crime groups with ties to Asian and former Iron Curtain countries. It is anticipated that there will be a tremendous influx of organized criminals into the United States when China takes over the government of Hong Kong on June 30, 1997. Whirlwind political and economic changes in Eastern Europe have nurtured the spread of crime groups in that region at an incredible pace. Evidence already exists that these groups are burrowing into the United States — including New Jersey. Those who pose these threats, whether from the East or the West, will seek areas where the greatest profits can be attained at the least risk of interference from authorities. Of all the official response organizations in New Jersey, the Commission can be expected to do the most to blow the whistle on their activities, counter their aspirations and persuade them that their “business” is better off conducted elsewhere.

Governments and economies have been rendered unstable in Italy, Colombia, Mexico, Jamaica and Eastern European countries where criminal organizations have been tolerated or underestimated. Indeed, organized crime’s historical successes in America have always coincided with official denial or neglect.

Just as the government is developing better tools to combat organized crime, the organized criminals are developing defenses to these tools. It is becoming more and more difficult, for example, to obtain successful electronic surveillance of organized crime figures as they become more alert to the capabilities of law enforcement technology and the legal limitations imposed on the collection of such evidence. There is no doubt that “successful” organized criminals have the money to keep abreast of the latest technological developments. This means that creative methods will have to be devised continually to discover and reveal the inner workings of organized crime. The Commission will play an important role in this process.