This chapter explores how gangs and the trope of violence are being used to bolster failing drug war machinery in the United States. The rhetorical nexus between gangs, drugs, and violence furthers the ongoing criminalization of communities of color and cements networks of state and neighborhood violence. As a core part of anti-gang and drugs work nationally, the growth of the FBI’s Safe Streets Initiative and the subsequent expansion of the Federal Bureau of Prisons inmate population are largely hidden trends. Also hidden is the toll gang and drug task forces take on families and communities, questionable success in decreasing violence, and rhetorical assumptions regarding gangs that inform law enforcements’ core foundations.

Within the federal system, gang members are generally prosecuted in one of three ways. First is through drug conspiracy charges, second through continuing criminal conspiracy, and third through Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO). Non-citizen criminal aliens, including gang members, have additional pathways into the federal system through immigration-based public order violations. Because of their intrinsic link to violence, gangs have by proxy become a way to absolve the federal system of a growing critique that it houses 75 percent non-violent offenders.

From 2003–13, I engaged in longitudinal field research into an FBI-led anti-gang task force called Operation Fly Trap. Just one among 349 “takedowns” or “sweeps” mounted in 2003, Operation Fly Trap targeted 28 individuals in two Los Angeles Bloods gang neighborhoods. As with many Safe Streets takedowns, Operation Fly Trap attempted to get at violent gang members by targeting the drug trade through long-term...
surveillance, recruiting confidential informants, and head-starting
the case with US attorneys. Headlines and press releases stressed that,
though the operations focus on the trade in drugs, most people appre-
hended were presumed to be guilty of violent gang crimes such as mur-
der or assault. And while the rhetoric of prosecution emphasized gang
affiliation, the verbiage of sentencing continued to emphasize drugs.

Founded in 1992, the Safe Streets Initiative has been the FBI’s key
anti-gang program nationally. Part of a national trend in multi-jurisdic-
tional policing, Safe Streets task forceshone a precision style of attack
and an excision of problem elements from crime-ridden neighborhoods.
Safe Streets “disruptions,” “sweeps,” or “takedowns,” as they are called,
have increased dramatically since 9/11. From 250 in 2001, takedowns
have averaged 1,600 annually since 2009. Safe Streets actions have
become major feeders into the Federal Bureau of Prisons, whose inmate
population has swelled in lockstep with FBI initiatives since 2001.

Multi-jurisdictional task forces have gained popularity since 9/11 and
have gone hand in hand with new efforts to share information across
jurisdictional lines. In police departments nationally, federal involve-
ment is a way to gain funding for specific gang and drug eradication
efforts. Federal involvement brings money and manpower, training and