

PROMINENT GANG MAY HAVE SPREAD FROM CHICAGO

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CHICAGO -- Young Al sat on a car fender and squinted down Racine Street toward the traffic light at 18th Street.

The scrawny 18-year-old's gang, the **Latin Counts** , is purported to have invaded southwest Detroit, 275 miles away.

But in Chicago, Al doesn't stray far past the light, which marks one of the boundaries of his gang's turf, a three-square- block island of broken sidewalks, boarded windows and graffiti-clad buildings on the near west side.

The reason? Rival gangs in every direction. He ticked off their names: "The Ambrose, Racine Boys, Two-Sixers, Party Players, La Raza."

"I can't walk around," Al said last week.

Some Michigan experts have said gangs in Chicago, particularly the **Latin Counts** , have traveled with a carefully planned blueprint to set up franchises in southwest Detroit.

Latin Counts have indeed surfaced in Detroit. But did they have a blueprint? Chicago police doubt it. So do Chicago's community gang experts. So do a present and former member of the **Counts** interviewed by the Free Press.

Veteran police gang specialist John Howe said: "They don't travel out of their neighborhoods. They don't have any idea of anything but here."

Howe's comments were underscored by Al, who refused to give his real name.

"I'm not leaving," he said. "I live on this block. I never, ever in my life am going to leave."

Police said if the **Counts** show up someplace else, it's because they have family there or they are laying low because of police or other gangs.

Anthony Viramontez is an example. He started the **Latin Counts** in Detroit three years ago "because the heat was on in Chicago," said Danny Rodriguez, pastor of the Victory Outreach Church at 19th and Racine.

Rodriguez grew up with Viramontez. The pastor had been a **Count** , but left the gang and the neighborhood when he found God. He recently returned to help kids on his old turf.

Viramontez and others "went to Detroit to cool out and then just started dealing drugs," he said. Now the 20-year-old is facing sentencing for an assault conviction in Detroit.

Chicago police estimate their city has 10,000 to 20,000 gang members. They say the **Latin Counts** account for only 100 to 120 hard-core members, mostly of Mexican ancestry, living in three locations within a few blocks of each other. The gang has operated in Chicago for 30 years.

Detroit police say about 100 **Latin Counts** are in the Motor City, along with some Spanish Cobras.

Detroit police officials were not available Friday for comment on the statements made by their Chicago counterparts. But Deputy Chief James Younger, who oversees the Detroit gang squad, has said investigators are trying to determine what connection the Detroit group has with **Latin Counts** based in Chicago.

Last month, Younger termed the **Latin Counts** the biggest gang threat in southwest Detroit and said they are "into assaults, drugs and weaponry. . . . I wouldn't put it past them to take a life."

Still, Viramontez and his attorney have said that many so-called **Latin Counts** in Detroit are simply borrowing the name of a Chicago gang they think has a tough reputation. And many southwest Detroit residents say the gang situation has been overblown by the media.

In Chicago, all the gangs deal in drugs -- cocaine, heroin and marijuana, police said. They also use and sell marijuana dipped in PCP.

Unlike Detroit, crack cocaine has made no real inroads in Chicago.

Some Chicago experts believe the gangs have kept crack out to protect their current operations. Others think it never had a chance because powdered cocaine is so plentiful and cheap.

Some gangs also deal in guns. Chicago police believe the **Counts** have moved in at least one shipment of handguns from Detroit.

Capt. Thomas Sadler, commanding officer of Gang Crimes West, said most Chicago street gangs are run from the state prisons. That is where the leaders are. They have their own inmate security guards. They hold executive board meetings with gang representatives.

It was in the prisons that Chicago's gangs were organized under two huge umbrella groups. They are called People and Folks. Archenemies, they are essentially the Allies and Axis of the streets.

People, for example, include the **Latin Counts** and the **Latin Kings**. As People, they have special hand signals, a special code number and they must fold their arms and tilt their hats in a certain way.

The Spanish Cobras and all the **Counts** ' Chicago rivals are Folks with another set of street rituals.

"The first allegiance is to the gang, second to the Folks or People," said police gang specialist James Spratte. But Spratte and other officers believe these umbrella groups are starting to fracture.

"We got Folks killing Folks," Howe said.

Back on Racine Street, Al, who has survived being shot twice, suddenly found himself trying to cope with Frances Sandoval, the 5-foot-tall founder of Mothers Against Gangs.

She wanted him to quit the **Counts** , to leave the neighborhood, to go live someplace else.

Al listened. He pulled his hands out of his pockets on her command. He stopped swearing when she snapped, "Watch your French." But there was no question of quitting.

"I ain't going to leave the **Counts** ," he said patiently. "I can't."

Caption: Photo JOHN LUKE

: Dawn Mendoza, 20, hugs 9-year-old Repo. Both are Detroit members of the **LatinCounts** , a gang that has operated in Chicago for 30 years. Capone, 19, a member of the **Latin** Kings gang in Detroit, creates a five-point star with his fingers. He said it's the signal of People, an umbrella group over gangs in Chicago. Dawn Mendoza, one of only a few female members of the **Latin Counts** , has said her gang is getting a bad rap and that it's more like a family.

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