

## ' THE NEW BIG BOYS ' GANG TIED TO DRUG KILLINGS BELIEVED MUSCLING OUTSTATE

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Best Friends, a reputed Detroit murder-for-hire **gang believed** responsible for multiple **killings** , perhaps as many as 50, is strong-arming its way into **the drug** trade in other Michigan cities, according **to** local, state and federal investigators.

**The gang** is **the** target of a special Detroit police task force investigating **the** homicides over a period dating back three years, law enforcement officials said.

"We are investigating a number of different murders," said Deputy Chief James Younger. "In terms of what numbers or what figures are related **to the** Best Friends, we don't care **to** speculate on that until we come back with our warrants."

**The** deadly nature of Best Friends is not in dispute among law enforcement officials.

William Coonce, special agent in charge of **the Drug** Enforcement Administration Office in Detroit, said Best Friends is responsible for at least 15 homicides in Detroit, plus numerous other shootings and violent attacks.

But an official close **to the** investigation who spoke on condition of anonymity, said, "I'd put their total at 40 or 50, but maybe more like 30 in terms of those that we will solve."

**The** scourge is spreading. Officials in Grand Rapids and **the** Flint area say they have identified Best Friends associates involved in local cocaine dealing and at least one **killings** .

" **The** Best Friends have a very definite reputation in **the drug** community. . . . They come in, if you will, as **the new big boys** on **the** block," said Jeffrey Kildow, agent in charge of **the** DEA office in Grand Rapids.

"They have such a reputation that they can say, 'Look, you can still do your thing, but now you're going **to** do it under our umbrella.' They are very definitely a force **to** be reckoned with."

Best Friends is like "that cartoon Tasmanian Devil," a kind of whirling buzz saw, chewing up everything that gets in **the** way, according **to** a state narcotics official.

Officials say **outstate** migration is not unique. Rather, it is an example of Detroit dealers ready **to** trade on chilling reputations and street savvy **to** muscle their way into smaller cities.

In addition **to the** Best Friends bridgeheads in Grand Rapids and Flint, authorities in Kalamazoo, Lansing, Port Huron and Saginaw have reported increased **drug** activity and **drug** -related violence in **the** last two years with a corresponding increased number of Detroit residents arrested on related charges.

Cmdr. Mel Turner of **the** Wayne County Sheriff's Department narcotics section said Best Friends and other Detroit groups are taking over existing operations **outstate** , relying heavily on **the** city's reputation.

"They think they have **the** upper hand because of **the** education they've gotten on **the** streets of Detroit," Turner said.

**The outstate drug** markets, officials said, are attractive because they are vulnerable **to** intervention from **the** heavily armed big city **gangs** and because **drug** prices have been driven down in **the** glutted Detroit area market.

An Oakland County narcotics official said **the** smaller cities are a magnet now because cocaine that sells for \$800 **to** \$900 an ounce in Detroit can bring up **to** \$2,800 in **outstate** markets.

Best Friends' beginnings trace back four years, authorities say.

Reputed east-side **drug** lord Richard (Maserati Rick) Carter, who was shot **to** death in his hospital bed in September 1988, formed **the gang** because he wanted a front-line force **to** fight turf wars while he handled **the** business side of **the** operation, investigators say.

Best Friends is also thought **to** have been **the** brawn for teenage **drug** figure Richard (White **Boy** Rick) Wershe Jr., now serving a life sentence for cocaine possession.

Four east side brothers who are **believed to be the** core of Best Friends are now off **the** street -- two were shot **to** death, another is serving a life sentence for murder and **the** youngest is awaiting trial on a murder charge. But police say **the** group's associates still are major players in **the** lucrative and violent world of crack cocaine.

At their peak in 1986, Best Friends had 25 **to** 50 members, all of whom used automatic and semiautomatic weapons such as Uzis and AK47s, according **to** DEA officials. Members protected themselves with body armor suits and bulletproof vests, officials said.

As their notoriety spread, **gang** members flaunted their reputation by wearing jackets with Best Friends embroidered on **the** back and driving Volvos -- their trademark automobile.

In late 1986, Best Friends members began migrating **to** other communities **to** elude **the** law and expand operations, **the** DEA's Coonce said. **The gang** 's links with such **drug** kingpins as Wershe enhanced their reputation.

But despite **the** prominence of Best Friends in **the drug** community, efforts **to** track its activities have been hampered by **the** group's fluid membership and loose structure. Actions attributed **to** Best Friends do not always follow a logical pattern, with personal grudges sometimes overriding professional interests, investigators said.

Unlike traditional **gangs** with a fairly stable roster of associates, Best Friends seems **to** function with a small core of officers surrounded by a pool of acquaintances who can be enlisted for specific tasks. **The** informal nature of Best Friends frustrates police surveillance and intelligence methods, investigators said.

Assistant Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Hood said it can be a frustrating exercise trying **to** figure out motives.

"They don't leave business cards behind explaining why they do what they do," Hood said.

**The** Best Friends link **to** Grand Rapids was spelled out in March in a federal bond hearing for former Detroit Christopher Shorter, convicted of cocaine trafficking.

DEA agent Bruce Peters testified that Shorter, 40, was supplied by Jimmie Lee Denard, an alleged Best Friend. Peters testified that Denard was "one of **the** main leaders" of Best Friends, which he described as "an enforcement group for cocaine narcotics traffickers in **the** Detroit metropolitan area."

Shorter faces a maximum 40-month prison term at his sentencing Monday.

DEA Agent Kildow of Grand Rapids said it is important **to** stop any expansion by Best Friends.

"We certainly want **to** attempt **to** put an end **to** their business right now and send a strong message **to** these people and others that they cannot come into our community and deal in **drugs** with impunity," Kildow said.

In June 1988, a turbo-charged 1987 Volvo registered **to** Denard led state police on an eight-mile high-speed chase on eastbound I-96 near Ionia. When stopped and searched, two men in **the** car were found **to** be carrying more than \$8,000.

**The** men said **the** money came from mowing lawns, according **to** police.

Denard said he was baffled by police linking him **to** Best Friends.

In Genesee Township near Flint, Mark Murray, a 17-year-old Detroit, was found shot **to** death in August 1987. Murray, according **to** investigators, was skimming money from two Detroit brothers, Antonio and Willie James Smiley.

Antonio Smiley, 23, was convicted of first-degree murder and his brother is being sought for questioning. Witnesses told police that **the** Smileys were **the** local representatives of Best Friends.

Two other homicides in nearby Mt. Morris Township are being examined for possible ties **to** Best Friends, police said.

In Detroit, Deputy Chief Younger said **the** department is committed **to** fighting Best Friends.

"We don't intend **to** let any group take over **the** city or terrorize **the** citizens," he said.

#### Best Friends Organization

Law enforcement officials investigating Best Friends, a reputed Detroit murder-for-hire **gang** **believed to** be spreading its **drug** - peddling influence into other Michigan cities, have diagrammed their understanding of **the** group's structure. Many of **the** suspects are dead or in jail.

#### LEVEL ONE

Name: Richard Wershe Jr.

Nickname: White **Boy** Rick

Suspected role: **Drug** supplier

Status: Sentenced Feb. 4, 1988, **to** life in prison without parole for cocaine possession.

Name: Richard Carter

aka Richard Cosby

Nickname: Maserati Rick

Suspected role: Best Friends leader

Status: Shot **to** death Sept. 12, 1988, in Mt. Carmel Mercy Hospital bed, where he was recovering from earlier gunshot wounds. Loderick Parker tried, acquitted in **the** slaying.

## LEVEL TWO

Name: Reginald Brown

Nickname: Rockin' Reggie

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Sentenced May 20, 1988, **to** life in prison for **the** shooting death a Wershe associate Steve Roussell.

Name: Terrance Brown

Nickname: Boogaloo

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Jailed pending trial in daylight shooting death on March 16 of man in car near St. Regis Hotel.

Name: Ezra Brown

Nickname: Wizard

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Shot **to** death Dec. 20, 1986. Case unsolved.

Name: Gregory Brown

Nickname: Ghost

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Shot **to** death Dec. 27, 1986. Case unsolved.

## LEVEL THREE

Business Manager

At least 20 other suspects are **believed to** be active. Police would not provide **the** names of those under investigation.

Name: Patrick Jackson

Nickname: Lunchmeat

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Shot **to** death June 13, 1987. Case unsolved.

Name: Darryl Hardy

Suspected role: Hit man

Status: Shot **to** death in 1986. Case unsolved.

CUTLINE:

Best Friends **gang** figures Richard (White **Boy** Rick) Wershe Jr. and Richard (Maserati Rick) Carter, **the gang** 's founder. Carter is deceased.

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