

Gang witnesses portray conflicted life  
The Benton trial brings little insight into faux family

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Cucaracha, a 19-year-old MS-13 member, was on the stand when the prosecutor dug in. Assistant District Attorney Mia Magness, a petite woman wearing a power suit, looked at him straight on. He was wearing a button-down shirt and clean-shaven, sitting beneath recessed spotlights, a judge to his right, 12 jurors to his left, a world away from the Southwest side where he grew up.

The prosecutor questioned him about June 6, 2006, the day a gang fight in the Montrose area left a 15-year-old boy dead. The gang member said before they went to Ervan Chew Park, they stopped at a CVS, where a Crazy Crew member hung out of a car window throwing gang signs at them.

So when some guy chunks up a gang sign, you react. Magness asked, "Why?"

He shrugged off an answer: "We're just used to it," he said.

He went quiet. "I could've let it go, but I don't know ... "

Cucaracha was one of five gang members who testified in the Ashley Benton murder trial, which was declared a mistrial Friday because of a hung jury. Some, like Cucaracha, tried to explain their actions and choices made on the deadly day, and others offered little insight into the typical life of a gang — be it the local clique of an international gang or one homegrown.

## **Different takes**

When testifying about the details of the fight, some changed their account depending on the question. Some played macho while admitting weakness; some told of letting go of the gang while staying true to a faux family.

Their vacillating testimony, according to Lisa Taylor-Austin, a psychotherapist and forensic expert witness on gangs, is typical because they are conflicted. Most gang banging occurs between the ages of 12 and 21, a developmentally important age at which youths are trying to decide who they are.

At that age, "peers become more important than family, and young people often become involved in 'causes.' For some youth, the 'causes' are feeding the hungry and don't kill the whales," Taylor-Austin said. "For other youth, the cause can become gang banging. It is a way to fit into the peer group, be accepted, achieve perceived power and find a place to belong. Most youth never realize what they are getting into until it is too late."

Each gave his version of how he came to be in a gang: Cucaracha said he first encountered MS-13 during a trip to El Salvador when he was 12 or 13.

"I didn't have no brothers or nothing," he said, so he joined.

### **It was like family**

Another 16-year-old MS-13 member, who goes by Greñas, testified he started hanging out with the gang after a trip to El Salvador when he was 6; at 14 he jumped into the gang. "I had love for them," he said. "We used to party with girls, go to quinceañeras, go to movies. It was like a big family."

Benton said she hung out with Crazy Crew because she didn't have brothers or a father, and the gang "in a way, always made sure I was OK."

HPD officer Jose Sosa said most Houston gangs are interested in "money and dope." MS-13, he said, has been involved in homicides, assaults and robberies in Houston.

Edward Rendon, a Houston Independent School District police officer, said Crazy Crew had a rash of violence and crime. "They gang bang," he said. They like to fight so much, "they beat up each other; they're involved with narcotics and weapons — knives, BB guns, brass knuckles and bats."

### **Court security**

The courtroom was staffed with three police officers at all times.

When each was asked by the prosecutor to point at the girl who stabbed Granillo, they did it meekly, without making eye contact. Each answered questions with ma'ams and sirs.

Cross-examining Greñas, defense attorney Rick DeToto asked whether the MS-13 member had any knowledge of fellow members committing crimes.

If anything, Greñas said, "they probably jacked a store or something like that. They probably took a beer.

"It's not like that here," he said, comparing Houston gang life to El Salvador's gang life. "(The gang) doesn't send us to do stupid stuff here." He said, in Houston, nobody sends him to do drug deals or commit murder.

"In the U.S., the police is always smarter than us," he said. "In El Salvador if you kill someone, it's like killing a dog."

### **Juvenile delinquencies**

DeToto pressed him. MS-13 isn't benign. In 2005, in Houston, a 19-year-old member was accused of killing a 2-year-old.

Flustered, Greñas blurted: "I like to party with them."

Alex Alonso, owner of Streetgangs.com and expert witness on gangs, said gang members' favorite activities are loitering, playing sports and doing drugs.

"The idea that gangs are criminal and terrorist and wreaking havoc, that they are a bunch of misfits out for destructions couldn't be further from the truth," Alonso said.

He said that, according to Los Angeles Police Department statistics, less than 1 percent of gang members in Los Angeles are murderers. What used to be called juvenile delinquencies in the 1970s or '80s, he said, are now considered gang-related felonies.

According to the Houston Police Department, 1.4 percent of homicides in the city are gang-related.

On the stand, the gang members seemed uncomfortable. Greñas would brag one minute about how just three MS guys were enough to scare Crazy Crew members and the next minute assert that when they passed by Lamar High School, he stuck to the school zone speed limit.

"I didn't want to get in trouble," he said.