Aryan Brotherhood of Texas

The Aryan Brotherhood of Texas (ABT) is one of the largest and most violent white supremacist prison gangs in the United States, responsible for committing dozens of murders and many other violent crimes.

Note: Despite the similarity in their names, the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas has no connection to the “original” Aryan Brotherhood, a white supremacist prison gang which formed in California in the 1960s and exists primarily in California and the federal prison systems.

Origins

The ABT originated in the Texas prison system in the 1980s, following the desegregation of Texas prisons and the dismantling of the “building tender” system, an odious system in which prison staff used other (mostly white) inmates to help maintain control of prisons. These major and more or less simultaneous changes created an atmosphere of uncertainty and a lack of control that proved fertile breeding grounds for black, Hispanic and white race-based prison gangs. These gangs, though always a minority of the prison population, soon became the top predators in the Texas prison system.

The various white gangs, with names like the Aryan Society and the Aryan Brothers, mostly adopted a relatively crude white supremacist ideology. In the early to mid-1980s, most of the members of these two gangs united to become the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas, while others left out of the merger later helped form the rival Aryan Circle prison gang. From its beginning, the ABT emerged as one of
the most violent gangs in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, committing
13 murders in 1984-1985 alone.

**Ideology & Beliefs**
The ABT is a white supremacist gang. Its constitution (most prison gangs have constitutions or sets of rules) claims that it “was founded upon the sublime principles of White Supremacy, no pretense is or will be made to the contrary. The ABT remains and always will remain a venerable all-Aryan organization.” A “study course” created for new members claims that the ABT will try to bring “into fruition” the “14 Words,” which is a reference to the popular slogan and rallying cry used by hardcore white supremacists: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”

However, the ABT is not solely a white supremacist gang: it is also an organized crime group, highly involved with a variety of criminal activities. The centrality of that role often eclipses the group's white supremacist nature. The ABT, notes its constitution, “is no longer solely based on the precepts of racial ideology.” The study course elaborates: “There are other factors that the family now focuses on to [benefit] its members instead of focusing ‘solely’ on racial ideology. The ‘Tip’ [a slang term for the ABT] has to look to the ‘industrialization’ of our organization. In some of these areas it can be a hindrance for us to put our ‘ideological’ beliefs before our business transaction[s].”

In other words, organized crime comes first and white supremacist ideology second. The ABT justifies this order of priority by claiming that if it did not generate income, members would be unable to support themselves. Moreover, “by having other precepts,” they have a “protective shield of sorts” that would help protect them from “persecution and possible prosecution from Z.O.G. [Zionist Occupied Government, a common white supremacist term for the federal government].”
The reality is that there is a wide variety of knowledge of and commitment to white supremacy among ABT members. A minority of members are highly-steeped in white supremacy, while others have only a basic knowledge, and some exhibit nothing more than a crude sense of racism. This distinguishes the ABT from many other white supremacist groups, where most members will have a considerable knowledge of and commitment to white supremacist precepts.

**Subculture**

More important than the ABT’s ideology is its subculture. ABT members are part of the “peckerwood” subculture. This subculture emerged originally among white prison inmates in the South and West who were members or associates of racist prison gangs. Now it has spread to most prisons and onto the streets. Adherents of this subculture, who call themselves “peckerwoods” or “woods” (females will call themselves “featherwoods”), see themselves as proud white soldiers standing together against all others (being “down for the cause”). Collectively, peckerwoods in a particular prison are often referred to as “the woodpile.” Peckerwoods typically are given a nickname or “monicker” by others (similar to biker gangs).

The attitudes of this subculture can be found in the lines of a popular peckerwood poem, found in many variations and versions, such as this one by an ABT member:

*We’re peckerwood soldiers, down for our cause
Texas convicts, soldiers, and solid outlaws!
The rules we live by are carved in stone,
Awesome and fearless, bad to the bone.
In joints all over and from around the ways
People try to down us with each passing day.
The strength we have when we go to war
Was passed on to us from brothers before.
We’ll go to war with our heads held high
Knowing some of us will get hurt and die.
None of that matters while the battle is on*
We will fight to the finish, till all strength is gone. 
Our bodies are solid, blasted with ink, 
Warbirds and bolts are all that we think. 
In times we turn cold, ruthless and hard, 
The price we pay to survive in the yard. 
We are peckerwoods down for our cause. 
Texas convicts, soldiers and outlaws.

Racist prison gangs try to strengthen these bonds as much as possible, often to the extent of claiming that their gangs are actually families. The ABT, for example, in its “official” documents, repeatedly refers to itself as a family. Members will frequently call each other “brothers,” or refer to female associates (women are not allowed to be members) as “sisters.” Some ABT members even briefly ran a Web site called “Featherwood Connection,” designed to find mates for imprisoned ABT members.

The reason for this emphasis is simple: organized crime can be very powerful, but is only as strong as its weakest members. Thus every form of organized crime, from drug cartels to the mafia to biker gangs, seeks to instill in its membership an extremely strong group loyalty. The ABT is no exception. “Loyalty to the family comes first,” stresses the ABT constitution, “loyalty to an individual member comes second.”

**Size & Presence**

The total membership of the ABT is unknown, probably even to its leadership, but it is clearly one of the largest racist prison gangs in the entire country. Total membership is estimated at over 2,000, in prisons and on the streets. Because women are not considered formal members of the group, though the group relies heavily on female associates, the de facto size of the group may be considerably larger. The size of its main rival, the Aryan Circle, is around 1,400-1,500. In comparison, the largest neo-Nazi group in the United States, the National Socialist
Movement, has fewer than 500 members total and only around 330 active members. In other words, the ABT is very large by extremist group standards.

ABT membership is heavily concentrated in Texas. The ABT is the dominant white supremacist prison gang in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, but its presence increasingly extends far beyond prison walls. The average felon in Texas serves a sentence of only around three years in prison, so many people who become ABT members in prison are quickly back out on the streets. Moreover, the ABT will also recruit members from the streets. As a result, the ABT has a street presence across Texas, though it is strongest in southeast Texas and along the I-35 corridor running from San Antonio north to the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Sadly, the ABT has existed long enough that “second generation” ABT members are starting to appear—young adults raised from childhood by ABT members to become members themselves.

The ABT presence extends beyond the borders of Texas into all neighboring states. New Mexico in particular has a strong ABT presence, as its dominant racist prison gang, the New Mexico Aryan Brotherhood, is actually an offshoot or colony of the ABT. There is also a small but noticeable ABT presence in the federal prison system. Still other ABT members can be found scattered in various other states, or those states’ prisons, but they are not organized there.

**Structure**

Like most prison gangs, the ABT is highly structured and organized, at least on paper, though this is not always strictly adhered to “in the field.” Membership in the ABT is “for life,” as its rules put it, but that does not necessarily mean that the ABT will kill members who attempt to leave (though it has happened on occasion). As is common in prison gangs, people cannot simply join the ABT but must be sponsored by a member and go through an apprenticeship period as a “prospect,” the duration of which can last up to a year or more. During this period, the group will evaluate the prospect, instill its beliefs and rules into the prospect, and assign the prospect “dirty work,” including criminal activity.
The ABT is organized into a paramilitary structure, with sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors and generals. Of these, probably the key ranks are the captains and the generals. The captains will typically be the ABT leaders in a particular prison unit or city (or other geographical area).

At the top are the generals, who number only a handful (and typically control a region of Texas or the ABT federal prison presence) and who constitute the “Steering Committee,” sometimes called the “Wheel,” that leads the ABT. However, over the past decade, the ABT has suffered from occasional factional fighting that has resulted in a number of deaths. The fighting started in 2002 as two ABT generals, Steven “Stainless” Cooke and Scott Freeman, emerged as leaders of rival factions (Cooke later killed Freeman and received a life sentence for the crime) and recurred periodically thereafter. In late 2012, the federal government charged four ABT generals (Terry “Big Terry” Blake, Larry “Slick” Bryan, William “Baby Huey” Maynard, and Charles “Jive” Roberts) and 29 other ABT members in a major racketeering case. Another ABT general, Terry Sillers, is allegedly cooperating with prosecutors following his capture in 2011. Larry “Slick” Bryan is currently the most senior ABT general.

The ABT leadership structure not only organizes criminal activities but also functions to keep members in line, ordering violence (often lethal violence) against members who are suspected of having broken gang rules or, worse, becoming an informant or “weak link.”

**Slang Terms, Signs & Symbols**
Like many gangs, the ABT has a large number of slang terms, code words, tattoos and symbols associated with it. Of these the most prominent is the “shield” or “patch” of the ABT. Many racist prison gangs have designed what are essentially logos for their group, which are used for tattoo designs, in gang art, and for other purposes. The most common variety of such “patches” are called “shields,” which somewhat resemble a coat-of-arms symbol. The ABT shield typically consists of an upright sword bisecting such a shield (which may itself sport a swastika or an
image of Texas). Not all ABT members use shield tattoos because they are immediately obvious to corrections officials, who will place known ABT members in administrative segregation (or “adseg”).

Not surprisingly, ABT members will frequently use the initials “A” and “B” to refer to themselves, or often their numeric equivalents “1” and “2.” Thus an ABT member may sport a tattoo with the numbers 1 and 2 or the number 12, or perhaps 112% (for “100% Aryan Brotherhood”). Some ABT members have tattoos with a pair of dice, one showing a single pip and the other displaying two pips. ABT members also use Roman numerals as well, with tattoos such as “I II” or “I II XX” (the latter representing “Aryan Brotherhood of Texas”). ABT members frequently use single-hand hand signs with two fingers upraised and one finger upraised, separated by a non-raised finger. They may also use two-hand hand signs with one finger raised on one hand and two fingers raised on the other hand.

ABT members often refer to their gang as “the Tip” or “the Family.” One of their more popular slogans is “God Forgives, Brothers Don’t” (sometimes abbreviated as GFBD). Sometimes they may appropriate symbols or slang created by the original Aryan Brotherhood, such as use of a shamrock.

**Organized Crime and Violent Activity**

Above all else, the ABT is a criminal organization. Whether behind bars or on the streets, its members commit crimes with regularity: crimes for money, crimes for power or control, and crimes based on hate. In an assessment released by the Texas Fusion Center in March 2013, analysts ranked the ABT as having the fifth highest threat assessment out of the thousands of gangs (including street gangs, biker gangs, prison gangs, and others) present in Texas.

Although ABT members commit all sorts of crimes, most of their criminal acts fall into one of three categories:

1. Organized Crime
Of these, organized crime is the most important category and constitutes the majority of the gang's activities both behind bars and on the streets. Smuggling contraband is the most common prison-based crime. This includes especially illegal drugs such as methamphetamine but also a variety of other prohibited substances or materials. ABT members also run protection and extortion rackets and sometimes even engage in scams and frauds from behind prison walls.

On the streets, ABT members also engage heavily in methamphetamine trafficking. Sometimes, ABT members will make their own meth, sometimes turning cheap motel rooms into ad hoc meth labs. However, the ABT may also purchase meth from Mexican drug cartels (notably the Gulf Cartel) when it is cheaper to do so—one instance where the ABT clearly subordinates its ideology to its criminal endeavors. ABT members also routinely engage in burglary and theft rings, home invasions, and identity theft schemes.

Accompanying these crimes are related crimes of violence, whether killing the victims of a home invasion or killing police officers or others who may encounter ABT members in the act of committing some crime. One grisly example of this occurred in 2007, when Bobby Evans, a Bellmead Animal Control Officer, was gunned down by ABT members at an animal shelter when he stumbled upon them while they were searching for materials used to cook methamphetamine.

Some recent examples of ABT-related organized crime include:

- November 2012, Houston, Texas. Federal authorities arrested 34 ABT members, including almost all of its top leadership, on racketeering (organized crime) charges for crimes that included drug trafficking, kidnappings, assaults, and multiple and attempted murders. The arrests were part of an ongoing crackdown on the ABT led by the Bureau of Alcohol,
The second-most prominent type of ABT criminal activity is gang-related crime. This consists of criminal acts (typically violent acts) committed against its own members, for purpose of maintaining discipline or to punish suspected informants, or criminal acts committed against members of rival gangs such as the Aryan Circle.

Although not as common as its organized crime activities, the ABT's gang-related crimes are often their most violent. The gang is ruthless in killing members who have broken gang rules or, worse, those who are suspected of being potential or actual informants. Many of these murders take the form of professional “hits” in which the bodies are disposed of through grisly means (including decapitation, burning, and sinking in a body of water, among other ways) in order to inhibit identification of the victims. Of the more than 30 known murders committed by ABT members “on the streets” since 2000, more than 40% were internal killings. It is almost as dangerous to be an ABT member as it is to encounter one.

Recent examples of gang-related crimes include:

September 2012, Pasadena, Texas. A federal judge sentenced ABT member John Oliver Manning to nearly 30 years in prison following his conviction on Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, a crackdown that has resulted in at least 72 arrests since 2008.

- November 2012, Cleburne, Texas. A judge sentenced ABT member Jeremy Chad Bukowski to life in prison without parole following his conviction of capital murder for a 2011 incident in which he and two ABT prospects brutally beat someone to death with a pipe wrench and a hammer while they were conducting a home invasion. The two accomplices still await trial.

- July 2011, San Jacinto County, Texas. Local sheriff’s deputies arrested three ABT members and a juvenile who was a son of one of the members for a home invasion in which one of the suspects allegedly used a set of bolt cutters to slice off the right index finger of the person who owned the home.
racketeering and firearms charges in connection with the shooting of a member of the rival Aryan Circle gang. The victim barely survived the shooting, which caused so much blood loss that he suffered severe brain damage and will, according to doctors, probably have to spend the rest of his life in a nursing home.

- **May 2012, Atascosa County, Texas.** ABT member “Michael “Bucky” Smith received a life sentence in federal prison after pleading guilty to the murder of Mark Davis Byrd, Sr. Smith and two other ABT members—Frank “Thumper” Urbish, Jr. and Jim “Q-Ball” McIntyre—were charged with racketeering in connection with the brutal murder of Byrd, a fellow ABT member who had allegedly stolen drugs he was supposed to deliver to someone. The men beat, tortured, and repeatedly stabbed Byrd before shooting him in the head with a shotgun at least two times. Urbish and McIntyre also pleaded guilty to the crime.

- **April 2012, Lufkin, Texas.** Angelina County sheriff’s deputies arrested three men, including one allegedly associated with the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas, for delivery and possession of methamphetamine. The Lufkin/Hudson area is a hotbed of activity for both the ABT and the Aryan Circle. Numerous ABT members and associates have been arrested on meth-related charges in this area in the past several years.

- **March 2012, Tomball, Texas.** Steven “Stainless” Cooke, an ABT general, received an 87-month sentence after pleading guilty to racketeering aggravated assault for a 2008 incident in which Cooke and 11 other ABT members brutally beat an ABT prospect because he allegedly violated gang rules. At the time of his sentencing, Cooke was already serving a life sentence for a 2008 murder.

- **March 2011, Lubbock, Texas.** Lubbock police arrested ABT general John “Thumper” Clark on charges of directing the activities of a criminal street gang for allegedly threatening to kill a former ABT member and his family when that person tried to leave the ABT.
The third type of ABT criminal activity is hate-related crime. While the ABT is an organized crime group, one must never forget that it is also a white supremacist group, and ABT members both in and out of prisons do commit hate crimes against blacks, Hispanics, LGBT people, Jews, and others.

Examples of hate-related ABT criminal activity include:

- March 2013, FCI Seagoville, Texas. ABT member John Hall was sentenced to 71 months in federal prison after pleading guilty to federal hate crime charges for brutally assaulting a fellow inmate at the federal correctional institute at Seagoville, Texas, because he believed the victim was gay. Hall punched and kicked the victim, and stomped on his face, breaking or knocking out some of the victim’s teeth, crushing his eye socket, and rendering the victim unconscious. Though incarcerated in a federal prison at the time, Hall’s tattoos identify him as a member of the ABT rather than the “original” Aryan Brotherhood gang.

- November 2011, Crane, Texas. A federal judge sentenced ABT member Steven Scott Cantrell to 450 months (more than 37 years) in prison after Cantrell pleaded guilty to federal charges related to hate-motivated arsons in December 2010. Cantrell burned down a prominently African-American church; he also set fire to a gym because he believed its owner assisted people of color and was married to a Hispanic woman, and a house because its occupant was Jewish.

- July 2011, Huntsville, Texas. Prison officials execute ABT member Mark Anthony Stroman, sentenced to death on multiple murder charges for a series of shootings in September 2001 following the 9/11 attacks that targeted convenience store clerks in the Dallas area who appeared to be Middle Eastern. Stroman murdered two people and seriously injured a third. None of the victims—who were from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—were actually from the Middle East.