



Nazi Low Riders

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Since their beginnings as a skinhead gang in the California Youth Authority, the Nazi Low Riders have developed into a racist, violently criminal organization active both on the streets and in prison. Much of the group's rise to power can be attributed to its alliance with another, older prison gang, the Aryan Brotherhood. This alliance -- in which NLR members acted as middlemen for AB's various criminal enterprises -- helped build NLR's brutal and ambitious reputation and created new criminal opportunities unrelated to AB. NLR champions its whiteness especially when recruiting members from skinhead gangs and among new inmates, but it is primarily driven by criminal profit, whether from narcotics trafficking, extortion or armed robbery. At the same time, NLR members have been responsible for a number of fierce racist attacks during the past decade.

Quick Profile

- **Origins:** First organized as a gang in the early to mid-1970s among inmates housed by the California Youth Authority, the state agency responsible for the incarceration and parole supervision of juvenile and young adult offenders.
- **Ideology:** White supremacy

- **Location:** Primarily Southern California, also scattered among other states, including Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Illinois
 - **Criminal activity:** Narcotics trafficking, murder, assault
 - **Affiliation:** Aryan Brotherhood, various California-based skinhead gangs
 - **Tattoos:** Swastikas, SS lighting bolts, "NLR"
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New Kids in the Block

While the gang's precise beginnings are uncertain, one fact is clear: the Nazi Low Riders trace their roots to the Aryan Brotherhood, a notoriously violent prison gang founded in the 1960s. In the late 1970s or early 1980s, needing middlemen to help with criminal operations, AB leader John Stinson started to recruit young skinheads incarcerated by the California Youth Authority at the Preston Youth Correctional Facility, in Ione, and at the Youth Training School, in Chino. NLR had just begun to establish itself as a gang for young white inmates, while AB was the leading white gang in the California system. In an act of one-upsmanship, the group took its name from a phrase, "low riders," associated with Hispanic gangs.¹

With a limited membership, NLR led a relatively uneventful existence for several years, operating under the radar of law enforcement until the early 1990s. By then, the California Department of Corrections had successfully disrupted and virtually suppressed AB's activities. NLR's role as middleman for its predecessors' criminal operations put it in position to take the older organization's place in the prison gang hierarchy, and it became the principal white gang in California's penitentiary system.

A Growing Menace

Although NLR originated in the California prison system and still derives much of its power from inside correctional facilities, it is also a significant street gang. After first coming to the attention of authorities in Costa Mesa, California, other units appeared throughout Southern California and eventually in Central and Northern California. These "affiliates" grew quickly and developed strong links within their own ranks and with other white power gangs. During the past several

years, NLR's well-run and often extremely violent criminal operations have established it as a major player in the West Coast criminal world and among white supremacist skinhead gangs.

Recently, NLR members, who are mostly in their teens and early 20s, have moved east when paroled, often in an attempt to extend the gang's criminal network. In 1996, there were only 28 confirmed NLR members. (Several criteria are used to establish gang membership, including tattoos, self-identification as a gang member and possession of gang-related materials. Once an inmate has been classified as a member, he may be housed apart from other prisoners and subject to more severe disciplinary restrictions and punishment.) By 2000, the F.B.I. estimated that there were up to 1500 NLR members in prison in California and as many as 400 in San Bernardino alone. A year earlier, in 1999, Nevada law enforcement authorities identified over 100 NLR members, while Colorado and New Mexico authorities also began to notice the gang's presence. Gang members have recently been identified in Florida and Illinois as well. In Indiana, in August 2001, Trevor David Thompson, an alleged member of NLR from Pleasant, California, was accused of attempted murder stemming from the drive-by shooting of Ashley McNeil, a 14-year old African-American girl; police believe she was targeted because of her race.

Role of Racist Ideology

Although NLR's organized activity has been driven more by profit than ideology, both are fundamental to the gang's identity. The two essential requirements for membership are proven criminality and loyalty to the white race, and the gang's white power beliefs have prompted several violent acts. In April 1996, for example, in Lancaster, California, NLR members Danny Williams and Eric Dillard used a baseball bat to beat a black teenager. The Los Angeles Times reported that Williams was apparently on a mission to "rid the streets of Lancaster of African Americans." In July of the same year, Williams and Dillard attacked two African-American men, stabbing one of them several times in the back. In 1998, Williams and Dillard received prison sentences for the two attacks.

In March 1999, again in Lancaster, NLR members Shaun Broderick and Christopher Crawford attacked a black Wal-Mart employee with a hammer. The two were charged with attempted murder and two counts of assault. Also in 1999, NLR member Ritch Bryant was sentenced to life in prison for his involvement in the stabbing death of Milton Walker Jr., a homeless black man. Bryant, who said that Walker "got what he deserved," hoped to gain status within the gang by committing the murder.

Status-seeking violence by gang members has occurred in prison as well. In September of 1999, while they were handcuffed in a holding cell, NLR member William Richie, using a handcuff key he had stolen, slashed the face and neck of black inmate Cedric Parker while another NLR member, David Rolph, acted as a lookout (Parker survived the attack.) An indictment later stated that the two men assaulted Parker "for the purpose of maintaining and increasing their positions in the NLR."

As these examples indicate, NLR members have generally focused their anger on blacks. So-called "race traitors" -- those in interracial relationships or who demonstrate an affinity for what members consider to be black culture -- have also been targeted, as have Jews, Asians and other minorities. The group has made a limited exception for Hispanics -- a few NLR members have Hispanic surnames, and members who have Hispanic girlfriends or wives are readily accepted -- probably due to the hatred of blacks shared by white and Hispanic prison gangs. (There is enmity between NLR and Northern California Hispanics, probably because of the demographics of established criminal gang rivalries.) Other nonwhites are not tolerated. One former NLR member explained, "You must have at least half white blood but no black blood."

NLR's Role in Prison Violence

Law enforcement authorities consider NLR particularly dangerous and difficult to police because of its tightly knit organization and ingenious communication methods (for example, incarcerated members and their counterparts on the outside often exchange "kites" -- prison slang for letters -- in nearly

indecipherable runic alphabets). By 1999, the group was responsible for a large part of the violence in California prisons; prison officials classified NLR as a "disruptive gang," authorizing more restrictive treatment. By taking members out of the general population and housing them separately, authorities were successful in impeding NLR's ability to conduct narcotics sales, extortion and other criminal activities.

NLR responded by allying with Public Enemy Number One Skins (PENIskins), who have acted as middlemen in NLR operations. The alliance recalls the initial interactions between Aryan Brotherhood and NLR; PENIskins, like NLR before it, may be able to parley the power and reputation of the more established gang into greater stature in the prison system (as well as on the streets).²

Life as a Nazi Low Rider

NLR Prison Hierarchy

NLR membership in prison is based on a three-tier hierarchy consisting of "seniors," "juniors" and "kids." The typical NLR unit is led by seniors, some of whom have been connected to the gang since its early days in the California Youth Authority. To attain senior status, NLR members must have been active for at least five years and must be elected by three other senior members. In the NLR hierarchy, juniors, who are just below seniors, cannot induct new members (only a senior can confer membership), but they recruit potential members. The senior who inducts a kid becomes his mentor and disciplinarian. Kids usually come from smaller white power gangs like the PENIskins and Insane White Boys.

The Look

As in most gangs, NLR members have created a subculture of graffiti, hand signals, tattoos, attire and language. However, while much of it has been based on Nazi symbolism and icons, usage has varied from place to place. Unlike other skinheads, Nazi Low Riders have not adhered to specific rules regarding

appearance, making immediate identification of gang members more difficult for law enforcement.

NLR members are not required to wear any particular tattoo, for instance, though symbols like the swastika, SS lightning bolts and other Nazi-related images, including pictures of Hitler, frequently adorn members. Others prefer eagles, skulls and demons, while tattoos or patches with "WP" (White Power) or the number "88" (the eighth letter of the alphabet is H, hence HH or Heil Hitler) are also popular. Abbreviations of less obvious white supremacist phrases like "WSU" (White Student Union) and "AYM" (Aryan Youth Movement) are common as well.

The group's "business card" -- a tattoo of the letters "NLR" -- commonly appears, often on the stomach, back or neck or in small letters above the eyebrows and on the knuckles. Some prefer the full words "Nazi Low Riders," frequently written in Old English script. The runic alphabet (any of several alphabets used by Germanic peoples from about the third to the 13th centuries) is also becoming a popular way of designating white power gang affiliation. Recently, to confound law enforcement and avoid being classified as gang members, NLR initiates have become more reticent about admitting their allegiance; some claim that the letters inscribed on their bodies signify "never lose respect" or "no longer racist." And while most members tend to wear their tattoos proudly in visible places, it has become more common to opt for smaller, less conspicuous images in less visible spots.

With regard to clothing, NLR cohorts frequently wear shirts or jackets with white supremacist or Nazi emblems, or T-shirts printed with white power band logos. Here, too, however, gang members both in and out of prison increasingly wear less recognizable logos or symbols.

On the Streets

NLR members tend to congregate in pool halls, bars, fast-food joints, video arcades and high schools, where they try to recruit new members. These sites have

sometimes been the scenes of attacks, as when, in 1996, five teenagers beat a 12-year-old Hispanic boy at a video arcade in Costa Mesa, California, in what was reportedly an attempt to gain membership in the gang through random violence.

In some communities, NLR members live together in the same apartment buildings. These NLR clusters often serve as family-like units for alienated and uprooted young men. Although NLR does not fight other gangs over turf, it does tend to dominate the areas where members live. When NLR members move into a residential complex, they often establish themselves by harassing or threatening other residents.

In contrast to the gang's well-defined hierarchy behind bars, however, NLR's street leadership structure is unclear. Members organize locally only with the approval of established leaders -- those who try to set up independently risk retribution. Recruits are usually culled from smaller white gangs like Insane White Boys, La Mirada Punks, Independent Skins and Orange County Skins, all of whom acknowledge and submit to NLR's authority on the street. Some law enforcement officials believe that NLR hopes to unite all white gangs under its umbrella and, much like ethnic organized crime rings, tax the proceeds from their criminal operations -- with the collections sent to incarcerated NLR members. Currently, various white gangs maintain a frail alliance known as the Southern California Skinhead Alliance or SoCal Skins. Public Enemy Number One Skins leads the coalition, in alliance with NLR.

Drug Trafficking

NLR has been particularly successful in the trade and production of methamphetamine (also called "meth" or "speed"). Speed is relatively easy to produce and is both in high demand and very profitable. Members jury-rig "meth labs" wherever they can, from million-dollar homes to motel rooms. The gang has created several labs in San Bernardino; in Orange County, the Antelope Valley and Riverside, NLR has become a major distributor of the drug. It is also likely that NLR works with motorcycle gangs in methamphetamine production and

distribution. And while the fact that NLR members are often addicted to speed increases their proclivity toward violence, it also may keep them from organizing more effectively.

Role of Female NLR Members

Like other gangs, NLR depends on women not only to provide personal and financial support, but also to oversee business operations when male members are incarcerated. Often family members or girlfriends of NLR members, they have sometimes become directly involved in the violent activities of the gang. In March 2001, for example, NLR member and ex-con Todd "Stomper" Givens and his wife Lacey murdered Scott Holston, also an ex-con, and his sister Patreace, allegedly because of a dispute between the two men. After shooting and stabbing the Holstons, Givens and his wife, with the help of Givens's mother, placed the bodies in the trunk of a car, set it on fire and fled to Las Vegas, Nevada.

More commonly, according to an Upland, California, law enforcement report, female members act as liaisons to speed users unaffiliated with the NLR, supplying addicts with drugs and sexual favors. Eventually, NLR members coerce these users, through force and intimidation, to commit crimes for the gang. In addition, the addicts are themselves targets of robberies by gang members. Because of their own crimes, they usually do not bring charges.

Anger and Money

NLR's ability to attract racist skinheads with its mix of white pride and criminality has become a significant problem -- both in and out of prison. The gang's illegal operations continue to prosper, and members continue to attack racial minorities -- as on March 15, 2001, in Merced, California, when a black man named Arman Braxton was stabbed 23 times by NLR member Gregory Lee Claunch. New gang members have been identified in Reno and Las Vegas, Nevada, and Lake Havasu City, Arizona, and, should they continue their eastward migration, could evolve into a national problem over the next few years.

¹Though the gang calls itself "Nazi," anti-Semitism has not figured significantly in its actions. NLR uses the term to flaunt its whiteness rather than its hostility to Jews.

²While NLR members generally appear to believe that all other white prison gangs are subordinate to them, they maintain a strong link with, and deference to, Aryan Brotherhood. Indeed, members who have advocated breaking ties with the older group have been kicked out. A growing number of NLR partisans, though still a small minority, oppose this traditional alliance, however, seeking complete independence or believing that older AB members are out of touch with the current scene.