



**U.S. Department of Justice
National Drug Intelligence Center**



Gulf Coast High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area



Drug Market Analysis 2010

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This assessment is an outgrowth of a partnership between the NDIC and HIDTA Program for preparation of annual assessments depicting drug trafficking trends and developments in HIDTA Program areas. The report has been coordinated with the HIDTA, is limited in scope to HIDTA jurisdictional boundaries, and draws upon a wide variety of sources within those boundaries.

Table of Contents

Strategic Drug Threat Developments	1
HIDTA Overview	2
Drug Threat Overview	3
Drug Trafficking Organizations	4
Production	4
Transportation	5
Distribution	5
Drug-Related Crime	5
Abuse	6
Illicit Finance	6
Outlook	6
Appendix A. Tables	7
Sources	9



Strategic Drug Threat Developments

The principal drug threats to the Gulf Coast High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) region are the distribution and abuse of cocaine and the production, distribution, and abuse of methamphetamine. In addition, the abuse of chemically infused herbal mixtures, such as K2, Spice, Genie, and Mojo, which imitate the effects of marijuana, poses an emerging threat to the region.

The following are significant strategic drug threat developments in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region:

- Cocaine availability at the wholesale level rebounded in 2009. The cocaine shortages experienced in the region during 2007 and 2008 have abated, and cocaine is readily available throughout the region. In fact, cocaine prices at the wholesale level decreased in some of the larger cities in the region from late 2008 to mid-2009. Cocaine availability is expected to remain at levels sufficient to support market demand in the near term.
- Methamphetamine laboratory seizures increased 23 percent from 2008 to 2009 in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region, suggesting rising methamphetamine production. Increasing production is attributed to the growing popularity of the one-pot production method and the many pseudoephedrine smurfing operations in the region.^a State legislatures in Alabama and Mississippi have responded to pseudoephedrine smurfing by enacting tighter regulations on the sale of products containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine. National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) analysts expect that the legislation, when successfully implemented, will inhibit pseudoephedrine smurfing operations and lead to decreasing methamphetamine production in the region. NDIC analysts further expect that this situation will create an opportunity for increased Mexican methamphetamine distribution in the region because of traffickers' diminished ability to produce the drug locally and the presence of an established abuser population.
- Although legal throughout the Gulf Coast HIDTA region, chemically infused herbal mixtures aimed at mimicking the effects of marijuana, commonly dubbed "synthetic marijuana" or "legal weed" by users, are becoming increasingly popular, particularly among high school students.

a. Pseudoephedrine smurfing is a method used by some methamphetamine producers to acquire large quantities of pseudoephedrine by enlisting the assistance of several friends or associates to make purchases at or below the legal thresholds from multiple retail locations.

Figure 1. Gulf Coast High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area



HIDTA Overview

The Gulf Coast HIDTA region, encompassing 25 counties and parishes throughout Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, is the primary transportation corridor for illicit drugs from the Southwest Border area and Mexico destined for eastern drug markets, particularly Atlanta, Georgia. (See Figure 1.) Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) transport illicit drugs and illicit drug proceeds over the interstate highways that intersect the region, primarily using private vehicles modified with hidden compartments, rental cars, and commercial tractor-trailers. Mexican DTOs are the principal wholesale and midlevel distributors of powder cocaine, ice methamphetamine, commercial-grade marijuana, and Mexican brown powder heroin and black tar heroin in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. They supply these drugs to most other midlevel and retail-level distributors in the region, particularly African American and Hispanic traffickers.

The coastal areas of the Gulf Coast HIDTA region were hit hard by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, causing extensive physical destruction that is still under repair. The hardest-hit areas lie between Biloxi, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana. The rebuilding effort has caused a significant influx of both legal and illegal Mexican immigrants who came to the area in search of work. As a result, the region has a growing Hispanic population that has enabled Mexican drug traffickers to assimilate within Hispanic communities and conceal their drug trafficking activities. Caucasians are the largest racial demographic group in the region, followed by African Americans.

Drug Threat Overview

The distribution and abuse of cocaine and the production, distribution, and abuse of methamphetamine are the principal drug threats to the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. According to the NDIC National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) 2010,^b 52 of the 101 law enforcement respondents in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region identify cocaine (crack or powder cocaine) as the drug that poses the greatest threat to their jurisdictions and 31 identify methamphetamine (ice or powder methamphetamine). In 2009, Gulf Coast HIDTA initiatives reported the seizure of more than 846 kilograms of cocaine and 252 kilograms of methamphetamine. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Gulf Coast HIDTA Initiative Seizures, by Drug, in Kilograms, 2009

	Powder Cocaine	Crack Cocaine	Methamphetamine	Marijuana	Heroin	CPDs* (in dosage units)	MDMA* (in dosage units)
Alabama	313.77	4.17	40.53	245.79	.31	26,049	3,182
Arkansas	111.16	.39	16.89	3,012.29	3.65	151	531
Louisiana	320.35	12.12	173.39	4,166.25	10.56	38,538	563,248
Mississippi	81.10	3.92	21.39	1,212.73	6.03	21,991	6,043
Total	826.38	20.60	252.20	8,637.06	20.55	86,279	573,004

Source: Gulf Coast High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

*The Gulf Coast HIDTA reports that some initiatives report MDMA seizures in the Controlled Prescription Drugs (CPD) category.

Wholesale cocaine availability in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region rebounded in 2009. The cocaine shortages experienced in the region during 2007 and 2008 have abated, and cocaine is readily available throughout the region. According to National Seizure System (NSS) data, a separate data set from HIDTA initiative seizures, law enforcement officials seized more than 1,134 kilograms of cocaine in Gulf Coast HIDTA counties in 2009, a 117 percent increase from the 522 kilograms seized in 2008. Moreover, wholesale cocaine prices remained stable throughout much of the region and decreased in some of the larger cities, such as Mobile, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Gulfport, Mississippi. For example, wholesale-level cocaine prices in Gulfport decreased from \$20,000 to \$30,000 per kilogram at the end of 2008 to \$18,000 to \$25,000 per kilogram during the first half of 2009. Despite the wholesale price decrease in some markets, retail-level cocaine prices remained stable throughout the region. For example, retail-level cocaine prices in Gulfport stayed at \$75 to \$100 per gram from late 2008 to June 2009.

Methamphetamine production and abuse pose significant drug threats in many rural areas in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. Methamphetamine is extremely addictive and is often associated with crimes such as domestic abuse, child endangerment, theft, and burglary. Consequently, abuse of the drug has damaged the social fabric of many rural communities. Locally produced methamphetamine is most commonly available in the region; however, Mexican ice methamphetamine is also trafficked and abused, particularly in Arkansas.

The diversion, distribution, and abuse of controlled prescription drugs (CPDs) pose a serious and growing threat to the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. CPDs are readily available and abused at high levels throughout the region. NDTS 2010 data show that 97 of the 101 law enforcement agency respondents in the region report that CPDs are available at high to moderate levels in their jurisdictions. The most commonly abused CPDs are oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone.

Marijuana, heroin, and MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy) pose a low threat to the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. Marijuana availability and abuse levels throughout the region remain stable at high levels. Most of the marijuana available in the region is commercial-grade Mexican marijuana. Locally produced high-potency and commercial-grade marijuana are also available in the region. (See Table A1 and A2 in Appendix A.) Heroin availability and abuse are at low levels throughout most of the region, with the exception of the New Orleans metropolitan area, where heroin availability and abuse have historically been high. MDMA is readily available in the region.

b. NDTS data for 2010 cited in this report are as of March 3, 2010. NDTS data cited are raw, unweighted responses from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies solicited through either NDIC or the Office of National Drug Control Policy HIDTA program. Data cited may include responses from agencies that are part of the NDTS 2010 national sample or agencies that are part of HIDTA solicitation lists.

Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican DTOs are the principal wholesale and midlevel distributors of powder cocaine, ice methamphetamine, commercial-grade marijuana, and Mexican brown powder heroin and black tar heroin in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. These traffickers use the region as a transportation corridor for conveying significant quantities of illicit drugs from the Southwest Border to Atlanta and other major markets throughout the Southeast. Mexican DTOs supply illicit drugs to most midlevel and retail-level traffickers in the region, particularly African American and Hispanic distributors.

Production

Small-scale methamphetamine laboratories pose the most significant drug production threat to the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. Law enforcement reporting and laboratory seizure data indicate increasing methamphetamine production in the region, principally by Caucasian traffickers. According to NSS data, the number of methamphetamine laboratories seized in the region increased from 241 in 2008 to 297 in 2009, with the most notable increases occurring in Mississippi and Louisiana. (See Table A1 in Appendix A.) Increased production is attributed to the rising popularity of the one-pot production method and the abundance of pseudoephedrine smurfing operations. In response to pseudoephedrine smurfing and increasing methamphetamine production, the state legislatures in Alabama and Mississippi have enacted tighter regulations on the sale of products containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine.^c (See text box.)

Pending Pseudoephedrine and Ephedrine Legislation in Alabama and Mississippi

Alabama legislation, which becomes effective January 1, 2011, will require retailers to record all pseudoephedrine or ephedrine product transactions in a statewide electronic database. The database will automatically track the daily and monthly amounts of pseudoephedrine or ephedrine purchased by an individual and will advise the retailer to either approve or reject the sale. A retailer who completes a sale despite being advised to reject it could be found in violation of the law and punished with a misdemeanor offense for the first two failures to comply and a felony charge for any subsequent violation. The database is expected to be operational in 2011.

Mississippi legislation, which becomes effective July 1, 2010, requires a prescription for any product containing pseudoephedrine or ephedrine. The legislation effectively amends the Mississippi Code of 1972 to include these chemicals as Schedule III controlled substances. Mississippi is the second state, after Oregon, to require a prescription for pseudoephedrine and ephedrine products. Data from Oregon suggest that this legislation will lead to decreased methamphetamine production in Mississippi. After similar legislation was enacted in Oregon in 2006, methamphetamine production and methamphetamine-related crimes decreased. For example, from 2005 through 2008, Oregon officials reported a 92 percent decrease in the number of methamphetamine laboratories seized, a 22 percent decrease in property crime, and a 7 percent decrease in violent crime.

Eradication data and law enforcement reporting indicate that indoor cannabis cultivation is increasing in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. According to Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program (DCE/SP) data, the number of plants eradicated from indoor grow sites in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi increased nearly 160 percent from 2,518 plants in 2008 to 6,540 plants in 2009. (See Table A1 in Appendix A.) Most indoor grow sites in the region are operated by Caucasian traffickers. Large indoor grow sites in Alabama, however, are increasingly operated by Cuban and Mexican traffickers who have ties to similar operations in Florida. Cuban traffickers have been expanding indoor cannabis cultivation operations from southern Florida into the Southeast for several years. Cuban-operated indoor grow sites seized recently in Alabama appear to be part of this expansion. Law enforcement officers report that some marijuana producers prefer to cultivate cannabis indoors to avoid law enforcement detection and to increase the quality of the marijuana produced. The controlled environment, combined with sophisticated growing techniques such as hydroponics, typically yields high-potency marijuana.

c. Pseudoephedrine is a Schedule V drug in Arkansas and Louisiana, and both states have pseudoephedrine tracking laws.

Transportation

The Gulf Coast HIDTA region is the primary transportation corridor used by Mexican DTOs to move illicit drugs from sources of supply in the Southwest Border area and Mexico to eastern drug markets, particularly Atlanta. (See [Figure 1 on page 2](#).) Traffickers use private and commercial vehicles, generally rigged with hidden compartments, to transport illicit drugs into and through the region along major highways, particularly Interstates 10, 20, 30, and 40. Bulk cash shipments from the sale of illicit drugs in eastern drug markets are also transported through the region to Mexico along these same routes. Additionally, illicit drugs, in relatively small quantities, are regularly transported by passengers on commercial bus lines originating from the Southwest Border area.

Traffickers also use other methods to transport drugs into and throughout the region, including couriers on commercial flights, rail lines, package delivery services and, increasingly, maritime conveyances. For example, in July 2009, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers seized 994 pounds of powder cocaine commingled with bags of Colombian coffee aboard a cargo vessel in the Port of New Orleans. The vessel was laded in Panama. Additionally, several packages containing illicit drugs were found washed up along the Gulf Coast shoreline in 2009.

Distribution

Mexican DTOs dominate the wholesale and midlevel distribution of powder cocaine, ice methamphetamine, commercial-grade marijuana, and Mexican heroin in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. They supply these drugs to African American and Hispanic midlevel and retail-level traffickers in the region, as well as Caucasian traffickers and street gang members. Retail-level drug distribution typically occurs at open-air drug markets, at housing projects, in local clubs, in private residences, and at prearranged meeting sites such as parking lots.

Various traffickers distribute illicit drugs at the midlevel and retail level in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. African American traffickers distribute powder cocaine, commercial-grade marijuana, methamphetamine and, to a lesser degree, MDMA. Hispanic traffickers distribute powder cocaine, crack cocaine, and commercial-grade marijuana throughout the region and are the primary distributors of ice methamphetamine, particularly in Arkansas. For example, in September 2009, Arkansas law enforcement officers arrested 84 individuals and seized more than 100 pounds of ice methamphetamine from a large-scale distribution ring. These Hispanic traffickers, operating from Batesville, Arkansas, supplied ice methamphetamine that they obtained from Mexico to local distributors as well as distributors in Memphis, Tennessee; Kansas City, Missouri; Des Moines, Iowa; and Indianapolis, Indiana. Asian criminal groups are the primary distributors of MDMA in the region, particularly in the coastal areas of Alabama and Mississippi. Caucasian traffickers are the principal distributors of CPDs and locally produced methamphetamine. Traffickers and abusers in the region often obtain CPDs from unscrupulous physicians working at pain management clinics, primarily in Texas and Florida. Physicians at these pain management clinics generally write prescriptions for opioid pain killers using false or grossly exaggerated medical conditions.

Street gang members primarily distribute crack cocaine and commercial-grade marijuana in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. Most street gangs in the region are made up of unorganized and unaffiliated neighborhood gangs, including local Bloods, Crips, and Vice Lords, who emulate the behavior of nationally affiliated gangs despite having no formal connections. However, some highly organized, nationally affiliated African American street gangs, such as Gangster Disciples, distribute illicit drugs in the urban and rural areas of southern Mississippi.

Drug-Related Crime

Drug-related violent and property crimes often occur within the Gulf Coast HIDTA region as distributors and abusers seek funds to sustain their operations and addictions, respectively. According to NDTs 2010 data, 63 of the 101 law enforcement agency respondents in the region identify crack cocaine as the drug that most contributes to violent crime in their jurisdictions, and 59 identify crack as the drug that most contributes to property crime. Most large cities in the region, such as Huntsville, Alabama; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Jackson, Mississippi, report that crack cocaine is frequently associated with violent crime. The New Orleans metropolitan area continues to experience high rates of both violent crime and property crime. Much of the violent and property crime committed in New Orleans has a drug nexus (to either heroin or crack cocaine), as abusers have turned to crime to fund their addictions. In addition, law enforcement officers in many rural areas report that methamphetamine regularly contributes to property crime as addicts turn to home invasion, robbery, and burglary to obtain money to purchase the drug.

Abuse

Crack cocaine and methamphetamine pose the greatest drug abuse threats to the Gulf Coast HIDTA region because of the highly addictive nature of the drugs. Public health officials report that crack cocaine abuse is stable at high levels in the region but that methamphetamine abuse is rising, particularly among Caucasians in rural areas. Law enforcement officers characterize the abuse of powder cocaine, CPDs, marijuana, and MDMA as high to moderate. Heroin abuse is generally low throughout the region, with the exception of the New Orleans metropolitan area, where abuse is high.

Abuse of chemically infused herbal mixtures aimed at mimicking the effects of marijuana, commonly dubbed “synthetic marijuana” or “legal weed” by its users, is an emerging threat in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. These products are becoming increasingly popular, particularly among high school students. Sold as herbal incense, products such as K2, Spice, Genie, and Mojo are readily available in head shops and convenience stores throughout the region.^d While these herbal mixtures remain legal throughout the Gulf Coast HIDTA region, some state and local legislatures in the region are seeking to make several of the chemical compounds found in these mixtures controlled substances and are trying ban the sale and possession of such compounds. For example, Alabama and Louisiana have introduced legislation making several of the chemical compounds found in these mixtures controlled substances.^e Kansas became the first state to enact a law banning the sale, possession, and use of any mixture containing HU-210,^f JWH-018, or JWH-073.^g In addition, it is a violation of U.S. military law to possess or abuse herbal mixtures.

Illicit Finance

Mexican drug traffickers use the Gulf Coast HIDTA as the primary corridor for transporting bulk cash shipments from Atlanta, a regional cash consolidation hub, to the Southwest Border area and Mexico. The Gulf Coast HIDTA Blue Lightning Operations Center (BLOC) reports that nearly \$17 million was seized as a result of highway interdiction operations in the region in 2009. Mexican traffickers are also increasingly moving illicit drug proceeds to Mexico through wire transfers and money remitters. Traffickers also launder illicit proceeds through the operation of cash-intensive businesses, structured bank deposits, purchases of real estate and luxury items, and casinos.

Outlook

Mexican DTOs will continue to use the highways that intersect the Gulf Coast HIDTA region as the primary transportation corridor for conveying illicit drugs to and bulk cash shipments from Atlanta. Although successful highway interdiction efforts have resulted in the seizure of many shipments, the sheer quantity of illicit drugs and cash that transit the region makes it difficult to significantly disrupt DTO transportation operations.

NDIC analysts expect cocaine to remain available at levels adequate for sustaining the retail markets in the Gulf Coast HIDTA region. Cocaine abuse is expected to remain stable at high levels throughout the region.

NDIC analysts project that the pseudoephedrine and ephedrine control legislation in Mississippi and Alabama, when successfully implemented, will inhibit pseudoephedrine smurfing operations and lead to decreased methamphetamine production in the region. As a result, the number of methamphetamine laboratories seized in the region is expected to decrease over the next 24 months, particularly in Mississippi. NDIC analysts expect that this situation will create an opportunity for increased Mexican methamphetamine trafficking and distribution in the region because of the diminished ability of traffickers to produce the drug locally and the presence of an established abuser population. NDIC analysts also expect that some methamphetamine traffickers will continue to produce methamphetamine locally by traveling to nearby Florida or Texas to obtain pseudoephedrine, which is not a scheduled chemical in either state.

d. Because of the speed of innovation in this area, any list of products is likely to become quickly outdated.

e. The Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics sent a proposal to the state legislators seeking to make several of the chemical compounds found in herbal mixtures illegal and a city ordinance outlawing the sale and possession of chemically infused herbal mixtures was passed in Northern Arkansas.

f. HU-210 is structurally and pharmacologically similar to tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main active ingredient of marijuana, and it was synthesized around 1988. HU-210 is a Schedule I controlled substance in the United States.

g. The Kansas law also banned the sale, possession, and use of other chemical compounds, including BZP (N-benzylpiperazine) and TFMPP (1-(3-trifluoromethylphenyl)piperazine), which is often sold as MDMA or promoted as an alternative to MDMA.

Appendix A. Tables

Table A1. Cannabis Plants Eradicated at Indoor Grow Sites in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 2005–2009

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009	
	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated
Alabama	5	139	3	257	6	291	15	748	19	1,167
Arkansas	4	52	8	680	21	1,004	15	844	20	1,498
Louisiana	25	1,240	50	1,605	29	1,375	24	426	53	3,251
Mississippi	21	2,207	4	53	10	233	18	500	16	624
Total	55	3,638	65	2,595	66	2,903	72	2,518	108	6,540

Source: Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program.

Table A2. Cannabis Plants Eradicated at Outdoor Grow Sites in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 2005–2009

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009	
	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated	Sites Seized	Plants Eradicated
Alabama	1,779	91,475	929	47,920	334	26,357	529	36,118	414	59,137
Arkansas	138	46,030	133	12,821	185	28,536	114	20,373	114	4,606
Louisiana	75	2,460	144	3,562	68	1,664	81	1,652	124	2,199
Mississippi	63	897	67	2,346	109	2,167	75	1,237	78	591
Total	2,055	140,862	1,273	66,649	696	58,724	799	59,380	730	66,533

Source: Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program.

Table A3. Methamphetamine Laboratories Seized in Gulf Coast HIDTA Counties, 2005–2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
HIDTA Counties in Alabama Total	62	29	38	96	97
Baldwin	5	3	1	4	1
Jefferson	10	2	1	21	33
Madison	6	6	12	16	14
Mobile	13	2	5	12	7
Montgomery	1	0	0	0	2
Morgan	27	16	19	43	40
HIDTA Counties in Arkansas Total	110	76	78	85	82
Benton	10	7	11	12	18
Jefferson	5	7	1	7	5
Pulaski	57	41	36	32	31
Washington	38	21	30	34	28
HIDTA Counties in Louisiana Total	12	5	4	2	25
Bossier	1	2	0	0	0
Caddo	3	0	1	1	5
Calcasieu	3	0	2	1	4
East Baton Rouge	0	0	0	0	1
Jefferson	0	0	0	0	1
Lafayette	0	0	0	0	0
Orleans	0	0	0	0	0
Ouachita	5	3	1	0	14
HIDTA Counties in Mississippi Total	39	21	24	58	93
Hancock	1	1	1	3	10
Harrison	13	3	12	30	56
Hinds	4	8	2	1	12
Jackson	14	3	4	17	4
Lafayette	1	0	1	1	2
Madison	2	0	0	1	0
Rankin	4	6	4	5	9
Gulf Coast HIDTA Counties Total	223	131	144	241	297

Source: National Seizure System, data run date March 8, 2010.

Sources

Local, State, and Regional

Alabama

Alabama Criminal Justice Information Center
Alabama Department of Public Safety
Alabama Fusion Center
Mobile County Sheriff's Office

Arkansas

Jacksonville Police Department
Jefferson County Sheriff's Office
Little Rock Police Department
North Little Rock Police Department
Pulaski County Sheriff's Office
Springdale Police Department
Washington County Sheriff's Office

Kansas

Governor of the State of Kansas

Louisiana

Louisiana State Police
New Orleans Police Department

Mississippi

Jackson County Narcotics Task Force

Missouri

Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

Oregon

Oregon Alliance for Drug Endangered Children

Federal

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Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
New Orleans Office
Drug Enforcement Administration
Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program
El Paso Intelligence Center
National Seizure System
Gulfport Office
Jackson Office
Little Rock Office
Mobile Office
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Mobile Office
Pascagoula Office
Uniform Crime Report
U.S. Attorneys Office
Southern District of Alabama

Other

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Birmingham News
Huntsville Times
Mississippi Clarion-Ledger
Mobile Press-Register
New Orleans Times-Picayune
South Mississippi SunHerald

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