

MS-13 ORGANIZATION & U.S. RESPONSE

[IN DEPTH]



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Introduction

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) considers the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) the most dangerous street gang in the United States. The violent nature of MS-13 members results in a number of murders and vicious beatings. Already a number of cases, tried in Maryland, New York, and Tennessee, have resulted in hefty prison sentences, even life in prison for MS-13 gang members.

Violence first attracted the FBI, but evidence of the gang's increased levels of organization has attracted public attention. Organization is an indication of a future where MS-13 is not only a street gang but a transnational criminal network, stretching from Central America to suburban neighborhoods in dozens of US cities.

Horizontal integration of the gang is a primary concern. Smaller groups within the MS-13 gang structure known as "cliques" communicate on a regular basis. The nature of their collaboration ranges from recruiting strategies and turf protection to the development of regional strategies that involve protecting gang members from law enforcement through witness intimidation, targeting of police officers and rival gang members, collecting dues to support gang members in Central America and other locations inside the US, human smuggling, and extortion.

Vertical integration, or connections between US-based cliques and gang members in Central America, cements the transnational nature of the MS-13. Communication between gang members in Central American countries and the leaders of MS-13 factions in Virginia, Maryland, New York, California, Texas, and other states suggests a trend toward a level of organization normally operated by well established drug smuggling organizations such as the Norte del Valle Cartel in Colombia or Mexico's Sinaloa Federation.

"[The MS-13] is absolutely organized in Central America," Brian Truceon, the Director of the FBI's National Gang Force said in a recent interview.¹ He added there is evidence that MS-13 members are moving from Central America to the United States – from El Salvador to Los Angeles, and from Honduras to New York. Once inside the United States, MS-13 members from Central America maintain their international contacts.

From the smallest towns to big cities, the US government's reaction to MS-13 activity has quickened its pace since 2005, when the FBI announced the MS-13 as the country's most dangerous street gang. Challenges in human resources, frayed attention from the federal level, and the day to day details that stymie police work, such as language barriers, sometimes work in the gang's favor.

States' attorney generals offices across the US have begun to use anti-racketeering legislation to prove that the MS-13 is a well organized criminal enterprise. The same legislation has been used in the past to dismantle mafia networks in New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. The very use of this legislation underlines the organized nature of the Mara Salvatrucha, which in some regions of the US, such as the greater Washington DC area and Los Angeles, appears to have become more of a criminal organization than a street gang.

The MS-13, even as a criminal organization, is far from a national security threat, but its presence in US cities and towns, along the US border, and its connections with Mexican organized crime and a number of criminal elements in Central America designate the MS-13 as one of the latest groups to threaten the well being of US citizens across the country.

¹ Author interview with Brian Truceon, November 13, 2006.

Horizontal Integration

The spread of the MS-13 gang across the United States is a unique happening, unlike gang threats law enforcement has tackled in the past. MS-13 finds its origins in large urban areas, but members are known to follow the migratory patterns of illegal aliens leading them to labor jobs in small towns across the United States.

In these far-flung corners of the country MS-13 gang members commit crimes, recruit new members, collect taxes, extort and work diligently to expand their network and gain more territory for the gang. Investigations into the inner workings of the gang are not easy either. MS-13 has a very strident zero-tolerance policy toward anyone who shares the secrets of the gangs, especially with police. Informants may have their tongues cut out, and the law of the gang mandates murder of transgressors where clique members vote on a "green light" or assassination order on an individual.

Despite acts of violence, what may be most alarming about the MS-13 gang is its increasing organization and structure that many leading experts are comparing to criminal factions of the 1950's such as the Mafia and Hell's Angels.

A 2004 report by the National Drug Intelligence Center echoed this alarm stating that the gang "may be increasing its coordination with MS-13 chapters in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia, and New York City, possibly signaling an attempt to build a national command structure."

Illustrating this warning Robert Hart, supervisory special agent with the FBI, described a case in 2005 in which a high ranking MS-13 member from the West Coast arrived on Long Island to "to try to organize these various cliques or sets into a more formal structure."

Interviewed by POLICE Magazine, Hart discussed how cliques have become more organized.

"The cliques, instead of operating independently of each other, are beginning to come together. The difference is by doing that, obviously you have a much tighter organization, much stronger structures and, instead of having various cliques doing whatever they want, wherever they want, there is one individual who is the leader and is able to control the payment of dues and the criminal acts they engage in. The result is very, very similar to what you would see in what we refer to as traditional organized criminal families."²

In northern Virginia, Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty observes that "in some of the violent crimes, there seems to be a kind of approval process in some kind of hierarchy beyond the clique."³

In 2002, The Washington Times obtained a Metropolitan Police Department internal memo that stated that 20 MS-13 members from L.A. traveled to Northern Virginia because they were "upset with the local MS-13 gang because a Fairfax County police officer has not been killed."⁴

² Domash, S., "America's Most Dangerous Gang," POLICE Magazine, February, 2005.

³ Campo-Flores, A., Romano, A., "The Most Dangerous Gang in America," Newsweek, March 28, 2005.

⁴ Ward, J., "Gang Follows Illegal Aliens," The Washington Times, May 5, 2005.

And such incidences continue, leading law enforcement to question whether MS-13 has a higher structure with leadership or whether the gang simply engages in networking.

Detective Ricky Smith, of Hempstead Village New York, had an experience that suggests more than simple networking between individual gang members. He told his story in a February 2006 edition of POLICE Magazine.⁵

Smith and his partner Detective Joe Serrano began working gangs in 1995. They started a database similar to that used by tri-state officials in Maryland (see below), and began collecting information on gang members. They believe the MS-13 entered Hempstead Village in 1996.

"We were lucky enough to have had the training, so when we started to see an influx of MS-13...we at least knew what we were looking at," Smith told POLICE magazine.

Eventually his work attracted the attention of MS-13 gang members, who issued a green light on Smith and Serrano. As Smith tells it, he reacted with more pressure because he knew which gang members to target.

"But since I knew who [the gang members] were, we proceeded to intensify our enforcement of gangs. We let them know that we knew what was going on and pretty much told them if someone in the task force gets hit, their lives would not be worth living. We eventually locked up two people, and deported them, and after that the threat pretty much went away," Smith explained to POLICE magazine.

His relationship with the MS-13 did not end there. After two years, another MS-13 leader again took an interest in Smith, trying to intimidate Smith and other task force members, according to POLICE magazine. Task force members did some research and learned the man targeting them had an outstanding warrant for illegal entry into the United States, so they arrested him, placing him in a New Jersey jail while he waited for his hearing.

While in prison, the MS-13 gang member told an informant used by Smith that he was going to issue a green light on Smith and Serrano. According to POLICE Magazine, he was going to bring in two gang members from California to do the assassinations.

Another case of networking and perhaps higher organization and structure within the gang lies in the Normandie Locos clique. The Normandie Locos clique originated in L.A., and it now has representatives in numerous locations in the United States and Central America.

The Normandie Locos led a well-known series of attacks that occurred between Texas, Virginia and San Pedro Sula, Honduras, elucidating the mobility and coordination of the clique. The MS-13 member who orchestrated the attacks, Lester Rivera-Paz, had already been deported four times. He was arrested after crossing the U.S. border in flight from Honduran authorities.

A subsequent investigation into the murder of a 16 year old girl killed by Normandie Locos members revealed how the clique made trips around the United States in an effort to create new gang chapters. The Normandie Locos has an established presence in Los Angeles, California; Grand Prairie, Texas; Fairfax, Virginia; New York City; Miami; and throughout the East Coast.

⁵ Domash, S., "Taking Gangs to Task," POLICE Magazine, February, 2006.

In Grand Prairie, Texas, Sgt. Alan Patton had never heard of Mara Salvatrucha when he was called to the site of the murder of 21-year-old Javier Calzada. Investigations into the murder of the young man revealed his killers were members of the Normandie Locos clique. Livis "Junior" Flores, 29, was the leader of the local Normandie Locos clique and was one of the responsible parties in the murder of Calzada.⁶

The Brenda Paz Story

One of the girls involved in the plot to kill the young man, Brenda "Smiley" Paz, then 15 and also a member of the clique, became a key source of information in later investigations, shedding light on the extent of the gang's networking.

Paz was a typical MS-13 recruit. Born in El Salvador she grew up in a broken home in L.A. where she was "jumped in" to the gang at 12. She moved about living with different relatives during her years spent as a gang member and in each new city she found a new MS-13 clique happy to take her in.

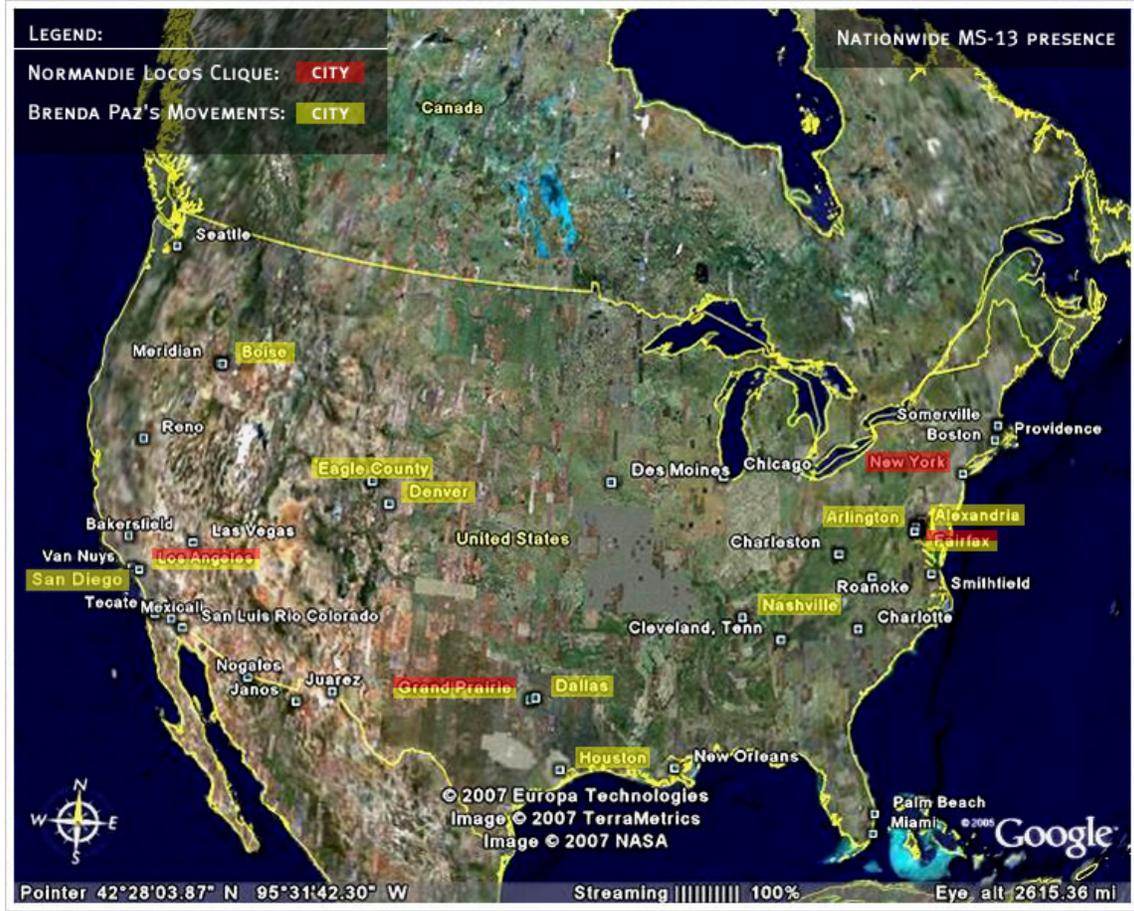
She told investigators that she and Normandie Locos clique leader Junior Flores had traveled to meet MS-13 leaders in Seattle, San Diego, Tijuana, Eagle County (Colorado), and Meridian (Idaho), often collecting and transferring money from drug dealing and auto thefts.

After Paz was arrested in 2002 for involvement in the death of Javier Calzado in 2001, she entered the federal witness protection program and soon became a stellar informant, recounting dates, places, murders and even giving law enforcement lessons in interpreting gang signs, codes and lingo.

Feeling lonely and missing her friends, Paz escaped from the witness protection program and traveled to Virginia, where she was sure none of her fellow gang members knew of her cooperation with police. Days after arriving in Virginia, trusted friends brutally murdered her next to the Shenandoah River in Virginia with 16 stab wounds and a slit throat. She died, pregnant, at 17 yrs old, becoming yet another victim of the gang's ruthlessly enforced code of silence. According to court testimony, one of the murderers told her, "This is for the Mara Salvatrucha," as he stabbed her.

Paz's own movements across the US reveal the penetration and suction force of the gang. Members trying to flee the gang find themselves sucked in by a new clique wherever they go, as had happened to Brenda. From California, to Texas, to Virginia, Paz found friends and a home with MS-13 cliques.

⁶ McLemore, D., "For Witness to MS-13 Crimes, Betrayal was a Death Sentence," The Dallas Morning News, October 29, 2006.



Vertical Integration

An October 2005 Los Angeles Times article reported Central American gang leaders communicated directly with clique leaders in Maryland revealing deeper truths of vertical integration within the MS-13.⁷

Federal indictments and the testimonies of Noe "Shorty" Cruz, a member of the Sailors Locos Salvatruchos clique in Maryland, and Jose "Stomper" Constanza, second in command of the Teclas Locos Salvatruchos also in Maryland, related to a jury case tried in Greenbelt, Maryland in October 2006 confirmed the Los Angeles times report.

Federal attorneys continue to prosecute the Greenbelt case against 22 alleged MS-13 gang members on racketeering conspiracy charges, six murders, and four attempted murders. Their results have so far proven eight of the defendants guilty of racketeering conspiracy and assault with a deadly weapon to improve status within the MS-13 gang, revealing through witness testimony that in Maryland at least two MS-13 cliques maintain direct communication with MS-13 gang members based in El Salvador.

⁷ Lopez, R. J., Connell, R. and Kraul, C., "Gang Uses Deportation to its Advantage to Flourish in US," Los Angeles Times, October 30, 2005.

Leaders of a clique known as the “Sailors,” or “Marineros” in Spanish, maintain contact with older MS-13 members incarcerated in the Ciudad Barrios prison, located in the mountains near San Miguel, El Salvador. In early 2005, leaders of this clique discussed an area in the United States that would be an ideal target for an extension of their group. They chose Maryland.

Members of the Marineros traveled from El Salvador to Maryland where they quickly settled into the immigrant community in southern Maryland and formed the Sailors Locos Salvatruchos, the US version of their Salvadorian clique.

The testimony of Noe Cruz, made during a jury trial for one known leader of the Sailors clique and a named defendant in the Greenbelt case, Edgar “Pony” Ayala, reveals communication between the Sailors in Maryland and other Sailors cliques in Virginia and Washington DC. These various cliques would meet from time to time to discuss communication and orders from El Salvador.⁸

One member of the Sailors, known as Omar or Duke (also Duck or “Pato”), was known as a “runner.” He would travel between Maryland and El Salvador to “let them know what was going on [in Maryland], and he would find out what was going on in there in El Salvador,” Cruz testified.

Duke would return to Maryland and “report about everything that he found out was going on in El Salvador.” When Duke made these reports, members of the Sailors cliques from Maryland, Washington DC, and Virginia would be present.⁹

Cruz also testified that Duke would bring back a list of things Sailor members in El Salvador needed, including money, for the Sailor clique in the United States to send down to them.¹⁰ Dues collected at meetings would, in part, be used to send to clique members in El Salvador.

During meetings, an appointed treasurer would keep a list of those present, marking next to their name the amount of money paid at that meeting.

Sometimes there is conflict. When an El Salvadorian member of the Sailors, known as “Player,” appeared in Maryland with instructions from El Salvador, there was some resistance to his call for more violence. Player relayed orders from El Salvador that stated every Sailors clique in the area should kill at least two rival gang members every 15 days. Sailors leaders in Maryland didn’t agree, pointing out that the local cops wouldn’t allow them to kill that many people that often.

According to a meeting of the Sailors, convened to discuss Player’s instructions, one leader of the Sailors, known as “Lil Man,” was upset. During Cruz’s testimony, he pointed out that Lil Man didn’t agree and felt like Player was disrespecting him. Adding up all seven of the Sailors cliques in the area, the resulting death count would be 28 murders a month and the police “wasn’t going to permit it,” Lil Man said.¹¹

Another clique, known as the Teclas Locos Salvatruchos also operates in southern Maryland. It was started in High Point high school by an El Salvadorian MS-13 gang member, Henry S. Zelaya,

⁸ Testimony of Noe Cruz, witness for the prosecution in United States of America vs. Edgar Alberto Ayala & Oscar Ramos Velazquez, October, 16, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

also known as Homeboy. He named the Teclas Locos Salvatruchos (TLS) after his El Salvadorian clique, the Moritas Teclas Locos Salvatruchos, so-called for the neighborhood and home town in El Salvador where the clique operates.

Like the Sailors clique, members of the TLS maintain ties to members of the same clique in El Salvador. Another defendant in Greenbelt case, Walter "Lil Loco" Barahona, was found with a video tape in his apartment that revealed footage of TLS members in El Salvador saluting Maryland TLS members.

Jose "Stomper" Constanza, formerly second in command of the TLS clique, testified his clique had about 26 members and met every 15 days near Beltsville, Maryland.¹²

During meetings the leaders took dues, between US\$10 and US\$20 per member, discussed the activity of other cliques in the area, and talked about gang loyalty and the violation of gang rules. Dues, Constanza explained, were used to post bail, deposit into the accounts of incarcerated gang members, or purchase weapons.

Another member of the TLS, Lisbeth Delcid, acted as an intermediary between Homeboy, once incarcerated, and another Teclas leader, who was to maintain communication with TLS members in El Salvador. According to Constanza's testimony, Homeboy wrote letters to Delcid from prison, instructing her "to disseminate a message to an MS-13 gang member about how the gang should handle the leadership of Zelaya's clique while Zelaya was incarcerated, including instructing the gang member to make contact with other MS-13 gang members in El Salvador and to use Lisbeth Delcid as a conduit for passing information to Zelaya." This gang member was Constanza.¹³

Zelaya's request for Delcid to act as a conduit between himself and Constanza to maintain contact with gang members in El Salvador reveals a habit of constant communication between himself, as leader of the Teclas Locos Salvatruchos clique in Maryland, and clique members in El Salvador.

TLS leaders were required to confer with gang leaders in El Salvador, Constanza testified, to report on the status of the gang. El Salvadorian gang members would also pass along instructions to gang leaders in Maryland.

¹² Testimony of Jose Constanza, witness for the prosecution in United States of America vs. Edgar Alberto Ayala & Oscar Ramos Velazquez, October, 3, 2006.

¹³ Ibid.



Organization

Both Cruz and Constanza testified to a regional MS-13 meeting, held in January, 2003, where various cliques from the tri-state region arranged a meeting in Virginia to meet, greet, and discuss activity among the various cliques in the area.

There are many MS-13 cliques in the tri-state area between Maryland, Virginia, and Washington DC including: Sailors Locos Salvatruchos, the Teclas Locos Salvatruchos, the Langley Park Salvatruchos, the Coronados Locos Salvatruchos, the Silvas Locos Salvatruchos, the Parvis Locos Salvatruchos, the Virginia Locos Salvatruchos, and the Hollywood Locos Salvatruchos.

There are known cases of Teclas members loaning weapons to members of the Sailors. Members of both groups would gather with others from the Silvas or Coronados on the weekends to hunt rival gang members or travel to destinations where known rival gangs hang out, presenting a unified MS-13 force against rival gangs.

Some cliques, such as the Sailors, have a number of "sub-cliques." There can be various sub-groups with the same name in one region. The leader of one clique may oversee the development or direction of a sub-group of that clique in a nearby town or suburban area.

Duke, the runner who communicated between the Sailors in El Salvador and the Sailors in the tri-state area, was a member of Sailors cliques in Maryland, Washington DC, and Virginia. When he held meetings to report on news from El Salvador, members from around the region would attend.

Homeboy, the El Salvadorian MS-13 member that started the Teclas by recruiting Central American youths from a high school in Maryland, could have moved on, leaving Constanza in charge of the High Point Teclas clique if he had not been imprisoned. Even behind bars, Homeboy worked to maintain communication with his clique members in both the United States and Central America.

MS-13 members deliver information and items, often money, between cliques inside the United States and El Salvador. And phone calls from the United States to El Salvadorian members and between MS-13 members inside the United States are common.

And according to the research of Susan Ritter, Chair of the University of Texas Criminal Justice Department, there are at least 15 MS-13 cliques in Houston. Police in Houston have traced phone calls from MS-13 members there to Baltimore, Maryland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington DC, New Orleans, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.¹⁴ These traced phone calls suggest constant communication between members of MS-13 cliques located in cities across the nation.

United States Response

Documented cases of coordination and cooperation between MS-13 cliques across the United States have galvanized law enforcement to rethink strategy to combat the gang. Worried the MS-13 may be in the process of building a national command structure, U.S. agencies have had to respond. The responses are many and varied.

In response to growing concerns over MS-13 consolidation and penetration throughout the United States, law enforcement on all levels have begun to understand a greater need for coordination and information sharing on their part in order to dismantle the gang.

In December 2004, the FBI launched a multi-agency MS-13 National Task Force in response to growing concerns over MS-13 activity throughout the United States. The MS-13 Task Force is the first of its kind and represents the first time federal agents marked a street gang for special attention from law enforcement.

The task force works to dismantle the gang, concentrating on increasing and expediting the flow of information and intelligence, coordinating investigations and helping local and state law enforcement more easily identify the gang in their areas.

In 2005 the Department of Homeland Security launched "Operation Community Shield" a nationwide Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) anti-gang initiative designed to dismantle and prosecute violent gang organizations by employing the full range of authorities and investigative tools at the hands of ICE agents.

Since its inauguration, Operation Community Shield has seen considerable success. In the two-week law enforcement round-up of illegal immigrants that began 24 February 2005, authorities arrested 2,388 gang members; 922 were Mara Salvatrucha. It represents the first time the federal government has used immigration and customs authorities in a combined, national campaign against criminal street gangs in the United States.

¹⁴ Author interview with Dr. Susan Ritter, February 18, 2007.

In northern Virginia, where the gang runs rampant relative to other areas in the US, multi-jurisdictional law enforcement as well as state and federal law enforcement executives have formed their own Northern Virginia Gang Task Force – a partnership to interdict and disrupt gang activity in the area.

Information sharing to understand crimes as part of a gang problem and not isolated acts has become a must for law enforcement combating MS-13. In Maryland, authorities have purchased software called GangNet with federal funding to help monitor MS-13 regional concentration and national movements.

GangNet is an internet-based program that will create a database to streamline information sharing between law enforcement officials. Specially trained officers, who will log on to the secure network with a password, can enter information on gang members such as a person's history, photographs of tattoos or scars and share with other police officers news of his or her latest arrest. It is a modern day, multi-state version of the database started by Detectives Smith and Serrano in Hempstead Village during the mid-1990s.

More than 500 agencies in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. are expected to participate. According to Thomas H. Carr, director of the Washington-Baltimore High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program that will oversee GangNet, the system will eventually be tied into gang information networks in California, New York, Ohio and other states. The first officers should be able to log on by February, and GangNet should be fully implemented in June.

Beyond the work of law enforcement there have also been numerous changes in laws and legal proceedings against gangs in the United States.

Virginia is one of many states that is now tailoring bills and changing laws in order to better combat the gang. The Virginia state legislature is formulating a new bill that will specifically apply to the machete – the favored weapon of the MS-13. Soon, swinging a machete in a threatening way could be a punishable offence in the state.

Community leaders in Howard County, Maryland are working to pass a similar bill to outlaw the machete. If passed, the bill would make it illegal to carry a knife at least 18 inches long and 1.5 inches wide within one hour after sunset and one hour before sunrise.

State government officials in Maryland are working to change the state constitution in order to allow gangs to be prosecuted on a state level – currently the constitution only allows for the prosecution of gangs at the county level.

In November 2006 two defendants in the Greenbelt case were convicted of racketeering under the RICO act. Use of the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) act marks a milestone in federal prosecutions of the MS-13 and other modern-day gangs.

RICO was originally developed and used in federal courts to bring down the international criminal enterprises of the Mafia in the 1950s. Its re-introduction into federal courts against MS-13 gang members sets a new precedent for use of the RICO act in future MS-13 cases. Conviction under the RICO act is achieved by convincing a federal jury that MS-13 defendants are not just part of a local clique, but members of an international criminal organization.

As of the publication of this report, RICO legislation has been used in federal indictments against alleged MS-13 members in Tennessee, New York, and Maryland.

Challenges

In small-town America, where MS-13 has flourished inside immigrant communities, combating gangs remains problematic for local law enforcement. There are many reasons for this challenge.

Officers are often unprepared and unequipped to deal with cultural and language barriers in combating these gangs – many small counties do not have a single officer that speaks Spanish. This is not the case where the MS-13 is currently concentrated in Los Angeles, Maryland, and New York, but the gang's presence in the Midwest and Northwest has given officers there some trouble.

Illegal aliens are the best sources for information on gang activity, but they often distrust law enforcement and therefore do not work with officers for fear of being deported. The reality of heavy gang presence in immigrant communities full of illegal aliens further complicates this situation. Victims of violent gang activity are often reticent to contact the police.

Authorities sometimes avoid using the term "gang" due to its effect on property values in suburban areas. Therefore some officers may have treated crimes as isolated events instead of a broader gang issue.

"Gangs are bad from the point of view of house values and public perceptions, so the 'g' word is avoided," the FBI's Trucheon said. "Community leaders sometimes avoid calling the problem what it is...they focus on extortions or car jacking...not allowing a particular police force to bring full attention [to] these issues," he explained.¹⁵

Detective Ricky Smith of Hempstead Village, New York ran into this problem ten years ago in 1996, when he began investigating MS-13 activity in his town. He asked for help from neighboring counties to track gang member movement.

In his interview with POLICE magazine, Smith claimed most police departments "didn't want to admit there was a gang problem, and didn't want us to tell them that we even saw a gang problem in their community because their thing was gangs make communities look bad, and they didn't want the recognition of being a troubled community."¹⁶

Thousands of gang members, imprisoned as a result of massive anti-gang operations in the early 1990s, have served their sentences. They have been set free. While in prison gang members tighten ties with fellow gang members, building new networks in prison they begin to exploit once freed. While many MS-13 members are deported upon release from prison, their return to the United States within a short time is all but guaranteed.

Authorities were not prepared for a wave of released gang members. Almost all large cities drastically reduced their anti-gang units after the success of a clampdown against gangs 15 years ago and are only now reacting to a new surge in gang activity, especially the MS-13. In New York City, where police and prosecutors terminated one sophisticated drug gang known as the Crazy Cowboys and several Jamaican gangs, retired detectives were not replaced, or those who remained were moved to anti-terrorism duties after 9/11.¹⁷

¹⁵ Author interview with Brian Trucheon, November 13, 2006.

¹⁶ Domash, S., "Taking Gangs to Task," POLICE Magazine, February 2006

¹⁷ Arana, Ana, "Crime Without Borders," Enjeux Internationaux, <http://www.enjeux-internationaux.org/articles/num11/en/crime.htm>: accessed on January 12, 2007.

MS-13 members, as illegal aliens, are deported after serving their jail sentence in the United States, regularly return to the U.S. within months of deportation.

Melvin “Joker” Cruz-Mendoza was deported four times and twice in the same year, according to the Los Angeles Times. For over eight years, Cruz-Mendoza would be arrested, deported, and return to the United States, only to commit another crime. His story illustrates the “conveyor belt” pattern of MS-13 members who, once deported, return with little trouble, often bringing with them other immigrants.

MS-13 members have begun to learn from law enforcement profiling efforts. The removal of tattoos, the most visible sign of MS-13 gang membership, or the placement of tattoos on body parts normally covered by clothing, is a trend that has spread across MS-13 cliques both inside the United States and in Central America.

Susan Ritter believes younger gang members have been told not to place tattoos on their faces and neck.¹⁸ Gang members are encouraged to maintain a low profile, she says. Members now maintain a lower profile, and once inside the United States, they seek to integrate and blend with immigrant communities, often holding normal jobs and participating in gang-related activities off the clock.

In southern Maryland, MS-13 gang members from various cliques are known to work for the same company, called Asplundh. Time together during the day creates opportunity for deeper networking between cliques as well as ad hoc recruiting meetings during break or after work.

Some of the latest generation of gang members are clean cut. According to Ritter’s research, they are sent to universities to take classes related to business management. This becomes their job for the gang, something like an undercover role. It is a trend that works well with recruiting the US-born children of Central American immigrants, who in some cases wouldn’t otherwise have an opportunity for higher education.

Within these communities, gang members provide ample opportunity for recruiting at soccer games, community-organized BBQ events, or other occasions that would attract the younger members of immigrant communities.

Ritter’s sources claim MS-13 members in Houston often meet in Galveston, Texas where they have formed a soccer team. Meetings centered around soccer matches serve the “dual purpose of providing recreation while making their meetings less obvious,” she says.¹⁹

Clean-cut members are used as runners, ferrying messages between US cities, or between the US and Central America, because leaders of the MS-13 are aware of cell phone taps. They suspect email messages are scanned.

Gang members actively recruit younger members, but the reverse is also true, according to Brian Trucheon.²⁰ Young members of the community seeking a strong peer group or some level of acceptance outside what is in most cases a broken home find solace inside the gang structure, which over time becomes a second family.

¹⁸ Author interview with Dr. Susan Ritter, November 14, 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Author interview with Brian Trucheon, November 12, 2006.

As fathers, older brothers, and cousins attract younger family members, gang membership jumps from one generation to another. There are known cases of second and third generation MS-13 gang members in the US, according to Special Agent Trucheon. Brenda Paz's father was a MS-13 gang member.

"Once you're in, it's very difficult to get out. Second generation gang members are not just talking about walking away from a gang but walking away from [their] family," Trucheon said.

Considering these challenges and the collective US response to the virulent and violent nature of the MS-13, two questions come to mind. Has the US response made much of a difference? And how quickly will the MS-13 become more organized, perhaps forming a centralized hierarchy inside the United States?

According to Detective Smith, "The numbers go down after you lock them up...Then after a couple months, you see some new younger kids joining, and numbers go up. It is a continuing job for us no matter what. Get rid of some, next thing you know get some new ones."²¹

The so-called new ones underscores the reality of how difficult it is to find a positive answer for the first question. As new members swell MS-13 ranks, the necessity for higher organization will arise. The conveyor belt effect of MS-13 movement between Central America and the United States ensures fresh blood.

We cannot say the US response has not been effective. Operation Community Shield deported nearly 1,000 gang members. Using RICO legislation has been effective in the court case against 22 alleged members of the MS-13 in Maryland. As of this publication all eight tried have been found guilty – a perfect score. GangNet is very promising. Within months there will be a map that details MS-13 concentration and nationwide activity by name, date, tattoo, and other data. This is unprecedented.

A look at the gang's ultimate goal, its reason for existence, adds a final shred of evidence. According to the FBI, the MS-13 is much like any other gang. It seeks to maintain the myths and the allure of the MS-13 through acts of violence and a strong national presence. As the gang becomes better known, it is able to move into new turf – and in some cases absorb other gangs and criminal activity – in targeted communities.

Gang members that travel to new destinations, such as Brenda Paz, receive instant street credit because of their affiliation with the MS-13. For most members, the street credit alone is reward enough for the daily difficulties and risk of membership with the MS-13. The three dots tattooed between the thumb and first finger on many MS-13 gang member's hand underscores these risks. Each dot represents one of three fates for MS-13 members: prison, hospital, or the grave.

The ultimate goal is power and recognition. As the MS-13 grows larger, it will be forced to organize or deal with internal power struggles that could cause serious, and clearly very violent, conflict between rival cliques. The result in both cases is not promising for the future of security in America's immigrant communities or those neighborhoods and communities that touch the fringe areas of MS-13 presence and activity.

²¹ Domash, S., "Taking Gangs to Task," POLICE Magazine, February, 2006.