

## **MS-13: A GANG PROFILE**

by

Jennifer J. Adams and Jesenia M. Pizarro, Ph.D.

### ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this article is to shed some light into the characteristics and origins of the MS-13 by compiling what it is known about the group in a gang profile. In doing this, this article discusses MS-13's origins, proliferation, characteristics, norms, and involvement in illegal enterprises. We also discuss recent policies used by law enforcement in an attempt to combat this gang.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS -13) gang has received considerable attention by the media and policy makers in the United States (U.S.). Recent media reports have categorized this gang as one of the most deadliest and dangerous in the country (National Geographic 2006). Official reports have documented that they are gaining popularity among youth, and are rapidly spreading not only within the U.S. but also in Latin America. In 2006, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimated that there were about 10,000 members in the United States and 50,000 in Central America (FBI 2006a). Current estimates suggest that the MS-13 is present in thirty-three states within the U.S. and in over six countries (i.e., Canada, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and Columbia). Within the U.S., their presence is strongest in Washington D.C., California, and New York (National Geographic 2006; Johnson 2006).

Although MS-13 has received a large amount of media attention, there is very little academic literature written about them. To date only one academic article has focused on this gang (i.e., Grascia 2004). Most of what

is known about the Mara Salvatrucha comes from media accounts and law enforcement reports. The purpose of this article is to shed some light into the characteristics and origins of this gang by compiling what it is known about them in a gang profile. In doing this, this article discusses MS-13's origins, proliferation, characteristics, norms, involvement in illegal enterprises, and policies used by law enforcement in an attempt to combat them.

### **Origin of the MS-13**

The Mara Salvatrucha has its roots in El Salvador. El Salvador is a Central American country with a tumultuous history. In the 1980s, a violent civil war erupted in the country between the Salvadoran government and the leftist guerilla groups that opposed it (Enemies of War 2001). One of which was the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación (FMLN). During this civil conflict approximately 70,000 Salvadorans lost their lives, and about 1 million fled the country (particularly to the United States) in order to escape the dangerous, chaotic, and disorganized environment of El Salvador (Valdez 2000). The backgrounds of the immigrants ranged from peasants, to Salvadoran street gang members, to former paramilitary group members from the FMLN (Valdez 2000).

Many of the Salvadorian immigrants who came to the United States settled in Southern California and Washington D.C. Those who settled in Southern California predominantly set their residences in the Rampart area of Los Angeles. The Mexican Mafia, a notorious Hispanic gang, dominated this area at the time. Consequently, many of the new immigrant youth were victimized by the Mexican-American gang (NAGIA 2005). In response to the violence, Salvadoran youths began to band together in order to protect themselves (NAGIA 2005). These youths were friends that often spent their time at Sol International Park and went to rock concerts together. Due to their fondness of rock music, the boys adopted the devil horns as their hand sign. The boys also gave themselves a name - Mara Salvatrucha (National Geographic 2006). Mara is slang for a gang or posse, and Salvatrucha is slang for a street smart or street tough Salvadoran (Flores 2005; Kovaleski 2007).

As the gang increased in numbers so did their involvement in illegal enterprises. In order to facilitate their illegal activities, in 1993 MS leaders formed an alliance with the Mexican Mafia (NAGIA 2005). This alliance officially made them a Southern California gang. Mara Salvatrucha then added the number 13 to their name, marking them as Sureños (Southern Californian Gang) (NAGIA 2005). The number 13 signifies the letter M as the thirteenth letter of the alphabet (NAGIA 2005). Due to the growth of the gang and its alliance with other gangs throughout the Los Angeles region,

MS-13 then began accepting members of other nationalities, such as Ecuadorians, Guatemalans, and Mexicans, Hondurans, and Peruvians (Valdez 2000)

In 1996, the U.S. government passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. This new law established that non-citizen immigrants convicted of crimes (i.e., felonies) would be deported back to their home countries (Papachristos 2005). MS-13 members were greatly affected by this law. Due to their growing involvement in illegal activities, some of the gang members were arrested. Since many of them were non-citizens, they were deported back to their home countries. While in their home countries, they bonded with fellow gang members who were also deported and recruited new members. Hence, the gang began to flourish in Central and South America.

### **Characteristics of the Gang Members**

Members are initiated into the gang through a ritual called beating in where prospective members are beaten by current members for at least thirteen seconds. Often times they are beaten by three older members (Carranza 2004). Female members are usually initiated through sexual rituals, such as having sex with thirteen members of the gang, but they may have the option to be beaten in instead (Castro 2005; Rather 2005). Before the initiation process prospective members are required to undergo a trial period. During this period, they hang out with members and participate in gang activities (Carranza 2004).

Current estimates suggest that the gang is comprised of members who range from the ages of eight to forty (Valdez 2000; National Geographic 2006). The gang recruits youths from high schools, middle schools, and juvenile detention centers (National Geographic 2006). The goal is to get the youngest members possible so that as they get older their commitment to the gang is cemented to their whole lives. As it was mentioned previously, although the majority of members are of Salvadorian origin, there are also members from a wide array of Central and South American countries (FBI 2005; Kovaleski 2007).

### ***Identifiers***

MS-13 members use a number of identifiers that signify their allegiance to the gang. The gang's colors are blue and white, which are the colors of the El Salvadoran flag (Grascia 2004). Members tend to have tattoos all over their bodies (Valdez 2000). Tattoos and graffiti include Salvatrucha, MS-13, the number 13, Eme-Ese Trece (MS-13 spelled out in

Spanish), Sureños /Sur/Sur13, the phrase Salvadorian Pride, and the initials of their clique (Valdez 2000; Castro 2005; Johnson 2006) (See Appendix A & B). The hand sign most often used are the devil horns, which looks like an upside down M; this hand sign is also pictured in tattoos and graffiti (Valdez 2000; Castro 2005). Members also use stacking, which is the use of multiple hand signs, to spell out the name of their clique and to give directions to other members (National Geographic 2006).

The machete is also a symbol of the gang. Acts of violence committed by the gang tend to involve machetes. MS-13 members have been spotted with machetes while fishing in Maryland (Morse 2007). Another example occurred in Virginia, where MS-13 members attacked a member of the South Side Locos gang with a machete and cut off three of his fingers (Flores 2005). Some assert that the reason for this is that the machete is a cultural symbol in El Salvador, especially in rural areas where there are farming families (Morse 2007). In rural El Salvador the machete is an item that many Salvadorans grow up with. Indeed, one MS-13 member reported that he guarded his family's crops armed with a machete at age four (Flores 2005).

### **Organization**

The MS-13 is divided into subgroups called cliques; each clique has its own name and is in charge of defending a certain amount of territory (Flores 2005; National Geographic 2006; Carter 2007). For example, in Los Angeles, a clique of sixty-five members was in charge of patrolling thirty-three street blocks (National Geographic 2006). Each clique is independent of one another, but they will band together in response to a perceived threat (National Geographic 2006). Cliques may also work together in some criminal activities, such as dealing drugs and selling weapons (Grascia 2004). It is currently unknown exactly how many MS-13 cliques are there, however, estimates in some municipalities exemplify their magnitude. For example, in 2004 law enforcement identified thirteen cliques within Montgomery County Maryland alone (Wennar 2004).

All the cliques have leaders; however, the organizational structure of each clique varies. The leaders of each clique are often called "shot callers." The larger cliques usually adopt a military type structure; however, smaller cliques are less likely to adopt this model (Castro, 2005). There are reports that the "shot callers" of each clique attend regional gang meetings where gang punishments for violations and recruitment are topics of discussion (Flores 2005).

There have also been rumors that cliques are attempting to unify under one leader (NAGIA 2005; Carter 2007). Spurring this rumor are reports that MS-13 members from Los Angeles, New York, and North Virginia were spotted together in Maryland, and that they were there for a gang meeting (Castro 2005). Additionally, in July 2004, a meeting was held in Honduras by Central American cliques in which leadership issues were the topic of discussion (Castro 2005). In Long Island authorities also claim MS-13 members meet there in 2004 to discuss uniting cliques from the East and West coasts (Buckley 2007). Los Angeles law enforcement officials have gone as far as to identify a specific individual as a worldwide MS-13 leader (Castro 2005).

### ***Gang Rules and Norms***

The MS-13 has “constitutions” that outline codes of conduct and punishments for breaking gang rules (Johnson 2006). Thirteen rules are given to each member following his or her initiation (Castro, 2005). Some of the rules are related to MS-13’s rivalry with the Eighteenth Street Gang. For example, MS members are forbidden to use words that end in “cho” like “ocho,” the Spanish word for eight, due to the number’s relation with the Eighteenth Street Gang. Members are forbidden to tie their shoes in the shape of an eight. Additionally, they are not allowed to wear hoop earrings because the hoop and the ear form the shape of the number eight. They are also not allowed to use word “shit” because this is the term their rivals use to refer to them. Specifically, they are forbidden from saying “mierda seca” (i.e., dry shit). They are also expected to use violence (i.e., “drop”) against friends that says the word “mierda” (i.e., shit) in front of them. Finally, the gang rules dictate that on every thirteenth day of the month a member of the Eighteenth Street gang must die.

Other rules emphasize the obligation to follow orders that are given by a superior member of the gang. If the subordinate member does not follow the orders, the rules indicate that he must be killed. Additionally, once a member of the gang they cannot renounce that membership. To be clear, the only form to undo ties with the gang is through death. In addition, they are not allowed to snitch on fellow MS members, and are instructed that they need to share their belongings with their gang brothers. They also have to participate in gang functions, such as retaliations or hits on other gangs. Finally, the gang rules specify that the term “green light” indicate that they are going to kill a person.

In addition to the thirteen core rules, members have to recruit, kill when instructed, bring profit for the gang, and prove their toughness

(National Geographic 2006). Members may have to commit some violent act to prove toughness and loyalty in place of, or in addition to, being beaten in, depending on the clique (Grascia 2004). For example, a member from a Los Angeles clique reported that when he first joined the gang at age nine he had to go into rival territory and shoot a rival gang member at point blank range (National Geographic 2006). These violent rituals increase cohesion among gang members and it provides an experience that all members share (Grascia 2004).

Violations of gang rules are dealt with in a very organized and almost democratic manner. For example, Brenda Paz was a MS-13 member that became a federal informant. When her fellow gang members found out this information, the gang conducted their own investigation to determine whether the rumor was true (National Geographic 2006). After the investigation was completed, members of Brenda's clique held a meeting to decide whether she was guilty of snitching (National Geographic 2006). Her fellow gang members decided that she was guilty, and voted unanimously to green light (i.e., kill) on her (Rather 2005; National Geographic 2006). She was then lured on a fishing trip on the banks of the Shenandoah River in Virginia by three of her closest friends and her boyfriend, who were also members of the MS-13, and they stabbed her to death (National Geographic 2006).

### **Criminality**

The MS-13 has become notorious in the U.S. for their involvement in criminal behavior. This behavior is often attributed to their historic roots. As mentioned previously, some of the original members were soldiers in the El Salvadorian civil war (Grascia 2004). These youths, some who had been members of the FMLN, were trained in guerilla warfare and military weapon usage (Valdez 2000; Grascia 2004). For example, one of the original leaders of MS-13, Ernesto Miranda, was a former soldier that fought in the El Salvadorian civil war (Barco 2006). Miranda attributes MS-13's rise as one of the most violent gangs in the U.S. to the military training that he and others received (Barco 2006); particularly because they passed on their training to new members (Grascia 2004; Johnson 2006).

### **Violence**

Violence plays a major role in MS-13 culture. Violence not only serves as a means of punishment for betrayals and initiation rituals, but it is also used to prove toughness, retaliate against rivals, defend turf, and in conducting business. For example, MS-13 members have committed acts in retaliation against rival members. In one case, MS-13 members killed a

woman suspected of having ties with their biggest rival, the Eighteenth Street Gang (Carter 2007). The victim was decapitated and the roman numeral eighteen were carved into her head. In another occasion, after a leader of a the MS-13's Marineros clique was beaten by the member of a rival gang called Mara R, the gang retaliated by stabbing a member of the Mara R (FBI 2006b). In Honduras, MS-13 members shot at a bus and killed twenty-eight people; six of them were children (BBC News 2005). This attack was meant to retaliate against the government for anti-gang policies and consideration of re-instating the death penalty.

MS-13 members also use violence to keep rivals from taking their turf (National Geographic 2006). Turf is very profitable, and the more turf a gang has, the more powerful it is. As a result, members of a Los Angeles clique after spotting a rival member on their turf killed him. One of the clique's members was quoted as saying that defending turf was "like a game, a game of who wins the street" (qtd. in National Geographic 2006).

Violence is also used by MS-13 to conduct business. Fear and intimidation is used to collect taxes from any legitimate or illegitimate business owners for the right to conduct their business in MS-13 territory (National Geographic 2006). Anyone conducting business in their turf is required to pay for protection and for the right to conduct their business in their gang turf (Valdez 2000; National Geographic 2006). Hot dog vendors may pay a monthly fee of a few hundred dollars while drug dealers will pay thousands of dollars a month (National Geographic 2006). An MS-13 member told National Geographic that the gang takes a percentage of business owner's earnings, sometimes up to 50% of their profit. He said the people always pay, but "sometimes you have to get a little aggressive with them."

Other violent activities that MS-13 members participate in are rape and witness intimidation (Johnson 2006). There was a case in Hyattsville, Washington where a 22-year-old MS-13 member organized and participated in the gang rape of two teenage girls, ages fifteen and sixteen (Castaneda 2007). The older victim reported that one MS member threatened her with a gun, and afterward, eight other men raped her. Additionally, any witness agreeing to testify against MS-13 members in a court of law or to law enforcement is marked for death (Rather 2005).

### *Criminal Enterprise*

MS-13 participates in a number of criminal activities for profit. As mentioned before, MS-13 extorts business owners, both legitimate and illegitimate, that operate in their territory (Johnson 2006; National

Geographic 2006). In addition to local crimes, MS-13 is known to participate in numerous transnational crimes (Johnson 2006; Valdez 2000). For example, they are involved in the illegal trafficking of stolen vehicles from the U.S. to Central America. They also participate in weapon smuggling and illegal firearm sales (Johnson 2006). Members are able to get high-powered military weapons for cheap prices in their home countries, which they then smuggle back to the U.S. (Valdez 2000). For example, hand grenades cost of \$1-\$2 dollars and an M-16 rifle costs \$200-\$220 dollars in El Salvador (Valdez 2000). The gang has also established themselves in the transnational drug trafficking business. The DEA reports that drugs are a major source of income for MS-13 (Carter 2007). In Los Angeles, MS-13 is a major retail distributor of marijuana (NAGIA 2005). They are also accredited for being a major retail distributor of drugs in Houston (NAGIA 2005). MS-13 also has theft crews that travel across the U.S. robbing over the counter medications from stores, which are then sold in the illegal market (Johnson 2006). Finally, there have also been reports of their involvement in the trade of humans, particularly human smuggling (Castro, 2005).

### **Criminal Justice Police Geared Towards the MS-13**

Law enforcement agencies have tried a number of policies to tackle MS-13. In 2004 the FBI created the MS-13 National Gang Task Force (FBI 2006a). This task force is meant to help coordinate cooperation among local and state law enforcement agencies, and facilitate the flow of information among these agencies in order to dismantle MS-13 (FBI 2005). In 2005, the task force coordinated efforts to arrest and crackdown on MS-13 members in the United State and Central America (FBI 2006a). As a result of this effort, over one hundred gang members were arrested (FBI 2006a). Other strategies involve the deportation of MS-13 members to their home countries (Valdez 2000). Deporting members back to their homeland has exacerbated the gang problem; however, since it has helped the international proliferation of the gang (Carter 2007). MS-13 members who are deported not only maintain their ties to the gang, but have also helped recruit new members once they are back in their home countries (Valdez 2000; Carter 2007). Furthermore, deportation has not been effective because deported members often find ways to return to the U.S. For example, one of the MS-13 members who assassinated Brenda Paz was deported prior to the murder and was able to return to the U.S. illegally (Flores 2005).

Unlike the United States, Central American countries have adopted policies that are more drastic. For example, El Salvador and Honduras have adopted a zero tolerance policy called “Mano Dura” (hard hand). This policy

makes it illegal to be a gang member. In Honduras, for example, being associated with a gang can lead to a prison sentence that ranges from twelve to thirty years (Del Barco 2005). El Salvador has adopted a similar policy. The prison term, however, is shorter and ranges from five years for members and nine years for gang leaders. There have also been allegations that these countries have adopted illegal policies to combat the gangs. For example, in Honduras it is said that prison officials purposely started a fire in a prison in order to execute gang inmates. During this fire over one hundred inmates, most of them who were gang members, died due to burns and smoke inhalations (Carraza, 2004). In addition, some allege that El Salvador uses vigilante groups called “La Sombra Negra” (The Black Shadow) in order to execute local gang members (Del Barco 2005).

### **Conclusions**

Mara Salvatrucha 13, also known as MS-13, was formed by Salvadoran immigrants that came to the United States in order to escape the civil war in their home country. The gang appears to be highly organized and entrenched in lucrative illegal enterprises. In addition, the MS-13 is notorious for its use of violence. Although the attention this gang has received by practitioners, the media, and academics has increased in recent years, there is still much to be learned about this group. As it was illustrated in the above gang profile, there is currently a dearth in knowledge on this gang. Due to their rapid growth and involvement in illegal activities, gang specialists and scholars should conduct more research that focus on this group. For example, future research should examine the organizational structure of the gang, the extent of its membership and reach throughout the U.S. and worldwide, and their rules/norms. Future research should also address the reasons why this gang is so appealing to youth and their recruitment practices. Research in this area may help criminal justice practitioners come up with effective policies to combat this gang. MS-13 is growing rapidly, and effective policies must be created to slow and eventually stop their proliferation.

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### **About the Authors**

Jennifer J. Adams is an undergraduate Honor's College Student at Michigan State University. She is currently completing a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and Criminal Justice. Her research interests include the etiology of gangs, gang violence, and criminological theory.

Jesenia M. Pizarro is an Assistant Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. She earned her Ph.D. from the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, Newark, NJ. Her research interests focus on the social ecology of violence, homicide, and corrections policy. Her recent work has appeared in *The Prison Journal*, *Homicide Studies*, *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Victims & Offenders*. Address all correspondence to Professor Pizarro.