

## Mara Salvatrucha 13: A Transnational Threat

by

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### **Abstract:**

*Rising from humble beginnings as a street gang formed by Salvadorian immigrants in the Rampart District of Los Angeles in the 1980's, MS-13 has expanded across the United States and developed into a transnational gang that has been exported to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. The MS-13 is involved in numerous criminal enterprises including trafficking in drugs, guns and humans. With a penchant for violence, they have been called the "most dangerous gang" in America.*

### **Introduction:**

It began as a local street gang. The Mara Salvatrucha 13 gang was started by Salvadorian refugees and began in the Rampart section of Los Angeles during the late 1980's as a defense against established L.A. street gangs. Two teenage friends, Ernesto "Smokey" Miranda started MS-13 along with Julio Cesar when they felt they were not being accepted by the predominately Mexican street gangs in their neighborhood (Corbiscello, 2008). The name Mara Salvatrucha comes from La Mara street in San Salvador and the Salvatrucha guerillas (Farabundo Marti Nacional Liberacion) that fought in the civil war in El Salvador from 1981-1992. According to some, the gang was originally called the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners but dropped the stoners and adopted to show solidarity with SUR 13 in Southern California. They adopted the "chollo" way of dress. ([http://crimeandcriminalsblog.blogspot/2006\\_09\\_11\\_archive.html](http://crimeandcriminalsblog.blogspot/2006_09_11_archive.html))

The civil war in El Salvador was brutal and killed at least 62,000 people and wounded thousands more. Many of those killed were civilians and both sides used "death squads" as well as conventional or guerrilla forces. During the Salvadorian Civil War many children as young as 14 were inducted into either

the guerilla or government forces. This gave many of the original MS-13 members paramilitary training. The civil war also led to masses of refugees fleeing the war looking for work and safety. The war displaced an estimated 1 million Salvadorians, many of whom came to the United States either legally or illegally (Grascia, 2004).

From these humble beginnings the Mara Salvatrucha 13 began to expand. MS-13 is now active in 42 states and in the District of Columbia. Other branches of MS-13 are active in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The Federal Bureau of Investigation estimates there are 6,000 to 10,000 members in U.S. There are larger contingents overseas (FBI, 2008). The gang has adopted colors of blue and white taken from the colors of the national flag of El Salvador.

### **Membership:**

Like most beginning local street gangs, MS-13 was looking for “people like us” to become members of their group. They recruited friends from within their own social circles. Membership was originally restricted to people from El Salvador, Ecuador, Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. But now other Latinos are permitted to join. Ethnicity rather than race is a factor.

Spanish is the primary language used by members of the gang. This also serves as a protective factor for the gang. By limiting access for membership to a particular ethnic group who speaks a particular language, a gang lessens the possibility of infiltration by the police or other hostile groups. Prospective members must be vouched for by current members.

Ages of MS-13 members range from 11 to 40. The membership of MS-13 is overwhelmingly male. However, some females are permitted to join MS-13 in some areas on East Coast of the United States especially around the Washington D.C. or Fairfax, Virginia area. ([http://crimeandcriminalsblog.blogspot/2006\\_09\\_11\\_archive.html](http://crimeandcriminalsblog.blogspot/2006_09_11_archive.html)). The members of the MS-13 cliques on the West Coast find the very idea of female MS-13 members to be very strange and “not LA!”

According to the FBI (2008): MS-13 in the United States is expanding its membership at a “moderate” rate through recruitment and migration. Some MS-13 members move to get jobs or to be near family members—currently, the southeast and the northeast portions of the United States are seeing the largest increases in membership. MS-13 often recruits new members by glorifying the gang lifestyle (often on the Internet, complete with pictures and videos) and by absorbing smaller gangs.

Unlike more traditional Hispanic gangs, MS-13 is very mobile and flexible. Rather than staying within a single neighborhood or turf, MS-13 has rapidly spread across the United States.

When they move into a new area they are very flashy and wear colors openly. When police respond, they tone down colors or use more subtle markings. MS-13 members are very open about what type of crimes they commit. They are not stuck on just one type of crime. They adapt very quickly and can change tactics to meet local needs.

### **Initiation and Rules:**

Like all gangs, MS-13 has initiation procedures to ensure that the prospective member is worthy to be a member of the group. Male members are

jumped in with a beating by other MS-13's for 13 seconds. Female members are often sexed in but may choose to be beaten in (United States East Coast, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico). Sexing in of female members is more common in Central America (Dixon-Gomex, et al, 2006). Murdered MS-13 member Brenda Paz had chosen to be beaten into MS-13 when she joined the gang.

While most MS-13 cliques operate as independent entities, they often have similar sets of rules. Johnson (2006) observed that:

“Raids of suspected MS-13 safe houses in Central America, Mexico and the USA by federal and international law enforcement officials resulted in more than 600 arrests and the discovery of gang ‘constitutions’, the FBI said. The documents, most of them crudely handwritten codes of conduct, listed a range of punishments—from death to severe beatings—for transgressions against the gang. The seizures marked the first time that such organizational records had been recovered in this country.”

A “Code of Silence” is strictly enforced with no tolerance. Informers are murdered. An example of this would be the July 13, 2003 murder of Honduran immigrant Brenda Paz. Paz was a member of MS-13 and had turned informant for the U.S. government. She was 17 years old and pregnant when she was stabbed 16 times by MS-13 members and left to die in Shenandoah County, Virginia. When the body was found the head of the victim had almost been severed. Two MS-13 members were convicted of her murder, but two others were acquitted in a federal jury trial (Frieden, 2005). Alleged violators of MS-13 rules are often tried internally in an *El Juzgado* (court) held by senior MS-13 members in the clique (Perez, 2001). Other times, such as Nassau County, New York two different MS-13 members were killed with hours in different parts of the county for allegedly informing on MS-13 to the police. Domash (2005) found that:

“Court papers reveal that one of the Nassau County defendants was captured in a secretly recorded telephone conversation detailing how he had killed a male victim because he had provided law enforcement officials with information and that he had ‘put one in his chest and three in his head’. In another recorded conversation, a second defendant said he killed a young female because, in part, she had also provided information to law enforcement” (p. 31).

Membership in MS-13 is for life. Members of MS-13 can't act without boss's consent. Members can't skip gang meetings.

### **Organizational Structure:**

The MS-13 is organized into “Cliques”. Each clique operates sort of like a hamburger franchise. Thus being independently owned and operated, while retaining their affiliation with the national brand of MS-13. Cliques have business meetings with agendas, goals, reports, etc. . The National Drug Intelligence Center (2004) found that:

“Mara Salvatrucha cliques conduct annual meetings that vary from clique to clique. Some cliques also have weekly or monthly meetings. The cliques use the meetings to plan criminal activity, discipline members, resolve disputes, and initiate new members. Most meetings are held at local restaurants, outdoor recreation facilities, parks, pool halls, private homes, and rented hotel rooms. Occasionally the gang hold a national or regional level meeting, referred to as a Universal, with representatives of cliques from multiple states

attending.”

The local boss is called “the shot caller”. “Runners” are messengers that travel between cliques and are treated with great respect. Originally, these cliques operated totally independently of one another, but there have been recent attempts by MS-13’s from the West Coast to get things more formally organized through Misas Janeras (conferences). The goal is to be the leading Hispanic gang (Carter, 2007).

### **MS-13 Clique Structure:**

[Graphic not printed here](#)

### **Common Crimes:**

Criminal activity by members of MS-13 can be divided into primary and secondary crimes. Primary crimes are those crime that general money. Secondary crimes are those that are committed in support of the primary crimes.

### **MS-13 Primary Crimes:**

1. MS-13 does not manufacture drugs. They are however, heavily involved in drug trafficking (Methamphetamine, Cocaine, Marijuana and Heroin). MS-13 is also involved in the retail drug sale of drugs to consumers. It is a major source of income for the gang.
2. Weapons violations are another primary crime that MS-13 specializes in. MS-13 deals in guns. Some of these guns (especially handguns) end up being smuggled back into El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, or Honduras.

3. Carjacking/Auto Theft/Chop Shops are popular money making activities for many cliques of MS-13. Many of the stolen cars are smuggled into Central America and thus removed from being recovered by United States law enforcement authorities.
4. Extortion/Protection Rackets are reported among MS-13 activities in the immigrant communities in the U.S. and in Central and South American MS-13 operations. Payment often comes in the form of a "*impuestos de guerra* (war taxes)" that MS-13 members to business, other gangs and sometimes (in Central America) even government officials so that the "taxpayers" will be allowed to operate in their areas unmolested.
5. Smuggling has become another major money maker for the MS-13. Their extensive transportation network from El Salvador back to the United States has given rise to lucrative trade in drugs, illegal immigrants automatic weapons being smuggled back into the United States. Almost as lucrative is the trade in weapons (handguns, rifles, shotguns), and stolen automobiles going back south into Central America.
6. Human Trafficking is becoming a major operation by MS-13. The illegal immigrants are often extorted or robbed for money, especially on the Mexican railway system. They often are required to "mule" illicit drug into the United States as a part of the fare for their passage.
7. Theft/Fencing is usually an affair conducted by local MS-13 cliques. It may be a part of the initiation process. However, it is a primary source of weapons for the export trade back into Central America. Junkies will trade stolen goods for dope and the MS-13 will move the stolen goods out of the country.
8. Robbery is another way that MS-13 makes money. They like to rob other drug dealers as well as regular citizens.
9. Home Invasions are primarily against immigrants (especially against illegal immigrants) in the local area. The likelihood of being reported to the police is less.
10. MS-13 involvement in prostitution is not widespread, however it has been reported in some states (i.e. MD).

#### **MS-13 Secondary Crimes:**

1. MS-13 participation in murder or assaults can occur for many reasons including intimidation, eliminating gang rivals, control of turf, control of drug trade, control of MS-13 personnel, etc.
2. When you acquire lots of illegal money it has to go someplace. Therefore MS-13 participates in money laundering to be able to use its ill gotten gains without interference from government.
3. Bribery is used by MS-13 to limit the actions of business or government officials mainly in Central America. This is especially true among officials of the Mexican railway systems.
4. While not an official tactic, gang rape has been reported in several states by MS-13 members (NY, TX). It is usually involved

in a party setting. However, the use of gang rape for intimidation or retaliation against a wayward member or their family, while rare is not unheard of.

### **Violence & MS-13**

Violence is an inherent part of gang life in most street gangs in the United States. This is especially true in the MS-13. Many of the members have had paramilitary training or experience. An interesting thing about violence and MS-13 is that the gang has a set of rules as to when and how a MS-13 member can engage in violent acts and style counts. Permission to kill is called a “green light” and must come from the shot caller. Assassinations have strict rules that call for at least one head shot to the victim. There are penalties for the MS-13 assassin that fails to score at least one head shot on the victim. If a victim is shot in the head and somehow survives, it is considered to be OK because the rules were followed. Murder weapon (gun) is often sent to other city to be used in another murder. Notes are often left with the body of the victim either listing the reason that the victim was killed or containing further threats against rival gangs or law enforcement (USA, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala) .

Another favorite weapon for MS-13 members is the machete. Machete attacks on the East Coast and in Central America have decapitated many victims. Fingers are often chopped off the hands of gang rivals such as in the 2005 attack in Fairfax, Virginia in which three fingers were chopped off the left hand of the victim by three MS-13 members using a machete. The victim was a member of the South Side locos, a rival gang (Jackman, 2005). This attack followed a machete attack on a South Side Locos gang member in May, 2004 where the victim lost four fingers to MS-13 machete wielding members. Local military surplus stores in the area noted a sharp rise in machete sales to groups of individuals who “did not look like the camping” types (Shapira, 2005).

### **Markings and Identifiers:**

Members of Mara Salvatrucha 13 use the number 13 to show their originations in Southern, California. Sometime they use different numbers such as 76 and 67 which add up to 13. MS-13 colors Blue and White for Salvadorian flag.

MS-13 gang members will sport tattoos denoting membership in MS-13. Gothic Script is preferred for most tattoos using letters.(MS-13, MS XIII, La Mara, comedy and tragedy masks indicating laugh now/cry latter, three dots in the shape of a triangle indicating mi vida loca, dice, cross bones, daggers). Other tattoos such as tear drops located under the eyes of the gang members can indicate a fallen gang member or a person that the MS-13 member that assaulted or killed. Tattoos of bricks sometime indicate that the MS-13 member has served time in prison, each brick tattoo= 1year of time served. In west coast members, these tattoos may not be visible if the MS-13 member is wearing a long sleeve shirt. However, MS-13 members on the east coast of the United States and those in Central America follow a more Mayan based cultural tradition in the selection of their tattoos and often will have their entire body tattooed including their face. This type of facial tattooing is especially popular among MS-13 members who have served prison time in Central America. Tattoos on the inside of lips and on upper eyelids have also been seen.

MS-13 gang members are fond of heart shaped jewelry (making closed M) and multi-colored rosaries (usually blue and white). Like most gangs in the United States, MS-13 member will also use hand signs for challenge and identification. The usages of graffiti to mark turf, declare war, show morning, or intimidate rivals is common in MS-13 as it is in other street gangs across the United States (NDIC, 2004).

#### **Will Raid Other Drug Dealers:**

Drug rip offs and attacking other gang's drug houses have become an MS-13 trademark. Paramilitary tactics are often used including heavily armed assault teams conducting sweeps of the residence to be hit. In describing a raid by MS-13 in Houston, Texas on a rival gang's drug house, USA Today reporter Kevin Johnson (2006) quoted a Houston Police spokesman's description of the attack:

"The MS-13 suspects swept through the house like a well-trained assault team, using paramilitary tactics including perimeter lookouts, high powered weaponry (an AK-47 rifle was among the weapons recovered later), and a quick, room-by-room sweep of the house that was notable for its precision and sophistication, Houston police spokesman Alvin Wright said."

When law enforcement authorities challenged the raiders, a shootout broke out that left two MS-13 suspects dead. MS-13 has used hand grenade attacks in Central America.

#### **MS-13 Soccer Teams:**

Soccer is possibly the most popular sport among Hispanic youth. MS-13 has at least two soccer teams in Los Angeles that play regular games against other clubs. There has been information that there is a possible MS-13 Soccer team in Galveston, Texas. Most MS-13 soccer teams were some variation of the Salvadorian National Team Jersey with the colors blue and white. Playing organized sports allows the MS-13 to legitimize itself as a community organization with the Hispanic community and also acts as a good place to recruit new members.

#### **Communication Tactics:**

MS-13 members are very technologically competent. While they still use runners as the most secure method of communication, they also use:

- Cellular Phones
- Internet
- 3 way calling from jail or prison through friends or relatives.
- Hand signs
- Pagers
- Graffiti

#### **Deportation is Ineffective as a LE Tactic:**

The government's answer to the control of gangs with foreign born members has been forced deportation of convicted members of those gangs back to their countries of origin. Large scale immigrations sweeps were conducted that targeted gangs such as MS-13. ICE's Operation Community Shield in 2005 which arrested over 103 MS-13 members in 27 states was typical of this type of operation (OCD, 2005). Deportation has proved to be an ineffective tactic in the control of gangs such

as MS-13. Sibaja, et al (2006) observed that:

“In 1996, the number of returnees increased, as immigration policies changed and the United States deported thousands of people to El Salvador and other Central American countries. Although these deported immigrants were not identified as criminals or gang members at the time of deportation, some had been incarcerated in the California prison system. Some of these deportees were gang members, including members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street (Barrio 18) gangs, and took many aspects of U.S. gang culture back to El Salvador, including hand signals, insider language, styles of dress, and propensity for rebellion and violence. MS-13 and 18th Street members learned much of their craft from the established Mafia Mexicana, then the most influential gang in Southern California..“

Agreeing on the ineffectiveness of deportation as a way to control MS-13 gang members, the Crime and Criminals Blog (2006) stated:

“One of the ways in which the MS-13 has grown and spread has been through United States deportation policy. The United States has a law allowing for the deportation of non-citizens convicted of felonies to their country of origin. Salvadorian members of MS-13 were and are deported to El Salvador, where they recruit more members. Because of the meager wages provided by prisons, many jail guards in El Salvador are easily corrupted through bribes, or are forcefully coerced to release the recently deported MS-13 members. MS-13 members who are deported to El Salvador from Los Angeles are idolized by the youth there and are fascinated by the newly deported gang members.”

Thus countries such as El Salvador, which had never had MS-13 as a gang before, suddenly acquired MS-13 gang members and they brought their criminal lifestyles with them. MS-13 gang members view deportation as an opportunity to see friends, family and fellow gang members in the old country. They frequently bring back weapons, illegal immigrants or drugs when the MS-13 members re-infiltrate the United States.

### **MS-13 in El Salvador:**

MS-13 migrated back to El Salvador when gang members were deported there from the United States beginning in 1996. DeCesare (1998) found that:

“The emergence of youth gangs in El Salvador with ties to gangs in Los Angeles is in many ways a story of changing U.S. immigration policy. It is also a story of modern economic dislocation the disappearance of traditional economies and the rise of new crack cocaine markets. At one time a drug transshipment country with no internal market for cocaine beyond the small elite class, El Salvador now has crack houses in its slums. Smoking primos—joints of crack mixed with marijuana—is a common part of gang life, and homeboys often support their own drug habits by selling drugs. Add to this the cultural dislocation which has led to a triumph of consumerism and advertising over politics, and the saga of El Salvador assumes an historical irony of tragic proportions.”

MS-13 took root and grew rapidly growing to thousands of members engaged in human and drug trafficking. The Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Publica (National Council of Public Security) estimates there are approximately 22,000 Ms-13 members are in El Salvador (Sibaja, 2006).

MS-13 is listed as an “organized crime” organization by Salvadorian authorities who have taken a hard line stance against both MS-13 and La 18. However, MS-13 leaders are difficult to identify. It is rumored that there is a single head of MS-13 in El Salvador who acts as the “shot caller” from his prison cell in El Salvador. Publicity by the Salvadorian press has only served to romanticize the gang and the gangster lifestyle. Some Salvadorians (rumored to be off-duty Salvadorian cops) responded with La Sombra Negra (black shadow) kidnapping and killing MS-13’s as they got off of the deportation planes (Corbiscello, 2008). It is unknown if any women belong to MS-13 in El Salvador. However, it may be assumed that there are, based on La 18 adopting a rule prohibiting the recruiting of any more women into La 18 in El Salvador.

In their examination of the gang situation in El Salvador, (Sibaja, et al., 2006) interviewed several Salvadorian officials. They were told by:

“Ricardo Meneses, former Director of Police, observed that some *clickas* and some gang members are becoming more sophisticated. The increased sophistication of El Salvadoran gangs is exemplified by the following characteristics:

- Use of minors to commit crimes, since they cannot be convicted as adults.
- Family support of gangs, as some gang members support their families financially through gang activities.
- Widespread, national visibility, with incarcerated gang members expanding their networks through jails.
- “Fees” demanded (extortion) from bus drivers and business owners.
- Stronger links with organized crime.
- Competition for drug trafficking replacing competition for territories.
- Some members are to pay for costly defense attorneys indicating substantial profits through criminal activity.
- Fluid communication between gangs in El Salvador and in the United States. Members have a sophisticated communication networks between prisons and the street, using coded language and paper messages folded in a precise manner, which is also coded. Gangs may also communicate through Web sites.
- Autonomy and organization. It is believed that in El Salvador, 18th Street has a structure made up of *ranfla* (national leaders), *runers* (leaders with no tattoos, strong discipline, and the responsibility for committing homicides, and trafficking drugs and weapons), and *missionaries* (*clickas* gang members).
- Gang members displacing “*coyotes*”<sup>11</sup> and narcotraffickers” ([http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin\\_america\\_caribbean/democracy/els\\_profile.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf))

The result has been an increasing culture of gang violence in El Salvador between the MS-13 and their arch enemies La 18. MS-13 members often charge “*impuestos de guerra* (war taxes)” to business and sometimes even government officials so that the “taxpayers” will be allowed to operate in their areas unmolested. El Salvador remains an important transshipment point for illegal drugs and narcotics from Columbia to the United States. MS-13 members in El Salvador have also begun to invest in legitimate businesses possibly to launder illegally acquired monies such as natural

gas companies.

The murder rate in El Salvador has skyrocketed in recent years. Ironically one of the murder victims was one of the original founders of MS-13, Erenensto “Smokey” Miranda who had allegedly left MS-13, returned to El Salvador and was helping children to stay out of gangs. Miranda was murdered on 05-13-06 after declining to attend a party for a MS-13 member who had been recently released from prison. One of the many victims of the *racha violenta* among the *pandillero*'s (gang members) in El Salvador (COAV, 2006).

### **MS-13 in Guatemala:**

Guatemala had its own civil war between 1960-1996. This left thousands dead and thousands more armed in a country that had a culture of violence. This problem was compounded by refugees from the civil war in El Salvador that fled the conflict in their country. This was complicated even further by the deportations of Guatemalan MS-13 members back to Guatemala beginning in 1992. The murder rate in Guatemala is 7 times that of the United States. In observing the role of females in the MS-13 in Guatemala, Acuna et al. (2006) observed that:

“While there are females in male dominated gangs, their role within these is subordinate and sexual exploitation of women by male gang members is common.”

The Guatemalan National Civil Police (PNC) estimates that there are over 200 MS-13 gangs with about 3,000 members operating on the border with Mexico. MS-13 members commit crimes in Guatemala and flee into Mexico to avoid the PNC. Beheadings of *Mara* enemies have occurred in prison and in Guatemala City. The prisons are breeding and training grounds for MS-13 in Guatemala.

### **MS-13 in Honduras:**

After the El Salvador Civil War, thousands of Salvadorian refugees had fled to Honduras. This refugee population combined with deportations of MS-13 members to Honduras from the United States beginning in 1992 and Salvadorian MS-13 members fleeing prosecution in El Salvador for crimes committed there resulted in MS-13 growing to thousands of members in Honduras (Richard, 2003). MS-13 and La 18 members began to absorb and take over the local gangs. In its Honduran version, MS-13 is very territorial. Women make up approximately 7% of the MS-13 membership in Honduras.

The Honduran government has cracked down on MS-13 after President Maduro's son was killed by a MS-13 member. Criminal prosecutions resulted in sentences of 12 yrs for being a leader and 9 yrs for simply being a gang member. Research into the gang situation in Honduras by Acuna et al. (2006) found that:

“Honduras implemented anti-*maras* legislation in 2001 after the National Congress approved an amendment to the Penal Code intended to deal with crimes committed by gangs. In response, gangs are now less territorial and have changed their dress, some members have fled to El Salvador and the United States, and some *clickas* still charge war taxes or extortion on bus drivers,

taxi drivers, and small business owners. Others have been hired as mercenaries and are used for executions, drug distribution, and distractions for the police while other gang business is being conducted. As gangs have become more sophisticated, many have become involved in trafficking of drugs and arms. Many youths in gangs are also substance abusers, and their payment for services is often drugs, especially crack and marijuana. Up until 2000, gangs used homemade weapons, but gangs are becoming more sophisticated as some drug traffickers pay gang members with firearms. Honduran gangs tend to be located around prisons to allow easier communication with incarcerated leaders.”

In 2002, MS-13 counterattacked and slaughtered 28 people on a bus. MS-13 moved many operations from Honduras into Mexico or El Salvador. Many MS-13 members remain in Honduras. There are an estimated 60,000 members of MS-13 per the Honduran Police. (BPFIC, 2004)

### **MS-13 in Mexico:**

Mexico has long had its own organized criminal drug trafficking organizations. People of organizations who attempted to conflict with these Mexican DTO's usually ended up badly. However, MS-13 has found a unique solution to this problem. MS-13 has allied itself with the Mexican DTO's and Los Zetas (allied primarily with the Gulf Cartel). Unlike the Mexican DTO's, MS-13 is not a manufacturer of drugs. However, they are extensively involved in the transshipment, distribution and retail of drugs especially in the United States. Therefore they can and do provide useful services to the Mexican DTO's primarily "El Chapo" Guzman's Sinaloa Cartel (allied with the Federation) and the Gulf Cartel in exchange for being allowed to operate in Mexico. MS-13 members have been used as soldiers or hit men in the various conflicts between the Mexican DTO's. (Acuna, 2006). MS-13 members are predominately male, however in some areas of Mexico a few female members are found.

In 2004, the Mexican government arrested over 300 MS-13 members, as a threat to national security. The Minister for Public Security, Eduardo Medina Mora estimated that there were 5,000 MS-13 members currently in Mexico. The MS-13 members were charged with drug Trafficking, Human Trafficking and Weapons Trafficking. MS-13 is active in the state of Chiapas, Matamoros, Nova Laredo and other areas. The Chiapas State Attorney General reported that during the first 9 mo. of 2003 there were 187 murders on the coast and border area with Guatemala. 30% showed torture and coupe de grace in the MS-13 style ( BPFIC, 2004)

MS-13 is engaged in transportation of drugs, stolen goods, weapons, and illegal immigrants throughout Mexico and into the United States. Thus the MS-13 controls many railroad operations in Mexico through bribes or threats. MS-13 members often board Mexican trains showing their blue and white MS-13 beads like a rail pass and are given free passage. Transportacion Ferrovaria Mexicana and other railways have been mentioned as cooperating with MS-13 either voluntarily or through intimidation. Bus traffic in *tijuaneiros* by immigrants is also regulated by MS-13 in some areas and would be immigrants are "taxed". Acuna (2006) observed that:

“The movement of people, drugs, weapons, and other illegal substances is a major reason gang members come together in the southern border area.

Until Hurricane Stan ravaged southern Mexico in October 2005, the Chiapas-Mayab railway line was a major source of income for MS-13. MS-13 allegedly extorted migrants as they attempted to illegally board the train for a ride north. The train is now back in operation.”

### **MS-13 and Alleged Terrorist Ties:**

In an article published in the Boston Herald, Michele McPhee (2005) stated that:

“In recent months, intelligence officials in Washington have warned national law enforcement agencies that al-Qaeda terrorists have been spotted with members of MS-13 in El Salvador, prompting concerns the gang may be smuggling Islamic fundamentalist terrorists into the country. Law enforcement officials have long believed that MS-13 controls alien smuggling routes along Mexico.”

There have been reports in the press of meetings in Honduras between MS-13 and members of Al-Qaeda at a recent gang summit meeting. These meetings were supposedly to smuggle members of the Al-Qaeda into the U.S. (Chandler, 2005). Describing this alleged meeting Washington Times reporter Jerry Seper (2004) reported:

“A top al Qaeda lieutenant has met with leaders of a violent Salvadoran criminal gang with roots in Mexico and the United States -- including a stronghold in the Washington area -- in an effort by the terrorist network to seek help infiltrating the U.S.-Mexico border, law enforcement authorities said. Adnan G. El Shukrijumah, a key al Qaeda cell leader for whom the U.S. government has offered a \$5 million reward, was spotted in July in Honduras meeting with leaders of El Salvador’s notorious Mara Salvatrucha gang, which immigration officials said has smuggled hundreds of Central and South Americans -- mostly gang members -- into the United States. “

Another article published in the Terrorism Monitor and on Mexidata,Info (Cruz, 2005) reported that:

“The inexorable expansion of Mara activities has not been ignored by the U.S. government. Indeed last summer, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft claimed that Adnan G. El Shukrijumah, a known al-Qaeda member and suspect in the planning of 9/11 (and for whom the U.S. has offered a \$5 million reward) was allegedly spotted in July 2004 in Honduras meeting with leaders of the Mara Salvatrucha. Shukrijumah was allegedly trying to secure entry routes into the U.S., along the Mexican border, as the MS is purported to have established a major smuggling center in Matamoros, Mexico, just south of Brownsville, Texas.”

These rumors of MS-13 involvement in alleged Al Qaeda infiltration into the United States have not been substantiated by investigations from the FBI. On April 20, 2005, FBI Assistant Director Chris Swecker testified before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the House International Relations Committee that there was no Al Qaeda and MS-13 connection that the FBI was able to find after extensive investigation in the rumors of such an association (<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm>). However, in an article in the Boston Globe reported by Mark Sherman (2005) said that:

“FBI director Robert Mueller told Congress yesterday that people from countries with ties to Al Qaeda have crossed into the United States from Mexico, using false identities.”

**MS-13 Allies:**

Like any other street gang or criminal organization, Ms-13 has its friends and allies. Among these are :

MS-13 is allied with Mexican Mafia in prison. They pay street tax to Mexican Mafia in custody. According to Acuna et al. (2006) “All gangs south of Bakersfield must pay homage to the Mafia Mexicana once in the California prison system. The *tregua de sur* (truce of the south), as it is called, is characterized by those southern gangs, including the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, taking their orders from the Mafia Mexicana.”

SUR 13

La Gran Familia (NJ)

Southwest Cholos (TX)

Rolling 60's Crips (VA)

Hell Angels (Canada, WA)

“El Chapo” Guzman and the Sinaloa Cartel (Mexico)

Los Zetas (Mexico)

Gulf Cartel (Mexico)

**MS-13 Enemies:**

If you have friends, you also have enemies and rivals in a gang. Those groups that MS-13 considers to be enemies or rivals include:

La 18

Latin Kings (NJ)

52 Hoover Street Crips

Brown Pride

Gangster Disciples

La Raza

La Sombra Negra

Nortenos

Salvadorians With Pride

United Blood Nation

**Summary:**

The Mara Salvatrucha -13 has grown from a small local Los Angeles street gang phenomenon into a growing transnational organized criminal enterprise that extends across the United States and into Central America.

With the revolving door problem that exists on the U.S. borders, MS-13 has been able to emerge as a transnational criminal presence ((Boerman, 2007, p.39). MS-13 is opportunistic and is involved in multiple levels of criminality both horizontally and vertically. With its franchise style structure MS-13's ability to expand and adapt to local conditions makes it a dangerous threat to law enforcement. The international nature of MS-13 makes its' eventual involvement with international terrorists a real possibility.

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