

Organization Attributes Sheet: Mara-18/M-18/18th Street Gang

Author: Andrew Moss

Review: Phil Williams and Adrienna Jones

A. When the organization was formed + brief history

- What is now known in El Salvador as Mara 18 or M-18 is a regional offshoot of the Los Angeles-based 18th Street Gang.
- Formed in Los Angeles in the 1960s, 18th Street Gang consisted mostly of Mexican immigrants who could not get into other Mexican gangs.¹
- During the 1970s and 1980s, 18th Street's lack of membership restrictions made it the first multi-racial and multi-ethnic gang in Los Angeles. Its non-restrictive policy made it grow in size to become one of LA's largest gangs.²
- During the 1980s some 700,000 Salvadorans fled the Salvadoran Civil War, the majority of whom ended up in impoverished areas of Los Angeles. Gang life became attractive to disaffected Salvadoran youths and many joined either 18th Street or the native-Salvadoran gang the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).
- In the early 1990s the United States began to pursue an aggressive policy of deportation for violent criminals who were immigrants. Of all the Salvadorans deported during this time approximately one third had committed violent crimes, mostly related to gang activity.³
- The deported Salvadoran members of 18th Street regrouped in San Salvador. Although still formally belonging to 18th Street, the Salvadoran faction renamed itself Mara 18 (M-18).
- Once established in El Salvador, M-18 began a bloody turf war with MS-13, which continues nearly two decades later.

B. Types of illegal activities engaged in,

a. In general

- Drug trafficking, drug distribution, murder, prostitution, rape, armed robbery, car theft, car-jacking, extortion.⁴

b. *Specific detail: types of illicit trafficking activities engaged in*

- Control certain railroad routes in southern Mexico in which they collect "taxes" from migrant workers attempting to reach the United States.⁵
- Traffic cocaine, methamphetamine, marijuana, and heroin around the United States, which they purchase from Mexican DTOs namely Sinaloa and Tijuana.⁶

C. Scope and Size

a. Estimated size of network and membership

- Around 30,000 active members in the United States.⁷
- According to the Salvadoran Police there are approximately 4,000-5,000 M-18 members in El Salvador although the Salvadoran National Council on Public Security estimates the number to be as high as 10,000.⁸

b. Countries / regions group is known to have operated in. (i.e. the group's operating area)

- United States, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico

D. Leader Characteristics

a. Who is/are the leader(s)

- Although it is suspected that there is some national-level leadership no single leader has ever been identified.⁹
- Group is made up of loosely affiliated, independent cliques each with its own

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

leadership organization.¹⁰

b. Leadership timeline

- The “anti-mara” laws in Central America have been focused around targeting important leaders of individual cliques. It is believed that when a leader is taken down it rarely affects the group’s ability to operate as another member quickly assumes the vacant leadership role.¹¹

c. Leadership style (autocratic, diffuse, etc.)

- Within each clique, leadership is very autocratic. Members who break gang rules are subjected to a group beating that lasts 18 seconds. Betraying the gang or attempting to leave is punishable by death.¹²

E. Organizational Structure

a. Topology (cellular, hierarchical, etc.)

- Structure can vary but the typical Salvadoran M-18 clique is quite hierarchical. There is a clique leader (called “primera palabra”) and a deputy (called “segunda palabra”) who serves as the leader’s right-hand man. Beneath them are three different groups or “executive committees,” which are responsible for the gang’s main operational concerns: logistics; enforcement; and surveillance. At the lowest level of the M-18 pyramid are the foot soldiers. They are responsible for selling drugs and collecting extortion payments from bus drivers and local merchants.¹³

b. Membership – is there formal or informal membership in the organization or network? What role do informal or nonmembers play in trafficking and other criminal activities?

- Membership is very formal.¹⁴

c. Command and Control (decentralized or centralized)

- Decentralized. Each clique operates more or less independently although occasionally they will come together to fight a common enemy (usually MS-13).¹⁵

F. Resources

a. Financial

- Primary source of funding is through drug trafficking/distributing operations, extortion, and kidnapping.

b. Human

- Group is thought to have more somewhere around 50,000 members worldwide with 30,000 in the United States, 4000-5,000 in El Salvador, and the remaining 5,000 spread out primarily in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico.¹⁶

c. Logistical

i. Forgery, safe-houses, etc.

- Have safe houses in southern Mexico that they use for logistic purposes in their human smuggling activities and as places to store kidnapped migrant workers until ransom is paid.¹⁷

ii. Key routes

- Railways in southern Mexico.¹⁸

d. Transportation

i. Land

- Rely on cars and trucks for drug trafficking operations in the U.S.
- Control certain railroad routes in southern Mexico where they extort and kidnap migrant workers traveling to the United States.¹⁹

ii. Sea

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No information was found.
iii. Air
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No information was found.
iv. Intermodal container
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No information was found.
G. Trafficking Methods and Modalities
a. Corruption
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploits corrupt nature of Salvadoran politics and law enforcement for trafficking and other illegal activities.²⁰
b. Concealment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use cars and trucks with secret compartments.
c. Deception
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deceptive measures include trafficking drugs disguised as other products such as legitimate medicines.
d. Circumvention (avoiding border entry points)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group is not directly involved in cross-border trafficking but rather provides muscle and logistical support to Mexican DTOs that do use circumvention methods along the Mexican-United States border.
H. Prior / Existing Relationships
a. Other criminal organizations (cooperative and conflictual)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mexican DTOs, particularly Sinaloa and Tijuana. Colombian DTOs for whom they provide protection and logistic support for trafficking operations through Central America. The Mexican Mafia (La Eme) who provide protection for members in American prisons.²¹
b. Corrupt politicians, law enforcement, political parties and other state entities, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses widespread corruption in El Salvador to advance illegal activities. This is particularly evident in the ability of M-18 to operate with almost complete impunity in Salvadoran prisons.²²
c. <i>Specific detail: Any alliances / past dealings with terrorist groups.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has worked in the past with the FARC in drug trafficking activity.²³
I. Ideological / Ethnic / Familial Orientation (if any)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18th Street Gang is one of the only American gangs whose membership is not defined by a particular race or ethnicity. The ethnicity of the M-18 branches in Central America and Mexico presumably corresponds to the country in which the group is operating. The group considers itself a family and fellow members are considered brothers/sisters for life.
J. Technical Sophistication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration with Mexican DTOs has made the group more sophisticated in its trafficking methods and combat skills, particularly with larger caliber arms.²⁴
K. Penchant for Innovation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seems to be quite high. Congressional Research Service classifies M-18 as a third generation gang, suggesting that it is quite innovative.²⁵
L. Activities in United States
a. Includes both criminal and non-criminal activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drug trafficking, drug distribution, murder, prostitution, rape, armed robbery, car

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

theft, car-jacking, extortion

b. Specific detail: trafficking activities; logistical activities

- Traffic and distribute cocaine, methamphetamine, marijuana, and heroin, which they acquire from Mexican DTOs namely Sinaloa and Tijuana.²⁶

c. Linkages with US groups

i. Market/transaction links

- U.S. cliques of 18th Street give a portion of their revenue to La Eme for protection for members in American prisons.²⁷

ii. Stable supplier

- Mexican DTOs mainly Sinaloa and Tijuana.²⁸

iii. Franchise arrangement

- Members who have relocated to a new city often found new cliques using the 18th Street/M-18 franchise.²⁹

iv. HQ and Branch office

- No official “headquarters” but largest geographical concentration is found in Los Angeles.

M. Evaluations

a. Strengths

- Very large and powerful with a presence in almost every major U.S. city. With over 30,000 active members in the United States M-18 is one of America’s biggest gangs.
- Connection to 18th Street cliques in the United States gives the gang great logistical support.
- Desire and ability to expand. Along with counterpart/rival MS-13, is one of the few gangs classified as a legitimate third-generation gang.
- The gang’s openness to members from other races and ethnicities has helped it expand its network throughout North and Central America.

b. Weaknesses and vulnerabilities

- Huge number of members, but the lack of central leadership has not yet allowed them to become a legitimate transnational criminal organization.
- Mexican DTOs (particularly the Zetas) that are expanding through Central America seem to prefer working with MS-13.
- M-18 has been slower than MS-13 to respond and adapt to new anti-gang initiatives in Central America.³⁰

c. Additional insights

- There are several factors that will ultimately determine if Mara-18 will make the step from third-generation gang to fully functioning transnational criminal organization. First, the group needs to adapt better to changing circumstances. The members have been slow to lose the culture of covering themselves from head to toe with tattoos, thus making them more visible to law enforcement. MS-13, on the other hand, has adapted much better which could explain why Mara-18 seems to be receiving less attention from the Zetas. Second, were the cliques able to form a cohesive central leadership structure M-18 would be one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the United States. However, it might just be too big and too diverse to centralize.
- In June 2010, M-18 members burned a bus, killing at least 14 people.³¹ Targeting civilians without a second thought could indicate that the group would be willing to work with terrorists who wish to carry out similar acts in the United States.

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

Other Notes

•

¹ Franco, Celia. "The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threats?" *Congressional Research Service*, 2008 p.5

² Ibid

³ Dudley, Steven S. "Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels, and Maras". *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, 2010 p.19

⁴ Sampson County Sheriff's Office. "18th Street", 2010. Retrieved online at http://www.sampsonsheriff.com/otherforms/20051011_18th_street_gang.pdf

⁵ Wuebbels, Mark. "Demystifying Human Smuggling Operations Along the Arizona-Mexican Border" p.37

⁶ National Drug Intelligence Center. "National Drug Threat Assessment 2010", p.64 Retrieved online at <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs38/38661/38661p.pdf>

⁷ USAID. "Central American and Mexican Gang Assessment: Annex 1 El Salvador", 2006

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Dudley, Steven S. op cit "Drug Trafficking..."

¹¹ USAID. op cit

¹² Pollack, Ricardo. "Gang Life Tempts Salvador Teens", *BBC News*, 2004. Retrieved online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4201183.stm>

¹³ USSOUTHCOM, "El Salvador Gang Presentation", 2010. Retrieved online at <http://publicintelligence.net/ussouthcom-el-salvador-gangs-presentation/>

¹⁴ Pollack, Ricardo op cit.

¹⁵ North Carolina Gang Investigators Association. Retrieved online at <http://www.ncgangcops.org/gangs.html>

¹⁶ USSOUTHCOM op cit.

¹⁷ Wuebbels, Mark op cit.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Dudley, Steven S. "Maras' connections to Criminal Syndicates Growing", *Insight*, 2011. Retrieved online at <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/insight-exclusives/item/461-maras-connections-to-criminal-syndicates-growing>

²⁰ Arana, Ana. "How the Street Gangs took Central America", 2005. Retrieved online at http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/international/20050501faessay84310_arana.html?pagewanted=print

²¹ The History Channel. "Gangland: 18th Street Gang", Retrieved online at <http://www.history.com/shows/gangland/articles/18th-street-gang>

²² Dudley, Steven S. op cit "Drug Trafficking..."

²³ Salamanca, Wilfredo. "Las FARC están detrás de maras", *El Diario de Hoy*, 2005. Retrieved online at <http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/2004/06/16/nacional/nac22.asp>

²⁴ Franco. op cit

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ National Drug Intelligence Center op cit

²⁷ The History Channel. op cit

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ North Carolina Gang Investigators Association. op cit

³⁰ Ordóñez, Antonio. "Guatemala: Mara-18, Mara Salvatrucha Gangs Creating Major Problem", *Diálogo Américas*, 2011. Retrieved online at http://www.dialogo-americas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2011/03/01/feature-01

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

³¹ "Gang Burns El Salvador Bus, Kills 14," *CBS News*, June 22, 2010, available at:
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/06/22/world/main6605508.shtml>

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.
All research conducted according to the project manual.