

Organization Attributes Sheet: Mara Salvatrucha/MS-13

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A. When the organization was formed + brief history
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MS-13 is a criminal organization – comprised mostly of young Salvadoran immigrants – that originated in Los Angeles in the early 1980s.• With many African-American and Mexican street gangs already operating in LA, Salvadoran youths had to unite in order to protect their friends and family.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The group quickly became known for its brutality and violence, which were in part a legacy of El Salvador’s civil war.¹• By the early 1990s the U.S. government initiated a campaign of deporting violent criminals who were foreign nationals.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Tens of thousands of Salvadorans were deported – nearly one third of those individuals were violent criminals with gang ties.²• Once these members returned to El Salvador, many found themselves in an extremely advantageous position to continue their violent, illegal activities.• Unfortunately the national government was still floundering after years of civil war and authorities were under matched against gangs whose years of activity in the U.S. had made them well-versed in violence.³• Large weapons caches left over from the civil war gave groups such as MS-13 easy access to different kinds of firearms.• Given El Salvador’s role in the drug trade, the group quickly seized the opportunity to get involved in drug distribution.⁴• As the repatriated gang members came in droves to the impoverished and marginalized neighborhoods of San Salvador, they quickly realized they could operate with near impunity.⁵• During the 1990s the group formed an alliance with the Mexican Mafia (La Eme) in order to provide protection to MS-13 members in American prisons.⁶
B. Types of illegal activities engaged in,
a. In general
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling, extortion, kidnapping, murder for hire, rape, robbery, prostitution, home invasion, retail theft, car-jacking, and car theft.⁷
b. <i>Specific detail: types of illicit trafficking activities engaged in</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The group controls railroads used by migrant workers in order to get to the U.S. border.⁸• Recently MS-13 has been linked to Los Zetas and its efforts to expand drug selling and trafficking operations in the Northern Triangle. Los Zetas have contracted certain MS-13 members to provide security and logistics protection for trafficking operations in Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico.⁹
C. Scope and Size
a. Estimated size of network and membership
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Around 30,000 worldwide with 7,000 active members in El Salvador.¹⁰• Around 8,000-10,000 currently operating in the United States.¹¹
b. Countries / regions group is known to have operated in. (i.e. the group’s operating area)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, United States, Mexico, Canada, and Spain.¹²

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

D. Leader Characteristics	
a.	Who is/are the leader(s)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific leaders are not known.
b.	Leadership timeline
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No information was found on clique leaders' timelines.
c.	Leadership style (autocratic, diffuse, etc.)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autocratic within each clique. Members who get caught acting against the group's interest are subject to beatings and in some cases are killed.
E. Organizational Structure	
a.	Topology (cellular, hierarchical, etc.)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The structure is something of a hybrid with elements of hierarchy combined with cliques or cells that, for the most part, operate independently of one another. • MS-13 expert Samuel Logan writes, "At the clique level, leadership is distributed. There are two primary leaders, the "first word" (primera palabra) and the "second word" (segunda palabra) who operate something like a commander and an executive officer in military settings. The segunda palabra from large, powerful cliques often exerts influence over smaller or subordinate cliques. In many facets, this leadership is neo-feudal, where leadership is determined by fealty to a leader who collects taxes and the support of warriors and in turn offers protection. Order and control are exercised through a variety of communications (including meetings and the targeted use of violence as an enforcement measure). Meetings include clique meetings, known as misas, and generales (or inter-clique coordination meetings)."¹³ • Each clique also has a treasurer who monitors the collection of the gang's "taxes". These taxes can include money extorted from local merchants and bus drivers as well as the percentage the gang takes from independent pimps and drug dealers operating in its territory.¹⁴ • Another key figure is the liaison from the Mexican Mafia (La Eme), MS-13's main ally in LA. The Eme representative ensures MS-13 pays its taxes to the Eme, disciplines MS-13 members and associates, organizes and conducts meetings (generales) among MS-13 cliques and shot callers, resolves disputes, and coordinates relations throughout the distributed network, including brokering business transactions and ensuring "respect" is paid to nodes in LA and El Salvador.¹⁵ • As Sam Logan explains, "In operational terms, the 'hierarchy of respect' is expressed through a web of social relationships within individual cliques and social/business relationships between cliques."¹⁶
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?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very formal membership, blood in blood out.¹⁷ • Initiation involves getting "beat in" and pledging your life to the gang.¹⁸
c.	Command and Control (decentralized or centralized)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historically cliques operated independently of one another although they would occasionally join forces to combat a common enemy.¹⁹ • Some signs indicate a recent effort to create a more cohesive group with more centralized control. Larger Salvadoran cliques may now be trying to exert more influence over cliques operating in the United States.²⁰

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

F. Resources

a. Financial

- Generate money from drug trafficking/distribution, murder for hire, extortion, robbery, retail theft, car-jacking, prostitution.²¹
- Revenue sources might be increasing as a result of greater alliance with Mexican drug trafficking organizations.²²

b. Human

- Around 30,000 members in Central America, 7000 of whom are based in El Salvador.²³
- 8-10,000 in the United States.²⁴
- Many indications that MS-13 is strengthening relationships with Los Zetas.²⁵

c. Logistical

i. Forgery, safe-houses, etc.

- The group has a number of safe houses in southern Mexico that are used to keep kidnapped migrant workers.²⁶

ii. Key routes

- The group maintains control of rail routes in Southern Mexico in order to transport undocumented workers from Central America.²⁷

d. Transportation

i. Land

- Automobiles, Railways in the Northern Triangle, and southern Mexico.²⁸

ii. Sea

- Use fast boats in drug trafficking activities off Salvadoran coast.²⁹

iii. Air

- No information was found.

iv. Intermodal container

- No information was found.

G. Trafficking Methods and Modalities

a. Corruption

- The group exploits the corrupt nature of the Salvadoran prison system where incarcerated members plan operations and regularly communicates with members on the street.³⁰

b. Concealment

- Drug trafficking in United States uses “traditional” trafficking methods i.e. cars and trucks with secret compartments.³¹
- Human smuggling uses trains.³²

c. Deception

- No information was found.

d. Circumvention (avoiding border entry points)

- It is unclear if MS-13 has established its own trafficking routes into the U.S. from Mexico or whether it simply provides muscle and logistical support to Mexican trafficking organizations that smuggle people and drugs across the U.S. border.

H. Prior / Existing Relationships

a. Other criminal organizations (cooperative and conflictual)

- Conflictual: the group’s main rival is M-18, with whom it has fought a brutal turf war in San Salvador for nearly two decades.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For drug distribution in the United States and Central America MS-13 purchases cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana from the Gulf and Sinaloa Cartels and Los Zetas.³³
<p>b. Corrupt politicians, law enforcement, political parties and other state entities, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Known to exploit the Salvadoran prison system in order to plan operations and smuggle drugs and other contraband.³⁴
<p>c. <i>Specific detail: Any alliances / past dealings with terrorist groups.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumors about dealings with al-Qaeda – these have not been confirmed.³⁵
<p>I. Ideological / Ethnic / Familial Orientation (if any)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominant ethnicity is Salvadoran. • MS-13 cliques in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico are comprised mostly of nationals of the country in which they operate.
<p>J. Technical Sophistication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using more advanced weapons (M-16 assault rifles and military issue grenades).³⁶
<p>K. Penchant for Innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high. Classified by the Congressional Research Service as a “third generation gang” which is defined as highly sophisticated, “mercenary type-groups with goals of power or financial acquisition and a set of fully evolved political aims. Third-generation gangs tend to operate in a global environment and may embrace quasi-terrorism or true terrorism to advance their goals”.³⁷ • In response to the Salvadoran government’s <i>mano dura</i> anti-mara campaign group members have stopped flagrantly displaying elaborate tattoos, a trademark of mara membership in the past. This indicates that the gang is willing to adapt to changing circumstances.³⁸
<p>L. Activities in United States</p> <p>a. Includes both criminal and non-criminal activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug distribution, drug trafficking, prostitution, retail theft, car-jacking, extortion of local merchants.³⁹ <p>b. <i>Specific detail: trafficking activities ; logistical activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongest domestic bases for drug trafficking and distribution are found in Los Angeles, New York City, Washington DC/Northern Virginia, Nashville, and Houston.⁴⁰ <p>c. Linkages with US groups</p> <p>i. Market/transaction links</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working alliance with the Mexican Mafia (La Eme). MS-13 members in U.S. prisons receive protection from La Eme in exchange for a share of the money generated by illegal activities in El Salvador and the U.S.⁴¹ <p>ii. Stable supplier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine, are routinely purchased from the Sinaloa, Gulf and Zetas cartels.⁴² <p>iii. Franchise arrangement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New cliques do appear although they are usually started by an established member who has relocated either from El Salvador or another city in the U.S.⁴³ <p>iv. HQ and Branch office</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is not one clear headquarters for the group.⁴⁴
<p>M. Evaluations</p> <p>a. Strengths</p>

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All research conducted according to the project manual.

- Strong transnational ties between United States and Central America.
- Weak nature of Salvadoran state allows MS-13 members to operate with relative ease whether on the street or in jail.
- The group is growing in strength, money, weaponry, and knowledge of the trafficking business thanks to an increasingly strong alliance with Los Zetas.
- Enjoys a virtually limitless supply of new recruits in poverty-stricken El Salvador.
- Entrepreneurial, always looking to expand operations and take advantage of new illicit activities.

b. Weaknesses and vulnerabilities

- Lack of central organization/coordination has led to some infighting among some cliques.⁴⁵
- The group is in a sort of organizational limbo, more than a gang but less than a fully-fledged transnational criminal organization.

c. Additional insights

- There are many indications that some members, mostly in the large Salvadoran cliques, want to centralize leadership; and as it refines its trafficking and combat skills (through the training from Los Zetas) the group could begin to take steps towards becoming a transnational criminal organization.

Other Notes

- Emergence as a genuine threat to the national security of the United States will depend on two things:
 - 1) Increased collaboration with Mexican DTOs (particularly the Zetas)
 - 2) The ability to establish a strong central leadership with effective organizing abilities

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

² Dudley, Steven S. "Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels, and Maras". Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010 p.19

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dudley. op cit "Drug Trafficking Organizations..." p. 20

⁶ The History Channel. "Gangland: 18th Street Gang", Retrieved online at <http://www.history.com/shows/gangland/articles/18th-street-gang>

⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation. "The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment", 2008. Retrieved online at http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/ms13_011408

⁸ Wuebbels, Mark. "Demystifying Human Smuggling Operations Along the Arizona-Mexican Border" p.37

⁹ Dudley. op cit "Drug Trafficking Organizations..." p. 22

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Franco op cit p.4

¹² Franco op cit. P.5

¹³ Logan, Samuel. "MS-13 Leadership: Networks of Influence, 2010. Retrieved online at http://digital.ipcprints.com/display_article.php?id=428186

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

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- ¹⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁷ Logan. op cit
- ¹⁸ MSNBC News. "MS-13 is one of nation's most dangerous gangs", 2006. Retrieved online at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11240718/ns/msnbc_tv-rita_cosby_specials/t/ms--one-nations-most-dangerous-gangs/
- ¹⁹ Dudley op cit "Drug Trafficking Organizations..." p.23
- ²⁰ Logan, Samuel and Morse, Ashley. "MS-13 Organization and U.S. Response", 2007. Retrieved online at <http://gangs.umd.edu/Downloads/MS-13-Organization-and-US-Response.pdf>
- ²¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation. op cit
- ²² Carrol, Susan. "Raid exposes street gang's reach", The Houston Chronicle, 2011. Retrieved online at <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/7554115.html>
- ²³ Franco. op cit p.4
- ²⁴ Ibid
- ²⁵ Stone, Hannah. "Street Gang No More: MS-13 Moves Into Organized Crime", Insight: Organized Crime in the Americas, 2011. Retrieved online at <http://www.insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/659-el-salvadors-gangs-get-organized>
- ²⁶ Wuebbels op cit "Demystifying..." p.37
- ²⁷ Ibid p. 38
- ²⁸ Ibid p.38
- ²⁹ Stone. op cit
- ³⁰ Dudley, Steven S. "Maras' Connections to Criminal Syndicates Growing", Insight: Organized Crime in the Americas, 2011. Retrieved online at <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/insight-exclusives/item/461-maras-connections-to-criminal-syndicates-growing>
- ³¹ Ibid
- ³² Wuebbels op cit "Demystifying..." p.37
- ³³ National Drug Intelligence Center. "National Drug Threat Assessment 2010", p.64. Retrieved online at <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs38/38661/38661p.pdf>
- ³⁴ Ibid
- ³⁵ Harman, Diana. "U.S. steps up battle against Salvadoran gang MS-13", USA Today, 2005. Retrieved online at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-02-23-gang-salvador_x.htm
- ³⁶ Stone. op cit
- ³⁷ Franco. op cit p.5
- ³⁸ Stone. op cit.
- ³⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation. op cit
- ⁴⁰ Ibid
- ⁴¹ Logan. "MS-13: Networks of..." op cit
- ⁴² National Drug Intelligence Center. op cit p.64
- ⁴³ Logan and Morse. op cit
- ⁴⁴ Franco. op cit p.5
- ⁴⁵ Logan and Morse. op cit