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What's Behind the Rise of MS-13?

The street gang that stalks the suburbs of Long Island has become a focus of President Trump's efforts to link immigration and crime.

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 Comments



Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone speaks at a press conference in Hauppauge, N.Y., where he

vowed to take action against the MS-13 street gang. (Frank Eltman/AP)

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On Thursday, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced one of its biggest operations since the beginning of the Trump administration: The agency reported that a recent six-week “gang surge” by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) had netted 1,378 arrests. According [the ICE press release](#):

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The operation targeted gang members and associates involved in transnational criminal activity, including drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, human smuggling, and sex trafficking, murder and racketeering.

Of the 1,378 total arrested, 1,098 were arrested on federal and/or state criminal charges, including 21 individuals arrested on murder related charges and seven for rape and sexual assault charges. The

remaining 280 were arrested on administrative immigration violations. Of the total arrested, 933 were U.S. citizens and 445 were foreign nationals from 21 countries in South and Central America, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean.

The activities of transnational gangs—crime organizations that may have roots in one country and but operate across the borders of several—have become a focus of the federal government’s efforts to associate immigration with criminality, with a particular emphasis on the street gang known as Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. In March, several MS-13 members were indicted for a string of killings in Long Island, New York. The grisly murders [made national headlines](#) and have made the faces of MS-13 members in El Salvador—often heavily tattooed—a staple of media reports. President Donald Trump [invokes MS-13 in his speeches](#), and [Attorney General Jeff Sessions](#) visited Long Island on April 28, in which he pledged to escalate the federal response to MS-13. “We’ll find them, dismantle their networks, and deport them,” he promised.

But for Rahsmia Zatar, there’s nothing new about MS-13. She’s the executive director of S.T.R.O.N.G., a Long Island anti-gang organization founded back in 2000, when MS-13 first became active in the area. “It was a similar moment,” she says “This feels like déjà-vu. During that period, we saw an increase in gang-related violence, and a similar political crisis.”

President Trump may [blame the immigration policies of his predecessor](#) for the rise of MS-13, but the roots of the gang are in the Reagan Administration: [It originated in Los Angeles in the early 1980s](#), formed by groups of young Salvadoran refugees. Only after a massive deportation program in the 1990s that sent thousands of Central Americans back to their home countries did it expand into El Salvador itself. Soon after, the gang began to look for new territories in the United States. “The gang’s expansion into the East Coast happened in the late 1990s, but it was not just MS-13,” says Jesenia Pizarro, Associate Professor of Criminology at Arizona State University. “This was also the case for other California gangs, like the Bloods and the Crips.”

Currently, MS-13 has a presence in at least 40 states; the Department of Justice

estimates their number at about 6,000. On the East Coast, the group is especially strong in Massachusetts, Virginia, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland. The end of 2015 saw a new surge of activity, according to [InSight Crime, a research project of American University](#). One of the peculiarities of MS-13 on the East Coast is its presence in suburbs rather than cities. The gang's recent killings have taken place in suburban Virginia and Maryland, as well as Suffolk County on Long Island—"areas where perhaps Latino youth feel more marginalized, where there may be less diversity," says Pizarro. "There are also few resources to help combat the formation of these gangs."

This is the case in Long Island, for example, which has received about [8,000 unaccompanied minors from Central America in recent years](#), child refugees from the political instability and violence in the region. MS-13 has long been characterized by its efforts to recruit children at a very young age, taking advantage of the challenges they might face in attempting to adapt to a new culture. If communities and schools don't provide alternatives, this process is exacerbated. "When there is a large influx of Central American immigrants, thousands of people in recent years, if gangs can recruit less than 1 percent of them, they have succeeded in recruiting members," says Justin Meyers, Assistant Police Commissioner of Suffolk County on Long Island. "Another thing that facilitates this process is the lack of resources available in these communities and school districts, which makes the gang a more attractive option."

“The problem is that the United States tries to respond to the problem of gangs with deportation.”

Since the beginning of 2016, Suffolk County Police has made 200 gang-related arrests. "We have estimated that there are 450 gang members in the area. You need to remember that they are an incredibly small percentage of the total population," says Meyers. "However, the reason we have given them so much

attention is because they have shown extreme violence.”

The jobs of local police can be complicated by the growing fear and mistrust of law enforcement in immigrant communities. In Suffolk County, police have posted signs saying, “If you are a victim, we will never ask about your immigration status.” Commissioners here attend community board meetings and police officers are collaborating with local schools and organizations. In addition, they have phone lines, which have Spanish-speaking operators, so that people can report crimes and give tips. “The first thing we have to do is build strong relationships with our immigrant communities,” says Commissioner Meyers.

However, experts note that prevention efforts among youth are lacking. “In addressing this issue, the main target has never been the causes that lead youths join gangs,” says [Álex Sánchez, co-founder of Homies Unidos](#), an organization that works with at-risk adolescents in Los Angeles. “The police must understand that they cannot have a relationship with the community with a stick in hand. If a young man is arrested time and time again, he is finally going to say, ‘It’s probably better to be part of a gang.’”

Rahsmia Zatar of S.T.R.O.N.G. says she is happy because she sees that police have realized the importance of working with immigrant communities, but says there is still a “very well-justified fear,” as the [county has moved away from its sanctuary policies recently](#). “We know that children are being detained for no particular reason, being discriminated against, being asked about their immigration status,” says Zatar. “We want to work with schools and create welcoming committees. We can use their peers and they can create these communities. They do not necessarily have to be adult-driven actions.”

Zatar’s organization also works to unify families: Many young people come to the United States to meet parents or family members that they may not have seen for years; they neither feel comfortable in their schools nor in their homes. “We tell parents that it will take time, it is not something that can be forced,” she says.

However, these initiatives are rarely practiced as part of city or county initiatives. Instead, the rhetoric of deportation continues to loom over these discussions. “The problem is that the United States tries to respond to the

problem of gangs with deportation," says Sonja Wolf, a drug policy expert at CIDE, a Mexico-based research center. "If the U.S. really wanted to solve the problem, it would focus on social exclusion, which contributes to the formation of gangs."

All of this was also said in the '90s, when aggressive deportations ultimately served to fuel the growth of MS-13 from Central America. Many of those arrested recently have already been deported several times; Álex Sánchez knows this narrative first-hand; as a teen in Los Angeles, he was a gang member. He was then imprisoned, deported and returned, where he eventually co-founded Homies Unidos.

"More than these hard-line policies, politicians and governments should invest in social support and programs," Sánchez says. "But that does not lead to the sense of instant gratification we are accustomed to.... What will happen now, is that a massive wave of deportation will lead to huge chaos."

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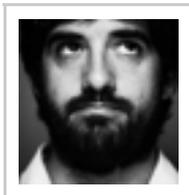
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