

# Press Conference with Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and Other Senior Officials on Operation Community Shield

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## Secretary Chertoff:

Good afternoon, everybody. I'm delighted to be here with some very distinguished law enforcement leaders -- Julie Myers, the Assistant Secretary for Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Emilio Gonzalez, the Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; Marcy Forman, the Director of ICE Office of Investigation; Claude Arnold, the unit chief for the Public Safety and Human Right Violator unit of ICE; and David O'Neal Brown, the First Assistant Chief of Police of Dallas, Texas.

I was here in August, after we completed phase two of Operation Community Shield, which culminated in a two-week offensive against gang members that yielded several hundred arrests. And today I'm pleased to return to celebrate our continued progress in a little bit over a year on this front, targeting gang members. They're the worst of the worst in terms of criminal activity.

This is a tribute to the outstanding work of our ICE agents and supporting personnel, as well as our federal, state and local law enforcement partners, fighting the war against gang violence.

We began Operation Community Shield a little over a year ago, particularly focused on the violent MS-13 gang, which came from Central America and which really flourished in the United States. Due to the success of this Operation Community Shield, last May we expanded it to target all criminal street gangs. In the first year of operation, ICE agents in 76 field offices, working with law enforcement nationwide, arrested a total of 2,388 gang members from 239 different gangs. About 40 percent of these were MS-13 members, more than 1,075 with violent criminal histories, including 51 gang leaders.

Beginning February 24th, and continuing through yesterday, ICE joined up with federal, state and local law enforcement to target gang members in 23 states, resulting in 375 arrests of gang members and associates, even in this very short period of time. More than 260 of those arrested in this recent effort have violent criminal histories. They've committed brutal crimes like rape, murder and assault, and many of them have brought drugs and weapons into afflicted neighborhoods. At least 70 of those arrested face new criminal charges ranging from drug and firearm violations to immigration violations. Those who we can prosecute for criminal cases will be prosecuted. Others will be removed from the communities and deported back to their native lands.

This progress and the way we are coordinating to achieve these results is unprecedented. Never before has the federal government used all of its immigration, customs and criminal authorities in one coordinated fashion in the fight against violent gangs.

Before Operation Community Shield, we did a lot of law enforcement against gangs. I was involved doing some of that myself when I was at the Department of Justice. But we didn't do it as a comprehensive, government-wide effort using all of the tools we could bring to the table. Part of the problem was we had local law enforcement, for example, that would arrest gang members, and they didn't realize that there were also outstanding immigration violations that could be additional tools used to incapacitate these violent street criminals. At the same time, ICE agents would go out and arrest people for immigration violations without knowing they were wanted for very serious criminal offenses.

In much the same way that we have connected the dots in the war against terror, we are now connecting the dots in the war against gang violence. And to do that, we're sharing information, we're operating in a coordinated fashion, and the result is making sure people who commit crimes -- gang members who commit crimes face the most serious sanctions that are available under the law. This is the way we protect communities that have been terrorized for too long by gang violence.

Police departments across the country are now providing ICE with names of gang targets in their community. Using its combined authorities, ICE has the ability not only to identify targets who are subject to immigration or customs laws, but to remove them from the community, either by deporting them or by putting them in jail to serve criminal sentences. And let me be very clear about this. When we have evidence of criminal activity, like drug violations or weapons violations or crimes of violence, we are bringing the toughest criminal charges available against these gang members.

To date, more than 533 gang members have been charged with individual criminal violations as part of Operation Community Shield. They are now facing lengthy sentences in federal prison. In addition, we're using our combined resources to dismantle these organizations by cutting off their funding, by seizing their assets -- their cars and their wealth -- all of which is part of our effort to cut off their means of survival.

The success of Operation Community Shield continues to depend upon strong partnerships between the federal agencies that are represented here and state and local law enforcement. This is truly a team effort and it's a team effort that we will continue to bring to bear to incapacitate and eliminate this criminal gang violence, which is a scourge of many of our communities.

I'm particularly honored to stand here with the law enforcement community, represented so ably by those standing at the podium today. Everybody here recognizes the very urgent need to stop this threat that is causing a lot of havoc, pain and violence in communities from the border into the interior of this country. We've made a lot of progress in the first year of Community Shield, but we are going to continue to work to make more progress.

This is a classic demonstration of how we achieve success when we work together, when we connect the dots, when we fuse and integrate our authorities, and when we execute in a coordinated plan. I want to compliment the entire law enforcement community involved in this effort for their dedicated work. I appreciate the partnership of everybody here and their agencies in uniting against this very serious threat.

Now may I call on Assistant Secretary Myers.

**Assistant Secretary Myers:**

Thank you so much, Secretary Chertoff. And I want to also extend a warm welcome to all of our law enforcement partners here today, from the FBI, from ATF, from the Dallas Police Office, and as well the other members of our ICE team.

In the last decade, the United States has experienced a dramatic increase in the size and number of transnational street gangs. To head off the growth of the most violent and most criminal gangs, ICE created Operation Community Shield. Today I'm pleased to recognize the one-year anniversary of this critical public safety and immigration enforcement initiative. And I'm particularly pleased with the success that we've had with our targeted efforts over the last two weeks.

First, just a little more about Operation Community Shield. As Secretary Chertoff noted, ICE began by doing an assessment of one of the most violent gangs, MS-13. And we realized that they had some things in common, these MS-13 gang members. Primarily, they were foreign-born; they were in the United States illegally; they had prior convictions; and they also often tended to be involved in gangs -- excuse me -- in crimes that had some sort of a nexus to the border.

These were characteristics that clearly called upon ICE's specialized and unique authorities. In response to this threat, we initiated Operation Community Shield to fulfill the responsibilities of our mission. This program represents the first time that the federal government has used combined customs and immigration authorities as tools against violent gangs in a nationally coordinated effort.

Under Operation Community Shield, we work to identify and develop intelligence on violent gangs. And here, our local partners are really key in telling us about the local gangs that are transnational in nature.

We then partner with other law enforcement agencies at the local, state and federal level to arrest these gang members and to seize their weapons, cash and other assets. We then seek the prosecution of gang members and, wherever possible, remove them from the United States. We conduct investigations and we conduct outreach efforts to boost public awareness about the fight against violent gangs.

As the Secretary has already pointed out, in its first year, Operation Community Shield has had some tremendous results. In one year we successfully arrested 2,388 members from 239 different gangs. And we've processed 1,855 members for administrative removal.

With Operation Community Shield, ICE is sending a clear message to gang members that we intend to deal strongly and forcefully with you if you come into our country and you break our laws. Gang members should understand that their criminal activities and associated violence are not part of the American Dream, and we will do everything we can, we will use our coordinated efforts to find you, to prosecute you, and if you're here illegally we will send you home.

Unfortunately, the broad reach of these transnational gangs is felt throughout the country, in smaller cities such as Springfield, Missouri, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to metropolitan areas like Miami, Washington, D.C., and New York. In just the last two weeks, as Secretary Chertoff noted, Community Shield has resulted in the arrest of 375 gang members and associates throughout the country. More than 264 of these individuals have violent criminal histories.

And you might be asking, so what kind of individuals have we actually arrested in our efforts? Well, you could take Roberto Madrigal-Lopez -- he's a citizen of Mexico; he's also a member of the Border Brothers gang, a convicted drug dealer and a sexual predator. As a result of Operation Community Shield, he was arrested and recently sentenced to 12-and-a-half years in federal prison. At the end of the sentence he will be processed, deported and removed from this country.

Another example is Carlos Peralta-Morales. He's a Surenos gang member. He was arrested just last week in this recent operation, when we saw him beating a juvenile with a baseball bat in the middle of a Wal-Mart store. Additionally, after we arrested him we discovered that he had previously been convicted of robbery and accessory after the fact in connection with an incident in which gang members broke into and robbed the house of a North Carolina state representative.

There's no question our communities are much, much safer with individuals like these off the streets. I want to thank all of the ICE agents all across the country that have played such a tremendous part in making Operation Community Shield a success in its first year. But we could not have done it alone. This is a collective effort, a partnership between federal, state and local agencies.

I first want to thank Director Gonzalez and the men and women at the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. They have provided us invaluable assistance to actually target these gang members who have had the nerve to go and apply for immigration benefits. And I am proud to say that this week we've arrested a number of those folks.

I also want to thank our partners at ATF. They provide invaluable assistance and expertise -- and our partners at FBI and the other federal agencies.

Finally, there is no question that one of the key parts to our success is really the efforts and constant effort of our local partners -- from Anaheim out to Dallas and on up to Boston, local law enforcement officers, like First Assistant Chief David O'Neal Brown, are on the ground in their communities each and every day. They help show us the lay of the land, explain the local rules -- and together we fight the problems that are plaguing their communities.

I'm proud of what ICE has accomplished in this past year. We will continue the fight. We will continue to use our unique legal authorities to remove violent and criminal gangs from our nation's communities.

I now want to recognize our great partner, Director Gonzalez, who will talk a little more about how critical our partnerships are in making our communities safer. Thank you.

**Director Gonzalez:** Thank you, Julie. Thank you for being here, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for your leadership.

It's a real honor for me to be here today because this is clearly an important event -- not for the substance, but also for the organizational unity that United States Citizenship and Immigration Services brings to the table.

I'm proud to stand alongside Secretary Chertoff and Assistant Secretary Myers to focus our national attention on joint efforts to take violent criminals off the street. And I have a special relationship with this program, but particularly the fact that Assistant Secretary Myers and myself were good friends before we each took our respective jobs and we've been able to transfer that friendship into our respective agencies and create a seamless and transparent cooperative effort between the 15,000 professionals at USCIS and the ICE organization within DHS.

USCIS was placed in the Department of Homeland Security for a reason. Our priority is always to ensure security and maintain the integrity of our immigration system from those that would do us harm. The United States has enjoyed a long and storied tradition as an open and inviting society. We are a generous society; we are a generous nation. The doors of our country will remain open, but they will always be well-guarded. USCIS, ICE and the other members of the DHS team will ensure that no one takes advantage of our hospitality, of our generosity to do us harm.

Last year alone, USCIS conducted more than 35 million background checks on individuals seeking immigration benefits. That comes out to something like 135,000 a day. USCIS has played a critical role in Operation Community Shield by using our unique resources to identify cases of fraud and criminal activity among immigrants, both legal and illegal. Once identified, we work very closely with our law enforcement partners, like ICE, to quickly remove these violent gang members like the MS-13 gang from our streets -- hopefully forever.

These searches have resulted in the identification just from the USCIS of 600 targets and 86 confirmed gang members or associates with felony charges and convictions during the first year of Operation Community Shield. USCIS and ICE continue to work together in a close partnership, daily identifying gang members and those who would pose to threaten public security. Every day we receive new names of individuals and suspected gang members from state and local law enforcement, as well as from foreign governments. And this information is compared to our existing immigration databases to make sure that the immigration status of the individuals is correct, and identify those individuals who are in violation of U.S. immigration law.

We have also joined forces in a major national effort aimed at detecting and pursuing persons seeking immigration benefits via fraudulent means. USCIS continues to identify and refer to ICE the names of persons who pose a threat to national security and/or public safety. At USCIS, as in ICE, as in all of Homeland Security, the United States national security and public safety is our main concern.

This joint anti-fraud and national security effort is a major priority for USCIS and ICE, and as the months go by, and the relationships between both of our agencies become closer, and we continue to work together on these joint projects, I think that you're going to see improved results, you're going to see increased quality, but always keeping in mind that the nation's security remains our number one concern.

Thank you very much. Assistant Secretary.

**Assistant Secretary Myers:** Thank you, Director Gonzalez. We are -- at ICE, we are so grateful for the terrific partnership that we have had with USCIS over the past couple of years, and the potential for much more to do.

Working cooperatively with all our counterparts is critical to our success. As I mentioned before, one of the things we are most dependent upon at Operation Community Shield is the great intelligence on the ground. And I think on the screens, as they go by, at some point you see maps of the country. And these maps show kind of where we've done arrests over this past year and over the past two weeks. And you'll see that we have a number of really great partners that we've worked with.

One of the best partners that we've worked with in this effort has been the city of Dallas. The police department there has been absolutely tremendous. And we've actually had the most arrests of anywhere during this recent enforcement operation in Dallas. And that is due to the efforts of our local partners. And that's one of the reasons I am so pleased and proud to have with us today Dallas Police Department First Assistant Chief David O'Neal Brown. Chief Brown.

**Chief Brown:**

Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and thank you Assistant Secretary Myers. I appreciate being invited to come here today and speak on behalf of all my local law enforcement counterparts involved in Community Shield. I've been an officer in Dallas for 22 years, and I know all too well about violence perpetuated by gangs and their associates. These gang members do not care about human life. They do not care about the communities they ravage. Their only commitment is to the gang life and to violence which they wear like a badge of honor.

Many of these gang members come from other countries, making it difficult for local law enforcement to handle alone. That's why the type of intelligence sharing taking place as part of Operation Community Shield is so critical. ICE comes to the table with national intelligence on gang activity, the full weight of federal prosecutions, and its unique removal authority, while Dallas police officers who are working on the streets day to day bring out the most up to date local intelligence and all of our expertise and authorities.

This approach brings success. Working together, ICE and the Dallas Police Department have arrested 149 gang members in Dallas alone as a result of Operation Community Shield. Nine of those gang members were taken off the streets in just one night. Those who we arrested had criminal histories that include aggravated assault with deadly weapons, burglary of vehicles, weapons offenses, and drug offenses, just to name a few.

The arrest of these drug members, criminal prosecutions, and in some cases, their removal from Dallas, has had an immediate impact to create a safer community. For example, in 2005, Dallas' murder rate was reduced by 20 percent, one of the largest reductions in the country of major cities. This was a result of Operation Community Shield's efforts in reducing our violence crime.

Community Shield is the right program that brings the right combination of federal, state and local authorities to combat these criminals. I want to thank Secretary Chertoff, Assistant Secretary Myers, and all of the Community Shield partners across the country for their assistance in this battle to keep our communities safe and free of gang violence.

Thank you.

**Secretary Chertoff:**

Thank you, Chief. That 20 percent drop in violence is a real testimony to the significance of this effort. That's a real concrete demonstration of how this kind of combined law enforcement effort yields direct results to members of the community protecting innocent people against heartless purveyors of violence that cause an awful lot of damage and destruction all across the country.

We'll take some questions. Yes.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, I wanted to know how many of those gang members were coming from Mexico? And also, do you believe they are -- they can be related to the violence that we have seen along the border?

**Secretary Chertoff:**

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In a minute I'll ask someone to see if we have a breakdown by nationalities. But let me take a minute to talk about violence at the border. A week ago I was in Brownsville, Texas, with Minister -- a week ago I was down in the border with Minister of Government Abascal and Minister of Public Security Medina-Mora from Mexico. We were there because both the United States and Mexico have a shared interest in suppressing and eliminating violence at the border. Violence at the border is increasingly a serious threat to the security of both countries. And those who perpetrate violence are violent drug gangs, organized crime gangs.

The reason we've seen an increase in violence is because we are cracking down on their criminal livelihood, we're cracking down on their importation of drugs and their human smuggling, and like all vile criminal organizations, they want to fight back. They can fight back, but they're not going to win. We will continue to increase the pressure, we will bring to bear all of the elements of our law enforcement power on both sides of the border to strike at these groups. We will make their lives miserable until we eliminate them.

So we're going to be very focused on border violence. At the same time, of course, we recognize that a lot of these gangs have deep roots in the interior of both countries. Part of what we do with Operation Community Shield is focus on those roots, and really we're going to pull out all of the tentacles of these kinds of criminal groups and gangs, no matter how long it takes, using all of our power as federal, state, and local law enforcement officials.

I don't know if anybody has the nationality breakdown, or we can maybe get it for you afterwards.

**Assistant Secretary Myers:** We can get it afterwards.

**Secretary Chertoff:** We'll get it for you afterwards.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, there's evidence that many of these people get deported back to Central America and to Mexico, and they are back again. They come back again, and as a matter of fact, they participate in the trafficking of people, coyotes and that kind of thing. What other information can you share with us in that sense?

**Secretary Chertoff:**

Well, of course, our first preference is always if we catch someone committing a crime, lock them up, put them in jail for a long time here, and then send them back, because if they spend 20 years behind bars in federal prison, it's much less likely they're going to be coming back again.

When we can't do that, when we don't have a basis to just send them to jail here, we do deport them. We work with our friends in other parts of the world to make sure we're giving them information about the people that we're sending back. If they try to come in again, they've now committed a felony. We have some very tough laws on the books. We intend to use all of those laws to pile on as heavy sanctions and as heavy sentences as we can for people who we kick out and come back again.

But there's no question, it's part of a system we have to deal with here. We've got to find them, we've got to lock them up, we've got to send them back, and then we've got to keep them out.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, President Antonio Saca from El Salvador was here a couple weeks ago, and he talked precisely about that, having an agreement, negotiating an agreement with the United States in order to prosecute the Salvadorians who are deported from here, which up until now, apparently that wasn't done properly. Do you know anything --

**Secretary Chertoff:**

Yes, I had the privilege of meeting with President. We did talk about this issue. We are working very hard within the next couple of weeks to provide additional fingerprint information to the government of El Salvador, which will help them, in terms of identifying people they can prosecute down there. They've been a very good partner with us in the effort to strike at these gangs. And anything we can do to use the combined tools of both countries to incapacitate some of the worst criminals in this continent is going to be a benefit to the -- innocent people in both countries.

**Question:** Are you satisfied with what the government of Mexico is doing at the border, for example? We know that violence along the border involves groups like --Zetas, which are reported to have former military personnel. Is the Mexican government doing enough, do you believe they are, and other governments --

**Secretary Chertoff:**

I have spoken to the Cabinet secretaries. I've talked about -- I know the Presidents have talked about it, I know the Mexican government is very committed to dealing with what is a very serious problem on the south side of the border.

We are neighbors, and we have a common scourge we have to deal with. And like any good neighbors, we have to work together to defeat that scourge. We've now created a memorandum of understanding and an action plan to go forward and tighten the coordination on both sides of the border with our law enforcement. We have a good working relationship with our Mexican counterparts. We're going to build on that, and we're going to use all the tools both sides

can bring to attack these criminal organizations.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, do you have reason to believe that any of these 2,388 individuals had direct ties to al Qaeda or another similar terrorist-type network?

**Secretary Chertoff:**

No, we're not taking the position here or claiming here that these gang members are members of al Qaeda or affiliated with al Qaeda. And that's not meant to minimize the security problem presented by these gang members. These gang members are some of the people who are shooting at our Border Patrol agents, or committing acts of violence on both sides of the border, and that is, in and of itself, a very, very serious national security issue. So obviously, we're always mindful of the possibility of terrorist gangs piggybacking or forming alliances with criminal gangs. But we haven't seen that, at this point. But what we've seen about the criminal gangs is very, very serious. And we're going to take it as a very, very high priority.

**Question:** Mr. Secretary, can you tell us how much resources you've put into this last year? What was the budget for this? And I'm also wondering -- the number 2,388, what would you say that is in terms of population that's out there of gang members?

**Assistant Secretary Myers:**

Well, our Operation Community Shield work is done throughout our field offices as part of our targeted team. So it's part of our overall investigative effort. Obviously, there are then substantial costs incurred with removal, but it's part of our narcotics teams' and our other teams' work on this effort, so there's not a separate budget that addresses that separately because they kind of all work together.

This is something that we are increasing our efforts in, and we look forward to kind of making even stronger efforts and more progress in the years to come.

**Question:** What about the percentage -- in terms of the 2,388 number, in terms of the population of gang members that are out there -- is it a half, a third?

**Ms. Foreman:** It's difficult to put it in perspective because we don't have the whole universe. It's important to note that probably about 90 percent of the gang members are foreign-born. But there are some U.S.-born, and there are some individuals who are here legally. So it's hard to give you the universe of population because the gang universe is larger than just the foreign population. But together, we have identified at least 5,000 MS-13 members that we have contained in our databases, and that we've shared with all law enforcement.

**Question:** What are you doing going forward so that when you're not doing specifics -- these two-week crackdown periods, or when you're not specifically focusing on Community Shield operations -- what are you doing to guarantee that there's some information sharing between these between all of these -- when they arrest gang members to check for immigration violations and vice versa --

**Assistant Secretary Myers:**

Operation Community Shield for us is something that's ongoing every week. Every week, in fact, we provide arrests -- potential arrests to the FBI for de-confliction, and work with our state and local partners on an ongoing basis. They share information with us, we share information back with them. So it's something that we do on a regular basis. It's not only done as part of these larger enforcement operations.

I would also say with respect to the number of gangs in this country, it's important to note that our efforts focus on the transnational gangs -- with foreign-born members, as opposed to members that are primarily born here in the United States. And so our gang problem, obviously, far outweighs -- is far larger than just foreign-born gangs, but that's the focus of Operation Community Shield.

**Question:** Secretary Chertoff, since we are down to the last question, we can't let you get away without addressing something related to the ports. So I'd like to ask you if you could provide the DHS perspective on the latest development and also what actions now your DHS agencies -- the Coast Guard, Customs and so forth -- will take in dealing with port security?

**Secretary Chertoff:**

I think as you have embedded in your question is the understanding that the issue of port security is not an issue of the identify of a particular terminal operator. It's about increasing the level of security across an entire system. And while we have more to do, let me tell you, we've done quite a bit.

By the end of this year, we will have approximately two-thirds of the container cargo that comes through our ports going through radiation portal monitors to detect radiation. Our Overseas Container Security Initiative, which begins the process of screening and inspecting containers at the point overseas when they are loaded, before they actually get to the U.S., will be covering approximately two-thirds of the container cargo coming into the country. So those are

some very significant steps forward, dramatic increases from where we were two years ago.

We have a layered system now in which Customs and Border Protection begins analyzing cargo well before it actually gets on the ship. The Coast Guard gets crew lists. The Coast Guard has the identity of all the significant ships coming into our ports. We vet those, we check those. If necessary, we board them.

If we haven't inspected cargo at the other -- at the point of departure when it comes in, if we have reason to believe there's a high risk attached to a particular container, we screen it using not only radiation monitors, but X-ray machines. We open the containers.

All of these things are in place, or in the process of getting in place on a very rapid scale. Now, where are we going to the next level? Because we still have more we can do. We're looking to, first of all, stretch out this protective envelope or security envelop further down into the origination of the supply chain. That means we are evaluating how we can get more information at an earlier stage of the supply chain process about what is going in those containers. We're looking at technology that will be better sealing for containers, that will track the packages that go into the containers.

I'm going to go to Hong Kong in a couple of weeks, and I'm going to look at a system there which seems to have some promise in terms of our ability to do even more inspection and screening before things are actually loaded.

Meanwhile, at this end of the ports, I know that the movement we've had on the transportation workers security card has been a little bit slower than I would like. In very short order, I anticipate announcing some interim steps with respect to raising the level of security for those who have access to ports on our side of the Atlantic and Pacific, and then again in a relatively short time frame, getting to the final end state of background-checked workers with secure cards.

Again, this is a problem which we've had to face for many years. We've got some distance to cover, but I do want to emphasize, we've actually done quite a bit. And when the facts get out there, I think the public should be assured that we've done a bit, but should continue to be impatient for us to continue the process. I can tell you, I'm impatient, and we're going to get this process moving along at a very rapid clip.

Thanks everybody.