

**Statement of
Chris Swecker
Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Before the
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
House International Relations Committee
April 20, 2005**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today about the FBI's efforts to combat gangs in the United States, including Latin American or Hispanic gangs, such as MS-13.

Gangs and other criminal enterprises, operating in the U.S. and throughout the world, pose increasing concerns for the international law enforcement and intelligence communities. Today, gangs are more violent, more organized, and more widespread than ever before. They pose one of the greatest threats to the safety and security of all Americans. The Department of Justice estimates there are approximately 30,000 gangs, with 800,000 members, impacting 2,500 communities across the U.S. The innocent people in these communities face daily exposure to violence from criminal gangs trafficking in drugs and weapons and gangs fighting amongst themselves to control or extend their turf and their various criminal enterprises.

Gangs from California, particularly in the Los Angeles area, have a major influence on Mexican-Americans and Central American gangs in this country and in Latin America. Hispanic gangs in California have separated into two rival factions, the Nortenos, which are primarily found in Northern California, and the Surenos, found to the south and predominantly in the urban areas surrounding Los Angeles. A rivalry exists between these factions, which had its genesis in the California Department of Corrections during the 1960s, when the Nuestra Familia (Nortenos) prison gang formed to oppose the Mexican Mafia (Surenos) prison gang. Today, the Mexican Mafia, and other Hispanic prison gangs, such as the La EME in southern California, the Texas Syndicate (T/S, Sindicato Tejano), and the Mexikanemi (EMI, Texas Mexican Mafia) remain powerful both in prison and on the street, and most Hispanic gangs in California align themselves under the Nortenos or the Surenos. Hispanic gangs aligned under the Nortenos will generally add the number 14 after their gang name, while gangs aligned under the Surenos will generally add the number 13 (i.e., MS-13).

The migration of MS-13 members and other Hispanic street gang members, such as 18th Street, from Southern California to other regions of this country has led to a rapid proliferation of these gangs in many smaller, suburban, and rural areas not accustomed to gang activity and related crimes. Additionally, the deportation of MS-13 and 18th Street gang members from the United States to their countries of origin is partially responsible for the growth of those gangs in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, although the precise of this responsibility is unknown.

Major urban areas such as Chicago and New York have also experienced major gang activity associated with Latino gangs for decades. In Chicago, the Almighty Latin King Nation (ALKN) was founded in the 1940s by a small group of Hispanics, many of Puerto Rican descent. At first, the organization aspired to meet the personal, social, and economic needs of the members and the preservation of cultural heritage. Today, the Latin Kings in Chicago have chapters consisting primarily of members of Mexican descent and chapters consisting of membership of Puerto Rican descent. Numerous chapters now exist in multiple states and are involved in an array of criminal activity.

To address the threat these and other gangs pose on a local, regional, national, and even international level, the FBI established a National Gang Strategy to identify the gangs posing the

greatest danger to American communities, to combine and coordinate the efforts of local, state, and federal law enforcement in Safe Streets Violent Gang Task Forces throughout the U.S., and to utilize the same statutes and intelligence and investigative techniques, previously used against organized crime, against violent gangs.

The following Hispanic or Latino gangs have been identified by the FBI as National Gang Strategy Priority Groups.

<u>Gang</u>	<u>Location of Origin</u>
La Eme AKA California Mexican Mafia	Southern California
18th Street	Los Angeles, CA
MS-13	Los Angeles, CA
Nuestra Familia	Northern California
Latin Kings	Chicago, IL
Asociacion Neta 1.50 (AKA Neta)	Puerto Rico
Border Borders	Arizona

In response to the growing threat from gangs, the FBI has raised the priority of gang intelligence and investigative efforts by increasing the number of Safe Streets Violent Gang Task Forces (SSVGTF) from 78 to 108, with the ultimate goal of increasing this number to 128. From FY 1996 to 2004, the SSVGTF realized the following accomplishments:

- Arrests - 41,747
- Information/Indictments - 19,560
- Convictions - 19,166
- Disruptions - 846
- Dismantlements - 253
- Title IIIs - 1,460
- Undercover Operations - 109
- RICO Informations/Indictments - 533

Additionally, the FBI is in the process of establishing a National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) and has established the MS-13 National Gang Task Force (NGTF).

The NGIC will enable the FBI and its local, state, and federal partners to centralize and coordinate the national collection of intelligence on gangs in the U.S., and then analyze, share, and disseminate this intelligence with law enforcement authorities throughout the country. The NGIC will give local, state and federal investigators and intelligence analysts the opportunity and mechanism to share their collective information and intelligence on gangs. This will enable gang investigators and analysts to identify links between gangs and gang investigations, to further identify gangs and gang members, to learn the full scope of their criminal activities and enterprises, to determine which gangs pose the greatest threat to the U.S., to identify trends in gang activity and migration, and to guide them in coordinating their investigations and prosecutions to disrupt and dismantle gangs. The NGIC will be an essential part of our efforts to combat and dismantle gangs and will enhance the existing liaison and coordination efforts of federal, state, and local agencies.

We also note the significant contribution of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) in the effort to combat violent gangs. For example, during FYs 2001, 2002, and

2003 ATF investigated over 2,200 cases involving violent gangs. Due to ATF's comprehensive efforts to identify and investigate illegal firearms traffickers, career criminals, armed narcotics traffickers, and other violent offenders who use firearms to further their criminal endeavors, ATF has for years been at the forefront of the federal government's efforts to combat violent crime involving gangs. ATF's expertise in this regard is grounded not only in investigations of traditional street gangs, but also in large-scale investigations of other organized groups (e.g. outlaw motorcycle gangs) that are involved in violent criminal activities. ATF also provides outreach and training programs designed to encourage youth to resist joining gangs.

One of the gangs being addressed by the FBI and its law enforcement partners under the National Gang Strategy is the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). MS-13 is a violent gang comprised primarily of Central American immigrants which originated in Los Angeles and has now spread across the country. MS-13 gang members are primarily from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, who initially established a presence in Los Angeles, California, in the 1980s. In 1993, three MS-13 gang members from Los Angeles, California, moved to the Northern Virginia and Washington, DC, metropolitan area to recruit additional MS-13 members. Current reporting now estimates there are as many as 1500 members of MS-13 in the Northern Virginia/DC area.

Based upon the National Gang Threat Assessment conducted by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association, MS-13 members and associates now have a presence in more than 31 states and the District of Columbia. MS-13 has a significant presence in Northern Virginia, New York, California, Texas, as well as in places as disparate and widespread as Oregon City, Oregon, and Omaha, Nebraska. Due to the lack of a national database and standard reporting criteria for the identification of gang members, the frequent use of aliases by gang members, and the transient nature of gang members, the actual number of MS-13 members in the United States is difficult to determine. However, the National Drug Intelligence Center estimates there to be between 8,000 and 10,000 hardcore members in MS-13.

Based upon available intelligence obtained through our law enforcement partners, it appears that the MS-13 in the United States is still a loosely structured street gang; however, its threat is based on its violence and its potential to grow, not only geographically, but in its organization and sophistication. Gang members affiliate themselves into groups known as cliques. Each clique will have a local leader called the "shot caller." There is no evidence to support the existence of a single leader or governing authority which is directing the daily activity of all MS-13 cliques in the United States. However, there is some evidence of an increased level of sophistication and some indications of a hierarchy of leadership. This is based in part on reports of multi-clique meetings in which gang members pay a fee to attend, coordinate their activities, exchange information regarding law enforcement actions and efforts, and issue punishment and/or sanctions for infractions of the gang's code. Cliques throughout the country often follow the lead of the Los Angeles-based cliques, and there are reports of Los Angeles based members traveling throughout the United States for the purpose of recruiting new members, establishing new cliques, and taking over existing Latino gangs, and instilling discipline through violence and intimidation.

Law enforcement in 28 states have reported MS-13 members are engaged in retail drug trafficking, primarily trafficking in powdered cocaine, crack cocaine, and marijuana, and, to a lesser extent, in methamphetamine and heroin. The drug proceeds are then laundered through seemingly legitimate businesses in those communities. MS-13 members are also involved in a variety of other types of criminal activity, including rape, murder, extortion, auto theft, alien smuggling, and robbery.

Given the extreme violence exhibited by MS-13 and its potential threat, based on the historical precedent of other similar gangs and organized criminal organizations, the FBI established the MS-13 National Gang Task Force to disrupt and dismantle this gang, now, before it has the opportunity to become more organized and sophisticated and more difficult to attack. The goals of the MS-13 National Gang Task Force are to enable local, state, and federal, as well as

international law enforcement agencies, to easily exchange information on MS-13; to enable local and state law enforcement agencies to identify the presence of MS-13 in their territories; to identify related investigations; and to coordinate regional and/or nationwide, multi-jurisdictional law enforcement action, including federal Racketeering (RICO) and Violent Crimes in Aide of Racketeering (VICAR) prosecutions.

To date, the MS-13 National Gang Task Force has initiated extensive outreach efforts to inform local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies of the establishment of the task force, through the direction of Safe Streets Violent Gang Task Forces, the initiation of the National Gang Intelligence Center, and during a recent multi-agency MS-13 national strategy conference held in Dallas, Texas. At this time, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Customs and Border Protection, ATF, Bureau of Prisons (BOP), and the Department of State (DOS) have committed to support the Task Force with personnel, intelligence, expertise and jurisdiction. These federal agencies will comprise the core group of the national task force. We are already working with other agencies to coordinate investigative operations. In addition, non-resident members of the task force include the Department of Justice Organized Crime and Racketeering Section, the United States Attorney's Office for the Central District of California (Los Angeles), the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community.

Extensive contact has also been made with the law enforcement community in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, by both the MS-13 task force leadership and our Office of International Operations, in order to share intelligence and begin a coordinated effort to address MS-13 street gangs both nationally and internationally. The FBI and other federal agencies recently attended the first International Gang Conference held in San Salvador, El Salvador, where the FBI succeeded in gaining the support of El Salvador's cooperation and participation in joint, international efforts against MS-13. At present, the FBI has one Legal Attaché in Panama that provides coverage to this region. Efforts are currently underway to establish a resident FBI presence in El Salvador.

As an example of the MS-13 National Gang Task Force coordination efforts, in early February 2005, the FBI, Customs and Border Patrol, Texas Department of Public Safety, and the East Hidalgo Detention Center worked together to arrest a key MS-13 figure. This individual is alleged to have been involved in a bus massacre that took place in Honduras on December 23, 2004, wherein a total of 28 people were assassinated, including 6 children. Fourteen other individuals were seriously wounded. A note left at the scene indicated the massacre was in retaliation against laws targeting gang members in Honduras, and MS-13 members were identified as being responsible for the attack.

Although there have been recent media reports alleging that MS-13 gang members have met with an al-Qa'ida operative in Honduras and that al-Qa'ida financed a MS-13 gang summit, there is no credible, independent reporting to support or otherwise corroborate these reports. Current analysis also supports the assessment that it is unlikely that MS-13 and al-Qa'ida would form an overt partnership for both security and ideological reasons.

According to reliable sources, the reason for the gang summit meeting in Honduras was to discuss international leadership issues within the group. There was no indication that this meeting was financed or attended by any outside organization.

Despite this initial assessment, the FBI continues to remain alert for any possible connections between MS-13, and any other gang or criminal enterprise, with Al Qa'ida. The FBI is well aware of at least one example of state-sponsored terrorists working with a U.S. street gang. In 1986, members of the El Rukin street gang in Chicago plotted with Libyan leader Mu' ammar al-Qadhafi to perpetrate terrorist acts against the U.S. in exchange for money. Qadhafi, however, is a notably secular Muslim leader who forged alliances with many groups, and he is opposed by al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups.

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to come before you today and share the work that the FBI is doing to address the problem posed by gangs in this country, including MS-13 and other Latin American or Hispanic gangs. The FBI will continue its efforts, and we will keep this Committee informed of our progress in protecting this nation's citizens against gangs and other criminal enterprises, particularly those with national and international implications.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your time and for your continued support of the FBI's efforts to combat gangs. I am happy to answer any questions.

<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm>