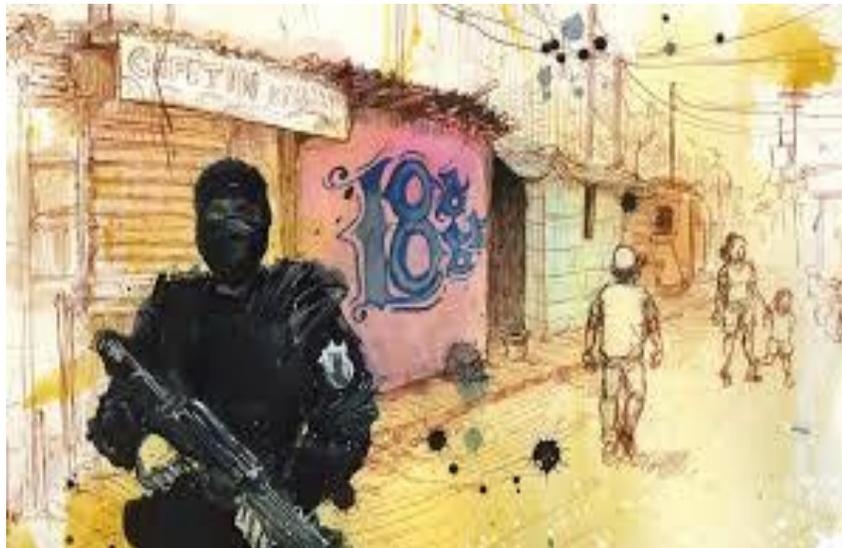


## New Yorker Magazine

### Trapped By Ms 13

By Jonathan Blitzer

Juliana grew up with a single memory of her father. He was sitting in the half-light of evening on the porch of their home, in a small town in El Salvador, while her mother cooked dinner in the kitchen. A man in a black mask emerged from the darkness. Juliana heard three gunshots, and saw her father fall off his chair, vomiting blood. She was three years old at the time, and afterward she wondered if the killing had actually happened. The most tangible detail was the man in the mask, who came to seem more present in her life than her father ever was.



Juliana used to find her mother by the windows, pulling back a corner of the curtains to be sure that he had not returned. “It was like that man went on living with us,” Juliana told me. One day when she was older, her mother said that a gang called the Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, had killed her father for refusing to pay a tax on a deli that he operated out of the house.

For five years after the killing, the family moved every six months, staying with relatives throughout El Salvador, trying to keep ahead of the gang.



In 2011, after Juliana’s mother, Ramona, testified against the killer, a member of MS-13 tried to stab her at a soccer game, where she was selling refreshments. She escaped, and fled the country, leaving Juliana and her two younger sisters at an aunt’s house, because she couldn’t afford to bring them with her. She went to Brentwood, on Long Island, where she had relatives, and took a job cleaning houses.

A few years later, she was returning home from work, when she got a call. “What I need is money to pay a lawyer for the people who have been affected by what you’ve said,” a male voice told her. “I know the people of the neighborhood. I know your family, your kids, your daughter.” One of Juliana’s schoolmates, a sixteen-year-old boy who belonged to MS-13, had kidnapped her from her aunt’s house; for weeks, she was raped and beaten. She managed to call her mother one afternoon, and together they plotted her escape.

In June, 2015, Juliana, who was then thirteen, and her sisters set off in the back of a truck, covered by a nylon tarp, packed in with other migrants heading north; at one point, in a jungle along the border between Guatemala and Mexico, Juliana had an asthma attack and the smugglers almost abandoned her. Six weeks later, the group was arrested in Texas by United States Border Patrol agents. Juliana was relieved. “You hand yourself over, and you know what’s going to

happen. You're going to experience the hielera," she told me, referring to the cold cells, called "refrigerators" by migrants, in borderland detention centers. "And then I'd finally get to see my mom."

Juliana and her sisters eventually made it to Brentwood and moved in with their mother. "I kept looking for tin-and-mud houses, like the ones from my village, but there weren't any—everything was huge," Juliana said. She followed a simple adolescent maxim: avoid humiliation. She prepared for her first day of seventh grade by memorizing the sentence "I do not speak English."



She arrived at a two-story brick building with dozens of classrooms and long hallways lined with lockers and crammed with students. "There were so many doors," she said. "I didn't understand anything." She had no idea where her classes were, or how to read her schedule. She recited the sentence she'd rehearsed to other kids, but they ignored her or responded unintelligibly. Juliana spotted a teacher who looked Hispanic, and asked her for help. "No hablo español," the teacher replied, and then walked away.

After a few months in school, two Salvadoran boys wearing oversized shirts, sagging pants, and light-blue bandannas sat down next to Juliana in her math class. They peppered her with questions in Spanish. Where was she from? Whom did she hang out with back home? Juliana had promised her mother that she wouldn't tell other students her full name, so that word of her escape wouldn't reach El Salvador, and, as the boys grilled her, she became panicked. "When

someone talks like that in El Salvador, it means they're in a gang," she said. "They weren't supposed to be here."

Her questioners belonged to MS-13, the gang that Juliana had fled El Salvador to avoid. Within days, gang members were taunting her, trying to recruit her to sell marijuana and to harass other students. When she refused, they grew aggressive and claimed that she was trying to act superior. "When the threats began, I told one of my teachers, but she couldn't do anything, because they would have run her out of the school," she told me. Her Spanish teacher told her to ignore them—security cameras had been installed, and, if she was seen talking to gang members, school administrators might assume that she was one of them. Juliana's mother called the school to complain, but she was undocumented, and didn't press the issue.

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More than a hundred and twenty thousand children from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala arrived at the southern border of the U.S. between 2014 and the end of 2016. Ranging in age from six to seventeen, they made the journey without their parents, travelling along routes controlled by smugglers, thugs, and crooked cops. The risks were outweighed by the dangers of remaining at home, where gang wars raged. The year that Juliana left, El Salvador had the highest murder rate in the world.



The U.S. government allowed the children to enter the country, but they were immediately placed in deportation proceedings. About a third of them would eventually be granted some form of asylum. In the meantime, the government tried to place the children with family

members who already lived in America, but many communities didn't want the newcomers. In July, 2014, at the height of what the federal government called a "humanitarian crisis," a mob in Murrieta, California, forced three government buses carrying a group of women and children to turn back, chanting "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" In thirty-five school districts in fourteen states, when unaccompanied minors tried to enroll in school they were prevented from doing so.

The hostility was especially pronounced on Long Island, which since 2014 has received eighty-six hundred children. One morning that August, a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan dropped pamphlets in the driveways of Hampton Bays, a blue-collar hamlet on the fringes of a seaside resort community. They called for troops on the U.S. border to "stop the flood of illegal aliens" and to defend "our unique European (White) culture."

Elsewhere, the resistance was more subtle. Schools in Hempstead required the families of incoming students to produce documents proving guardianship and residency in the district, which very few of them had. This was illegal, and, when New York's attorney general threatened a lawsuit, the children were admitted.

The new students desperately needed counselling and direction, but the schools couldn't afford to hire more teachers or to provide expanded services in Spanish. The U.S. Department of Education gave money to states to deal with the crisis, but almost all of the \$1.8 million that New York received that year went to New York City.

Most of the unaccompanied minors on Long Island were placed in Central Islip and Brentwood, in Suffolk County; the towns are currently owed sixty-five million and a hundred and forty million dollars, respectively, in education funding from the state, according to the Alliance for Quality Education. Some of the schools in the county lacked air-conditioning, and in a few of them students had to bring bottled water to class, because of concerns over lead contamination in the drinking fountains. "These new kids are just dropped into this mess," a science teacher in Brentwood told me.

Paul Pontieri, the mayor of Patchogue, a South Shore village of thirteen thousand, who also served as the interim principal of Amityville High School, told me, "Take a thirteen-year-old who isn't

an English speaker. Unless he's so bright, and unless his family life at home is incredibly structured, there's no way he's getting through high school." He said, "Fear, at a certain point, becomes anger. You can see it building up."

In September, 2016, Nisa Mickens and Kayla Cuevas, aged fifteen and sixteen, were found dead in Brentwood, killed with machetes and baseball bats and mutilated beyond recognition.


**SUFFOLK COUNTY** **1-800-220-TIPS**  
**CRIME STOPPERS**   
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**\$15,000 REWARD**  
**GUARANTEED TO BE PAID within 48 hours of arrest(s)**  
**for the first tip that leads to the arrest of the person or**  
**people responsible for the murders of Nisa Mickens, 15, and**  
**Kayla Cuevas, 16, of Brentwood.**



The Suffolk County Police Department is seeking information on the homicides of Nisa Mickens and Kayla Cuevas, which occurred on September 13, 2016 near Stabley Street and Ray Court in Brentwood. Anyone with information is asked to call Suffolk County Crime Stoppers at **1-800-220-TIPS**. Tips can be left **ANONYMOUSLY**.

The first tip leading to the arrest of the perpetrator(s) will be rewarded **\$15,000 GUARANTEED TO BE PAID** within 48 hours of the arrest.

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Thirteen members of MS-13, seven of whom had come to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors, were charged in their deaths. Between the beginning of 2016 and May, 2017, authorities in Suffolk County attributed seventeen killings to MS-13, and the county's police department identified at least eighty-nine gang members who were undocumented immigrants, thirty-nine of whom had been placed with family on Long Island by the federal government.

There are roughly four hundred MS-13 members in Suffolk County, which stretches from twenty miles outside New York City to the tip of Long Island, and comprises dense suburbs, vegetable farms, vineyards, and valuable beachfront real estate.



Many of the victims of MS-13 on Long Island are immigrants themselves, and a large number of them came to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors. The gangsters and their victims live together in the same towns, go to the same schools, and vie for the same jobs; their lives are thoroughly enmeshed. (Some names in this article have been changed.)

MS-13 has more than fifty thousand members in Central America and about ten thousand in the U.S. In 2012, the U.S. government named it a “transnational criminal organization,” the only street gang to receive the designation. Carlos García, a leading expert on MS-13, told me that the gang is more like a family than like a business. “They sell drugs, buy weapons, and engage in extortion, but they don’t have elaborate financial ambitions. It’s not comparable to a Mexican or Colombian cartel.”

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MS-13 began not in El Salvador but in Los Angeles, in the nineteen-eighties. Salvadoran refugees were fleeing a civil war at home, and they arrived in inner-city neighborhoods controlled by Mexican and black street gangs.



Some of the Salvadorans formed groups of their own, largely in self-defense, and over time they became increasingly aggressive. After the civil war ended, in the early nineties, the U.S. government deported the gang members en masse; within a few years, they had spread across Central America.

Those who weren't deported moved east. By the mid-nineties, more than ninety thousand Salvadorans were living on Long Island, and gangsters from the West Coast gravitated toward towns like Freeport and Hempstead, where nascent Salvadoran groups, with names like Los Seven Elevens, had already formed.

"The life style was different in New York," an MS-13 member who goes by the nickname Spider told me, from federal prison, where he is doing time for attempted murder. "There's more racism. People in New York are different than the people in California. In New York, the majority of the Hispanics are Dominicans, Puerto Ricans. All those people don't like the Central Americans. They look down on them."

"Wherever you have a large Central American population, you have a strong MS-13 presence," a federal law-enforcement official who specializes in gang crime told me. In Brentwood, a town of sixty thousand, nearly seventy per cent of the population is Hispanic, and

there are some sixteen thousand Salvadorans. In 2000, the Salvadoran government opened a consulate in town. “The idea that the violence is somehow new is wrong,” the official continued. At the same time, he said, a small number of gangsters from Central America were concealing their gang ties and coming to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors. Other new arrivals were joining MS-13 after they came to the U.S. Their isolation at school and at home—many hadn’t seen their parents since they were toddlers—created a void that the gang was able to fill.

This past summer, I met David, a twenty-seven-year-old with a chinstrap beard, at a pizzeria in Brentwood. He used to be a member of the Latin Kings, a predominantly Puerto Rican gang. In 2007, a group of MS-13 members attacked him with knives. He was shot a year later, and decided to leave the gang life. Now he installs home appliances and rarely goes out. “Brentwood used to be pretty much Kings and Bloods,” he said, referring to the black street gangs. “It’s MS-13 now. Around 2006 was when it completely turned over. It’s not just Brentwood, either. It’s C.I., Bayshore. They’re in the Hamptons. They’re in the city. They’re branching out—and they’re ruthless.”

As David spoke, I couldn’t always tell if he was referring to MS-13 or to Central Americans more generally. “These people are coming in, they’re getting all the houses,” he said. “We can’t get the houses — we’re getting denied left and right. They’re not even citizens. They got good jobs. We’re getting jealous. It’s like they’re taking everything from us, and they’re making our community like how their country is.”

“If you want to exploit the anti-immigrant rhetoric that exists out here, it’s easy,” Steve Bellone, the Suffolk County executive—the county’s equivalent of a mayor—told me, one afternoon last summer. Bellone is a forty-eight-year-old moderate Democrat, with silver hair and the attentive manner of an experienced retail politician. In 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama won Suffolk County by margins of six and four percentage points, respectively, but in 2016 Donald Trump carried the county by seven points. The result didn’t surprise Bellone. His predecessor was a proto-Trump figure named Steve Levy, a

Democrat turned Republican who built his political career on stoking white, middle-class resentment of Latinos.

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The Long Island suburbs have been segregated since their inception. After the Second World War, the Federal Housing Administration subsidized the development of suburban communities across America on the condition that homes be sold only to white families. The segregation has persisted, owing to the practice, among town governments across Long Island, of using zoning laws and tax codes to preserve their makeup.

The arrival of immigrant laborers from Mexico and Central America in the past few decades exacerbated the social tensions, and, in the late nineties, a white backlash emerged. Mexican workers in Farmingville were beaten and murdered by white vigilantes in a string of hate crimes that gradually spread across the county. Levy, who assumed office in 2004, called for mass arrests of the undocumented, and advocated conducting raids to evict immigrant workers from their homes. “We’re going to stand up for the people of this country who have been exploited in their neighborhoods,” he said. The more he attacked Latinos, the better he did at the ballot box: in 2007, he won reelection, receiving ninety-six per cent of the vote.

A year later, in Patchogue, a group of teen-agers attacked and murdered a thirty-seven-year-old Ecuadoran named Marcelo Lucero. Immigrants there had been complaining for months about increasingly violent altercations with white residents, but the police had ignored them. After Lucero’s killing, the U.S. Department of Justice found that for years the county police had been racially profiling Latino residents during traffic stops and discouraging them from reporting crimes.

Bellone, who succeeded Levy in 2012, signed an agreement with the D.O.J. to reform police practices, but the Suffolk County Police Department was slow to change. In 2014, a sergeant with twenty-five years on the force was arrested for extorting money from

Latino drivers. Undocumented-immigrant motorists, who receive their salaries in cash and drive without licenses, are easy targets. Latinos make up twenty per cent of the county's population, but they represent almost fifty per cent of the cases in traffic court.

Violent crime has steadily declined across the county since the late nineties, but MS-13 makes for a convenient anti-immigrant talking point. Gang crime is a symbol of the changes that people see around them — the Spanish they hear at the grocery store and the crush of new students at their children's schools. And the large and conspicuous population of unaccompanied minors has allowed residents to connect an abstract threat to a concrete phenomenon. "This sort of thing is about a feeling," Bellone told me. "You don't feel that crime is down. Acts like these murders aren't supposed to happen in the suburbs."

Unsurprisingly, MS-13 has become an obsession of Donald Trump, who talks incessantly about the gang, portraying it as representative of a wave of immigrant crime. "They come from Central America," he told *Time Magazine*, during his "Person of the Year" interview, in 2016. "They're killing and raping everybody out there. They're illegal, and they're finished." Trump visited Brentwood six months after he took office; in August, at a rally in Phoenix, he said, "We are liberating towns out on Long Island." Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General, has called the unaccompanied minors "wolves in sheep's clothing."

The Trump Administration may actually be helping the gang by excoriating it publicly. MS-13's notoriety, particularly among American law-enforcement agencies, has long emboldened members of the gang, both in Central America and in the U.S. "No national political figure has ever talked as much as Trump has about MS-13," Héctor Silva Ávalos, a former official at the Salvadoran Embassy in Washington, told me. The President's rhetoric about the gang has heightened the animosity that immigrant kids face on Long Island, and it makes them more desperate for protection.

The day that Trump visited Brentwood, he spoke at Suffolk County Community College. I watched the speech on TV, at the home of Debbie Cavanaugh, a white schoolteacher in her fifties who leads a

community group called the Central Islip Coalition of Good Neighbors. A Hispanic cleaning woman vacuumed a carpeted staircase behind us while we waited for the President to appear onscreen. Cavanaugh's organization helps residents who have grievances, from noise complaints to problems with squatters and, recently, the issue of gang violence. "Hispanic people are getting a bad rap," she conceded. But she liked that Trump was so outspoken. "He tells it like it is, no sugar-coating," she said.

Cavanaugh told me that, twenty-five years ago, when she moved to Central Islip, the town was a third white, a third black, and a third Hispanic. "It's now about eighty-seven per cent Hispanic," she said. (*Hispanics actually make up half the town's population.*) The demographic shift didn't seem to bother her. "One reason why I moved here was because it was diverse," she said. "But people are tired of seeing their tax dollars go toward paying for illegal immigrants. My personal opinion is that some of them feel an entitlement, that everything has to be handed to them." She admitted that the unaccompanied-minors situation was more complicated. "The federal government relocated kids to the community, then washed its hands of the problem," she said. "It becomes a burden on the taxpayers. Your population has grown, but you're not getting extra funding."

Trump didn't mention such concerns in his speech. The gangsters, he said, "have transformed peaceful parks and beautiful, quiet neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields. They're animals." He also encouraged the police to be rougher with criminal suspects. Cavanaugh was untroubled. "This is a great speech," she said. "He's not even being that racist."

Juan was a policeman in El Salvador, but, ten years ago, when he moved to Brentwood as an undocumented immigrant, he took a job in landscaping. Juan is in his early forties, strapping and chatty, and lives with his wife, Silvia, and their two daughters. He speaks in rapid-fire Spanish except when he mentions MS-13; in several months of conversations, I only ever heard him say the name in English. In March, 2016, Juan's fifteen-year-old daughter disappeared for three days with a teen-age boy. When Juan called the police, they told him that she had probably just run off with a boyfriend. He and Silvia were

circling the neighborhood when they spotted her, in tattered clothes, staggering around at a major intersection. Clearly drugged, she had been dumped on the street.

“What I tell my kids, and also my friends, is that if you meet someone who just arrived here, especially a kid who came alone to Long Island, avoid him,” Juan told me. “There’s a fifty-fifty chance he’s in a gang.” Juan and Silvia began keeping detailed logs of worrisome encounters or observations, such as an unfamiliar car parked on their block or a hostile encounter with aggressive teenagers at a gas station. They supplemented their records with photographs and videos. When I asked them if they planned to show these materials to the police, they told me it would be useless. “There’s only one group out here that’s actually helping,” Juan said. He was referring to *Make the Road New York*, an organization that provides support to local immigrants. At least once a week, Juan and Silvia visit the group’s offices to share their concerns and to get legal advice. Walter Barrientos, a thirty-three-year-old from Guatemala who grew up in Amityville, is the lead organizer in Suffolk County. “There are warning signs before there’s gang violence,” he told me. “Girls start disappearing. The police write it off as teen-age romance, but it’s much more serious than that. Not long after someone disappears, even if they eventually return, people turn up dead.”

Last December, Juan and Silvia’s daughter disappeared again. Late one morning, a boy led her from school to a waiting cab. When, a few hours later, she hadn’t returned home, Juan and Silvia went to the school, where a security guard demanded to see identification. “I have a daughter in this school,” Juan protested. He and Silvia presented identification cards from Make the Road, but the guard declared them invalid. Eventually, Silvia persuaded him to accept a Salvadoran I.D. card. They met with a school administrator, but she was reluctant to share any information. Juan and Silvia returned home, and their daughter was there, unharmed but too scared to say anything about what had happened.

Juan persuaded her to tell him where the boy had taken her: a small, ramshackle house on the outskirts of town. When Juan arrived, a woman answered the door, and insisted that the boy he was looking for didn’t live there. Juan went home and called the police, who

promised to investigate. Juan and Silvia never heard from them again. Several months later, Juan, watching the local news, recognized the house he had visited. Two brothers who belonged to MS-13 lived there; they had just been arrested for the murder of Nisa Mickens and Kayla Cuevas. The police found guns, knives, and drugs on the property. “I thank God that my daughter’s O.K., but no one else,” Juan said.

Now Juan’s family travels around Brentwood in his truck, careful not to stray far from one another. The parents and the children are in a precarious situation, but in different ways—the daughters because of the gang, and Juan and Silvia because they’re undocumented. Recently, Juan was stopped for a traffic infraction and ticketed for driving without a license.

There have been more police officers on the roads since MS-13 became national news, and in recent months Governor Andrew Cuomo has sent state troopers to patrol the streets of Brentwood and Central Islip. For an undocumented immigrant, multiple citations for driving without a license can trigger the involvement of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In the past year, Juan has spent about a thousand dollars on tickets; he goes to pay them on days when it’s raining, so that he doesn’t miss landscaping work. He told me, “In some ways, the gang members have it easier than we do. If they go to jail, they’re protected by their own. If *I* went to jail, or got deported, I’d be at risk. I’d be a target. No one would protect me.”

A sign on a telephone pole outside Brentwood High School offers a fifteen-thousand-dollar reward for information about a gang murder that was solved seven months ago. The sign greets students as they enter the two separate schools that make up Brentwood High. In front is the Ross Center, and behind it is Sonderling High. Students who live in historically poorer areas of Brentwood, the south and the east, go to Ross; those from the north and the west, which were once slightly better off, attend Sonderling. The entrance hall of Sonderling is gleaming, with a fountain and plants along the walls. At Ross, the linoleum floors are badly scuffed, the hallways dimly lit. The two buildings are linked by a long hallway that students traverse only reluctantly.

Elena, a sixteen-year-old who was born on Long Island to Salvadoran parents, goes to Ross. The school hosts the town's main Spanish-language E.S.L. program, and although Elena speaks fluent English, she has been in E.S.L. since kindergarten. When students enroll, the school district sends a form to their families asking them if English or Spanish is the predominant language spoken at home. If it's Spanish, the student is supposed to be interviewed and tested before being placed in an academic program. Elena was overlooked.



Elena is thin and reserved, and has a warbling, nervous laugh. We met at a diner in Commack, six miles from Brentwood. She sat facing the door and stole glances out the window. Her ex-boyfriend, Carlos, whose name is tattooed in cursive on her left wrist, is an MS-13 member in prison for murder. She worries that his friends will come after her; MS-13 members were angry that she broke up with him. Elena also worries about his rivals: to members of the Bloods, who live on her street, she's still guilty of having associated with MS-13.

When Carlos told her that he was in a gang, she thought that he was joking. "You're in MS, sure, and I'm President," she responded. Carlos had arrived from El Salvador in 2015, as an unaccompanied minor. His brother, who lived in Brentwood, belonged to MS-13 and initiated him into the gang. "He said, 'I'm a gang member. You can't leave me,'" Elena told me. He swore at her, and occasionally hit her. When she spoke to other men, even relatives or teachers, he became violently jealous.

Carlos had dropped out of high school and worked as a landscaper, but his friends in MS-13 attended Ross, and they trailed

Elena around school. The E.S.L. classrooms are on a corridor that everyone calls the “Papi and Mami hallway.” The students are mostly from El Salvador and speak only Spanish. In one corner of the hallway, about twenty boys would gather to “rep” the gang. (*A school spokesperson denies this.*) One of them, a close friend of Carlos’s who was later suspended for threatening to kill a teacher, took photographs of Elena to show Carlos where she went between classes. Carlos had her schedule, and called her throughout the day with questions about interactions that his friends had observed.

Elena and her parents filed a report with the police, accusing Carlos of harassment. When he found out, he began messaging her several times a day, saying that he was going to kill her parents. He sent her photographs of himself posing with guns, his hand flashing the gang’s sign, the shape of an “M.” “One time he called me and said, ‘I’m playing with teeth,’ ” Elena told me. “I was, like, ‘He’s crazy. He’s probably smoking weed or something.’ ” She later learned that he had pulled the teeth from the corpse of someone the gang had killed.

One night, in the fall of 2016, Carlos called Elena to ask if she had heard any rumors about girls who had gone missing. The next day, the police announced that they had found the bodies of Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens. Elena knew Mickens from school, but Carlos forbade her from going to the funeral.

A few weeks later, Elena was walking to the bus stop when a red pickup truck pulled up next to her. Carlos emerged, holding a gun, and told her to get in. With two friends, he drove her to the woods, where MS-13 members had a meeting spot. Carlos kept Elena hostage for three months. “At night, we would stay in the woods so no one could find me,” she said.

On a few occasions, she heard the police knocking on the door of Carlos’s mother’s house, in Central Islip, where she was sometimes stashed during the day, but they never came inside. She became pregnant, and resolved to escape. One morning in December, Carlos went to work early, and the friends he had deputized to watch her got into a fight and left the house. Elena ran to a friend’s house. There,

she called her mother, who got in touch with the police. They told her to call a taxi to pick Elena up. (*The police deny this.*)

Elena had always distrusted the police, because she felt that they could not protect her from Carlos. But, after being forced to make her getaway in a taxi, she came to resent them. Elena laughs when she gets upset — she doesn't cry — and she did so when recalling what one of the policemen told her. "Thank God you're alive," he said. "Do you have any idea who you were with?"

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For the past two years, the commissioner of the Suffolk County police has been a former prosecutor named Timothy Sini, now thirty-seven, who has a canny, lawyerly demeanor and a light Long Island accent. When we first spoke on the phone, in May, Jeff Sessions had recently visited Central Islip to give a speech about MS-13. He attributed its rise to lax immigration enforcement and "open borders." Sini was careful not to express his displeasure, but he was obviously annoyed. "We have to compete with that noise," he told me. If the police department wanted to root out gangs, victims had to feel comfortable coming forward. The more the Trump Administration ranted about immigrants, the more the Hispanic community feared the prospect of mass deportations. Sini brought Spanish-speaking officers with him to translate when he visited residents to assure them that the police would limit their cooperation with ICE. The work that his department was doing was tailored to catch criminals, not people who lacked papers.

A few months later, Sini told me that he had seen his first task in the job as cleaning up a deeply sullied department. But he was also mounting a campaign for district attorney. In one of his campaign ads, he said, "As Suffolk police commissioner, I declared war on MS-13, and put hundreds of its members behind bars. My message to the rest of them? Get ready, we're coming for you." On November 7th, he won sixty-two per cent of the vote.

In January, Elena had a miscarriage, and spent a few weeks convalescing at her aunt's house, in Hempstead. When she returned to Brentwood High School, the corner of the Papi and Mami hallway was empty. Most of the MS-13 members who hung out there had been arrested.

At school, Elena met a sixteen-year-old Salvadoran named Jorge, who had arrived as an unaccompanied minor a year earlier and lived with his sister. He was sensitive and respectful, and even Elena's parents, who could be stern and unforgiving, supported their relationship.

In late February, as they left school, they noticed a car idling across the street. Two middle-aged men got out and said they were detectives. They took photographs of Elena and Jorge, asked for their identification, and searched their backpacks and inspected them for tattoos that suggested gang ties. One detective made a gang sign to see how Jorge would react. But Jorge, who, according to Elena, had no connections to MS-13, did nothing, and they were eventually allowed to go.

In July, Jorge was arrested at a body shop where he worked as a mechanic, and sent to a detention center in Texas; he was scheduled to be deported. While Jorge was in custody, an immigration agent showed him the photograph taken by the detectives. ICE had arrested him after the local police suggested that he belonged to MS-13. Jorge's family thinks that perhaps ICE believed that his response to the gang sign had somehow been suspicious. Elena was inconsolable. "He was the only one I could talk to," she told me.

During the spring, I began hearing from immigrants' rights advocates in Suffolk County that the police were working with federal immigration authorities in some of the ways that undocumented residents had feared. In May, Sini told a Senate subcommittee holding hearings on MS-13 and the unaccompanied-minors program, "We automatically notify the *Department of Homeland Security* when we arrest an individual for a misdemeanor or felony who was not born in this country, so that immigration authorities can take appropriate action." Throughout the summer and fall, the police and ICE rounded up more than three hundred suspected gang members, and touted their

success at press conferences. Specific information about the arrests is rarely made public, and many in the community complained that authorities often baselessly considered undocumented residents to be gang members.

Jorge wasn't the only teen-ager to be accused of belonging to MS-13 regardless of scant evidence of gang ties. At least four other students in Suffolk County were suspended from school because administrators thought they were involved with the gang. Three of them, students at Bellport High School, twenty miles east of Brentwood, came to Long Island as unaccompanied minors from Guatemala and El Salvador. One had worn a Chicago Bulls T-shirt to school. (*MS-13 members used to wear Bulls attire, because the horns of the team's insignia resemble the gang sign.*) Another had posted a Salvadoran flag, which is mostly blue, on his Facebook page; MS-13's trademark color is light blue. That seems to be the extent of the evidence in each case, but it's impossible to know more, because neither the school nor the police will share any information. In Brentwood, an eighteen-year-old girl from El Salvador, who came to the U.S. fleeing the gangs, was detained in the immigration wing of a county jail, because school officials found marijuana in her locker and had seen her socializing with "confirmed MS-13 members." A judge released her, and she was allowed to return to school. "I'm scared to go back," she told NPR. "Look at everything I went through just for attending that school."

Inside schools throughout the county, the police post an employee, called a resource officer, whose job is to provide support to administrators. They have also been helping to identify gang members. But what constitutes membership is nebulous. ICE identifies someone as a gang member if he meets at least two criteria from a list that includes "having gang tattoos," "frequenting an area notorious for gangs," and "wearing gang apparel."

Elena told me that, in response to heightened police activity, Carlos and his friends from MS-13 would change their style of dress. In the weeks after the murders of Mickens and Cuevas, the gang members at school replaced their Nike Cortez sneakers with Adidas. They mocked the police for being slow to catch on. Immigrant teens without ties to the gang didn't necessarily know which clothes were off limits — schools don't specify.

Throughout the summer, a handful of students were expelled from school on suspicions of gang membership and then were targeted by ice for deportation. According to a federal lawsuit brought by the A.C.L.U., at least thirty-two teen-agers were placed in immigration jails for alleged gang ties. The charges included being “in the presence of MS-13 members” on a town soccer field; being seen at school and in a car with confirmed gangsters; cutting class; and writing the number 503, the international calling code for El Salvador, on a school notebook.

The strategy for combatting MS-13 rests on one of the core premises of American immigration enforcement: undocumented immigrants have far fewer legal rights than citizens do. Dismantling a criminal organization is a complex and painstaking legal task. It’s much easier to deport someone than it is to convict him of a crime.

In August, I spoke with Angel Melendez, the special agent in charge of ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations, in New York. “We’re placing people in removal proceedings as a way of disrupting MS-13’s efforts,” he told me. I asked him what he made of the girl in Brentwood who had been arrested based on unproven allegations of gang activity. “The removal process continues,” Melendez replied. The girl’s alleged ties to the gang would not have to be proved, because she was guilty of something that was never in dispute: to flee the gang she was now accused of joining, she had entered the country without papers.

At the end of the summer, I met Juliana at a church in Garden City, where she, her sisters, and Ramona had an appointment with Lauren Blodgett, a lawyer from the *Safe Passage Project*, a nonprofit legal-aid organization based in New York City, which represents more than five hundred Central American children. Juliana had recently learned that the government was granting her and her sisters asylum; they could now live legally in the U.S.

It was the start of the school year, and Juliana had a newfound optimism. “I’ll be taking almost all of my classes in English this year,” she told me. Her exam to place out of E.S.L. took two and a half hours, and was administered in four periods in the school cafeteria. Juliana had studied for months, and she scored high enough

to qualify for a full course load in English. There were no gang members in her new classes, and she no longer had to walk down the hallways they frequented. “Sometimes I see them at lunch, in the cafeteria, but it’s like we don’t know each other now,” she told me.

Blodgett called Juliana, her sisters, and their mother into a sparsely furnished room, where she presented them with three packets containing the paperwork formalizing their asylum status. “Your employment-authorization cards will arrive in the mail,” she told them. The younger girls glanced at Juliana to see how they should respond; when she smiled, they exhaled audibly. As they left, I asked Blodgett why she’d distributed only three packets. Immigrants have a year to apply for asylum, she told me. Ramona learned this too late.

Ramona confided to Blodgett her fear of deportation, but she rarely raised the subject with her daughters, knowing that it would upset them. Juliana withheld information from Ramona for the same reason. Even though Ramona drove Juliana to a therapist so that she could talk about what she’d endured in El Salvador, the topic was studiously avoided at home. I asked Juliana why. “It would only make her cry,” she said.