

MS 13

By Del Quentin Wilbur - Wall Street Journal



The meeting in Richmond, Va., quickly dispensed with routine matters, including introductions, before the senior leadership got down to business. Teamwork and recruitment, said one top official, needed improvement. Also, anyone wanting to kill a rival must secure prior approval.

Mara Salvatrucha, the violent international street gang known as MS-13, had its share of headaches by the time of its fall 2015 meeting, which was surreptitiously recorded by U.S. authorities. One proposed solution was to better manage its estimated 10,000 U.S. members along the lines of other corporate-style criminal gangs, such as the Mafia or drug cartels.

MS-13 leaders created a catchphrase, “The Program,” for widening its influence and improving cash flow. “What we are asking

is total cooperation,” a top leader told the group by speaker phone from El Salvador. “Let’s all work together, united, you know.”

For years, MS-13’s impact on the U.S. was local—confined to specific neighborhoods and cities scattered across the country as the gang used violence to secure and hold turf. Then, federal officials tracked an alarming development. As MS-13’s influence grew, so did its ambition to leverage its network of local franchises into a cohesive, national brand. That would vault MS-13 into territory once occupied by the Mafia, and now held by Mexican drug cartels.

A series of trials that wrapped up this summer in Boston shows how MS-13 is pushing to make that leap by streamlining its management structure and creating uniform standards, much like a multinational company. The question, one that will determine whether MS-13 can make the jump to national significance, is whether that transformation can impose order on its unruly, violent young members.

The group, partly because of its success in the U.S., has become a political football, with President Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions using gruesome acts by MS-13 members to push the administration’s tight immigration policy. The attorney general has called MS-13 “one of the most dangerous groups in America,” while Mr. Trump has declared its members to be “thugs” and “animals.” Democrats and lawmakers in favor of looser restrictions say their rhetoric is overblown.

Federal and state law-enforcement officials say MS-13 gang membership has grown by several thousand members over the past decade or so. It stretches to at least 40 states and the District of Columbia, according to the Justice Department. “They have definitely showed their organizational capacity in terms of ordering violence and in terms of recruiting and replenishing the ranks,” said Derek N.

Benner, a top official at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

MS-13 has drawn recruits by branding itself as an ultraviolent enterprise, according to federal officials, a gang image of protection and status. Yet while it dabbles in drugs, street robberies and petty extortion, its profits are minuscule. Federal raids of MS-13 residences typically net little more than a handful of knives, loose cash and occasionally a gun.

Dues range from \$15 to \$30 a month, largely paid by MS-13 members who work as laborers, construction workers or dishwashers. Most of the money is wired to gang leaders in El Salvador, to pay for phones and weapons. What's left is pooled locally for knives, guns and recreational drugs.

"The way they are acting right now, they are not going to reach the level of organization of, say, the Mexican Mafia or the Italian mob," said George Norris, an investigator with the Anne Arundel County, Md., State's Attorney's Office and a court-sanctioned gang expert. "They are just too violent. As other gangs have discovered, newsworthy violence is bad for business."

MS-13 was founded in the 1980s in and around Los Angeles by immigrants from El Salvador, who had fled their country's civil war. In their new neighborhoods, they found themselves surrounded by hostile gangs. For protection, they formed their own group, which they called Mara Salvatrucha. After an alliance with the Mexican Mafia for protection inside California prisons, Mara Salvatrucha became MS-13—(M is the 13th letter of the alphabet, a sign of respect for their new partners.)

U.S. immigration crackdowns in the 1980s ended up sending members of MS-13 to El Salvador, where the gang took root and transformed into a transnational enterprise.

The first time federal agents began tracking the MS-13 organizational push came during a 2013 gang-wide conference call. The line was shared by about two dozen leaders in California and El Salvador, according to law-enforcement officials and court records. The goal of the call was consolidating members “under a single, cohesive leadership structure,” U.S. prosecutors said in court papers. “The sales pitch was that everybody in MS-13 will benefit,” a federal law-enforcement official said. “The local members would get more money, guns, cars and support from the gang if they were arrested. Meanwhile, larger amounts of money would flow back to the leadership in El Salvador.”

While prosecutors in New Jersey were tracking the gang’s efforts to expand, federal agents and prosecutors in Boston were in the early stages of an MS-13 investigation in the Boston area, a probe that resulted in charges against 61 alleged members from at least eight cliques. Many who later pleaded guilty provided information about the gang’s inner workings.

Five gang members have testified in court. All were immigrants from either El Salvador or Honduras who entered the U.S. illegally. Some said they were recruited to join MS-13 by neighbors, friends at work or school classmates. They admitted to committing street crimes, assaults and killings largely targeting rivals and suspected informants. Their weapon of choice was a machete because, as one gang member said, it allowed him to “cut somebody’s head off easily, and that person will not scream or make noise.”

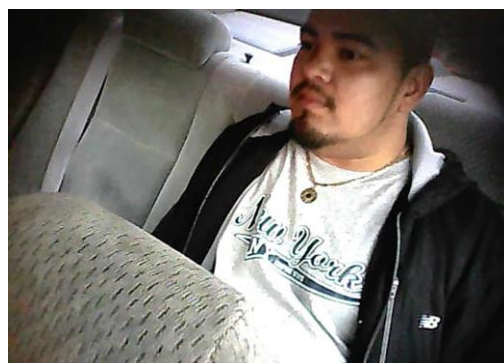
Mauricio Sanchez testified he traveled to the U.S. from Honduras in 2008, and once in the Boston area, he was recruited by MS-13 members. After joining the Eastside Clique in 2013, he said he embraced the gang’s mandate for violence and focused his energy on “doing hits on the rivals.”

Mr. Sanchez described how he and other members of the Eastside Clique chased members of the rival 18th Street gang and nearly beat one to death. “He was a small guy,” testified Mr. Sanchez, now 30. “I hit him on the head, and we were all beating him.... He looked like he was in bad shape.”



Mauricio Sanchez PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Jose Hernandez Miguel testified he was deported to El Salvador in 2009 but returned two years later. Members of his Everett clique chipped in \$1,000 to help pay for his illegal re-entry into the U.S.



Mr. Hernandez Miguel and other witnesses explained how members were kept in line under the organizational push from El Salvador. Short beatings were given for drinking too much or missing

too many meetings. Before then, local cliques were largely autonomous.

Two members were savagely kicked after MS-13 leaders in El Salvador saw a photo of graffiti on a high school wall hailing their clique without permission. At the time, the local clique was essentially on probation, awaiting the arrival of a new leader from El Salvador.

Josue Alexis De Paz aspired to join the gang while living in El Salvador. He sold drugs, kept an eye out for rivals and extorted delivery drivers. After being interrogated about his work by police, Mr. De Paz's family paid \$9,000 to have the teenager smuggled into the U.S., and, they hoped, out of trouble. He settled near Boston and soon joined the Everett clique. Mr. De Paz, now 21, became a junior associate. In April, he testified how suspicion grew that another member was a snitch. Mr. De Paz and an associate were told to "make the soup," code for killing the suspected informant, 16-year-old Jose Aguilar Villanueva, known by friends as Fantasma.

In a deserted park, Mr. De Paz testified he grabbed Mr. Aguilar Villanueva from behind and held him, while the other man stabbed the teenager. "Then Fantasma kicked him," Mr. De Paz said in court. "I took out my folding knife and I also stabbed him."

They left the teen for dead and tossed away their knives and bloody clothes. Gang leaders were impressed by the work and promised to promote them to full gang status. The two associates were arrested before they got the chance. Only later did they learn Mr. Aguilar Villanueva was never an informant.

Despite their obsession with betrayal, the Boston-area MS-13 members didn't suspect anything of the man who turned out to be their greatest threat. Federal agents had recruited an El Salvadoran man convicted in Florida on federal charges of trafficking drugs for Mexican cartels. He returned to the U.S. from El Salvador and took

the role of an unlicensed taxicab driver, shuttling members of more than a half-dozen MS-13 cliques in the area.

For nearly three years, the informant secretly recorded conversations in his car and at gang gatherings. He captured on video the promotions of junior associates—*chequeos*—to full-fledged gang member—homeboy—a process that included a ceremonial 13-second beating. As a trusted member of Eastside Loco Salvatrucha, the informant participated in the FBI’s biggest intelligence coup, secretly recording the December 2015 meeting in Richmond, Va. The informant drove gang leaders to meet with more than a dozen other leaders from around the U.S. His recordings, prosecutors said in court papers, provided rare “firsthand insight into the inner workings of MS-13, including its organizational structure and hierarchy.”

The meeting was held at the home of the head of the gang’s East Coast program, Jose Adan Martinez Castro, 28, who has since pleaded guilty to federal racketeering charges and awaits sentencing.



Jose Adan Martinez-Castro

PHOTO: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Mr. Castro kicked off the gathering by explaining he had been tapped by senior gang members in El Salvador to take charge. There was too much infighting among U.S. cliques, he told the group,

according to court papers that included a lengthy summary of the informant's recording.

The gang leader provided guidance on how to conduct "hits" on rivals and informants, telling other leaders that such killings "have to be coordinated and requested beforehand." He cautioned members against wearing *Nike Cortez* sneakers because police had figured out it was a gang favorite. He encouraged more drug dealing because he had extra product to sell.

The local leader dialed his counterpart in El Salvador, Edwin Manica Flores. One by one, those in attendance picked up the cellphone and introduced themselves to Mr. Flores, who was described in court papers as "one of the El Salvador-based leaders of MS-13's East Coast Program." Mr. Flores, who is in custody in El Salvador, couldn't be reached for comment.

During the meeting, Mr. Flores warned associates that their enemies "are filling up the turfs around us" and that they would benefit financially from cooperation. The MS-13 leader, court papers allege, also emphasized the need for careful vetting of members and associates. "You guys know how hot things are," the leader said, according to prosecutors. "Be very careful, all of you that are there, brother, be very careful The FBI gives them a car, gives them money, gives them everything, and when they give them all that, they loosen their tongues."

Mr. Flores' warning was prescient, but late. Within weeks, FBI agents and police were fanning across Boston with arrest warrants.