



# Drugs and Crime

## Gang Profile

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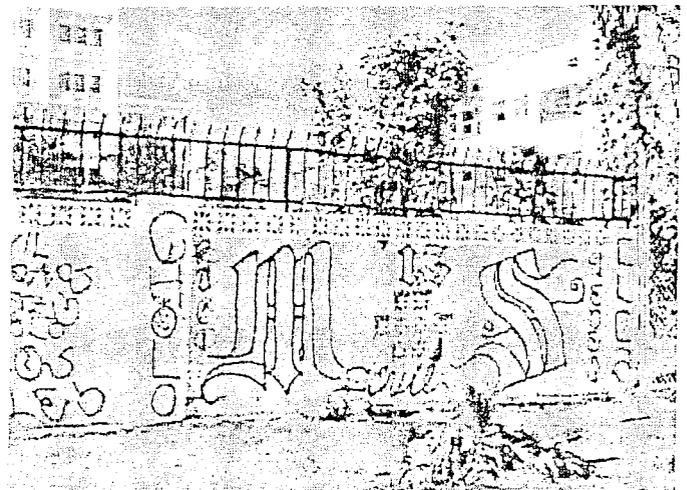
U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F J U S T I C E

# Mara Salvatrucha

*Mara Salvatrucha is a Hispanic street gang with more than 8,000 members in 27 states and the District of Columbia. The gang also has more than 20,000 members in foreign countries, particularly El Salvador. Also known as MS 13, the gang smuggles illicit drugs into the United States and transports and distributes drugs throughout the country. Members of Mara Salvatrucha often commit violent acts, principally against members of rival gangs. Traditionally, the gang was composed of loosely affiliated groups known as cliques; however, increased coordination of criminal activity among Mara Salvatrucha cliques in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia, and New York City may indicate that the gang is attempting to develop a national command structure.*

## Background

Nearly one million refugees, many of them illegal immigrants, fled civil war-torn El Salvador between 1984 and 1992 to settle in the United States, primarily in Los Angeles. Most of the refugees who emigrated to Los Angeles moved into the Rampart section (west of downtown) where Hispanic gangs were prominent and very active. Many Salvadoran youths living in Rampart joined Hispanic gangs—in particular the 18th Street gang—which accepted the Salvadorans because many had gained valuable military experience during the civil war in El Salvador. However, cultural differences led many Salvadorans to leave the 18th Street gang to begin forming Mara Salvatrucha cliques. Salvadoran youths joining newly formed cliques quickly gained



Gang graffiti.

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a reputation for their willingness to use violence while engaging in bank robbery, burglary, extortion, murder, weapons trafficking, and drug transportation and distribution.

During the late 1980s Mara Salvatrucha grew rapidly in Rampart. By the early 1990s Mara Salvatrucha had enough members and influence to rival established gangs and began to exercise their power by challenging the 18th Street gang for control of Rampart. The two gangs engaged in a series of violent confrontations that drew in other Hispanic street gangs active in the Los Angeles area. Although there was no clear winner, Mara Salvatrucha succeeded in gaining control of some parts of Rampart. Since then Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang have continued to fight each other in cities throughout the United States and in El Salvador.

In 1993 Mara Salvatrucha began fighting the Mexican Mafia prison gang and its affiliates in response to Mexican Mafia's demand that all Hispanic gangs in Los Angeles pay a tax on drug sales. In 1994 the two gangs reached a settlement in which Mara Salvatrucha agreed to supply Mexican Mafia with cocaine and marijuana and serve as enforcers and extortionists in exchange for exemption from the drug tax. This settlement forged a close relationship between the former rivals, and Mara Salvatrucha was designated a Sureños 13 gang—a Southern California Hispanic street gang affiliated with Mexican Mafia.

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### **Sureños 13**

Sureños 13 is an affiliation of Southern California Hispanic street gangs influenced by the Mexican Mafia prison gang. Sureños 13 has a two-part meaning: sureño is Spanish for southern—as in Southern California—and the number 13 represents the 13th letter in the alphabet—M for Mexican Mafia.

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Mara Salvatrucha has continued to expand in the United States and Central America. The number of states in which law enforcement officers reported confirmed or suspected Mara Salvatrucha cliques increased from 14 in 1996 to 28 in 2002.

(See map on page 3.) This increase can be attributed, in large part, to members leaving cliques in Los Angeles and, to a lesser extent, Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia and New York to establish cliques in new areas throughout the United States, most recently in North Carolina and Tennessee. In addition, over the past several years numerous Mara Salvatrucha members from the United States have been deported or have voluntarily returned to El Salvador and have established cliques in that country. Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador has grown rapidly, and in 2002 membership in El Salvador outnumbered that in the United States. Mara Salvatrucha has spread from El Salvador to Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Gang members reportedly steal cars in the United States and smuggle them to Central America, particularly to El Salvador. Mara Salvatrucha members in El Salvador smuggle drugs—primarily cocaine—military weapons, and ammunition into the United States.

### **Organizational Structure**

Mara Salvatrucha is a loosely structured street gang. There is no single leader or governing authority directing the daily activity of all Mara Salvatrucha cliques; however, cliques throughout the country often follow the lead of the prominent Los Angeles-based cliques. When cliques in Los Angeles designate a gang—the 18th Street gang, for example—as an enemy, all Mara Salvatrucha cliques follow suit. Likewise, when Los Angeles cliques forge an alliance with a gang—as with Mexican Mafia—all Mara Salvatrucha cliques recognize that gang as an ally. Mara Salvatrucha members in Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia maintain strong ties to each other, often through friendships and family relationships, and increasingly are meeting to coordinate and conduct criminal activity.

Mara Salvatrucha cliques in Los Angeles often have established internal organizations with designated leaders. Several Los Angeles cliques have adopted a military-type organizational structure, appointing captains, lieutenants, and soldiers.

Outside Los Angeles, members are less likely to appoint official clique leaders. There tend to be few assigned roles, although the senior members in most cliques lead meetings and plan the clique’s criminal activities, and the clique’s treasury usually is entrusted to a senior member.

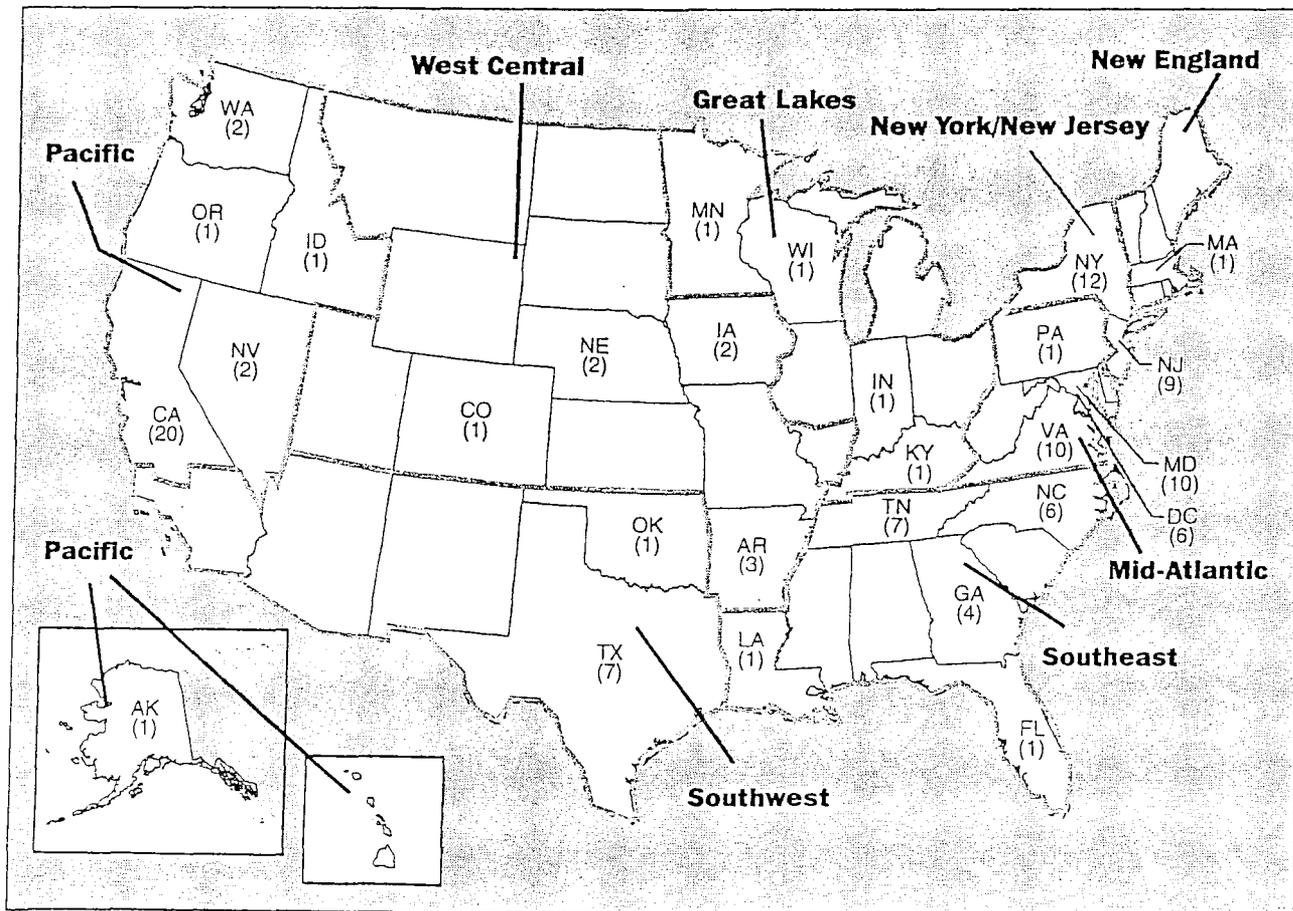
## Membership

Members of Mara Salvatrucha typically are either Salvadoran nationals or first generation Salvadoran Americans; however, many cliques in the United States now accept members from Belize, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. The inclusion of members from countries other than El Salvador reportedly has increased membership in the United States to more than 8,000—ranking it among the largest street gangs in the country. According to law enforcement authorities, there are an estimated 115 cliques in 28 states. (See map.) Recent reporting indicates that Mara Salvatrucha also is increasing its membership in El Salvador,

Honduras, Nicaragua, and Mexico by establishing new cliques and recruiting new members. In those countries there are more than 20,000 members—mostly in El Salvador.

Mara Salvatrucha cliques vary in size. According to local law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia, cliques in Los Angeles generally have 200 to 300 members, and cliques in Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia have 100 to 200 members. Cliques in other parts of the United States are much smaller with 25 to 50 members.

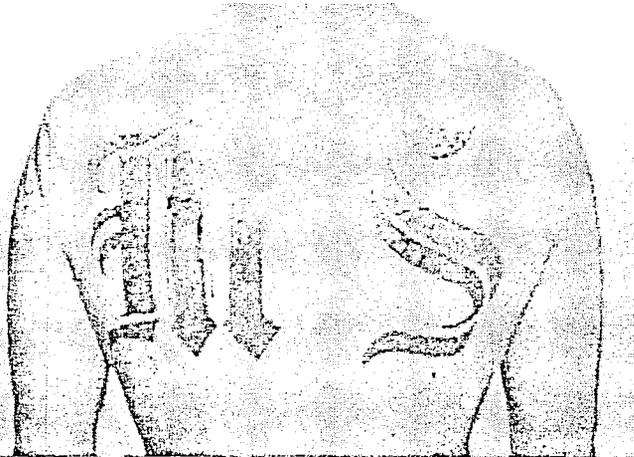
Mara Salvatrucha members wear particular kinds of clothing and bandannas and obtain tattoos that identify them as members of the gang. Members typically wear blue and black Nike clothing and black and white Nike Cortez athletic shoes. Junior members typically wear blue bandannas, and senior members wear black bandannas. Members often have tattoos—usually MS or MS 13—that



Number of Mara Salvatrucha cliques in the United States.

identify them as Mara Salvatrucha members. The tattoos often include a clique name or telephone area code, the words “Salvadoran Pride,” or “Mara” with a shotgun.

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Mara Salvatrucha tattoo.

Mara Salvatrucha members communicate via cellular phones, pagers, hand signs, and graffiti; however, they do not use secret codes or cipher systems. Members routinely use hand signs to greet each other and to challenge other individuals to identify their gang affiliation. Mara Salvatrucha graffiti closely resemble clique tattoos and often include MS, MS 13, 13, or XIII. Some include a clique’s initials or telephone area code, often to mark an area under the clique’s control. Occasionally, Mara Salvatrucha graffiti list the names or monikers of clique members, often ranked by seniority.

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Mara Salvatrucha graffiti.

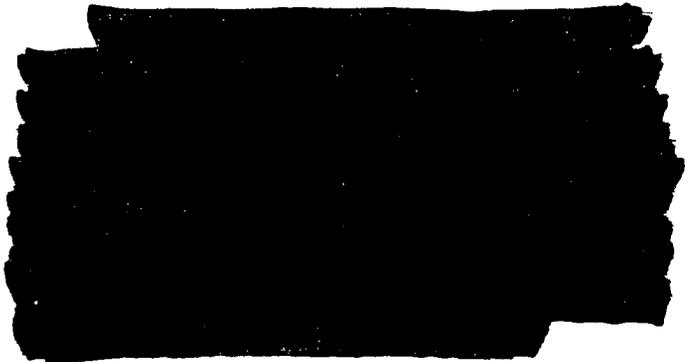
## Drug Trafficking

Mara Salvatrucha members transport drugs, particularly powdered cocaine, crack cocaine, and marijuana and, to a lesser extent, methamphetamine and heroin into and within 28 states where the drugs are distributed, according to law enforcement information. Mara Salvatrucha members continue to migrate from the Los Angeles metropolitan area to locations throughout the country, particularly the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions, to seek increased opportunities for drug distribution and to avoid law enforcement scrutiny. In addition, gang members from the New York City and Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas are migrating to other areas in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions to establish drug distribution operations.

### Southwest Region

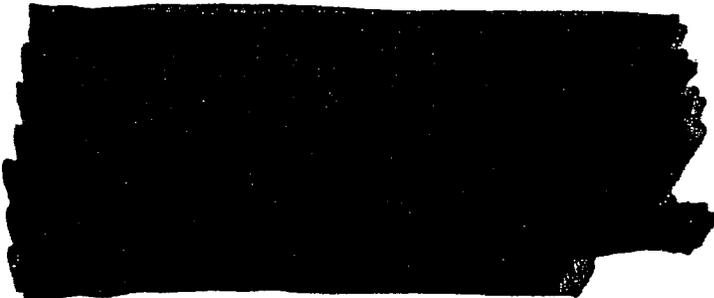
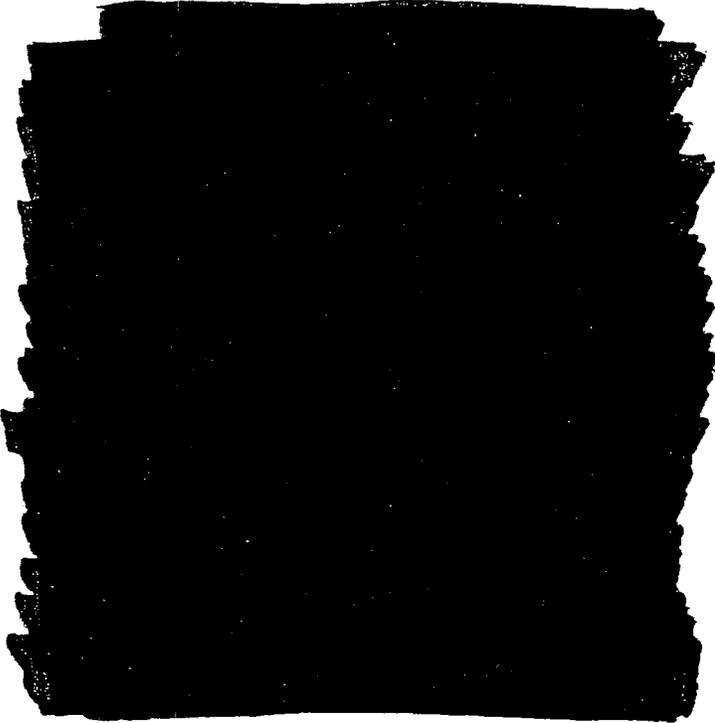


### New York/New Jersey Region



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**Mid-Atlantic Region**

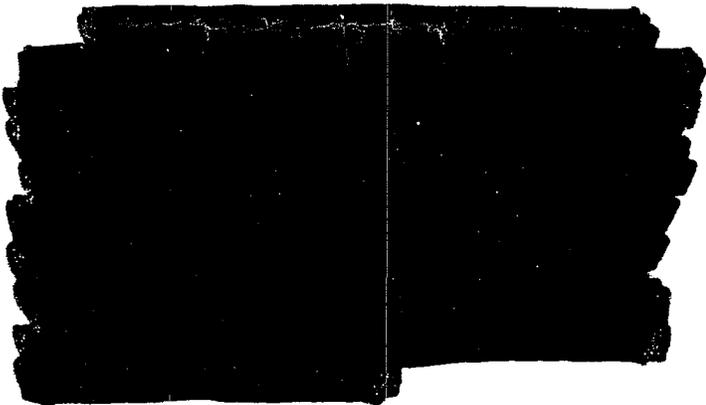


**Other Criminal Activity**

In addition to drug-related crimes, Mara Salvatrucha members are involved in many other types of criminal activity including murder, auto theft, and weapons trafficking. Mara Salvatrucha has gained a reputation for using extreme violence, and many members have military and combat experience and skills, which they use to further their criminal activities.

Mara Salvatrucha members also are engaged in laundering illicit drug proceeds through seemingly legitimate businesses.

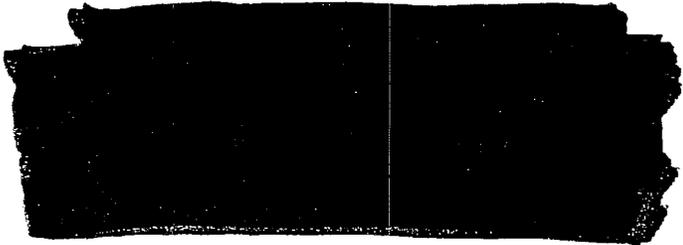
**Southeast Region**



**Violence**

Mara Salvatrucha is one of the most violent street gangs in the United States. The gang is involved in many types of violent criminal activity including murder and weapons trafficking. Many older members of Mara Salvatrucha received guerrilla warfare training in the 1980s during the civil war in El Salvador. Some of those members have formed and trained “hit teams” in the United States that Mara Salvatrucha employs to kill rival gang members. Other gangs also have hired these hit teams. They have been most active in Los Angeles, New York City, and Seattle, usually against Mara Salvatrucha’s greatest rivals: the 18th Street gang, Salvadorans with Pride, Latin Kings, and several Northern California gangs known collectively as Norteños.

**West Central Region**



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### Outlook

Mara Salvatrucha will continue to pose a growing criminal threat to dozens of communities in the United States and may soon be a national level threat. The gang’s rapid spread and aggressive recruitment in the United States—most recently in North Carolina and Tennessee—and in several drug transit and source countries and the extreme violence demonstrated by gang members suggest that Mara Salvatrucha will remain among the most threatening street gangs in the country. Indications that previously independent cliques are forming alliances to facilitate criminal activity heighten the threat.

### Intelligence Gaps

[REDACTED]

### Sources

#### Federal

- U.S. Department of Justice
  - Criminal Division
    - Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force
  - Drug Enforcement Administration
    - New York Division
    - St. Louis Division
  - Federal Bureau of Investigation
    - Los Angeles Division
    - Safe Streets and Gang Unit

#### Regional

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**State**

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