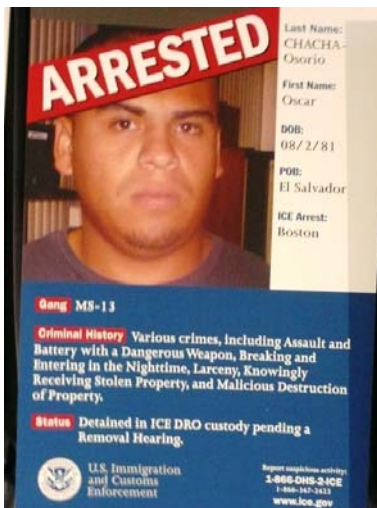




Operation Community Shield targeted MS-13 as the country's fastest growing gangs.

Immigration authorities combat MS-13

by [James Foley](#)
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ICE "touted" arrests of MS-13 gang members.

WASHINGTON-- Alex Sanchez was deported to El Salvador in 1994 after serving time in a U.S. prison. In El Salvador, a country where he hadn't lived since immigrating to Los Angeles as a child, he said he was hunted by "death squads", arrested and beaten because he was a member of Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13.

MS-13 was founded by Salvadoran youth who arrived in L.A. during the 1980s and banded together for identity and protection from other Latino street gangs. Many were

traumatized by the Salvadoran war and rough home lives and eventually got involved in violent crimes and illicit drugs.

But Sanchez, who slipped back into the country to reunite with his family, quit the gang and broke the mold. In 1998 he became involved with Homies Unidos, a group dedicated to gang prevention and intervention. The group, with chapters in El Salvador and L.A., has been called the first “transnational” gang-peace project.

“Transnational” is also a word used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to describe gangs such as MS-13 which operate across borders. In 2005, ICE initiated “Operation Community Shield” in cooperation with local law enforcement to “disrupt and dismantle transnational violent street gangs”.

ICE is the largest investigative arm of Homeland Security with broad federal authority to deport illegal aliens whether they be simply illegal, or have committed crimes in the U.S. The enforcement agency reported netting 1,313 violent gang members in a 23-city nationwide push that began this June and lasted three months.

“MS-13 still seems to be the primary and largest gang out there and still spreading,” said Julie L. Myers, assistant secretary of Homeland Security for ICE. Since 2005, nearly 1,700 MS-13 gang members have been arrested in Operation Community Shield.

In all, the operation has accounted for the arrests of 7,726 gang members since 2005, ICE officials said. Of those, 2,444 have been criminally charged and 5,211 have been charged with immigration violations and set for deportation.

Using those numbers, two-thirds of those arrested have violated immigration law, but may not have committed crimes other than re-entering the country or using phony visas or social security numbers.

According to the enforcement agency data, of the total 55,224 deportees to Central America in 2006, only 21 percent of the Hondurans, 20 percent of Guatemalans and 35 of Salvadorians had criminal records beyond their immigration issues.

But rounding up alleged gang members is a “band aid approach,” said Angela Arboleda of the national council of La Raza. “Some of them may be gang members, a lot of them are not. We can’t deport ourselves out of the broken immigration system.”

Some say the government needs to accept that illegal immigration and criminal gangs are two different problems.

“We need to understand there is illegal immigration issue and there is a crime issue,” said Elsa Falkenburger, an associate at Washington Office on Latin America. “They need to be dealt with separately. The conflation of these two is often the media grasping on to the idea.”

ICE has no data that shows these deportations have had an impact on the gang problem.

Its officials counter that many local law enforcement agencies attest to the effectiveness of ICE partnerships.

“Illegal alien transnational gang members and associates now know that they will lose their ability to stay in this country, regardless of whether they are convicted of a specific crime,” ICE officials said.

Lt. Ron Haugsdahl of the Northern Virginia Gang Task Force, which works with ICE, said that MS-13 has been around since 2001, but its activity has slowed. “We’re seeing banding together in smaller groups,” to avoid attention, he said. On Monday the task force reported crime was down 33 percent.

Alex Sanchez, 34, and now a director at Homies Unidos, believes that labeling MS-13 as “monsters” served immigration authorities and local police officers who have been given immigration powers under agreement with Homeland Security to deport immigrants they arrest.

MS-13 became the easiest gang to target, said Sanchez. “The Bloods and Crips gangs expanded into other states, but the feds couldn’t go after them in the same way as they could with MS-13, so using immigration became the edge.”

Because the gang members are often from immigrant communities, Sanchez said, officers come looking for gang members using last known addresses. When they find those individuals have left, they take the illegal immigrants living at the residences instead, he said.

The debate extends to whether gangs are structured organizations or more loosely based cliques. “The nature of criminal organizations, like legitimate companies,” ICE officials said, “is to want to grow and increase their profits. Success attracts members.”

Rick Jones who works for Catholic Relief Services in El Salvador and has been helping deportees since the early 1990s argues there is a difference between a gang and a criminal organization. “Organized crime is highly hierarchical, whereas gangs are decentralized and not as engaged for economic profit.”

Alex Sanchez questioned whether intense media coverage, reporting MS-13 networks from L.A. to Virginia, is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“The National Geographic documentary (which labeled MS-13 as the world’s most dangerous gang) is a recruitment tool for Mara,” Sanchez said. “Central American kids see that and are identified as that, so they mimic it and start up their own clique.”

Dr. Nestor Rodriguez, who interviewed 300 Salvadoran deportees in 2002, said U.S. government agencies have tacked “the gang issue” onto the overall immigration problem. “The question is, is it as huge a problem as the agencies say it is?”

Human Rights Watch has criticized the enforcement agency, ICE, for “touting” deportations of violent criminals while keeping vague about other categories of immigrants deported.

In its most recent news conference, ICE announced that 34 aliens with “ties” to violent street gangs were arrested in the Twin Cities area.

The news release stated that 30 of them were illegal aliens, five received criminal charges and four had previous criminal convictions that made them eligible for deportation. That left a question as to whether the remaining 25 are violent criminals or merely illegal aliens.

Alex Sanchez said more intervention programs are needed to help youth make good decisions and develop leadership skills. “Once you have suppression -- and no rehabilitation programs in place -- you’re only going to lock up many individuals.”