



# The Connection between the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Human Trafficking

© Human Trafficking Search 2017

A Project of the O.L. Pathy Family Foundation

[humantraffickingsearch.org](http://humantraffickingsearch.org)

Written by Michelle Lillie

Research Assistants: Olivia Gustafson and Susanna Korkeakivi

Document Design: Anne Paglia and Firas Nasr

Photo Credit: InSight Crime



# Table of Contents

<b>Definition of Terms</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
Roadmap .....	5
<b>Background</b> .....	6
History .....	6
Government Intervention .....	6
<i>The United States</i> .....	6
<i>El Salvador</i> .....	7
Structure and Membership .....	8
Northern Triangle Regional Security .....	8
<b>MS-13 Connection to Human Trafficking</b> .....	10
USA Immigration/Temporary Protected Status .....	10
<i>Background</i> .....	10
<i>Illicit Pathways</i> .....	11
US Human Trafficking Rings .....	12
<i>Recruitment</i> .....	12
<i>Structure</i> .....	14
MS-13 Patriarchal Structure .....	14
<i>Femicide</i> .....	15
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	16
For the US Government .....	16
For US Communities with an MS-13 Population .....	16
For Northern Triangle Countries .....	17
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	18
Unintended Consequences of TPS .....	18
Human Trafficking Rings in the United States .....	18
Rise of Femicide in the Northern Triangle .....	18
<b>Sources</b> .....	19

# Definition of Terms

**Northern Triangle:** the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

**Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13):** The Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, is perhaps the most notorious street gang in the Western Hemisphere. While it has its origins in the poor, refugee-laden neighborhoods of 1980s Los Angeles, the gang's reach now extends from Central American nations like El Salvador, through Mexico, the United States, and Canada. They rob, extort and bully their way into neighborhoods and have gradually turned to transnational crimes such as human smuggling and drug trafficking. The gang was initially composed of refugees from El Salvador in the Pico Union neighborhood, which is where the name comes from: *mara* is a Central American term for gang; *salva*, refers to El Salvador; *trucha*, which means "trout" in English, is a slang term for clever or sharp.<sup>1</sup>

**Sex Trafficking:** The illegal business of recruiting, harboring, transporting, obtaining, or providing a person and especially a minor for the purpose of sex.<sup>2</sup>

**Human Trafficking:** "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.<sup>3</sup>

**Labor Trafficking:** "Labor trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which individuals perform labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. Labor trafficking includes situations of debt bondage, forced labor, and involuntary child labor. Labor traffickers use violence, threats, lies, and other forms of coercion to force people to work against their will in many industries. Common types of labor trafficking include people forced to work in homes as domestic servants, farmworkers coerced through violence as they harvest crops, or factory workers held in inhumane conditions with little to no pay.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "MS-13," *InSight Crime*. March 9, 2017

<sup>2</sup> "Sex Trafficking," *Merriam-Webster*. ND.

<sup>3</sup> "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime." *United Nations*, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> "Labor Trafficking," *Human Trafficking Hotline*. ND.

**Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children:** Commercial sexual exploitation of children is the exploitation by an adult with respect to a child or an adolescent – female or male – under 18 years old; accompanied by a payment in money or in kind to the child or adolescent (male or female) or to one or more third parties.<sup>5</sup>

**Transnational Organized Crime/Transnational Criminal Organizations:** Those self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, and monetary and/or commercial gains, wholly or in part by illegal means, while protecting their activities through a pattern of corruption and/or violence, or while protecting their illegal activities through a transnational organizational structure and the exploitation of transnational commerce or communication mechanisms.<sup>6</sup>

**Cliques:** MS-13 cells that operate in specific territories. Specific cliques sometimes engage in different criminal activities that are conducive to the area they are in.<sup>7</sup>

**Palabrerros:** Leaders of the cliques; this loosely translates to “those who have the word.” Most cliques have a prima palabra and a segunda palabra, in reference to first or second-in-command.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children,” International Labour Organization. ND.

<sup>6</sup> “Transnational Organized Crime,” FBI. ND

<sup>7</sup> “MS-13,” *InSight Crime*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

# Introduction

The Mara Salvatrucha, better known by their acronym MS-13, is one of the largest and most violent transnational criminal organizations in the world. Their motto is “Kill, Rape, Control.”<sup>9</sup> Since the 1980s, MS-13 members have typically engaged in a wide range of violent and criminal activity including, “drug distribution, murder, rape, prostitution, robbery, home invasions, immigration offenses, kidnapping, carjacking/auto thefts, and vandalism.”<sup>10</sup> More recently there has been a rise in MS-13 engaging in various forms of human trafficking. This paper seeks to explore the connection between the MS-13 and human trafficking.

## Roadmap

This paper is comprised of four main sections. The first section is the background of the MS-13 including the history of the gang, government intervention, structure and membership and regional security. The second section explains the connection between MS-13 and human trafficking. This section is comprised of three connections: Temporary Protected Statue; patriarchal cultural structure in the Northern Triangle and prostitution rings in the United States The final section ends with specific recommendations to combat human trafficking by MS-13 as well as a summary conclusion.

---

<sup>9</sup> In Spanish their motto is: “Mata, Viola, Controla.”

<sup>10</sup> “The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment,” FBI. January 4, 2008.

# Background

## History

A look into the background of the MS-13, including its history, membership, structure, and operating environment is important to understand its connection to human trafficking. MS-13 is comprised of mostly Salvadoran nationals or first generation Salvadoran-Americans but also immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala and other Central American countries with factions throughout the United States and the Northern Triangle. MS-13 has its roots in El Salvador but was founded in the poor, violent neighborhoods of Los Angeles in the 1980s. As a result of the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, many refugees fled to the United States settling in East Los Angeles where the Mexican gangs reined. The Salvadoran immigrants quickly organized themselves into a gang called the Mara Salvatrucha for protection. The name they chose is a combination of multiple things: *mara* is a Spanish term for gang, *salva* is a nod to El Salvador; *trucha* is slang for a person who is clever. The addition of the number 13 came later, when the Mexican Mafia known simply as “M,” decided to integrate instead of battle with the Mara Salvatrucha. The MS became the MS-13, with the number 13 representing the position of the letter M in the alphabet. The alliance between the two groups protected the MS-13 and allowed them to expand their criminal enterprise from Central American up through Mexico and into the United States.

## Government Intervention

### *The United States*

Through its history, both the governments of the United States and El Salvador have attempted to reduce the strength of the MS-13, but each time the attempts have had the opposite effect and increased the gang’s power and influence. In the beginning, MS-13 operated in the United States much like most other domestic gangs and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) treated the MS-13 as just another street gang. In an attempt to stop gang violence, the LAPD launched Operation Hammer—expanded gang sweeps and raids throughout the city. By the early 1990s the MS-13 along with other gang members filled California’s prisons.

---

<sup>11</sup> “US Export? Central America’s Gang Problem began in Los Angeles,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 6, 2014.

This all changed in 1996 when Congress signed into law the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act which had a provision that turned petty crimes such as shoplifting, minor drug possession or even speeding into aggravated felonies if the term of imprisonment was one year or more—significantly reducing the original five-year threshold.<sup>12</sup> This new provision caused a mass-deportation of undocumented MS-13 gang members back to El Salvador. Between 1998-2005 an estimated 50,000 convicts were returned to El Salvador and another 150,000 were forced to return to El Salvador from 2008-2016.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the deported MS-13 had come to the United States as children fleeing the civil war in El Salvador. The country they returned to was fresh off a brutal civil war with a weak internal security structure and little rule of law. This coupled with the fact that many deportees barely spoke Spanish, had visible gang tattoos and had never visited El Salvador since moving to the United States, left them with no job prospects and often times no family in the country. This resulted in the MS-13 deportees seeking out other gang members for support. Waves of deportations over the years helped MS-13 take root in El Salvador and swelled into a powerful criminal organization.

### *El Salvador*

In 2003, the government of El Salvador adopted tough anti-gang policies known as *Mano Dura* (Iron Fist). *Mano Dura* outlawed gang activity and arrested thousands of members—effectively turning the jails into centers of gang coordination. The two largest gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18 took control of the prisons—directing extortion, human smuggling and kidnapping on the outside. *Mano Dura* was widely condemned by human rights groups as it allowed for the arrest of suspected gang members on the basis of their physical appearance alone. In just two years, from 2003-2005, the Salvadoran government jailed 31,000 young people. While in prison, the leaders of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 had more time to plan their drug operations and once the two gangs were separated, they were safer in jail from their enemies.

The MS-13 also began extorting and kidnapping from prisons, the Salvadoran Prosecutor in charge of the anti-extortion unit estimates that “84 percent of all extortion operations are run from jail.” Many of the imprisoned were only loosely affiliated with the MS-13 but

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “The Legacy of Deportations in El Salvador,” *Pulitzer Center*. January 16, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Barrio 18 and MS-13 have long been bitter rivals and helped drive up the homicide rate in El Salvador making it the most violent country in the world due to their relentless turf battles.

<sup>15</sup> “El Salvador: Bleak Prospects in the Face of Criminal Violence,” *Stratfor Worldview*. February 9, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> “Central American Gangs like MS-13 Were Born out of Failed Anti-Crime Policies,” *The Conversation*. May 8, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia J. Amson and Eric L. Olson eds. “Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle,” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. November 2011, page 44.



became full-fledged members after sharing a jail cell with the gang. During this time “violence in El Salvador also escalated to near civil war rates and within a generation the children of those who’d fled war and who were then deported, had destabilized the country so thoroughly that it fueled another mass migration.”<sup>18</sup> At the peak of the violence, an estimated 16 people were killed each day due to gang violence. By 2016, “more than 100,000 unaccompanied Central American minors had left for the United States, many seeking to escape the violence in El Salvador and Honduras.”<sup>19</sup>

## Structure and Membership

Estimates of the number of MS-13 vary between 70,000-100,000 gang members in the Northern Triangle—yet gang size and dynamics vary by country.<sup>20</sup> An additional 10,000 members reside in the United States in over 46 states but are centered mostly in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Washington DC and New York.<sup>21</sup> MS-13 has a distinct hierarchical system but the structure of the gang is fluid and loosely organized by country. MS-13 is comprised of different cells known as *cliques* which operate independently in different territories in the various countries where it operates. Each clique is controlled by two leaders, the first in-command known as the *primero palabrero* (those with the first word) and the second in-command known as the *segundo palabrero* (those with the second word). If the *primero palabrero* is arrested or killed, the *segundo palabrero* can quickly take over the clique so that operations are not interrupted.<sup>22</sup> The larger structure of the organization expands throughout Central America and is set up so that the true centers of power are spread out throughout the various countries—making it difficult for law enforcement to reach them.

## Northern Triangle Regional Security

Criminal organizations like MS-13 view the Northern Triangle region as one borderless territory where the trafficking of narcotics, humans, and weapons is not limited by national borders. The police and judicial forces of the individual countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala do not operate as one united front, giving the MS-13 an advantage over the security forces in an increasingly violent environment. The MS-13 is responsible for

---

<sup>18</sup> “Trump Doesn’t Understand About MS-13,” *The Atlantic*. June 26, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> “El Salvador: Bleak Prospects in the Face of Criminal Violence,” *Stratfor Worldview*. February 9, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Arana, Ana, “How the Street Gangs took Central America,” *The New York Times*. May/ June 2005.

<sup>21</sup> “Department of Justice Fact Sheet on MS-13,” *Department of Justice*. April 18, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> “MS-13,” *InSight Crime*. March 9, 2017.





brutal acts of violence, abuse of women and the forced displacement of thousands from the region—making Latin America the world’s most violent region not at war.<sup>23</sup> Since 2015, both El Salvador and its capital city, San Salvador have been rated the most murderous country and city.<sup>24</sup> Gang violence in neighboring Honduras has forced thousands of Hondurans to leave their homes—it is estimated that 23,000 gang members of MS-13 and its arch rival Calle 18 are involved in turf wars and almost daily shoot-outs with police.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> “The World’s Most Dangerous Cities,” *The Economist*, March 31, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “US Export? Central America’s Gang Problem began in Los Angeles,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 6, 2014.

# MS-13 Connections to Human Trafficking

There are three main connections between MS-13 and human trafficking. The first connection is through the US immigration system, specifically the Temporary Protected Status. The second is through prostitution rings in the United States. The third connection is through the patriarchal culture in the Northern Triangle.

## USA Immigration / Temporary Protected Status

### *Background*

The Temporary Protected Status (TPS) offers protected immigration status to citizens of specially designated countries.<sup>26</sup> This means citizens of foreign countries are eligible to legally live and work in the United States for a temporary amount of time when dangerous situations such as an ongoing armed conflict, environmental disaster, or extraordinary and temporary conditions that prevent nationals of these countries from returning safely.<sup>27</sup> El Salvador and Honduras are two of the ten countries whose citizens are currently eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS).<sup>28</sup> Approximately 57,000 Honduran and 195,000 El Salvador TPS beneficiaries live in the United States.<sup>29</sup> However, the TPS is not a blanket designation for any citizen from the ten countries on the list. Applicants are ineligible if they have been convicted of any felony or two or more misdemeanors committed in the United States; persecuted others; engaged in terrorist activity; failed to meet the continuous physical presence and continuous residence in the United States.

For the purpose of this paper there are three important caveats to take note. The first is that once an applicant is granted TPS, they are eligible for legal work documents but are not eligible to become legal permanent residents and must reapply for this status every 6-18 months depending on the country. The migrants granted TPS cannot hold green cards and are not eligible for US citizenship. The second point is that unlike green card holders, those with TPS are barred from sponsoring family members for immigrant or

---

<sup>26</sup> Argueta, Carla N. "Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues," Congressional Research Service. January 17, 2017, Page 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The remaining eight countries are Haiti, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen.

<sup>29</sup> Argueta, Carla N. "Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues," Congressional Research Service. January 17, 2017, page 4

non-immigrant visas. Finally, TPS requires that the applicant apply for the status during the window of time when the designation was given. (Although the government extended TPS for both Honduras and El Salvador many times, these extensions only benefit those persons already in the United States at the date of the initial approval). Migrants would have had to apply for TPS in 1999 from Honduras and in 2001 for El Salvador.<sup>30</sup> Thus the TPS is not helpful to the numerous young migrants who recently fled the gang violence in the Northern Triangle.

### *Illicit Pathways*

Due to the violence and rampant unemployment in the Northern Triangle countries, many TPS beneficiaries from the Northern Triangle migrated to the United States looking for work to support their families. As was aforementioned, a condition of the TPS is that beneficiaries are prohibited from sponsoring family members. Many men and women unable to support their families in their home countries left their children in care of their grandparents while they made the dangerous journey north. Once they found work in the United States they would send money back to their families in El Salvador or Honduras. As the TPS has been continually extended for the past 15 years, and violence in the Northern Triangle is getting exponentially worse, parents began to send for their children (or the grandparents would arrange to send the children) to the United States. Recognizing the "historically large number of people seeking to leave the region and enter the United States illegally, MS-13 quickly moved into the human smuggling business."<sup>31</sup> The MS-13 maintains an efficient coyote<sup>32</sup> infrastructure where "they can move individuals from the Northern Triangle to the United States in less than 72 hours."<sup>33</sup> This same infrastructure is also used by the Mexican cartels for human trafficking. The MS-13 has formed alliances with Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), specifically the Zetas. The Zetas now use members of the MS-13 as coyotes along the human trafficking routes. This non-traditional relationship has both helped morph MS-13's human smuggling operation into much more lucrative human trafficking operations and helped MS-13 move safely through Mexico with the protection of the Zetas.

---

<sup>30</sup> "Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: El Salvador," US Citizenship and Immigration Services. March 6, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Farah, Douglas and Pamela Phillips Lum, "Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil." International Assessment and Strategy Center, February 2013, page 17

<sup>32</sup> Slang for a person who smuggles Latin Americans into the United States for a fee.

<sup>33</sup> Farah, 2013, page 10.

# US Human Trafficking Rings

## *Recruitment*

Once the unaccompanied minors are smuggled into the United States, they become prime targets for human trafficking. Unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border are sent to juvenile detention facilities. Because of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, “unaccompanied alien children in custody shall transfer the custody of such child to the Secretary of Health and Human Services [HHS] not later than 72 hours after determining that such child is an unaccompanied alien child.”<sup>34</sup> HHS then places the minors either in foster care, with family or a sponsor. The majority of unaccompanied minors end up in California, New York, Texas, and the Washington DC area that includes Maryland and Virginia—states that have large Central American populations and subsequently, large MS-13 populations.<sup>35</sup> MS-13 preys on the vulnerability of the unaccompanied minors; some have previously suffered sexual abuse either in their home country or during the trip north; others lack a community and do not speak English.

The MS-13 groom the girls with two different tactics. The first is the boyfriend technique where the trafficker will pretend to be in a relationship with the victim and shower her with gifts and attention. Lonely, homesick and far from home, the young girls from the Northern Triangle feel comfortable around the MS-13 because they speak Spanish and often times even know their family members back home. Gang members approach the girls in a variety of strategic places.

such as malls, schools, subway stations and house parties. They analyze the girl’s insecurities; look for vulnerabilities to exploit; and overwhelm the girl with attention, affection and gifts. Soon the girl believes she is in a loving relationship and that is when the gang member asks her to have sex with another gang member to make money.<sup>36</sup> The girls often live at home and attend school, engaging in prostitution only part time as way to prove their love for the gang member boyfriend. Eventually the gang member uses “violence and other coercive tactics to intimidate the girl into continuing her sexual activity for the gang and public.”<sup>37</sup> Often times girls trapped in this type of human trafficking do not see themselves as victims and instead insist their participation is a voluntary choice.<sup>38</sup> The MS-13 typically traffic Latino and Spanish-speaking girls, specifically targeting newly arrived unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle.

---

<sup>34</sup> “William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008,” US Department of State. January 1, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> “Unaccompanied Alien Children Released to Sponsors by State,” Office of Refugee Resettlement, June 30, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, Jan, “Into Hell: Gang-Prostitution of Minors,” *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*. Volume 20, Issue 2, March 2014., page 599.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 599

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 601

Runaways are also appealing to the MS-13. Family problems, transitions from the foster care system and economic problems are some of the reasons that unaccompanied minors run away from their homes.<sup>39</sup> Many of the unaccompanied minors may have experienced sexual abuse, exploitation or physical abuse in their home countries or during their migration to the United States—even more suffer from poverty and lack of a stable social network. Minors that have “experienced violence and trauma in the past are more vulnerable to future exploitation as the psychological effect of trauma is often long-lasting and challenging to overcome.”<sup>40</sup> In 2011, a Fairfax County man and MS-13 member, pleaded guilty to sex trafficking teenage runaways throughout Maryland, Washington DC and Northern Virginia—notably in Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, Falls Church and Woodbridge. The FBI explained that the man “preyed on juvenile runaways who were desperate for shelter and support.”<sup>41</sup> In Fairfax County, MS-13 ran seven different networks of sex trafficked youths from Central America that were discovered in 2012.<sup>42</sup> Before this investigation, there had been little news about the participation of MS-13 in child prostitution rings.

The second tactic, called the “gorilla” technique is usually employed when the boyfriend technique doesn’t work. It is when a gang member uses violence to control and coerce the girls into submission into prostitution. Because gangs like the MS-13 “already account for a significant portion of violent crime, it is not difficult for gangs to channel their violence toward victims to induce them to prostitute.”<sup>43</sup> There are also cases of MS-13 members showing up at the homes of unaccompanied minors demanding she do what they ask in order to pay the debt she owed to the coyotes for having brought her to the United States.<sup>44</sup> Sometimes MS-13 members threaten the girl’s family back in El Salvador or Guatemala as well as abuse the girl in the United States. According to the FBI, MS-13 gang members in the Washington DC metro area have even been branding their prostitutes bodies with “M” and “S” gang symbols using knives and razors to show ownership.<sup>45</sup> To keep the girls complacent, the MS-13 members ply them with alcohol and drugs before selling them for sex.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> “Homeless and Runaway Youth,” *National Conference of the State Legislators*. April 14, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> “The Victims,” *National Human Trafficking Hotline*. ND.

<sup>41</sup> “FBI: MS-13 Member’s Child Prostitute Ring Serviced Clients in Fairfax,” *Fairfax City Patch*. September 19, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Silva, Hector, “The MS-13’s Prostitution Rings in the United States,” *InSight Crime*. July 22, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Frank, Michael J. and G. Zachary Terwilliger, “Gang-Controlled Sex Trafficking,” *Virginia Journal of Criminal Law*. p. 380

<sup>44</sup> Silva, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> National Gang Intelligence Center & Crimes Against Children Unit, FBI, *Gang Criminal Activity Expanding into Juvenile Prostitution: Intelligence Report* (2012).

<sup>46</sup> Wilber, Del Quentin, “MS-13 Gang is Branching into Prostitution Authorities Say,” *The Washington Post*. November 13, 2011.

## Structure

MS-13 structure contains a Central American sphere in the Northern Triangle countries, a “Senior” sphere in Los Angeles and the West Coast and a “Junior” sphere encompassing the Washington DC metro area and the East Coast.<sup>47</sup> In the United States there is no central command or control structure so the MS-13 is organized into smaller “cliques” under the umbrella rules of MS-13. Using this structure allows cliques that undertake sex trafficking to reach out to other cliques for assistance. Sometimes the sex trafficking clique may offer a percentage of the profits in exchange for help in obtaining customers or for a cut of the profits and free sex for the members of that clique.<sup>48</sup> Another advantage the gang enjoys is their ability to handle any customer problems that may arise. Many prostituted girls are raped, beaten or robbed by customers but MS-13 has the necessary force to prevent this from happening.

Sex trafficking is extremely lucrative for MS-13 in the United States; it has very little startup cost; involves resources that can be secured within their own community; and consists of a commodity that can be sold repeatedly without diminishing in value and has a high revenue-to-risk ratio.<sup>49</sup> This amount of income is very valuable to the MS-13, especially when that money goes to supporting gang members in the Northern Triangle. Money being generated from sex trafficking schemes in the United States is sent back to El Salvador. In a deeply poverty stricken country where the monthly minimum wage is less than \$300, even sending a modest amount of money back to fellow gang members in El Salvador can immediately impact MS-13 operations in Central America.<sup>50</sup> The funds help support the MS-13 both domestically and internationally. Domestically it allows the gang members to not have to obtain legitimate employment since they can live off the profits of the trafficking and invest the money back into drugs, weapons, alcohol, vehicles and motel rooms. Internationally, wiring trafficking proceeds back to El Salvador allows the MS-13 to feed, arm and protect the various cliques throughout Central America.

## MS-13 Patriarchal Culture

Violence against girls and women is widespread in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala—the same nations dominated by MS-13. Women in these countries are “disproportionately subjected to domestic violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, sex

---

<sup>47</sup> Stolpe, K. Elyse, “MS-13 and Domestic Juvenile Sex Trafficking: Causes, Correlates and Solutions,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law*. (Vol 21: 2), Page, 345.

<sup>48</sup> Frank, Michael J. and G. Zachary Terwilliger, “Gang-Controlled Sex Trafficking,” *Virginia Journal of Criminal Law*. Page, 404.

<sup>49</sup> Walser, Ray and Jessica Zuckerman, “The Human Tragedy of Illegal Immigration: Greater Efforts Needed to Combat Smuggling and Violence,” *The Heritage Foundation*. June 22, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> “Minimum Wages in El Salvador,” *El Salvador Perspectives*. September 19, 2015.



trafficking and other forms of largely gendered violence.”<sup>51</sup> MS-13 has a strong culture of machismo—and the high rates of femicide in the region contribute to high rates of sexual violence.<sup>52</sup>

### *Femicide*

Child abuse and spousal rape are major problems in the three northern triangle countries. All these countries have among the highest rates of femicide (killing of women) in the world. Femicide is the intentional murder of a woman, particularly by a man, on account of her gender. Femicide can involve some sort of sexual abuse or exertion of power, especially in cases where women are trafficked. The rates of femicide in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are especially high. In 2012, 6.2 out of every 100,000 women in Guatemala were murdered. In El Salvador, the rate is higher; in 2012, 8.9 out of every 100,000 women were the victims of femicide. In 2013, the rate of violent deaths of Honduran women was 14.3 out of every 100,000 women.

While the governments of the Northern Triangle have produced laws focused on prosecuting and ending violence against women, law enforcement in these countries often does little about the crime, and sometimes contributes to it. An average of two women are killed every day in Guatemala; only two percent of these femicides are ever prosecuted. In Honduras, there is a 95 percent impunity rate for violent crimes against women. In El Salvador, the rate of impunity is about 77 percent. In the Northern Triangle, femicide, human trafficking, and gang presence are inextricably linked with one another. As United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Representative Amado Philip de Andrés summarized, “the only case in which you can make a case that femicide is increasing as a result of transnational organized crime is human trafficking (...) in Central America and the Caribbean.” As the number of female human trafficking victims has increased in the region, so has the number of female fatalities, and gangs such as MS-13 are among the main perpetrators of the crime.

The link between femicide and human trafficking stems from deeply rooted machismo and aggressive masculinity in the region. Women tend to be perceived as the property of the men in their lives—especially their traffickers. Stripped entirely of their humanity, women who have been tricked into working as sex-slaves are subjected to torture, rape, and murder. The specific manner in which these events transpire varies. Some women are trafficked, raped, and immediately murdered. Others try to escape or are rescued from the sex-industry, only to eventually be murdered in retaliation.

---

<sup>51</sup> Zedginidze, Tina, “Domestic Abuse and Gang Violence against Women: Expanding the Particular Social Group Finding in Matter of A-R-C-G to Grant Asylum to Women Persecuted by Gangs,” *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice*. Volume 34: Issue 1. 2016, page. 222

<sup>52</sup> Society’s view of women is inferior.



# Recommendations

## For the US Government

- Renew the TBS for citizens from the Northern Triangle countries and allow them to bring in their underage children.
- Refrain from instigating mass deportations against Northern Triangle countries without prior guarantees of investment in returnee communities, proper attention to returnee employment and close monitoring of security effects.
- Continue to remove all unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border from detention centers within 72 hours and placed in foster care, with family or sponsors.
- The Congress funds the Alliance for Prosperity Program, a joint proposal from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and the United States that intends to address the structural issues (such as poverty and violence) that lead to the mass flight of unaccompanied children to the United States.

## For US Communities with an MS-13 Population

- Increased awareness of social workers, service providers, law enforcement, and educators about the growing number of Central American unaccompanied minors being drawn into sex trafficking by MS-13.
- Increased prevention by strengthening sex trafficking training programs for foster care families and Central American families recently reunited with an unaccompanied minor.
- Increased intervention by speaking with the local Salvadoran community about the signs and techniques MS-13 uses to lure young girls into sex trafficking.
- Empower girls and women by educating them early about sex education, financial literacy and the importance of education.
- Encourage local police to do outreach programs with the local community assuring them they will not ask about their immigration status if they report a crime.

## For Northern Triangle Countries

- Strengthen the rule of law and increase the penalty for impunity in cases of violence against women and femicide.
- Enforce anti-corruption measures to weed out police working with the MS-13 and those willing to turn a blind eye.
- Public outreach campaigns explaining the potential risks of sex trafficking for unaccompanied minors heading North.

# Conclusion

There are three ways the MS-13 is linked to human trafficking. The first linkage is through potential trafficking victims in the Northern Triangle countries. The second linkage is once the girls have been smuggled into the United States. Finally, the third linkage is through the culture of machismo and high rates of femicide in the Northern Triangle countries.

## Unintended Consequences of TPS

- TPS restrictions created a demand for desperate parents trying to get their children from the Northern Triangle countries into the United States. This led to MS-13 partnering with the Zetas and other Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations—who use the members of the MS-13 as coyotes to run people along their human trafficking routes. This partnership helped move the MS-13 from human smuggling to the much more lucrative human trafficking

## Human Trafficking Rings in the United States

- MS-13 actively recruits unaccompanied minors and recent underage Latino immigrant girls into prostitution rings throughout the Washington DC, Los Angeles and New York Metro areas. This lucrative practice sustains the MS-13 in El Salvador as most of the money made in the United States is sent back to support the gang in Central America.

## Rise of Femicide in the Northern Triangle

- Femicide—or the killing of women because of their gender has increased as the result of human trafficking by the MS-13. Machismo is deeply rooted in Central America and an aggressive masculinity saturates the culture of the MS-13. Women are seen as property by the gang who force the women into sex trafficking and eventually to violent deaths from torture, rape and murder.

# Sources

- Argueta, Carla N. "Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues," *Congressional Research Service*. January 17, 2017. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/RS20844.pdf>.
- Arana, Ana, "How the Street Gangs took Central America," *The New York Times*. May/ June 2005. [http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/international/20050501faessay84310\\_arana.html?pagewanted=print&mcbz=1](http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/international/20050501faessay84310_arana.html?pagewanted=print&mcbz=1)
- "Central American Gangs like MS-13 Were Born out of Failed Anti-Crime Policies," *The Conversation*. May 8, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/central-american-gangs-like-ms-13-were-born-out-of-failed-anti-crime-policies-76554>.
- "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children," *International Labour Organization*. ND. <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/csec/lang--en/index.htm>
- Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson eds. "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle," *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*. November 2011. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP\\_single\\_page.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf),
- "Department of Justice Fact Sheet on MS-13," *Department of Justice*. April 18, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/file/958481/download>
- "El Salvador: Bleak Prospects in the Face of Criminal Violence," *Stratfor Worldview*. February 9, 2016. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/el-salvador-bleak-prospects-face-criminal-violence>
- Farah, Douglas and Pamela Phillips Lum, "Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil." *International Assessment and Strategy Center*, February 2013. <http://www.ibiconsultants.net/pdf/central-american-gangs-and-transnational-criminal-organizations-update-for-publication.pdf>.
- "FBI: MS-13 Member's Child Prostitute Ring Serviced Clients in Fairfax," *Fairfax City Patch*. September 19, 2011. <https://patch.com/virginia/fairfaxcity/fbi-ms-13-members-child-prostitute-ring-serviced-clie07bccbed7>.
- Fox, Jan, "Into Hell: Gang-Prostitution of Minors," *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*. Volume 20, Issue 2, March 2014.
- Frank, Michael J. and G. Zachay Terwilliger, "Gang-Controlled Sex Trafficking," *Virginia Journal of Criminal Law*. <http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Gang-Sex-Trafficking-Article.pdf>

“Homeless and Runaway Youth,” *National Conference of the State Legislators*. April 14, 2014.  
<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-and-runaway-youth.aspx>.

“Honduras Gang Violence Uproots Thousands a Month: UN.,” Reuters. June 3, 2016.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-honduras-displacement-idUSKCN0YP25Z>

“Labor Trafficking,” *Human Trafficking Hotline*. ND.  
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/type-trafficking/labor-trafficking>.

“Minimum Wages in El Salvador,” *El Salvador Perspectives*. September 19, 2015.  
<http://www.elsalvadorperspectives.com/2015/09/minimum-wages-in-el-salvador.html>

“MS-13,” *InSight Crime*. March 9, 2017.  
<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13-profile>.

National Gang Intelligence Center & Crimes Against Children Unit, FBI, Gang Criminal Activity Expanding into Juvenile Prostitution: Intelligence Report (2012).

“Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.” *United Nations*, 2000. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/19223?download=true>.

“Sex Trafficking,” *Merriam-Webster*. ND.  
<https://www.merriamwebster.com/legal/sex%20trafficking>.

Silva, Hector, “The MS-13’s Prostitution Rings in the United States,” *InSight Crime*. July 22, 2015.  
<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/ms13-prostitution-rings-in-united-states>

Stolpe, K. Elyse, “MS-13 and Domestic Juvenile Sex Trafficking: Causes, Correlates and Solutions,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law*. (Vol 21: 2). [http://www.vjspl.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3.24.14\\_Stolpe\\_-MS-13\\_STE\\_PP.pdf](http://www.vjspl.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3.24.14_Stolpe_-MS-13_STE_PP.pdf)

“The Legacy of Deportations in El Salvador,” *Pulitzer Center*. January 16, 2017.  
<http://pulitzercenter.org/projects/deportation-el-salvador>.

“The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment,” *FBI*. January 4, 2008.  
[https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/stories/2008/january/ms13\\_011408](https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/stories/2008/january/ms13_011408).

“The Victims,” *National Human Trafficking Hotline*. ND.  
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/what-human-trafficking/human-trafficking/victims>

“The World’s Most Dangerous Cities,” *The Economist*, March 31, 2017.  
<https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/03/daily-chart-23>

“Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: El Salvador,” *US Citizenship and Immigration Services*. March 6, 2017. <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status/temporary-protected-status-designated-country-el-salvador>.

“Transnational Organized Crime,” *FBI*. ND <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/organized-crime>.

“Trump Doesn’t Understand About MS-13,” *The Atlantic*. June 26, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/06/trump-ms-13/528453/>

“Unaccompanied Alien Children Released to Sponsors by State,” *Office of Refugee Resettlement*, June 30, 2017. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/unaccompanied-alien-children-released-to-sponsors-by-state>.

“US Export? Central America’s Gang Problem began in Los Angeles,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 6, 2014. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2014/0806/US-export-Central-America-s-gang-problem-began-in-Los-Angeles>.

Walser, Ray and Jessica Zuckerman, “The Human Tragedy of Illegal Immigration: Greater Efforts Needed to Combat Smuggling and Violence,” *The Heritage Foundation*. June 22, 2011. <http://www.heritage.org/immigration/report/the-human-tragedy-illegal-immigration-greater-efforts-needed-combat-smuggling>.

Wilber, Del Quentin, “MS-13 Gang is Branching into Prostitution Authorities Say,” *The Washington Post*. November 13, 2011. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/ms-13-gang-is-branching-into-prostitution-authorities-say/2011/11/04/gIQAAtOylN\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.48b575d74483](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/ms-13-gang-is-branching-into-prostitution-authorities-say/2011/11/04/gIQAAtOylN_story.html?utm_term=.48b575d74483).

“William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008,” *US Department of State*. January 1, 2008. <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/113178.htm>.

Zedginidze, Tina, “Domestic Abuse and Gang Violence against Women: Expanding the Particular Social Group Finding in Matter of A-R-C-G to Grant Asylum to Women Persecuted by Gangs,” *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice*. Volume 34: Issue 1. 2016. <http://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1231&context=lawineq>