



# Department of Justice

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**STATEMENT OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE  
HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**FOR A HEARING CONCERNING**

**COMBATING GANG VIOLENCE ON LONG ISLAND:  
SHUTTING DOWN THE MS-13 PIPELINE**

**PRESENTED**

**JUNE 20, 2017**

**Statement of William F. Sweeney Jr.**  
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**Before the Committee on Homeland Security**  
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Good morning Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss gang violence on Long Island and the FBI's efforts to combat the threats posed by MS-13 and dismantle their network.

Street gangs continue to affect communities across the United States and show no signs of decreasing memberships or a decline in criminal activity. According to the FBI's 2015 National Gang Report, street gang membership increased in approximately 49% of jurisdictions from 2013-2015.

More specifically, the FBI assesses there has been a surge in MS-13 activity and recruitment in the United States over the past two years. We're here today to discuss this particular threat and our efforts to combat gang violence in MS-13 territories on Long Island.

While MS-13 is not the largest street gang in the United States, it is increasingly the most violent and well organized. Their leadership is based in El Salvador and Honduras, but we believe there could be up to 10,000 members currently living in the United States, primarily immigrants from Central America.

In terms of origin and structure, and in comparison to other street gangs in the United States, MS-13 is atypical in their approach to crime and organizational structure. Clique leaders here in the United States coordinate with one another, as well as leadership in El Salvador. This isn't something we typically see with other street gangs in the United States, whose primary leadership is home based. MS-13 gang members in El Salvador and the United States remain in contact with one another; they frequently discuss targets, members who have fallen out of favor, and ways to expand their operations.

Members also capitalize on the ability to extort individuals living in the United States who still have family in Central America, threatening to harm family abroad. Using fear as a method of extortion, the gang often targets small business owners and restaurateurs, individuals who don't want to join the gang, and gang members who no longer want to be active.

The brutal nature of MS-13 crimes has gained notoriety throughout the United States, and their motivation is generally rooted in a desire to kill for the sake of killing. The attacks on their victims are gruesome, typically up close and personal. They often involve mutilation and dismemberment and are sometimes recorded. Because of this, MS-13 crimes often receive a significant amount of media attention.

Law enforcement encounters unique challenges when addressing the MS-13 threat including the limitations of some traditional enforcement strategies; the group's propensity for gruesome

violence; their established international network; and their transient nature. What also concerns us is the age of the average MS-13 member and associate. Typically much younger than those connected to other street gangs, MS-13 members and associates often lack direction, taking cues from the gang instead of relying on a productive family structure. In addition, those emigrating from El Salvador to the United States are known to be exposed and desensitized to extreme violence at an early age.

Another concern for law enforcement is the increase in the use of technology and social media by criminal groups such as MS-13. We've found that gangs are exploiting new technologies largely for the anonymity that messaging applications afford. Many resort to the use of these technologies with the hopes of thwarting law enforcement efforts.

In January 1992, the FBI announced the Safe Streets Violent Crime Initiative, designed to allow each field office to address violent street gangs and drug-related violence through the establishment of FBI sponsored, long-term, proactive task forces focusing on violent gangs, crime of violence, and the apprehension of violent fugitives. The Violent Gang Safe Streets Task Force became the vehicle through which all of the federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies joined together to address the violent crime plaguing their communities. The FBI's Safe Streets and Gang Unit administers 169 Violent Gang Safe Streets Task Forces nationwide, staffed by approximately 800 FBI agents, 1,375 state and local law enforcement personnel, and 58 other federal law enforcement agents. The Safe Streets Task Force concept expands cooperation and communication among federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, increasing productivity and avoiding duplication of investigative efforts.

Here in New York, the FBI's Long Island Gang Task Force (LIGTF) is part of the Safe Streets Task Force network. Since 2003, the task force has been dedicated to protecting the communities on Long Island from the threat of gang violence, and considers MS-13 to be a top priority. The task force, currently composed of agents and officers from the FBI; Suffolk County Police Department; Nassau County Police Department; Nassau County Sheriff's Department; Suffolk County Sheriff's Department; Suffolk County Probation; Rockville Centre Police Department; New York State Police; Hempstead Police Department; and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, is a model that allows us to bring all essential stakeholders under one roof to address the most violent crimes crippling our neighborhoods.

Since the establishment of the task force, the largest and oldest federal gang task force on Long Island, hundreds of MS-13 members, including dozens of clique leaders, have been convicted on federal felony charges in the Eastern District of New York. This has allowed us to dismantle some of the most violent cliques in the area.

Since 2010, the task force has arrested over 200 MS-13 members, resulting in the successful prosecution of members involved in over 35 homicides. A majority of those MS-13 members have been convicted on federal racketeering charges for participating in murders, attempted murders, and assaults. Since 2016, MS-13 is believed to be responsible for more than 20 homicides in Suffolk and Nassau Counties.

Over the past few months, we've continued to surge resources to work the threat, both internally and with respect to our partner agencies on the task force. We've increased participation on our task force by adding officers from the New York State Police, and we've enhanced our intelligence capabilities by developing an intelligence fusion group, which is composed of intelligence personnel from the represented agencies. We've also strengthened our relationship with the Suffolk County Police Department, to include our mutual agreement that all MS-13 homicide investigations in Suffolk County will be investigated jointly by the LIGTF and the Suffolk County Police Department's homicide squad. Throughout the country, the FBI continues to uphold the task force model as we confront threats with the help of our various law enforcement partners, in particular, our colleagues from Homeland Security Investigations.

As the domestic representative for the Director of National Intelligence for FBI field offices in Newark, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, and Buffalo, I've gladly accepted the responsibility of serving as a delegate for senior field representatives throughout the Intelligence Community (IC) in leading the endeavor to create a coordinated and effective IC enterprise in defense of our homeland and homeland security efforts. This is an opportunity for us to engage in dialogue with our colleagues while ensuring a higher level of cooperation as we continue to integrate our intelligence efforts.

Additionally, from an international perspective, the FBI's Transnational Anti-Gang Task Forces (TAGs) continue to work with our partners to eradicate gangs and gang violence nationwide. Established in El Salvador in 2007 through the FBI's National Gang Task Force, Legat San Salvador, and the United States Department of State, each TAG is a fully operational unit responsible for the investigation of MS-13 operating in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – and threatening the United States. This program combines the expertise, resources, and jurisdiction of participating agencies involved in investigating and countering transnational criminal gang activity in the United States and Central America. These groups—headed by FBI agents who lead vetted teams of national police and prosecutors—coordinate with FBI legal attachés assigned to those regions and with the Bureau's International Operations Division.

Through the task force we reap the benefits of local intelligence, which allows us to apply a national and international approach to the problem. We're currently focused on identifying MS-13 membership in the United States, and we're working to establish an international standard for understanding elements of the gang's structure, its members, and its associates. Using overseas resources to identify and target individuals and organizations that negatively affect our local field offices has proven successful. In fact, this partnership contributed to the capture of two FBI Top Ten fugitives Edwin Ernesto Rivera-Gracias in 2013, and Juan Elias Garcia in 2014. Both men were wanted for murder. Specifically, Juan Elias Garcia was wanted for the execution-style murder of a 19-year-old New York woman and her 2-year-old son. Based on the success of the TAG Task Force in El Salvador, additional TAG Task Forces have been established in Guatemala and Honduras.

In summary, the FBI has effectively used task forces in an effort to combat the MS-13 threat, both on Long Island and throughout the country, by combining the tools of our local, state, federal, and international law enforcement partners. MS-13 will continue to be a top priority as

we have determined they intend to continue to expand and employ intimidation tactics while engaging in increasingly violent crimes.

We further assess they will continue to capitalize on the use of encrypted communications between members and associates, both in the United States and abroad, which could impede enforcement efforts. For this reason, the relationships we've established with our partners, both at home and abroad, will continue to prove essential in identifying, combating, and eliminating the threats posed by MS-13.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and members of the Committee, thank you again for this opportunity to discuss gang violence on Long Island and our efforts to combat the MS-13 threat. Mr. Chairman, we are grateful for the leadership that you and this Committee have provided to the FBI, and we thank you for your continuing support. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.