



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

Testimony Submitted by Vincent F. DeMarco, Sheriff of Suffolk County, New York

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Subcommittee on Counterterrorism
and Intelligence of the Committee on Homeland Security

My name is Vincent DeMarco and I am the Sheriff of Suffolk County, New York, and the Chairman of the County's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. As Suffolk's Chief Law Enforcement Officer, I lead an organization with more than 1300 uniformed and civilian employees responsible for protecting life and property, and I am responsible for oversight of the largest suburban correctional facility in New York State. It is my pleasure to be here today to provide testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence.

I want to thank the Committee Chairman, Congressman Michael McCaul, and the Ranking Member, Congressman Bennie Thompson, along with Congressman Peter King, for conducting this hearing on Long Island to bring attention to the threat that criminal street gangs pose to the safety and security of our communities and the nation. I would also like to thank President Donald Trump for making the eradication of gangs a priority of his Administration. He and members of his Administration are proactively seeking ways to work with local law enforcement and addressing loopholes in immigration procedures that have long contributed to the crisis of gang violence in communities like Brentwood, Long Island.

Since time is limited, I will focus my remarks specifically on what needs to be done right now to prevent criminal gang networks like the MS-13 from exploiting weaknesses in our governmental programs, which have allowed them to take hold in our neighborhoods, as well as what steps we need to take now, and in the future, to better immunize our children from the influences of gang recruitment. These are complex issues to tackle, but solutions that fail to address the multitude of ways that gangs have infiltrated society are destined to fail. We must take a systems-wide approach if we are to be successful in eradicating criminal gang networks. The United States has taken the lead in the world in the fight against terrorism, and I believe there must be a similar effort to protect our nation and its people from the threats posed by criminal gangs and organized crime.

Criminal gangs are very similar to terrorist organizations. They have a defined leadership structure, a belief system, cultural ties and a code of behavior that forges a cohesive bond among their membership. Gangs also capitalize on similar vulnerabilities in their recruitment of members: poverty, poor socialization, lack of opportunities for gainful employment and close ties to other gang members. Communities like Brentwood are targets for gang recruitment because there is a high concentration of new immigrants, including many unaccompanied minors who tend to be more easily coerced into street gangs. It is also a lower income community with many hard-working families. The Sheriff's Office Gang Intelligence Unit at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility has interviewed hundreds of youth from Brentwood and its surrounding communities. These interviews provide significant insight into the underlying causes of gang proliferation, such as dangerous gaps in our nation's border security, loopholes in our immigration system, lack of communication with local stakeholders and the ways these gangs have exploited government programs, like the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

I thought I would read to you some of the notes taken by one of our Gang Unit investigators after interviewing young MS-13 gang members in custody at the Suffolk County jail. In the interest of time, additional notes have been submitted separately to the Subcommittee.

One young inmate described his trek from Central America to the United States at the age of nine. His father, who is affiliated with MS-13, made arrangements with el Cartel del Golfo to transport him across the Texas border with Mexico. El Cartel Del Golfo is well-known for trafficking drugs and weapons into the United States. With the help of the cartel, this adolescent bypassed Immigration authorities at the border and eventually made his way to Brentwood, New York with several other family members.

Another young male, age 17, from Honduras reports that he was 15 years old when he left his native country and traveled to Mexico by train. He told our investigator that it took him about three months to get to Mexico because he made stops along the way to beg for food and water. Once in Mexico, he reports that he, along with 13 other adolescents, were rounded up by the Mexican Mafia by gun point. They were then told that they would have to transport marijuana for the Mafia, or they would be killed. He stated that he was fitted with 48 pounds of marijuana and that two guides, hired by the Mafia, escorted them from Sonora, Mexico to Phoenix, Arizona. After crossing the border, he was taken into custody by United States Immigration officials and placed in a facility for unaccompanied minors. He stated that he remained there for four months and then flew to New York to stay with his uncle.

Both adolescents have been charged with serious violent felonies.

Gang members are being arrested and prosecuted in record numbers, but it is clear that law enforcement cannot solve this problem alone. According to a report released by the Department of Health and Human Services, ORR placed 930 unaccompanied minors in Suffolk County over a six-month period from October 2016-April 2017. Since federal authorities do not communicate with local human service agencies, law enforcement, nor do they notify school districts when youth are placed with sponsors in the County, there is no way to responsibly deal with the influx of minors coming to places like Brentwood. This must change. Unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable to gang involvement, especially those who may have witnessed violence at a young age and experienced significant trauma. Without appropriate interventions, some of these children are destined to engage with criminal gangs such as MS-13.

Furthermore, federal authorities must close loopholes in the ORR program which threaten national security and aid in the proliferation of criminal gangs in the United States. Anyone who sponsors a child to resettle in the United States should be held fully accountable for compliance with all immigration court hearings. It has been reported that sponsor families are not always thoroughly vetted and that youth are placed in the care of adults who do not meet legal residency requirements. Some youth are placed in families with siblings and relatives who are gang-involved, and they are concentrated in towns with high rates of gang activity. This accelerates the cycle of crime and incarceration in many lower-income communities and hurts law abiding residents who are struggling in their own quest for security and personal prosperity.

Our nation's porous southern border has become the gateway for MS-13 to thrive on Long Island and in neighborhoods across America. This is also the economic epicenter for drug and sex traffickers, as well as a common route for weapons to enter our country illegally. Mexican cartels and organized criminal gangs have formed a powerful economic alliance to smuggle heroin and other illicit drugs into the United States. Ninety percent of the heroin coming into the country enters through Mexico, so we must intensify security along the southern border. These are real and serious problems that have been ignored by prior Administrations for far too long.

Finally, if we are truly serious about shutting down the MS-13 pipeline, we must do more to improve human services and funding for education in low-income communities. Federal lawmakers should strongly consider more funding for the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.), which is run by the Sheriff's Office in schools throughout Suffolk County, including some in Brentwood and its surrounding communities. Young people also need more recreational and social outlets, as well as viable opportunities for employment, to help them better assimilate into mainstream society so that they can resist the lure of gang membership.

I want to thank you once again for the opportunity to present testimony at today's hearing and I look forward to answering your follow up questions.