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Cultural Traits of Salvadoran Gangs Offer Chance for U.S. to Weaken MS-13

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About MS-13

MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) was founded by Salvadoran immigrants fleeing a harsh civil war in California during the 1980s. It became an international organization after deportation tactics in the LA barrios exported the threat to El Salvador.

MS-13 is a complex and loose network of cliques found throughout the US and El Salvador. These cliques, many of which have no knowledge of each other, are connected by name and cultural components but not by any form of central leadership, making the gang difficult to pinpoint, target, and exploit.

With 10,000 members in the United States, MS-13 has evolved into a predator gang with a reputation of ultraviolence. As gang activity has increased in recent years, the Trump administration prioritizes the eradication of MS-13.

Understanding the cultural tactics of MS-13, can help the US decrease gang activity, violence, and recruitment, as well as deter illegal immigration to the US from El Salvador.

Methodology and Scope

This research uses the Cultural Topography framework employed by the US intelligence community to assess the identity, norms of behavior, values, and perceptions of MS-13 that could help improve the strategy US officials use to combat the MS-13 threat.

Data gathered from:
• Interviews with gang members conducted by field anthropologists
• Immigrant asylum cases
• News sources
• Congressional documents
• Presidential briefs
• PhD Dissertations
• Police force comments

Key Findings

After analyzing cultural components found within the data, it became evident that the warlike-culture and anti-government sentiment created by MS-13 in El Salvador has increased rampant violence and illegal immigration of Salvadorans fleeing MS-13 to the US in recent years.

Current strategy against MS-13 may be disrupted by cultural components that make deported members unable to reintegrate back into Salvadoran life, a perception of enemies that allows public discourse to feed the gang’s need for attention, and the failure for US officials to recognize that MS-13’s harsh punishment and recruitment methods are unwanted by many of its own members.

Outlook

US approach towards MS-13 involves deporting gang members and affiliates back to El Salvador and publicly denouncing their inhumane behavior. This only increases gang, violence, recruitment, and illegal immigration to the US.

Steps to improve US policy:
• Work with the embassy in El Salvador to reform anti-gang policies
• Carefully change the current conversation surrounding MS-13
• Foster strong anti-gang, identity amongst youth

Figure 1 – MS-13 Presence in the Americas

General representation of MS-13 population gathered from news reports in 2009; pattern remains similar in 2019