

New Jersey State Commission of Investigation



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Immediate Release**

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SCI LAUNCHES NEW PROJECT: 'ORGANIZED CRIME SPOTLIGHT'

TRENTON – Fulfilling its statutory mandate to keep the public informed about the operations of organized crime in New Jersey, the State Commission of Investigation today introduced a new project, “Organized Crime Spotlight,” that will periodically provide up-to-date profiles of significant criminal groups impacting the State and region. The inaugural report focuses on La Mara Salvatrucha, commonly referred to as MS-13, a criminal street gang known for extreme violence.

The Commission found that while aggressive law enforcement efforts and prosecutions at the state and federal levels have been somewhat effective in suppressing MS-13, it remains a persistent threat in New Jersey, preying primarily on immigrant communities through extortion, robbery and street-level drug sales. With a ceaseless thirst to command respect through fear, its

trademark ideology of advancing in rank through violence and its rivalries with other groups, murder is always just a spark away for MS-13 members, the SCI found.

The most infamous example of MS-13's savagery in New Jersey was the slaying of three individuals – and the grave wounding of a fourth – in a Newark schoolyard on the night of Aug. 4, 2007. Six of the gang's members, including the leader of the Newark clique, are serving long prison sentences for the grisly attack. Such vicious incidents of violence have been less frequent in recent years, and some policing experts believe elements of MS-13 may be intentionally lying low to avoid law enforcement scrutiny.

Further, the Commission learned that New Jersey is a central command post for the gang's operations on the East Coast. Over the past decade, an effort by MS-13 leaders in El Salvador to exert greater control over U.S.-based cliques, or sets, has taken root. These cliques take orders directly from compatriots in El Salvador for killings and pay tribute by wiring cash to leaders in the Central American nation. New Jersey has played a prominent role in this movement with leaders in Monmouth and Hudson counties directing operations along the East Coast.

Founded by immigrants fleeing war-torn El Salvador in the 1980s, MS-13 originated on the streets of Los Angeles. New Jersey law enforcement officials identified the first MS-13 members in Elizabeth, Union County, in the mid-1990s. Today, MS-13 members are scattered throughout the state from Union City to Morristown, Trenton to Red Bank, and Lindenwold to Lakewood.

Along with outlining the gang's origins, expansion, structure and activities, the report also highlights some of the obstacles facing law enforcement as well as approaches some officials

have used to tamp down violence and to prevent vulnerable teenagers from bolstering MS-13's ranks.

Combating MS-13 presents unique challenges to law enforcement due to the insular nature of the gang, which often targets immigrants from El Salvador as both victims and as potential recruits. In some municipalities, outreach is hampered by a lack of Spanish-speaking officers. Law enforcement officials across the State told the Commission efforts are ongoing to build relationships with these communities but that many people, principally those who are undocumented, are fearful of deportation or of retaliation by the gang.

Notwithstanding these challenges, law enforcement in some jurisdictions, particularly in Hudson County, have adopted strategies that have successfully headed off potential violence and muted the gang's predatory behavior. Most notably, law enforcement officials in Union City, Hudson County, told the Commission that while many MS-13 members are present in the city, the gang does not conduct overt criminal activity there because of a zero-tolerance approach that involves multiple city departments and the school system. Some measures taken in Union City include a midnight curfew on those under 18 and a requirement that building owners swiftly remove graffiti, such as gang-related tags, or face significant financial penalties.



The State Commission of Investigation is an independent New Jersey watchdog agency established in 1968 to investigate organized crime and corruption, waste of tax money and other abuses of the public trust. Copies of public reports are available at the Commission's offices or via its Web site at www.state.nj.us/sci.index.shtm