

**COI QUERY**

Country of Origin	El Salvador
Main subject	The gang of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)
Question(s)	Information on the activities of the gang called Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13), between 2017 and 2018. In particular, information on: • its modus operandi and main activities • its presence in the Sonsonate department
Date of completion	22 August 2018
Query Code	Q113
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	

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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 22 August 2018. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE

Information on the activities of the gang called Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13), between 2017 and 2018. In particular: information on its modus operandi and main activities; on its presence in the Sonsonate department

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

The Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13¹, is a street gang which emerged in Los Angeles (US), in the early 1980s². Formed by underprivileged Salvadoran youths who had fled with their families due to the country's civil war³ in the 1980s, the MS-13 expanded in Central America in the early 2000s⁴.

In 2012, the United States declared the MS-13 a 'Transnational Criminal Organisation' (TCO) - alongside four criminal syndicates: the Mexican 'Zetas', the Japanese 'Yakuza', the Russian 'Brothers' Circle' and the Italian 'Camorra'⁵.

The MS-13 is considered the largest criminal group operating in El Salvador, followed by the two factions of the rival street gang called 'Barrio 18' (18th Street gang)⁶. The MS-13 gang is also deemed one of the largest and most violent street gangs in the world⁷.

The UNHCR 'Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from El Salvador' (2016) states that these gangs are the main factors leading to the increase of violence in El Salvador over the last decade, including the surge in murders and population displacement⁸.

Modus operandi and main activities of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) between 2017 and 2018

In a 2018 report, the OHCHR notes that a key element of the Salvadoran gangs' operations and ethos is the control of territory, which is often the reason why rival gangs violently fight. OHCHR adds that

¹ For ease of reference the acronym 'MS-13' will be used throughout this document.

² Cruz J. M., (The Conversation), *Central American gangs like MS-13 were born out of failed anti-crime policies*, 9 March 2017 ([url](#)).

³ For a chronology of key events in El Salvador's history, see: BBC, *El Salvador profile – Timeline*, 16 May 2018 ([url](#)).

⁴ Cruz J. M., (The Conversation), *Central American gangs like MS-13 were born out of failed anti-crime policies*, 9 March 2017 ([url](#)).

⁵ Guardian, *United States classifies MS-13 street gang a global criminal organisation*, 11 October 2012, ([url](#)).

⁶ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, Latin America Report N. 64, 19 December 2017, p. 8 ([url](#)); OHCHR, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons on her visit to El Salvador*, A/HRC/38/39/Add.1, 23 April 2018, p.4 ([url](#)).

⁷ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018 p. 3 ([url](#)).

⁸ UNHCR, *Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from El Salvador*, HCR/EG/SLV/16/01, March 2016, p. 10 ([url](#)).



most of the gangs' criminal income is derived through small scale extortion, such as extortion of local bus operators, even though the largest businesses may also be subject to extortion⁹.

In February 2018, the foundation InSight Crime¹⁰ and the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies (CLALS) at the American University of Washington DC, published a joint report focusing primarily on the structure and activities of the MS-13 in the American continent. The study found that, despite efforts by law enforcement in two hemispheres, 'the MS-13 remains a persistent threat and shows signs of expanding its criminal portfolio'¹¹.

The same source states that the MS-13 has between 50,000 and 70,000 members. Most of them are concentrated in urban areas in Central America or in locations outside the region where there are large Central American communities. In El Salvador, the gang has also spread into more rural areas¹².

According to the InSight Crime – CLALS study, the MS-13 is a scattered networked gang with no single leader. Its structure resembles more a 'federation' with layers of leaders who interact with each other differently, depending on the circumstances. The same report also explains that the MS-13 is a complex phenomenon rooted in social identity processes:

'The gang is not about generating revenue as much as it is about creating a collective identity that is constructed and reinforced by shared, often criminal experiences, especially acts of violence and expressions of social control. [...] Violence is at the heart of the MS-13 and is what has made it a target of law enforcement in the United States, Central America and beyond. It is central to the MS-13's ethos, its modus operandi, and its evaluation and discipline of its own members. Violence also builds cohesion and comradery within the gang's cliques'¹³.

However, the same source notes that, if the use of violence has boosted the MS-13's brand name, it has also hindered its ability to enter more sophisticated criminal economies, such as international drug trade and human trafficking. This is due to the fact that, potential partners see the gang as an unreliable, highly visible target¹⁴.

In fact, the aforementioned InSight Crime – CLALS report concludes that the current US government – like the previous one under the Obama administration – have misjudged the MS-13 in defining it as a transnational criminal organisation¹⁵.

The study argues that the MS-13 can instead be considered a 'transnational street gang' which conducts brutal but rudimentary criminal activities like extortion, armed robbery, petty drug dealing, prostitution, car theft, human smuggling and murder across Central America, Mexico and the US¹⁶.

⁹ OHCHR, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons on her visit to El Salvador*, A/HRC/38/39/Add.1, 23 April 2018, p.4 ([url](#)).

¹⁰ InSight Crime is a foundation based in Medellín, Colombia, specialised in the study of organised crime in Latin America. Founded by professional journalists, the foundation defines itself as 'a hybrid: part media, part academia, part think tank'. InSight Crime is funded, among others, by Open Society Foundations, the US, Canadian, British and Swedish governments. For more information, see: InSight Crime, *About us* ([url](#)).

¹¹ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 3 ([url](#)).

¹² InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 3 ([url](#)).

¹³ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 3-4 ([url](#)).

¹⁴ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 3-4 ([url](#)).

¹⁵ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 5 ([url](#)).

¹⁶ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 39-40 ([url](#)).



The MS-13's criminal activities mainly rely on the gang's physical presence and control of its areas of operation. The aforementioned source explains:

'The gang rarely controls the day-to-day operations of these businesses, but rather taxes them. [...] Control of physical space allows the gang to collect what they call "la renta," or "the rent." The gang collects money from licit, unlicensed and illegitimate businesses as well as from individuals in or near its area of influence. Some members of the gang control parts of these businesses. But mostly, they are taxing them'¹⁷.

An investigation carried out by the New York Times in 2016 reveals that the MS-13 gang extorted about 70 percent of businesses in El Salvador (as of 2016). The article adds that transportation companies have been particularly targeted, with 692 transportation workers and 93 police officers being killed, as of 2016¹⁸.

An article by 'The Atlantic' (US), published on March 2018, reports on an increase in the number of young girls murdered by the gangs in El Salvador. The article explains that sexual assaults against young women have been a common criminal practice by the street gangs in the country. Moreover, in recent years, the homicide rate for young girls has increased sharply. According to the same source, turf wars between MS-13 and the rival gang Barrio 18 have 'exacerbated what is the world's highest homicide rate for people under the age of 19'¹⁹.

The US Department of State (US DoS) 'Report on international religious freedom' for the year 2017 notes that members of religious communities – including Catholics, Protestants and Christians – were sometimes prevented from attending their respective congregations in areas controlled by the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs, 'due to fear of crime and violence'²⁰.

In its report for the year 2017, Freedom House states that the control of territory by the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs has made it dangerous for Salvadoran citizens to travel, work and attend school²¹.

Presence of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) in the Sonsonate department

An analysis published by InSight Crime in 2011 defines the Sonsonate department, in Western El Salvador, as the most violent region of the country²².

The aforementioned investigation by the New York Times informs that members of the MS-13 gang have maintained a presence in 247 of 262 municipalities of the country, as of 2016. As a result of their violent presence, entire communities in El Salvador have undertaken dangerous journeys to reach the United States²³.

¹⁷ InSight Crime/CLALS, *MS-13 in the Americas*, 16 February 2018, p. 39-40 ([url](#)).

¹⁸ New York Times, *Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador*, 20 November 2016 ([url](#)).

¹⁹ Atlantic, *El Salvador's gangs are targeting young girls*, 4 March 2018, ([url](#)).

²⁰ US DoS, *2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - El Salvador*, 29 May 2018, p. 1 ([url](#)).

²¹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018 - El Salvador*, 15 March 2018, ([url](#)).

²² InSight Crime, *Sonsonate: El Salvador's Most Violent Region*, 19 July 2011 ([url](#)).

²³ New York Times, *Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador*, 20 November 2016 ([url](#)).



In 2016, InSight Crime informs that, due to gang threats, the number of children abandoning school in the country had risen dramatically. As an example of such phenomenon, the same source mentions the case of a school, in the town of Izalco (Sonsonate department), which had to close for almost two months due to gang threats. The article adds that ‘the Sonsonate education department had to hire new employees to replace those who refused to return to work due to fears for their safety’²⁴.

In April 2017, InSight Crime reports that a breakaway faction of the MS-13 gang, known as MS503 or the ‘revolucionarios’, was the source of increasing conflict in the country. The same source informs that the dissent gang MS503 mainly consists of two gang cells (known as ‘clicas’), namely the Fulton and the Normandis. According to the authorities, these two gang cells control part of departments of Chalatenango, Ahuachapán, Sonsonate and San Miguel²⁵.

In April 2018, some media outlets²⁶ report that authorities in Mexico arrested and deported to El Salvador Herbert William Barrientos, known as ‘Tiburón de San Coco’ (‘shark of San Coco’), one of the most wanted members of the MS-13 gang active in Sonsonate. According to the police, he was the founder of the so-called ‘Sancocos Locos Salvatruchos’ - a gang cell of the MS-13 – as well as the mastermind of a massacre perpetrated on 25 November 2014, when eight people attending a 15-year-old party were killed in the municipality of Acajutla, in the Sonsonate department.

On 31 July 2018²⁷, the Salvadoran Prosecutor's Office issued arrest warrants against 222 alleged members of the MS-13 gang nationwide. This operation led to the arrest of 27 gang members in various municipalities of Sonsonate and Ahuchapán.

The detainees were accused of crimes, such as homicide, extortion, rape, terrorism and causing forced displacement²⁸.

²⁴ InSight Crime, *El Salvador's gangs causing tens of thousands to leave school*, 22 July 2016 ([url](#)).

²⁵ InSight Crime, *Tensions Rise over Dissident MS-13 Faction in El Salvador*, 28 April 2017 ([url](#)).

²⁶ Elsalvador.com, *El Tiburón de San Coco, el pandillero de la MS-13 que buscó una carrera política en Sonsonate*, 14 April 2018 ([url](#)); El Heraldo, *Mexico deporta a El Salvador a peligroso miembro de la Mara Salvatrucha*, 14 April 2018 ([url](#)); El Mundo, *Capturan a “Tiburón de San Coco” autor de masacre de ocho personas en Acajutla*, 14 April 2018 ([url](#)).

²⁷ El Siglo, *La Fiscalía de El Salvador ordena masiva detención de pandilleros de la MS-13*, 31 July 2018 ([url](#)); El Diario, *Ordenan arresto de 222 pandilleros de la Mara Salvatrucha, pero agentes se topan con sorpresa*, 31 July 2018 ([url](#)).

²⁸ El Siglo, *La Fiscalía de El Salvador ordena masiva detención de pandilleros de la MS-13*, 31 July 2018 ([url](#)).



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