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The Nature and Structure of MS-13 in Los Angeles County

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Abstract

Recent descriptions of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) by senior U.S. government officials suggest that the gang is highly organized, has significant transnational capacity, and is heavily involved in violence. Arguably, these depictions have created moral panic among the public and have fed xenophobic attitudes toward Latin American immigrants. However, little is known from empirical research about the nature and structure of MS-13 in the United States. In this article, we draw on data from interviews with incarcerated MS-13 members in Los Angeles County, the birthplace of MS-13. We examine three key aspects of MS-13: its organizational characteristics, its transnational capacity, and its involvement in criminal behavior, including violence. Our findings provide a useful descriptive summary of MS-13 in Los Angeles County, where the gang originated. Our findings also suggest that while there are good reasons to take MS-13 seriously as a threat to public safety, much of the public discourse on the gang is based on inaccurate assumptions.

Keywords

MS13, Hispanic gangs, Los Angeles County, Latin American gangs, transnational capacity and organizational characteristics, crime and violence

Introduction

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is a Salvadoran street gang that originated in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Its initial members were primarily the children of refugees who had fled the brutal civil war in El Salvador and settled in impoverished Los Angeles neighborhoods. Mass deportations of MS-13 members to El Salvador (along with members of Barrio-18, a rival gang) in the 1990s destabilized the tiny country and led to the inadvertent growth and expansion of both gangs (Arana, 2005). In 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department (2012) classified MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization due to its involvement in "serious transnational criminal activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, human smuggling, sex trafficking, murder, assassinations, racketeering, blackmail, extortion, and immigration offenses." However, scholars and journalists have raised serious questions about the validity of this depiction, with one scholar concluding that "representations of Mara

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Salvatrucha as a transnationally structured criminal enterprise depict the gang as more menacing than it is" (Wolf, 2012, p. 94).

The public specter over MS-13 has increased dramatically in recent years. After taking office in January 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump routinely depicted MS-13 as one of the greatest threats facing the nation. In July 2017, he told a group of law enforcement officials: "... Together, we're going to restore safety to our streets and peace to our communities, and we're going to destroy the vile criminal cartel, MS-13" (Trump, 2017). Others argued that such characterizations were overblown. Stephen Dudley, a journalist specializing in Latin American crime issues, concluded that MS-13's core membership "consists of teenagers who communicate mostly via text messages. Its principal communications strategy is conveyed with spray paint" (Fawthrop, 2018). These competing characterizations raise important questions about the gang, including its transnational capacity, its level of organization, its sophistication as a criminal enterprise, and the extent to which it engages in serious violence. Unfortunately, existing research evidence is insufficient to draw confident inferences about these issues. In the absence of systematic research evidence, political rhetoric and moral panic continue to drive public opinion and public policy about MS-13 in the United States (Barak et al., 2020; Osuna, 2020).

The present study draws on data from structured interviews with 37 MS-13 members incarcerated in Los Angeles County jails in California. We aim to provide descriptive data on three key aspects of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County: their organizational characteristics, their transnational capacity, and their involvement in criminal behavior, including violence. Our goal is to assess key aspects of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County to identify whether the fear surrounding them is warranted or if these perceptions are simply guided by rhetoric that feeds and intensifies moral panic. Our findings are useful for gauging the validity of recent characterizations of MS-13 by certain government agencies, politicians, and journalists.

Literature Review

Since the late 1800s, gang formation among new immigrant groups has been a common theme in the study of both immigration and gangs (Decker et al., 2009; van Gemert et al., 2008; Thrasher, 1927). Indeed, the linkages between immigration and gang formation are evident in classic studies of gangs from the early 20th century (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1920; Thrasher, 1927). The beginnings of MS-13 are rooted in migration as well. In the early 1980s, Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles faced many of the same experiences that other new immigrant groups in the United States had faced previously, including poverty, discrimination, and criminal victimization (Snipes et al., 2020; Zatz & Smith, 2012). Some members of new immigrant groups experiencing these forms of "multiple marginality" establish gangs to protect themselves against those seeking to harm them and their communities (Krohn et al., 2011; Vigil, 1988, 2003).

The massive increase in Salvadoran migration to the United States in the 1980s came as a result of a civil war in El Salvador that took place from 1979 to 1992. More than half a million Salvadorans fled to the United States primarily due to the political violence, human rights abuses, and poverty that resulted from the civil war (Jones, 1989; Montes, 1988; Stanley, 1987). Many of these migrants settled in Los Angeles or surrounding areas in California. In a region historically known for gang presence, new migrants settling in Los Angeles encountered a number of social and economic challenges, including criminal victimization and issues related to street gangs (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001; Lopez et al., 1996). These challenges exacerbated their sense of marginality, their need for group cohesiveness, and accordingly, their risk of gang involvement (Davis, 2006; Zilberg, 2011). Around the same time that Salvadorans arrived in Los Angeles, the city was in the midst of fighting a war on drugs, a "war" now infamous for disproportionally targeting people of color in predominantly poor neighborhoods (Provine, 2011). This regular exposure to heavy-handed policing

tactics further alienated Salvadoran immigrants from mainstream society, encouraging them to seek refuge within their communities and to band together in groups. MS-13 was established by Salvadoran youth in response to the various forms of multiple marginality they experienced, as well as to protect themselves against gangs in the area (Vigil, 2002).

In 1996, the United States passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which significantly increased in the number of noncitizens (including legal residents) deported from the United States after being convicted for committing certain criminal offense types (Kalsi, 2018; Morawetz, 2000). Included among the deportees were MS-13 and Barrio-18 (also known as 18th Street) gang members who were sent to El Salvador. Some of them established Los Angeles-style gangs in El Salvador, where institutional weaknesses enabled the gangs to flourish and expand rapidly (Cruz, 2010; McGuinn, 2017). Conflict between the two gangs resulted in significant inter-gang violence. In addition, nongang members fell victim to instrumental forms of violence when subjected to gang-related crimes such as extortion and kidnaping. Research has identified a direct linkage between U.S. deportations and increases in gang membership and violence in El Salvador (Kalsi, 2018). Aggressive gang suppression or *mano dura* strategies adopted by police in El Salvador had the inadvertent effect of further intensifying the gang violence problems in that country (Van Damme, 2018; Wolf, 2012, 2017b). Some MS-13 members who were deported to El Salvador eventually returned to the United States, thus raising questions about MS-13's transnational capacity (Coutin, 2016).

MS-13 and Moral Panic

As MS-13 gained popularity, so too did the fear and moral panic associated with the group. The concept of a moral panic refers to the idea that public fears about a social issue sometimes generate exaggerated responses that far exceed the potential threat. Moral panics often serve as the basis for misguided policy (Cohen, 1972). In fact, the moral panic discourse was first applied to the study of gangs in the 1960s (Cohen, 1972; McCorkle & Miethe, 1998). Cohen (1972) suggested that "moral panics" can target both novel or long-standing issues just as long as the party exacerbating these perceptions is a person or entity with the appropriate credentials, such as government officials.

The idea that moral panic influences our responses to gangs has received support from research in several U.S. cities. For instance, in her study of responses to Chicano gangs in Phoenix, Zatz (1987) found that media descriptions were exaggerated and police responses were disproportionate to the actual magnitude of the gang problem. Zatz concluded that police responses to gangs were motivated more by fear and moral panic than by a realistic appraisal of the problem. McCorkle and Miethe (1998) also found that false ideas, guided by moral panics, influenced responses to the gang problem in Las Vegas, NV. The authors found that gangs contributed to a small number of violent and drug-related crimes, contrary to law enforcement's claims. Lucas (1998) found that inaccurate police and media characterizations of the Latino gang problem in Santa Cruz, CA, were part of a larger, more systemic pattern of racial polarization in the United States.

Unanswered Questions

As MS-13's reputation continued to grow, new cliques began to form throughout the United States, with concentrations in certain metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles, New York, and the District of Columbia. The number of MS-13 members in the United States is unknown, though federal law enforcement agencies typically estimate it to be about 10,000 (Finklea, 2018; Franco, 2007). Little is known about the gang's organizational characteristics in the United States. Some commentators describe it as highly organized and tightly structured (Celona & Fears, 2018), while others view it as less organized and only loosely structured (InSight Crime, 2018). Little is also

known about the gang's transnational capacity. Certain politicians describe MS-13 as a transnational criminal organization or a cartel (Trump, 2017; U.S. Treasury, 2012), while others view its transnational capacity as much more limited (InSight Crime, 2018). Wolf (2012, p. 94) argues that while some MS-13 members and cliques "maintain sporadic cross-border links for both instrumental and expressive purposes, the gang is not transnational in structure or span of authority. Instead, it is best understood as an informal network of autonomous gangs bound by a shared symbolic and normative affiliation." Unfortunately, much of the public discourse on MS-13's organizational structure and transnational capacity is based on dubious evidence and a "perceived but overstated threat" (Barak et al., 2020, p. 564). This lack of understanding of basic group characteristics impedes our ability to determine the actual magnitude of the threat the group possess to the community.

Much also remains to be learned about MS-13's involvement in criminal behavior. Little is known about the extent to which the gang is a legitimate threat, or if its reputation is out of proportion to its actual criminal behavior. Some commentators describe the gang as highly violent and involved in serious organized crime (Trump, 2017), while others view these descriptions as exaggerated (Barak et al., 2020; Wolf, 2012). One common argument is that some of the migrants fleeing the civil war in El Salvador were trained combat soldiers or guerilla fighters, therefore posing a greater threat of violence than other U.S. gang members (Castro, 2005; Valdez, 2000). Yet the research evidence suggests an offending pattern that is similar to that of other street gangs (Wolf, 2012).

Involvement in delinquency and crime is a defining characteristic of street gangs (Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen et al., 2001). In fact, participating in delinquency and crime tends to strengthen the bonds between members and the gang itself (Klein, 1995). However, there is no empirical evidence to demonstrate that the prevalence and incidence of violent criminal behavior by MS-13 is any different than that of the conventional street gang, and much of what is discussed in journalistic accounts highlights isolated, sensationalized incidents (Barak et al., 2020; Osuna, 2020; Wolf, 2012, 2017a). In short, many descriptions of MS-13, especially by certain journalists and politicians, are long on conjecture and short on data. While descriptive, this study provides a basis for understanding the characteristics and behaviors of MS-13 cliques in the Los Angeles area and their members.

Data and Method

Data for this project were collected through interviews with incarcerated MS-13 members. Interviews were conducted in the Los Angeles County Jails.[1] MS-13 members were identified through the assistance of Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) Operation Safe Jails[2] personnel. Once the research team received the names of the identified MS-13 members, interviewers confirmed gang affiliation by asking respondents whether they were in fact a member of an MS-13 clique.1 From February 2016 to April 2017, trained interviewers administered in-person interviews with 37 members of MS-13 in private rooms within the jail facility where staff could not hear the content of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in a variety of different locations depending on the facility, including interview rooms, the chapel, and the nurse's office. The interviews were carried out in English and Spanish, depending on the preference of the interviewee, using an instrument that included questions on demographics, criminal involvement, migration, victimization, and social networks.[2] Interviewees also provided information specific to their clique. The length of the interviews ranged from 15 to 60 min.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics about the sample of MS-13 members that we interviewed. They ranged in age from 19 to 44, with a mean of 27 and a median of 25. Most of them were male (94.6%). The mean years of formal education ranged from 0 to 20 with a mean of 10.1 and a median of 11. Just over half the participants (54.1%) were either U.S. citizens or legal residents. In terms of

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Median
Age	19	44	26.95	25
Sex (male = 1)	0	1	0.95	1
Years of formal education	0	20	10.08	11
U.S. citizen or legal resident (yes = 1)	0	1	0.54	1
Nationality: United States (yes = 1)	0	1	0.32	0
Nationality: El Salvador (yes = 1)	0	1	0.54	1
Nationality: Other (yes = 1)	0	1	0.14	0
Speaks English (yes = 1)	0	1	0.92	1

Table 2. Organizational Characteristics of MS-13 Cliques in Los Angeles County.

Interview Questions		% Yes
Does your clique claim certain turf or territory?	27	96.3
If your clique maintains turf or territory, would you or other members of your clique be willing to use violence to defend it against others?	27	92.6
Does the clique have one person who serves as its leader?	25	76.0
Does your clique have a formal hierarchy in which some members have more authority than others?	28	75.0
Does your clique have regular meetings?	27	88.9
Does your clique have clear rules that members have to follow?	27	81.5
Are there punishments if rules or orders are not followed?	27	85.2
Do members give money to the clique?	28	64.3
Does your clique have special colors, symbols, signs, or clothing that clearly distinguish it from other cliques or gangs?	28	75.0
Does your clique follow instructions from gang leaders who are currently in prison?	25	72.0

nationality, 32.4% were from the United States, 54.1% were from El Salvador, and 13.5% were from elsewhere. Most of the interviewees (91.9%) spoke English.

Based on data from the interviews, our analysis focuses on three primary questions. First, what are the organizational characteristics of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County? We examine both their formal structure and indicators of the social cohesion their members feel with each other and the clique. Second, what is their transnational capacity? We examine the cliques' involvement in several types of transnational crime. Finally, what is the nature and extent of their involvement in criminal behavior, including violence? According to media and government accounts, MS-13 is an organized, highly criminal, transnational group. Yet, there is little scientific evidence to support this characterization. Answering these questions will allow us to better assess the validity of these claims. In the following section, we seek to provide answers to these three questions.

Findings

Table 2 summarizes the interview responses related to the organizational characteristics of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County. Respondents answering these questions came from at least 13 different MS-13 cliques.[3] The results reveal that most MS-13 members are involved in cliques that claim certain turf or territory (96.3%) and would be willing to use violence to defend it against others (92.6%). About three quarters of respondents come from cliques in which one person serves as

Table 3. Social Cohesion Among MS-13 Members in Los Angeles County.

Interview Questions	*n*	% Agree or Strongly Agree
My clique has very little to do with how I feel about myself	27	55.6
My clique is an important reflection of who I am	26	46.2
Belonging to my clique is an important part of me	27	37.0
My clique has almost nothing to do with what kind of person I am	27	63.0
My clique is a big part of my life	27	51.9
The members of my clique are cooperative with each other	27	81.5
The members of my clique know that they can depend on each other	27	81.5
The members of my clique stand up for each other	27	88.9
Being in a clique makes a person feel important	27	59.3
Clique members provide a good deal of support for one another	27	77.8
Being a member of the clique makes me feel like I am a useful person to have around	26	42.3
Being a member of the clique makes me feel like I really belong somewhere	27	48.1
Being a member of the clique is really enjoyable	26	69.2
Being a member of the clique is a good way to make money	27	59.3
A clique member expects to remain in the clique for many years	27	81.5
A clique member would leave the clique if something better came along	26	50.0
There is no future in belonging to a clique	26	73.1

Note. $n = 27$.

leader (76%) or that have a formal hierarchy (75.0%). Most respondents come from cliques that hold regular meetings (88.9%), have clear rules that members must follow (81.5%), and impose punishments for breaking these rules (85.2%). Less than two thirds of respondents report that MS-13 members give money to their clique (64.3%). Three quarters of respondents reported that their clique does not have special colors, symbols, signs, or clothing that clearly distinguish it from other cliques or gangs (75.0%). Finally, 72% of respondents report that their clique follows instructions from gang leaders who are currently in prison. All of these indicators suggest some level of structure or organization within MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County, though there is some variation across respondents. We elaborate on these findings further in the Discussion section.

Another key aspect of the social organization of gangs is the extent to which members feel connected to one another and to the gang. This is often described in the gang literature as social cohesion (Hennigan & Sloan, 2013; Hennigan & Spavonic, 2012; Jansyn, 1966; Klein, 1971, 1995). Table 3 summarizes the interview items on social cohesion among MS-13 members. Cohesion appears higher for certain indicators than others. For instance, more than four in five respondents report that clique members cooperate with each other (81.5%), know that they can depend on each other (81.5%), stand up for each other (88.9%), and expect to remain in the clique for many years (81.5%). At the same time, clique cohesion appears low on other key indicators. For instance, only 51.9% of respondents agreed that their clique "is a big part of my life." Only 46.2% agreed that their clique "is an important reflection of who I am." Only 42.3% agreed that being in the clique "makes me feel like I am a useful person to have around." Finally, only 37% agreed that belonging to the clique "is an important part of me." We explore these findings further in the Discussion section.

Table 4 summarizes participant responses related to the transnational capacity of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County. The respondents to these questions came from 20 different MS-13 cliques. The interview instrument asked respondents whether their clique was involved in five types of transnational crime in the previous 12 months, including four types of trafficking (drugs, guns,

Table 4. Transational Activities of MS-13 Cliques in Los Angeles County.

Interview Questions	*n*	% Yes
Engaged in drug trafficking between two or more countries (past 12 months)	15	16.2
To the US	11	10.8
From the US	11	13.5
Engaged in gun trafficking between two or more countries (past 12 months)	17	16.2
To the US	12	10.8
From the US	13	10.8
Engaged in sex trafficking between two or more countries (past 12 months)	16	10.8
To the US	11	5.4
From the US	11	0.0
Engaged in labor trafficking between two or more countries (past 12 months)	15	8.1
To the US	11	2.7
From the US	11	0.0
Engaged in smuggling of persons between two or more countries (past 12 months)	17	13.5
To the US	11	10.8
From the US	11	2.7

labor, and sex), and human smuggling. Six respondents report that their cliques were involved in drug trafficking (16.2%) and gun trafficking (16.2%), five in human smuggling (13.5%), four in sex trafficking (10.8%), and three in labor trafficking (8.1%). Table 4 also indicates the direction of travel for these transnational criminal activities. For each offense type, Table 4 also lists the extent to which the United States and El Salvador serve as source and/or destination countries for these activities. We explore MS-13's involvement in transnational criminal activities further in the Discussion section.

Table 5 summarizes participant responses related to the criminal involvement of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County. The respondents answering these questions came from at least 13 different MS-13 cliques. The responses reveal that MS-13 involvement in property crime is common, with more than 60% of respondents indicating that their clique has been involved in painting graffiti (70%), theft of items worth more than US$100 (66.7%), and housebreaking or burglary (61.9%). The responses also indicate that MS-13 involvement in violent crime is also common, with more than 70% of respondents indicating that their clique has been involved in threats or intimidation (72.7%), jumping or attacking someone (76.2%), shooting at someone (76.5%), or killing someone (73.3%). The respondents report less involvement in robbing people (50%) or businesses (55%). The violent crime in which the gang is least involved is kidnaping (33%). Nearly three quarters of respondents indicate that their clique has been involved in local drug sales (72.7%), but fewer report involvement in selling drugs to drug dealers (57.9%). Finally, 55% of respondents indicate that their clique has been involved in extorting individuals or businesses. We discuss the meaning of these findings in the Discussion section.

Discussion

The findings reported here are useful for understanding the nature and characteristics of MS-13 in Los Angeles, an area historically known for gang presence as well as the birthplace of MS-13. Numerous journalists, politicians, and government agencies describe MS-13 as highly organized, transnational, and violent. In 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization alongside notable organized crime groups like the Japanese Yakuza and Los Zetas, a Mexican drug cartel. At the time, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Director John Morton called MS-13 "one of the most violent, transnational criminal

Table 5. Criminal Involvement of MS-13 Cliques in Los Angeles County.

In the past 12 months, has the clique:	*n*	% Yes
Property crime		
Painted graffiti on someone else's property without permission	20	70.0
Stolen property worth less than US$100	21	61.9
Stolen property worth more than US$100	21	66.7
Broken into a house or building to commit theft or burglary	21	61.9
Violent crime		
Intimidated or threatened someone?	22	72.7
Robbed an individual by force or by threat of force?	20	50.0
Robbed a business through force or threat of force?	20	55.0
Jumped or attacked someone in a way that resulted in injury?	21	76.2
Kidnapped someone?	18	33.0
Shot as someone but didn't hit them?	19	73.7
Shot at someone?	17	76.5
Killed someone?	15	73.3
Drug sales		
Sold drugs locally?	22	72.7
Sold drugs to drug dealers?	19	57.9
Extortion		
Extorted an individual?	20	55.0
Extorted a business?	20	55.0

organizations operating today" (U.S. Treasury, 2012). Celona and Fears (2018) referred to MS-13 as a transnational street gang with a "better organizational structure than some corporations." In October 2018, U.S. Attorney General William Sessions said that MS-13 "is the most violent gang in America today" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). In July 2020, U.S. Attorney General William Barr called MS-13 a "death cult" and noted that the gang is "highly organized as a transnational organization" (White House, 2020). These accounts often appear wildly sensationalized, designed primarily to induce moral panic or to achieve specific political or partisan objectives (Barak et al., 2020; Osuna, 2020; Wolf, 2017a). Our findings are useful for evaluating the validity of these descriptions and the extent to which the structures and behaviors of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles are consistent with these characterizations.

Like most street gangs, MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County claim control over specific geographic territory and are willing to use violence to defend it against incursion by others.[4] Most cliques have a leader and a formal hierarchy, hold regular meetings, have rules that members must follow, punish members who break those rules, and have special colors, symbols, signs, or clothing that distinguish them from other cliques or gangs. Many of the cliques follow instructions from imprisoned gang leaders. While there was variation across respondents, these indicators suggest some level of formal structure or organization within MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County. Our findings so far are *partially* consistent with an instrumental or rational perspective that views street gangs as organized and goal-oriented (Decker & Curry, 2000; Decker & Pyrooz, 2015b). Comparing our findings on organizational characteristics with those from research on other U.S. street gangs suggests that MS-13 may be somewhat more structured in certain ways, such as leadership, meetings, and finances (see Decker et al., 2008; Katz et al., 2011).[5] However, without a properly sampled comparison group, these findings are speculative.

While formal structures are an important aspect of the social organization of gangs, informal social structures are also important. Organization theorists have long recognized the importance of understanding the extent to which members feel connected to one another and to the larger

organization (Odom et al., 1990). It is no mistake that concepts such as group cohesion and social cohesion appear regularly in the social science literature on both organizations (Dobbins & Zaccaro, 1986; Kirke, 2009; Krackhardt & Stern, 1988) and gangs (Jansyn, 1966; Klein, 1971, 1995). For instance, Sanders et al. (1998, pp. 104–105) note that "group cohesion fosters the willingness to comply with collective obligations," an observation that applies equally to private businesses, public agencies, and street gangs.

Our findings reveal that social cohesion among MS-13 members appears high for certain indicators. Most members report that they cooperate with each other, know they can depend on each other, stand up for each other, and expect to remain in the clique for many years. These findings are consistent with the literature on street gangs, which suggests that gangs fulfill various social and symbolic functions for their members "such as friendship, revenge, and peer affiliation, that are largely independent of instrumental concerns such as making money" (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015b, p. 298). Gangs can sometimes provide a sense of belonging for marginalized youth, particularly those from immigrant families (Ngo et al., 2017; Woo et al., 2015). Social cohesion is lower for other key indicators. Only about half the respondents view the clique as a big part of their life. Less than half of the respondents see the clique as an important reflection of their identity or believe that being in the clique makes them feel like they are useful to have around. Comparing our findings on social cohesion with those from research on other U.S. street gangs suggests that MS-13 may be more cohesive in certain ways, especially the extent to which its members find gang life enjoyable (see Katz et al., 2017; Nuño & Katz, 2012). However, in the absence of a properly sampled comparison group, these conclusions should be considered speculative.

Street gangs play a fundamental role in helping marginalized youth achieve a sense of identity (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012; Vigil, 1988; Woo et al., 2015). One key question is the extent to which gang members have an individual identity that is distinct from their group-based identity as a clique member. According to Goldman et al. (2014, p. 818), "when identification with a group is strong, individuals see themselves overwhelmingly as group members—the self is saturated by the group's identity. But when identification with a group is weak, individuals see themselves more as unique individuals." The responses to our social cohesion questions suggest that some MS-13 members may have preserved a sense of self-identity in addition to their group-based identity as clique members. This is a promising finding from the perspective of gang intervention efforts that encourage young people to leave their gangs (Hennigan et al., 2015).

A key element of many depictions of MS-13 is its alleged sophisticated transnational capacity and its involvement in transnational crime. Yet, respondents report that their cliques are not very involved in international drug trafficking, gun trafficking, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and human smuggling. Some readers may question the veracity of these reports, since there may be obvious incentives to be dishonest. However, as we reported earlier, these same respondents reported extensive involvement in violent crime. It is unclear why they would lie about one type of serious criminal activity (transnational crime) but tell the truth about other types (shooting and murder). These findings suggest that popular depictions of MS-13 may overstate the gang's involvement in transnational crime. Our findings are consistent with those of Dudley (2020, p. 16), who notes that although MS-13 has international ties, "it is a hand-to-mouth organization whose criminal economy is based mostly on small-time extortion schemes and petty drug dealing, not international drug trafficking or sophisticated corruption."

To the extent that MS-13 cliques in the United States resemble typical neighborhood-based street gangs, they may be viewed as "unattractive partners" for transnational crime groups such as cartels that specialize in drug trafficking or other forms of trafficking or smuggling. Turf-based street gangs differ considerably from more specialized organized crime groups. They tend to be generalists, engaging in a wide variety of opportunistic offending rather than specializing in certain offense types that require expertise (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015b). Indeed, Dudley (2018) has documented

several failed attempts by MS-13 leaders to engage in international drug trafficking. He argues that one of the key reasons these efforts have failed is that MS-13 "is more of a social club than a lucrative criminal enterprise" (Dudley, 2018). Moreover, within the United States, MS-13 is a decentralized organization without clear leadership or hierarchy. Even in El Salvador, where MS-13 is much more organized into a clear hierarchical structure, cliques are largely independent. Research in El Salvador reveals that each neighborhood-based clique "has a great deal of autonomy" and is "responsible for its own financial well being" (Farah & Lum, 2013, p. 6). Local clique leaders have wide latitude to make decisions about the clique's structure, finances, and activities. These structural characteristics differ from what we would expect to observe in organized criminal syndicates with significant transnational capacity.

Our findings reveal that in Los Angeles County, MS-13 is heavily involved in more traditional types of street crime. Many of the respondents reported that their cliques have engaged in property crimes such as vandalism, theft, and burglary. Respondents also report heavy involvement in various types of violent crime, including threats or intimidation, jumping or attacking someone, shooting at someone, and killing someone. They report a lower level of involvement in robbing individuals and businesses. Only about a third report having engaged in kidnaping. While nearly three quarters of respondents indicate that their clique has been involved in local drug sales, fewer report involvement in commercial drug sales. Just over half report that their clique has been involved in extorting individuals or businesses.

These patterns reveal that MS-13 may be similar to other street gangs in the extent to which it engages in a diverse set of criminal activities. A consistent theme in the gang literature is that street gangs tend to engage in opportunistic "cafeteria style offending" rather than specializing in specific offense types (Adams et al., 2018; Decker & Pyrooz, 2015b; Klein, 1995). The evidence presented in this study suggests that although MS-13 has transnational linkages, most of its criminal behaviors are consistent with those of conventional American street gangs. However, this study only included data only from MS-13 members and not from members of other gangs, thus preventing a more rigorous comparative assessment. There is little evidence of extensive involvement by MS-13 in more sophisticated transnational criminal enterprises such as those carried out by cartels and other organized crime groups.

The findings reported here provide useful information about the nature and structure of MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles County, which is the birthplace of MS-13 and is often considered the hub of the gang within the United States. However, the data have limitations that are important to consider when reflecting on our findings. Our analysis is based on a small sample of incarcerated offenders interviewed in a jail setting. As Wolf (2012, p. 69) has noted, studies of this sort raise questions about representativeness and validity that "can distort what we learn about MS-13's structure and activities." We do not know to what extent the MS-13 members we interviewed in this study constitute a representative sample of MS-13 members in Los Angeles County more broadly. One possibility is that they may be more criminally involved or enmeshed in the gang lifestyle than MS-13 members who are not incarcerated. We also do not know to what extent the respondents may have "exaggerated or minimized the nature and extent of... group criminal activities to convey a particular image of themselves and their gang" (Wolf, 2012, p. 69).

These potential limitations are important to keep in mind when interpreting our findings. At the same time, surveys and interviews of incarcerated offenders have produced valuable insights on a variety of criminological phenomena. Moreover, they often produce results that are similar to those based on surveys and interviews of active offenders in the community (Cook et al., 2018; Copes et al., 2015). Methodological concerns about interviews and inmate surveys highlight the importance of triangulating findings from research that relies on different methodologies. This triangulation across a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is essential for achieving external validity, particularly for a difficult-to-access population like active street gang members (Decker &

Pyrooz, 2015a). Thus, the findings reported here should be considered in concert with findings from studies of gangs using different methodologies, including ethnographic research and interviews conducted in a community setting.

While our sample is too small to provide concrete recommendations for policy, our findings provide useful information for thinking about various policy options. For the most part, the findings from our study of MS-13 members in Los Angeles are consistent with prior research on other U.S. street gangs. The participants interviewed in this study report that they joined the gang for reasons that are similar to those reported by members of other street gangs. Similarly, the structures and activities of the MS-13 cliques represented in this study are similar to those reported by members of other gangs. Thus, our findings suggest that MS-13-related problems should be approached using the same evidence-based practices that are used to address other gangs. Youth at risk of joining a gang—any gang—should be provided with opportunities to pursue alternative, pro-social activities. Research has shown that providing opportunities for youth can significantly reduce the likelihood of joining a gang (i.e., prevention) and increase the likelihood of leaving a gang (i.e., intervention). Communities should make efforts to adopt evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies such as the Gang Resistance Education and Training program (Esbensen et al., 2001) to target youth in schools. Although the evidence is mixed, some studies suggest that Cure Violence can reduce conflict and violence among gangs (Butts et al., 2015). A recent randomized trial found that Functional Family Therapy can reduce crime among youth at high risk for gang involvement (Thornberry, et al., 2018). There is also evidence that a broader approach called the Comprehensive Gang Model can produce beneficial outcomes (Howell, 2010; Spergel, 2007). Given the similarities between our findings and past research on other gangs, we believe such approaches may be well suited to address MS-13 cliques within Los Angeles County.

Conclusion

MS-13 has generated significant attention among politicians, journalists, criminal justice officials, scholars, and others. Much of the public discussion and moral panic associated with MS-13 is exaggerated, often resting on evidence that is absent, weak, or inaccurate. There is little doubt that certain MS-13 cliques in the United States have carried out heinous, violent acts and have preyed upon their communities. However, these outliers are sometimes used “as a pretext for policies to restrict migration and criminalize migrants” (Barak et al., 2020, p. 564). Public discourse and policy debates on how to respond appropriately to MS-13 should not be based on sensationalized accounts or moral panics. Howell (2007, pp. 40–41) notes that one of the dominant myths about street gangs is that they are transforming into “large, powerful criminal organizations—much like highly structured corporations.” Although many street gangs have some level of organization, they rarely exhibit the characteristics of organized crime groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015b).

The well-scripted narrative that depicts MS-13 as a highly structured, intensely violent, transnational criminal enterprise appears to be based more on partisan politics and moral panic than on empirical reality. Moreover, it appears to be heavily influenced by racialized, anti-immigrant perspectives that justify extreme reactions to overblown threats (Barak et al., 2020; Osuna, 2020; Wolf, 2017a). Careful, thoughtful research can provide a much more rational basis for making important public policy decisions about how to respond appropriately to MS-13 in the United States. These evidence-based decisions would involve a more balanced mix of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. Such decisions would likely be more effective and would produce fewer unanticipated consequences than the current suite of U.S. responses to MS-13.

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Notes

1. Research has raised important questions about the validity of processes used by law enforcement authorities to categorize people as gang members generally or as members of a specific gang (e.g., Barak et al., 2020; Barrows & Huff, 2009; Katz, 2003). However, during the interviews, all of the individuals identified as MS-13 members by LASD confirmed that they were MS-13 members.
2. We developed the instrument specifically for this project, but several of the items were drawn or adapted from previous instruments, including the AARIN gang supplement (Katz et al., 2011), the ADAM survey instrument (Decker et al., 2008), and the Eurogang youth survey (Weerman, et al., 2009). A copy of the instrument is available at the following URL: http://edmaguire.net/Instruments
3. Only 18 respondents agreed to provide the name of their clique.
4. For further details about the role of territoriality in street gangs, see Brantingham et al., (2012), Tita and Radil (2011), and Valasik and Tita (2018).
5. For further information on the organizational characteristics of MS-13, including its leadership and its use of meetings, see Ward's (2013) detailed ethnography of MS-13.

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