

ORION FORUM

MS-13 Unmasked: Anatomy of a Decentralized Network

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Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), a designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) and transnational criminal organization (TCO) by the U.S. federal government, has its origins in Los Angeles, California, in the 1980s. At that time, El Salvador was engulfed in a civil war between the government and leftist guerrilla forces, most notably the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). The conflict left roughly 70,000 dead and forced about one million Salvadorans to flee, many resettling in the United States with backgrounds ranging from rural peasants and street gang affiliates to former FMLN combatants. MS-13 emerged in this context and today functions through a patchwork of local hierarchies under broad but uneven national leadership, making it neither fully centralized nor entirely fragmented. Today, the group is known for its brutal enforcement methods, violent criminal activity, and involvement in human and drug trafficking.

Organizational Overview

Understanding MS-13's structure is critical to grasping both its resilience and the challenges it poses to law enforcement. The group is not directed by a single centralized authority but instead operates through layers of leadership that connect its prison-based senior council to regional coordinators and neighborhood cliques. This federated design has allowed the Mara to adapt across borders, survive leadership arrests, and maintain continuity even under heavy repression.

Table 1: Structure of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

Role	Function	Additional Notes
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La Ranfla Nacional	Prison-based senior leadership; issues directives and arbitrates disputes	Symbolic authority; strongest
Programas	Regional coordinators managing multiple cliques	Bridge between national and act as <i>palabrerros</i> .
Palabrerros	Clique leaders enforcing discipline and directing local operations	Supported by lieutenants (<i>Pr Palabra</i>).
Soldados	Foot soldiers carrying out enforcement and criminal activity	Rank-and-file operators.
Paros and Chequeos	Recruits under observation and probation	Entry-level members.

Source: Adapted from the [Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, InsightCrime, Pizarro \(2000\)](#) [Babineau \(2017\)](#)

Table 1 outlines the main roles within MS-13’s hierarchy and the degree of flexibility between them. In practice however, these positions operate differently depending on the level of organization: national, regional, or local. The following sections explain how these tiers interact and why the gang’s structure is both hierarchical and fragmented.

National Level: La Ranfla Nacional

Prison-based senior leadership with symbolic authority but uneven control.

The *Ranfla Nacional* operates as [MS-13’s senior council](#), traditionally directing strategy, negotiating with political actors, and arbitrating disputes. Its influence has been strongest in El Salvador, where [prison communications enabled coordination](#), but U.S.-based cliques typically act more autonomously. However, authority at this level is neither absolute nor uncontested. In recent decades, rivalries within the *ranfla* have fueled internal splits, most notably the emergence of a breakaway faction known as [MS-503](#), a reference to El Salvador’s telephone country code (sometimes called MS-13 503). This faction reflects divisions over leadership, strategy, and relations with the state. While most cliques continue to acknowledge the *ranfla*,

such fragmentation underscores the fragility of national cohesion and reinforces the federated nature of the gang.

Regional Level: Programas

Coordinators bridging national guidance and local operations.

Program heads oversee clusters of cliques across a defined territory (e.g., cities, states, cross-borders). They may act as intermediaries, transmitting guidance from the *ranfla* to local cliques, or as *palabrer* themselves. Their ability to enforce discipline varies considerably: in El Salvador, program leaders have historically coordinated extortion schemes and recruitment, whereas in the United States geographic dispersion and law enforcement pressure have weakened their influence.

Local Level: Clicas

The operational backbone of the organization.

Clicas are neighborhood-based cells responsible for extortion, drug sales, and acts of violence. Larger cliques are led by a Palabrero, who often directs operations from behind bars. They are supported by lieutenants such as the Primera Palabra and Segunda Palabra, along with members who handle finances, logistics, and weapons. Soldados, called “homies,” serve as rank-and-file operators, while Paros and Chequeos are probationary recruits whose trustworthiness is still being tested. Although cliques recognize the existence of higher-level structures, they retain significant autonomy in daily decision-making, making MS-13 hierarchical in form but fragmented in practice.

Membership

Understanding MS-13’s membership is critical for anticipating its operational, recruitment, and territorial influence. Yet determining the gang’s true size remains difficult due to extreme decentralization, internal fragmentation, and lack of consistent definitions in law and scholarship. Estimates vary widely: some place global membership between 50,000 and 70,000, while Salvadoran authorities recently reported more than 120,000 people tied to MS-13, including core members, recruits, and community collaborators. In the U.S., the Federal

Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) [last formal estimate](#) (2005) suggests roughly [10,000 members domestically](#); though outdated, it remains a [regularly cited figure](#). What is clear is that MS-13 maintains [a presence in nearly every U.S. state](#), even if its footprint differs by community.

Complicating these estimates is the absence of universal definitions of “gang,” “gang member,” or “collaborator.” Legal and academic definitions vary considerably; [most U.S. states employ](#) their own statutory definitions of gangs, with some also specifying what constitutes membership and delineating distinct forms of gang-related activity. Arrest statistics, for example, often blur the lines between core participants and those offering peripheral support. Still, available reporting indicates members are most commonly of [Salvadoran](#) or [broader Central American origin, along with U.S.-born individuals](#) connected to those communities. Membership also occasionally [extends to descendants and immigrants](#) of these groups in other regions.

Recruitment

MS-13's recruitment strategy is [youth-centered](#). The gang primarily targets [adolescents and young adults](#) who are [socially and economically marginalized](#), often focusing on boys between [ages 12 and 21](#). This is consistent with broader gang research, which shows that adolescence is a high-risk window for recruitment into organized groups: young people seek [identity](#), [belonging](#), and [protection](#) at precisely the time when [social support](#) is weakest. [MS-13 exploits this vulnerability](#), filling the gap left by [under-resourced schools](#), [fractured families](#), and [absent community structures](#).

Recruitment often begins informally, through peers, neighbors, or [older siblings](#) affiliated with the gang. Exposure to gang culture in schools, [social media](#), and [within neighborhoods](#) normalizes participation and makes MS-13 appear as a legitimate source of protection and status. For youth experiencing bullying, violence, or a lack of opportunity, the gang can present itself as a ‘family’ that offers [immediate safety](#) and recognition. At the same time, [coercion plays a role](#): some are pressured to join under threats of violence, or because refusal can cause serious consequences for themselves and their families.

This dual approach, blending coercion with the promise of belonging, ensures a steady stream of recruits. [Deportation and migration cycles](#) reinforce this process, as gang-affiliated [youth move between Central America and the U.S., spreading networks and gang culture across borders](#). In effect, [MS-13 maintains a transnational “youth pipeline”](#) that perpetuates membership across generations.

While youth remain the primary target, MS-13 also recruits in other contexts. [Prison populations](#) provide a significant base of new members, where the gang can offer protection and resources behind bars. Adults facing [economic precarity or seeking illicit income opportunities](#) may also be drawn in, while [women](#), [girls](#), and [migrants](#) are sometimes exploited or coerced into roles as romantic or sexual partners, messengers, recruiters, or facilitators. These additional channels strengthen the gang’s reach but ultimately complement, not replace, the central strategy of youth recruitment.

Enforcement

Violence is a central mechanism through which MS-13 maintains both internal cohesion and external dominance. The gang [enforces strict discipline](#) within its ranks through physical punishment, intimidation, and targeted killings. Members who disobey orders, fail to meet financial obligations, or even [miss a meeting face severe retaliation](#), which can include [beatings](#), mutilation, or [execution](#). These acts are not arbitrary; they are calculated to reinforce hierarchy, instill fear, and ensure compliance. [Initiation rituals](#), such as [“jumping in”](#) for males (a [13-second long beating](#)), serve a dual purpose by introducing new members to the gang’s violent culture while simultaneously binding them to collective criminal responsibility. Female recruits are often given [the option of undergoing the same beating](#) as male initiates or [the *trencito* \(‘little train’\)](#), where [at least 13 members sexually assault](#) the initiate in succession. This practice underscores the gang’s use of gendered violence as both initiation and control. Within the gang, the threat and application of violence create a rigid enforcement structure that sustains loyalty and operational control.

Externally, MS-13 employs violence as a tool to dominate neighborhoods, intimidate communities, and protect illicit enterprises. The gang has a reputation for employing [machetes](#), [firearms](#), and [blunt force weapons](#) to carry out targeted attacks. These acts are designed to

assert territorial control, deter rivals, and [signal the consequences of noncompliance to civilians, political, and other criminal actors](#). In addition to homicides, enforcement strategies include kidnappings, sexual assault, robbery, and [extortion-related intimidation](#). [Turf wars](#) and [conflicts with rival gangs](#) frequently result in civilian casualties, as the gang demonstrates little concern for noncombatants when consolidating or defending its territory.

[MS-13's enforcement tactics](#) are strategic, systematic, and adaptable. Violence is used to project power, enforce rules, and sustain fear across neighborhoods, prison systems, and transnational networks. [Law enforcement consistently reports](#) that this calculated brutality is a [defining feature](#) of the gang, integral to its operational model and its capacity to recruit, retain, and mobilize members. [The pervasive threat of violence](#) also undermines community cooperation with authorities, complicates law enforcement operations, and perpetuates cycles of crime and intimidation that reinforce the gang's presence and influence across multiple jurisdictions.

Illicit Operations

MS-13 finances itself through a range of illicit activities, but [extortion remains its most reliable](#) and lucrative source of income. In El Salvador especially, extortion has become the gang's financial backbone and a driver of both direct physical violence and wider structural harm to communities and local economies. Unlike cartels, which generate most of their revenue through international drug trafficking, MS-13 lacks the infrastructure to dominate global drug markets.

In [legal terms, a cartel](#) generally refers to a collection of otherwise independent actors who coordinate in order to manipulate markets, whether by fixing prices, dividing up territories, or engaging in other anti-competitive behaviors. Specific to the illicit drug trade, the label is applied to those organizations that exercise [control across the entire chain of production and distribution](#). These groups often resemble multinational corporations: they integrate operations vertically, secure transportation networks, rely on systemic violence for enforcement, and, at times, exert significant political or institutional influence.

MS-13, by contrast, functions more as a loose federation of street gangs than as a vertically integrated enterprise. While [the gang does participate](#) in drug trafficking, this activity supplements rather than defines its financial base. Its real strength lies in territorial control, coercive presence within communities, and localized revenue streams – extortion above all – as the foundation of its economic survival.

La Renta: The Economics of Extortion

Extortion has long stood as [the cornerstone of MS-13's financial model](#), shaping both its economic survival and its capacity to project power. Unlike transnational cartels that rely on large-scale networks, MS-13 operates primarily at the local level, [extracting revenue directly from the communities it dominates](#). This practice, known as *la renta* (“the rent”), involves systematic payments demanded from business, both formal and informal, as well as public transportation operators, local markets, and even individual residents. In this way, extortion serves not only as a steady income stream, [potentially totaling millions of dollars annually](#), but also as a mechanism of social control and territorial governance.

The decentralized structure of the gang enables each clique to set its own extortion rates, determine collection strategies, and enforce compliance. In many cases, clique leaders dictate both the targets and the terms of payment, which can include [daily “gota a gota” \(“drop by drop”\) loansharking schemes](#) with exorbitant interest rates, as reported in Honduras. Compliance is rarely voluntary. Property destruction, physical assaults, and targeted killings stand as the implicit penalties for refusal, reinforcing the perception that resistance is futile and survival depends on accommodation with the gang.

Beyond immediate financial gain, [extortion](#) also provides MS-13 with a platform for laundering money and deeper integration of funds into local economies. In some instances, [cliques](#) secure partial ownership stakes or complete control of businesses, allowing them to [embed illicit profits within legitimate financial systems](#). This blending of licit and illicit streams complicates law enforcement efforts and creates significant challenges of policymakers attempting to disrupt gang revenue flows without destabilizing already fragile local markets.

Policy responses to extortion face inherent difficulties. Unlike narcotics interdiction, [extortion](#) cannot be effectively disrupted at a border through seizures. It occurs at the micro-level, within neighborhoods, buses, and small shops. This makes it both resilient and highly adaptable, especially as communications move digitally allowing for more rapid and further reach. Crackdowns may temporarily displace extortion operations but often fail to dismantle the underlying power structures that sustain them. Moreover, victims of *la renta* are frequently unwilling to cooperate with authorities due to fear of reprisal or lack of faith in state protection. As a result, extortion remains one of the Mara's most persistent and difficult-to-disrupt revenue streams, its endurance secured less by economic logic than by the threat of force that permeates every transaction.

Additional Operations

Beyond violent enforcement and territorial control, MS-13 engages in a range of illicit activities that sustain its organizational structure, finance its operations, and reinforce its influence over communities. While the gang is not a dominant player in global criminal markets, its transnational presence allows it to exploit opportunities across multiple sectors, including drug trafficking, human exploitation, arms smuggling, and vehicle theft. These activities are often opportunistic and decentralized, reflecting the gang's fragmented command structure, but collectively they create revenue streams, extend territorial dominance, and increase the gang's leverage over both local populations and rival groups. The following sections examine these operations in greater detail, highlighting their scope, methods, and implications for enforcement and policy.

Drug Trafficking & Micro-trafficking

While MS-13 is not a dominant player in the global narcotics trade, the group has leveraged its transnational presence to facilitate limited drug trafficking activities. Its role is largely supportive, [providing services to large cartels](#) moving narcotics through the Americas. In some cases, [factions](#) have experimented with direct trafficking to increase profitability, but these ventures can expose the gang to heightened law enforcement scrutiny and violent conflict with rivals. Despite this, MS-13's presence in the international drug economy remains fragmented and opportunistic, with most operations confined to regional markets such as Honduras,

Mexico, and expansion into [Europe](#).

The group's more consistent involvement lies in domestic microtrafficking. At the street level, [some MS-13 cliques](#) engage in or seek control over distribution of narcotics, marijuana, and methamphetamine, though operations are often limited to their own territory. [Unlike large-scale cartels that rely on extensive supply chains](#), MS-13 focuses their local drug peddling as a means of providing a reliable revenue stream, supporting the gang's broader operations, weapons procurement, recruitment, and even [personal income](#).

Prostitution, human trafficking & migrant smuggling

MS-13 profits from exploiting vulnerable populations through [prostitution](#), [human trafficking](#), and [migrant smuggling](#). The gang often recruits victims, including minors, through fraud, coercion, or abduction and forcing them into commercial sex work. In the United States, MS-13 primarily [collects rent from prostitution rings it controls](#) in areas such as Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles.

In Central America and along migrant smuggling routes, MS-13 cliques [extort or coerce migrants](#) seeking passage from the Northern Triangle to the United States. These operations are often opportunistic, with profits generated less from structured smuggling networks than from territorial dominance and intimidation at transit points.

While not the gang's most lucrative enterprise, these activities reinforce MS-13's broader criminal ecosystem, expanding financial streams, extending territorial control, and deepening community fear. Law enforcement efforts are hindered by underreporting, as victims often fear retaliation or lack of legal protections.

Arms Trafficking

MS-13 sustains part of its operation through [arms trafficking](#), typically sourcing weapons via black markets, corrupt officials, and cross-border smuggling networks. While these efforts are concentrated in the Northern Triangle rather than international markets, the United States has been one of the largest origins for [weapons recovered in El Salvador](#), suggesting a pipeline network of arms trafficking to supply MS-13's stronghold. In addition to arms, some reports suggest certain cliques may provide contract-style violence services – such as [“hitmen for hire](#)

” - within their territories, though such claims remain anecdotal and not systematically documented.

Vehicle Theft & Resale

Vehicle theft and resale provide MS-13 with an additional source of income. [A flow of stolen vehicles](#) from the United States and Mexico into Central America, where they are integrated into the used-car trade or black-market networks, has been identified. However, international cooperation since 2020 and actions taken by Salvadoran authorities have reduced some of this activity, the scale remains difficult to measure, and available reporting likely underestimates its true contribution to MS-13’s finances. In some cases, [incarcerated MS-13 leaders](#) have been reported to own or control used car dealerships, allowing them to launder illicit proceeds while blending stolen vehicles into legitimate commerce. These overlaps between legal and illegal markets complicate efforts to track financial flows and illustrate how [prison-based leadership](#) can continue directing operations across borders despite confinement.

Money Laundering

MS-13 integrates illicit revenue into the legitimate economy through a range of laundering techniques, embedding the proceeds from extortion, drug sales, car thefts, and other operations into both local and [cross-border financial systems](#). Cash-intensive businesses such as restaurants, auto shops, [garbage and recycling collection, and taxi companies](#) serve as primary vehicles for these operations, allowing cliques to disguise the origins of their earnings and sustain day-to-day activities. In the United States, the gang has reportedly leveraged real estate investments and structured “smurfing” transactions to circumvent reporting thresholds and obscure large cash movements. [These efforts](#) often involve multiple participants, accounts, and banking locations to fragment sums and reduce detection risk.

By funneling illicit funds through legitimate channels, MS-13 not only secures the liquidity necessary to finance its operations but also reinforces its territorial influence. [Laundered revenues](#) can be reinvested into extortion enforcement, local drug markets, vehicle theft networks, or other revenue-generating schemes, effectively closing the loop between criminal activity and operational sustainability. For policymakers and law enforcement, the challenge

lies in [disrupting these financial flows](#) without destabilizing the small businesses and local market that serve as conduits, requiring a calibrated, multi-agency approach that balances investigative rigor with community protection.

Violence Against Civilians

While violence perpetrated by MS-13 may appear indiscriminate to outside observers, broader gang research suggests that such acts are rarely random. Instead, violence functions as an instrument for control, reputation management, and [organizational survival](#). Studies on gang behavior underscore that targeted aggression serves multiple purposes: deterring rivals, [enforcing discipline within ranks](#), and signaling dominance to local populations. In many communities, violence operates as a mechanism of [extortion enforcement](#), ensuring compliance from businesses and individuals who provide a steady stream of revenue the gang relies on. At the same time, lethal violence can be selectively deployed to send messages, [creating reputational shockwaves](#) that extend far beyond the immediate victim.

For MS-13, this strategic deployment of violence maintains territorial authority and ensures that [the threat of retaliation remains ever-present](#). This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in transnational criminal organizations, where visible brutality not only reinforces the gang's internal cohesion but also [destabilizes local security environments](#), thereby [weakening state legitimacy](#). In this way, [violence is not a byproduct](#) of disorganization; it is a deliberate tool wielded to advance the gang's operational and financial objectives.

Geospatial and temporal analysis of [ACLED](#) data highlights the scope and dynamics of MS-13 violence against civilians. **Figure 1** maps incidents geographically, showing concentrations in El Salvador, particularly San Salvador and surrounding municipalities, with additional hotspots in Guatemala near Guatemala City, and Honduras around San Pedro Sula and other regions. Complementing this, **Figure 2** presents trends in both incident frequency and fatalities from Quarter 1 2018 through Q4 2024. While the two measures generally track closely, certain periods – such as Q4 2022 – reveal instances where fatalities spike despite fewer incidents reported, indicating that when violent acts occur, they are sometimes exceptionally lethal. These visualizations reinforce the gang's strategic use of targeted violence, reflecting patterns consistent with enforcement of territorial control, extortion compliance, and operational

dominance.

Figure 1.

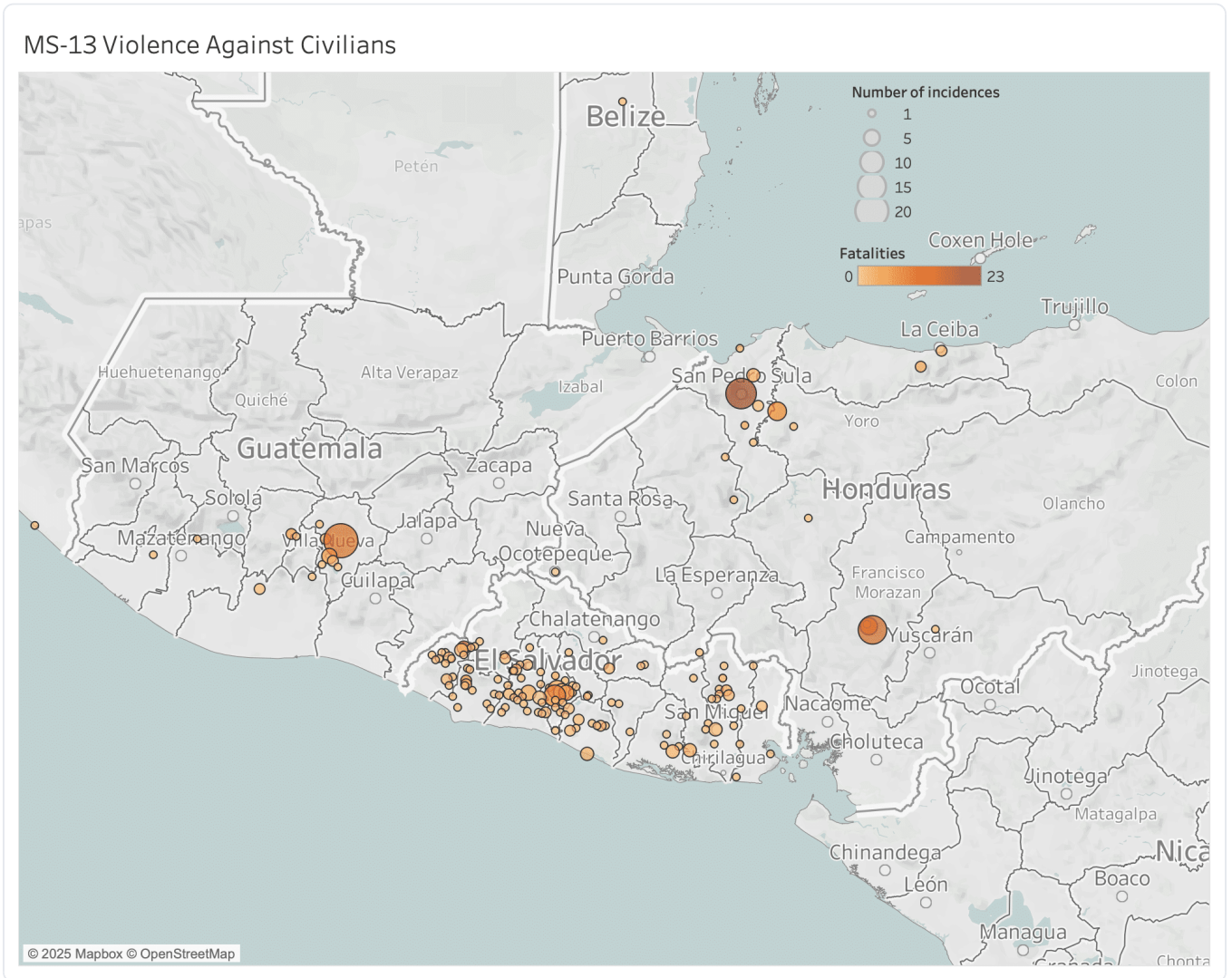
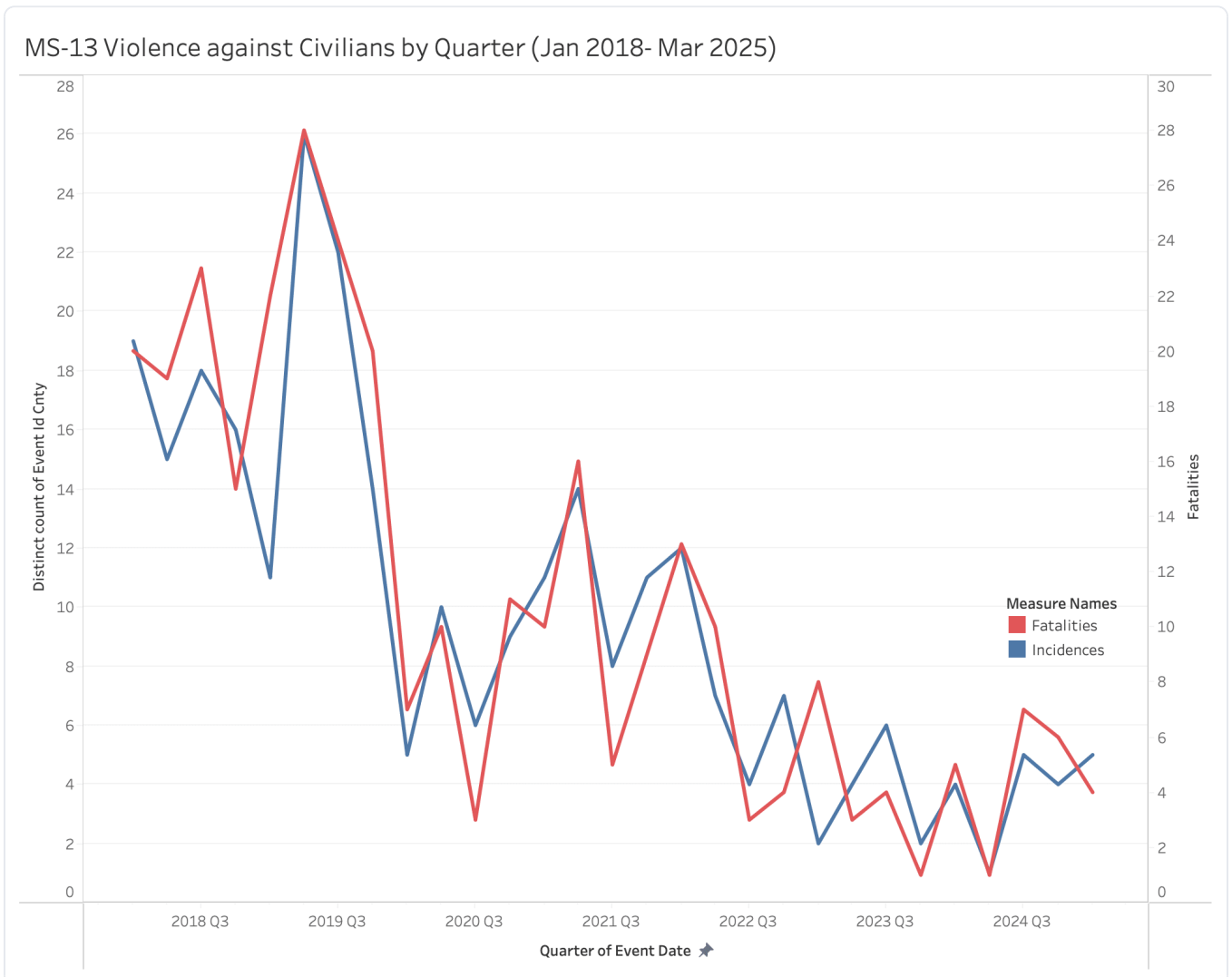


Figure 2.



Note: Figures were produced by Orion Policy Institute

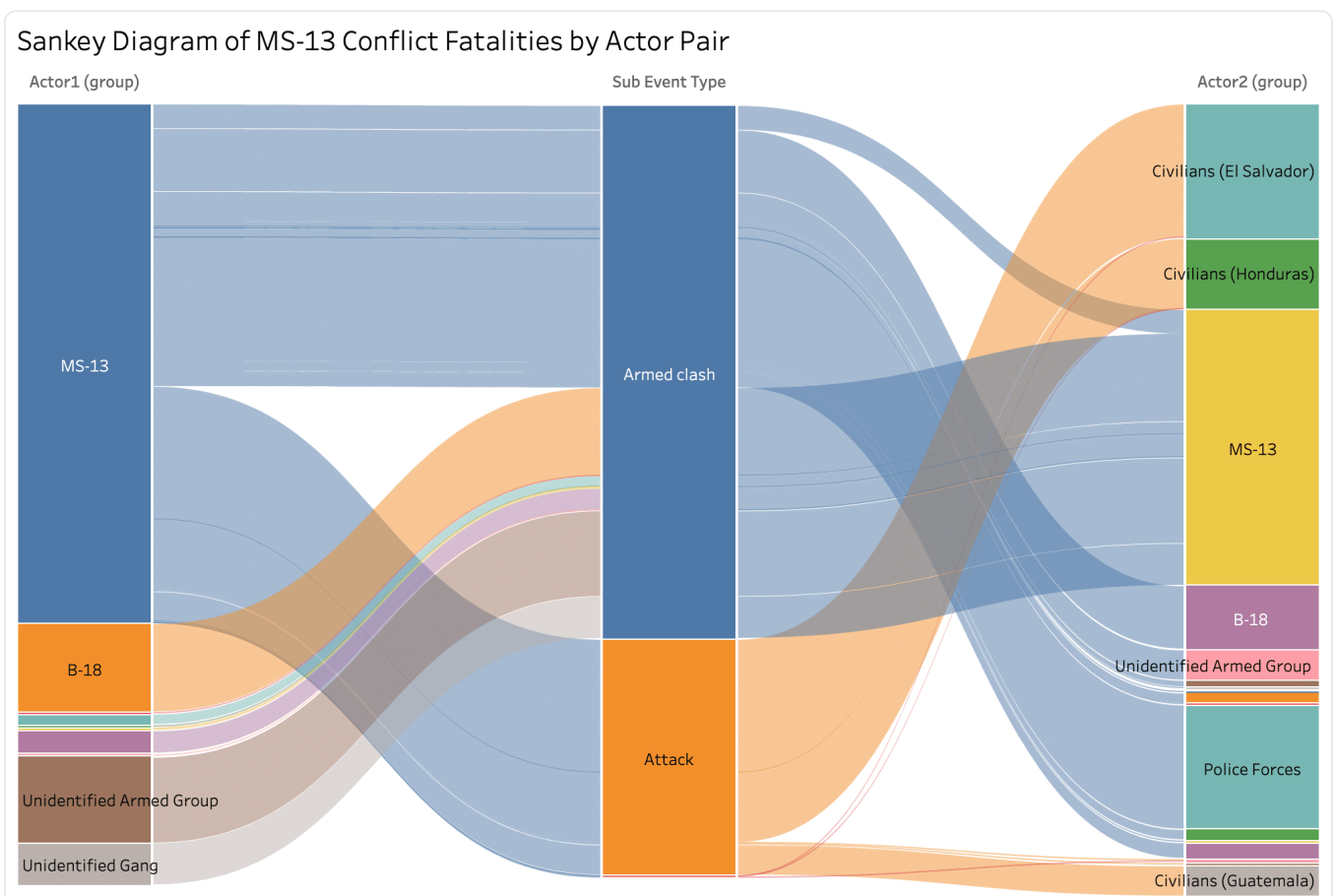
Rivalries, Alliances, and Power Balances

MS-13’s power does not exist in a vacuum. Its survival, expansion, and influence depend on a constantly shifting network of rivals, allies, and opportunistic partnerships. Rivalries can erupt into brutal violence that dominates local communities, while alliances – often pragmatic and short-term – provide access to markets, smuggling routes, or political protection. Understanding these relationships is essential to grasping MS-13’s strategic decisions, as the gang continually adapts to shifting territorial, economic, and institutional pressures.

Rivals

The primary rival of MS-13 is [Barrio 18](#) (the 18th Street gang). [Both groups emerged around the same time in Los Angeles](#) and initially coexisted, but tensions quickly escalated, sparking violence and an enduring feud. Violence against Barrio 18 even became central to MS-13’s identity, even [establishing a rule](#) to kill a Barrio 18 member on the thirteenth day of every month. In 2012, leaders of both gangs agreed to a government-facilitated truce aimed at curbing widespread violence. While the ceasefire temporarily [reduced El Salvador’s homicide rate](#), critics argued it elevated the gangs’ political influence and gave them space to consolidate power. The United States largely dismissed the truce and [intensified its campaign against MS-13](#). By mid-2013, [the Salvadoran government](#) entered the war against both gangs.

Figure 3.



Note: Figure produced by Orion Policy Institute

Conflict data underscores the lethal intensity of these rivalries. **Figure 3** illustrates fatalities involving MS-13, showing the most deadly confrontations stem from clashes with rival gangs, including Barrio 18. Civilians – particularly in El Salvador, Honduras, and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala – also account for a significant portion of fatalities. It’s important to note that the data suggests that most of these deaths are the result of targeted attacks rather than indiscriminate fighting. Police fatalities further demonstrate MS-13’s willingness to engage state actors. These patterns reveal MS-13’s violence is both strategic and calculated, serving territorial control and coercive enforcement.

Battles with Rival Groups

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the geographic distribution and temporal trends of MS-13’s confrontations with rival organizations from January 2018 to March 2025. The heaviest concentration of clashes occurred in El Salvador, particularly in and around San Salvador, followed by hotspots in Honduras (San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa) and Guatemala (notably Villa Nueva). These regions have been consistent theaters of both frequent and lethal encounters, underscoring their importance as contested strongholds for criminal influence.

The temporal data reveals a sharp escalation in violence during mid to late 2019, when both incidents and fatalities spiked dramatically. This period marked a peak in inter-gang hostilities, likely driven by competition over territorial control and revenue streams. Beginning in 2020, however, the frequency of clashes declined, reflecting the impact of government crackdowns, enhanced policing measures, and strategic recalibrations by MS-13 and its rivals.

Figure 4.

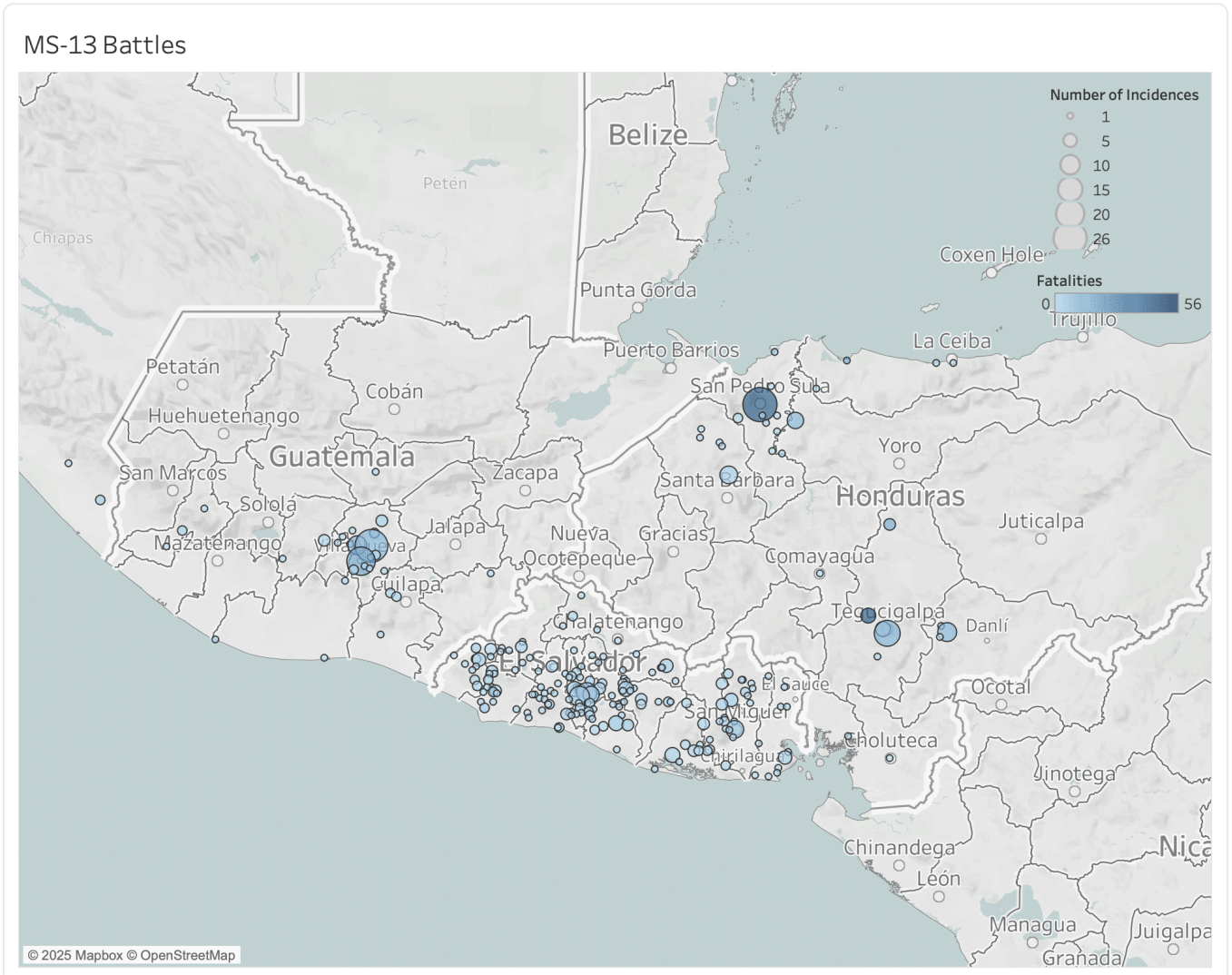
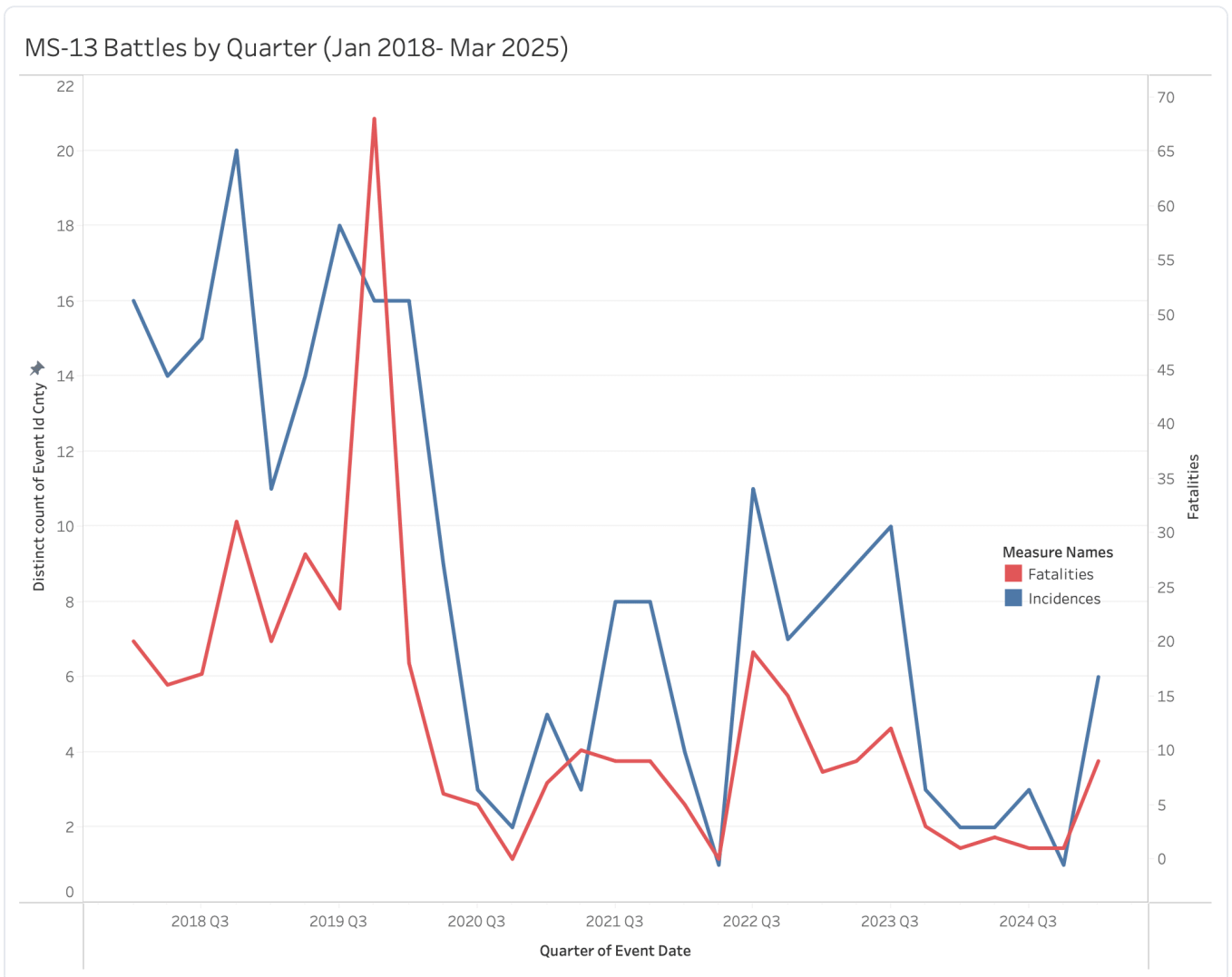


Figure 5.



Note: Figures produced by Orion Policy Institute

Since that decline, violence has not disappeared but rather shifted into a pattern of intermittent, localized spikes. These flare-ups demonstrate that while MS-13 has avoided large-scale, sustained campaigns of violence, it remains deeply entrenched in the regional gang conflict landscape. The persistence of such battles, even at a reduced scale, highlights MS-13’s dual role as both a defensive actor protecting its existing strongholds and an offensive competitor seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in rival groups

Alliances

MS-13’s alliances are largely opportunistic, grounded in pragmatic short-term interests rather than enduring loyalty. The gang has cooperated with Mexican cartels, particularly the [Sinaloa](#)

[Cartel](#) and [Los Zetas](#), to facilitate drug trafficking and weapons smuggling. In some cases, MS-13 cliques have acted as distributors for Sinaloa's methamphetamine trade in the United States, generating significant revenue for MS-13 while expanding Sinaloa's distribution networks. Additionally, MS-13 maintains [strong ties](#) and [cooperation](#) with [the Mexican Mafia](#), a formidable force in the United States with connections to some of the most powerful cartels across the Americas. As previously noted, MS-13's activities extend beyond narcotics, and these partnerships often support its wider portfolio of illicit enterprises. [Law enforcement initiatives](#) have sought to disrupt such arrangements by targeting mutual facilitators and financial intermediaries, but [MS-13 has consistently demonstrated resilience](#) by reorganizing and forging new connections. This adaptability underscores the gang's capacity to sustain operations and alliances despite external pressures, reinforcing the ongoing threat posed by its fluid, pragmatic approach to partnerships.

Political Violence, Collusion, and Assassinations

MS-13 operates with a distinctive [modus operandi](#) – that is, its habitual pattern of behavior in carrying out crimes – [centered on violence](#), [coercion](#), and [the cultivation of fear](#) as tools of control. Unlike organized crime groups that prioritize subtlety to protect their markets, MS-13 thrives on public displays of brutality. This includes targeted assassinations, extortion-backed threats, and mass intimidation campaigns designed to remind both civilians and state actors that the gang cannot be ignored.

El Salvador: Negotiations and State Collusion

The most widely documented evidence of collusion between MS-13 and political elites has emerged in [El Salvador](#). Investigative reporting by [El Faro](#) revealed that [the Bukele administration](#) allegedly entered into clandestine negotiations with MS-13 beginning in 2020. The deal reportedly promised reduced homicide rates in exchange for improved prison conditions and assurances that leaders would be shielded from extradition. While Salvadoran officials deny the allegations, court filings and journalistic investigations strongly suggest the arrangement existed. The result was a temporary and dramatic reduction in homicide rates, though at the cost of embedding MS-13 deeper into the political sphere.

Honduras: Strategic Shifts

In Honduras, collusion between MS-13 and the state has been less visible than in El Salvador, but the gang has nonetheless adapted its strategies in ways that affect local governance. By the mid-2010s, MS-13's increasing revenues from drug trafficking enabled it to [reduce reliance on extortion in certain areas](#). Analysts have interpreted this primarily as an economic adjustment, reflecting the gang's growing diversification of revenue streams. While this shift eased pressure on some small businesses and altered local dynamics, there is no evidence in the available reporting of a formal pact with the [Honduran state](#). Rather, MS-13's economic flexibility allowed it to adapt to enforcement pressure and maintain influence, even as state institutions attempted to disrupt its operations.

Assassinations and Political Violence as Leverage

Beyond negotiations, MS-13 has long employed [targeted assassinations as a political instrument](#). Security forces, [particularly the police](#), have been singled out for murder when perceived as obstacles to the gang's revenue streams or territorial control. [Such killings function not only as retaliation](#) but also as preemptive strikes designed to shape political agendas, deter aggressive policing, and instill fear among potential challengers. Since at least 2014, [reports have suggested](#) that MS-13 has gained access to military-grade weaponry, further escalating the scale of violence and compelling some [Salvadoran police officers](#) to abandon their posts or even flee the country - despite receiving training from elite institutions such as the FBI. In this respect, MS-13 operates not merely as a criminal organization but as a violent political actor actively seeking to recalibrate the balance of power in its favor.

This environment has also fueled the rise of [vigilantism](#), with elements of the security apparatus and affiliated groups responding outside the boundaries of the law. Among the most notorious is [Sombra Negra \("Black Shadow"\)](#), a reemerging clandestine death squad from the 1990s accused of carrying out "social cleansing" operations. Reports allege that members, sometimes appearing in [police or military uniforms](#), have executed suspected gang members extrajudicially - [often at their homes](#). However, the extent of Sombra Negra's organization, its ties to official state actors, and the true scope of its operations remain opaque. While some analysts view it as a [loosely coordinated](#) phenomenon driven by frustration within the ranks of

law enforcement, others argue it reflects [deeper institutional complicity](#). Either way, the cycle of violence between gangs, the state, and vigilante actors has contributed to a climate of normalized extrajudicial killings, undermining both public trust and long-term security sector reform.

Regional Patterns of Informal Understandings

Across the [Northern Triangle](#), informal “understandings” between MS-13 and local officials are more common than direct, documented collusion. These can range from local police turning a blind eye in exchange for protection, to municipal leaders tacitly accepting gang control over neighborhoods in return for reduced violence during election cycles. [Some politicians](#) use the issue to gain support from the United States. The result is a pervasive blurring of lines between political authority and criminal dominance, leaving communities uncertain of where the state ends and MS-13 begins.

Taken together, these dynamics show that MS-13 cannot be understood solely as a criminal organization seeking profit. In weak institutional contexts, it has developed into a hybrid actor—one that uses violence as its primary instrument of influence, while at times entering into implicit or explicit arrangements with state authorities. For policymakers, this underscores the need to address not only the gang’s criminal activity but also the governance vacuums and vulnerabilities that enable its entanglement with political systems.

Countermeasures and Responses

MS-13 has proven resilient due to its decentralized structure, transnational reach, and embedded influence in marginalized communities. Countermeasures against the gang are multifaceted, encompassing national security, law enforcement, financial regulation, and international coordination. These efforts vary across jurisdictions and involve both preventive and reactive strategies.

El Salvador

[El Salvador employs](#) an aggressive military and law enforcement strategy under President Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan. The plan prioritizes disruption of MS-13 strongholds, enhanced police presence, and monitoring of gang communications, particularly between incarcerated

members and active cliques. Social programs in gang-affected communities aim to reduce recruitment opportunities, though coverage remains uneven. [Mass imprisonments](#) and extended detentions are used to incapacitate gang leadership, while an [internal gang database](#) supports operational targeting, albeit with gaps in completeness and accuracy. These measures have coincided with a significant reduction in homicide rates, though attribution remains complex due to overlapping policies and social dynamics.

Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras) and Mexico

In Guatemala and Honduras, law enforcement relies on integrated police-military operations to dismantle local MS-13 networks, particularly in urban hubs such as Guatemala City, San Pedro Sula, and Tegucigalpa. [Anti-gang legislation](#), joint task forces, and U.S.-supported training programs enhance operational capacity, though corruption and resource constraints limit effectiveness. Mexico's involvement primarily focuses on disrupting trafficking routes and cartel coordination, with limited direct engagement against [MS-13 cells](#) except where transnational operations intersect. Community-based prevention programs exist but remain underdeveloped, leaving gaps in addressing recruitment and social influence.

United States

The U.S. addresses MS-13 through a combination of criminal prosecution, financial oversight, and immigration enforcement, coordinated across federal, state, and local levels. [Gang](#) designations under criminal street gang statutes ([18 U.S.C. § 521](#)), transnational criminal organization frameworks, and, in certain cases, [FTO](#) or [SDGT](#) classifications, allow for both [domestic and international leverage](#) in disrupting operations.

Countering Financing

Financial measures target the gang's revenue-generating activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, and money laundering. [The Bank Secrecy Act](#) (BSA), amended by the [Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2020](#) (AML Act), mandates U.S. financial institutions to implement anti-money laundering and countering the [financing of terrorism](#) (AML/CFT) programs. [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act](#) (RICO) statutes enable federal prosecutors to dismantle MS-13 networks by prosecuting criminal enterprises as a whole, targeting financial

structures and operational hierarchies.

Deportation and Immigration Enforcement

Immigration enforcement is integrated with gang interdiction, focusing on the removal of non-citizens identified as active members of MS-13. [Executive orders](#) from both Trump administrations and measures such as [the Alien Enemies Act](#) of 1798 expedite deportations. [Extraditions](#) and deportations have faced political and operational obstacles, including delays in Salvadoran cooperation and cases highlighting due process concerns. [Historical deportations in the 1990s and 2000s](#) also contributed to gang proliferation in Central America, illustrating the complex feedback between U.S. policies and regional security dynamics.

Regional and Bilateral Cooperation

Regional coordination between Northern Triangle countries, Mexico, and the U.S. focuses on intelligence-sharing, [joint task forces](#), and [coordinated operations](#) targeting trafficking routes and gang infrastructure. Programs such as [Operation Regional Shield](#) (ORS) and [Joint Task Force Vulcan](#) (JTFV) demonstrate the potential for cross-border enforcement, having led to hundreds of indictments and captures of MS-13 members. Despite successes, political interference, inconsistent enforcement, and corruption undermine some of these efforts.

Global and Transnational Measures

MS-13's expansion into [Europe](#), including [Spain](#), and networks in other continents necessitate international law enforcement collaboration. Bilateral treaties, Interpol coordination, and intelligence-sharing agreements aim to track gang finances, arrests, and criminal activity abroad. [Spain's campaigns against MS-13 cliques, such as Program 34](#), have revealed the challenges of decentralized gang structures persisting despite foreign intervention. Transnational initiatives combine law enforcement, counterterrorism, and financial sanctions to limit gang operations across borders.

Future Outlook

MS-13 is likely to remain a persistent threat in the coming years due to several structural and operational factors. Its decentralized organization allows individual cliques to operate semi-

autonomously, reducing vulnerability to leadership-targeted interventions. This autonomy facilitates rapid adaptation to law enforcement pressure, including shifts in territory, smuggling routes, and recruitment strategies. The gang's ability to self-regulate through local networks ensures continuity of operations even when senior leaders are arrested, extradited, or neutralized.

Active recruitment of adolescents and young adults, particularly in marginalized urban neighborhoods and immigrant communities, positions MS-13 to sustain its membership and expand influence over the long term. Socioeconomic instability, limited access to education, and community disenfranchisement continue to create fertile environments for recruitment. Unless interventions address these underlying drivers, the gang's pipeline of new members will remain robust, perpetuating cycles of violence and impeding regional stability.

While MS-13 is not traditionally considered a digitally sophisticated organization, the increasing integration of technology into its operations cannot be overlooked. [Telephones](#) and [other communication devices](#) from [within prisons](#) remain primary tools for the Ranfla and incarcerated clique leaders to coordinate activities across regions. Additionally, as with any gang, recruitment and influence via [social media](#) – both [direct](#) and [indirect](#) – pose growing risks. Youth exposed to [online content](#) depicting gang violence or embroiled in minor online disputes may find themselves drawn into offline conflicts or even recruited into the gang, intentionally or inadvertently. These technological vectors expand the gang's reach, complicating detection, and prevention efforts for policymakers and law enforcement alike.

Emerging technological tools, including encrypted communications, online recruitment channels, and digital financial networks, will likely enhance MS-13's operational capabilities. While current law enforcement approaches have disrupted certain aspects of gang activity, the organization's adaptability and technical agility make it difficult to fully dismantle using conventional policing or military strategies alone. Social programs, intelligence-driven policing, and international collaboration must therefore complement arrests, prosecutions, and financial sanctions to address the gang holistically.

Transnationally, MS-13's expansion into Europe and deeper integration with Mexican cartels signals a trend toward more complex, multi-jurisdictional operations. These developments

increase both the gang's reach and the number of state and non-state adversaries it encounters. Global operations also heighten the risk of cross-border criminal and terrorist activity, including drug trafficking, money laundering, and targeted violence against political, law enforcement, or rival actors. The gang's ongoing evolution suggests that future confrontations will be simultaneously local, regional, and international, requiring coordinated, multi-level responses.

Without integrated, multi-pronged interventions, MS-13's influence is expected to persist and, in some regions, grow. Future strategies should emphasize combining targeted law enforcement measures with community-focused initiatives, including education, economic opportunity, mental health support, and family engagement. By addressing both the immediate criminal threats and the underlying conditions enabling gang recruitment, policymakers can reduce MS-13's long-term resilience and mitigate its threat to public safety.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing the persistent and evolving threat posed by MS-13 requires a coordinated, multi-layered approach that integrates law enforcement, social intervention, and international cooperation. The gang's decentralized structure, transnational reach, and recruitment of vulnerable youth demand strategies that operate simultaneously at local, regional, and global levels. Policy measures must disrupt recruitment pipelines, strengthen community resilience, and limit the gang's operational and financial capabilities. The following recommendations provide actionable pathways for mitigating MS-13's influence, drawing on evidence from successful domestic and international initiatives. They are organized into two interrelated domains: disrupting youth recruitment and enhancing transparent international cooperation.

Disrupt Youth Recruitment

MS-13 targets marginalized communities, exploiting widespread poverty, limited opportunities, and social isolation. This [environment creates](#) fertile ground for gang influence, particularly among youth. Community-based interventions are essential for disrupting the gang's recruitment pipeline by providing viable alternatives to gang involvement. Programs such as the [Peacemaker Fellowship in Richmond, California](#), have demonstrated measurable success,

achieving a 50 percent reduction in homicides between 2007 and 2011. However, sustainability and broader programmatic scalability remain significant challenges.

School-based interventions grounded in criminal justice theory, including after-school programs and anti-gang education, also have the potential to reduce gang appeal. In [Los Angeles, the Gang Reduction and Youth Development \(GRYD\)](#) program has shown promise by integrating counseling and extracurricular activities into schools. Yet the effectiveness of such programs depends on consistent community and school engagement, which can be undermined in areas where residents feel abandoned by the system. [In communities](#) with historic distrust of law enforcement and social institutions, programs imposed externally may be met with skepticism or fail to produce lasting change.

Given these dynamics, supporting local nonprofits, charities, and schools may offer a more sustainable path. [Organizations embedded in these communities](#) often maintain long-term relationships and possess the cultural understanding necessary to engage youth effectively. Providing funding, technical support, and partnerships with schools can enable these groups to implement mentorship, skills development, and after-school initiatives that are trusted and consistent. In some cases, [allowing local actors](#) to lead while government entities focus on oversight, accountability, and resource provision. This approach leverages the sustained presence and [credibility of local organizations](#), fostering deeper engagement and greater long-term impact than top-down interventions alone.

[Streetworker programs](#) provide another complementary strategy, placing trained [community members](#), often including former gang members, directly on the streets to prevent violence, mediate conflicts, and engage youth. Individuals who have lived through the challenges of marginalized neighborhoods and experienced [gang involvement](#) carry credibility and insight that traditional authorities cannot replicate. By connecting with youth through shared experience, streetworkers can intervene before violence occurs, offer mentorship, and guide young people toward alternative opportunities.

[Boston](#) provides a notable example of this approach in practice. Violence prevention programs in the city, [described as “promising” by the U.S. Department of Justice](#) to reduce gun violence have deployed former inmates and gang members to patrol neighborhoods, [respond to crises](#),

advocate in courts, and engage with youth in their homes, recreation centers, and community spaces. These streetworkers serve as both mentors and mediators, offering real-life guidance and demonstrating that alternatives to gang involvement exist. Evidence from these initiatives suggests that having credible, relatable figures in the streets can foster trust, reduce retaliation cycles, and provide continuous mentorship that is otherwise difficult for government agencies or external programs to sustain.

Expanding streetworker programs nationally would require targeted investment, training, and institutional support while preserving the local roots that give them their effectiveness. Government agencies can support these programs by providing funding, resources, and technical assistance while allowing local organizations and former gang members to lead interventions. By placing individuals who have ‘walked the same streets’ in positions of influence, these programs offer a powerful complement to traditional enforcement and school-based initiatives, reinforcing alternative pathways and disrupting MS-13’s recruitment at its most vulnerable point: the streets themselves.

Transparent International Cooperation

MS-13’s transnational operations complicate efforts to dismantle its extensive networks across the Americas. Addressing these cross-border challenges requires sustained, robust, and transparent international cooperation. [Intelligence-driven law enforcement](#) has proven effective in coordinating multi-country takedowns, such as the ORS operations spanning from El Salvador to the United States. Expanding such efforts into a real-time intelligence-sharing network would allow government agencies and local law enforcement to coordinate more efficiently, improving their ability to target and disrupt MS-13’s leadership and financial structures. Recent [federal indictments](#) against some of the highest ranking MS-13 members demonstrates the potential impact of this approach. Strengthening these mechanisms now is critical to staying ahead of the gang’s evolving tactics and preventing it from exploiting jurisdictional gaps.

Building upon this framework, interagency task forces could leverage the capabilities of a real-time intelligence-sharing network to maximize operational impact. By integrating shared resources, these task forces would be better positioned to identify, track, and dismantle high-

value targets. This approach has already shown promise; in February 2025, [coordinated efforts through JTFV](#) led the DOJ to seek extradition of four of MS-13's highest-ranking members to face prosecution in the United States. Sustaining and expanding such coordinated actions would not only disrupt current leadership structures but also send a clear message that transnational criminal operations will face a unified and persistent law enforcement response.

Beyond targeting leadership, a real-time intelligence network could also serve as a [valuable tool for shaping deterrence strategies](#). It can guide law enforcement to areas where their presence is most effective, such as in schools, transportation hubs, and other youth-frequented areas, while ensuring these measures are paired with transparency. Simultaneously, these endeavors must be complemented by transparency and authentic community engagement to establish trust and legitimacy. Lessons from other countries demonstrate both the potential and the pitfalls of such an approach.

In Mexico's border regions, [community policing initiatives](#) have helped reduce MS-13's cross-border smuggling, but persistent corruption, uneven training, and weak oversight have often undermined their credibility. These shortcomings underscore the importance of pairing any community-based deterrence strategy with robust accountability mechanisms, independent monitoring, and sustained collaboration with local leaders. If designed with these safeguards, such strategies can complement targeted enforcement by disrupting recruitment pipelines and constraining local criminal activity, applying pressure to MS-13 from both its leadership tier and its grassroots base.

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