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MS-13: AN INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISE  
**Gang Uses Deportation to Its Advantage** to Flourish in U.S.  
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San Salvador On a sweltering afternoon, an unmarked white jetliner taxis to a remote terminal at the international airport here and disgorges dozens of criminal deportees from the United States. Marshals release the handcuffed prisoners, who shuffle into a processing room.

Of the 70 passengers, at least four are members of Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, a gang formed two decades ago near MacArthur Park west of the Los Angeles skyline.

For one of them, Melvin "Joker" Cruz-Mendoza, the trip is nothing new. This is his fourth deportation -- the second this year.

Wiry with a shaved head, the 24-year-old pleaded guilty in separate felony robbery and drug cases in Los Angeles. "MS" covers his right forearm. Other tattoos are carved into the skin above his eyebrows.

In the last 12 years, U.S. immigration authorities have logged more than 50,000 deportations of immigrants with criminal records to Central America, including untold numbers of gang members like Cruz-Mendoza.

But a deportation policy aimed in part at breaking up a Los Angeles street gang has backfired and helped spread it across Central America and back into other parts of the United States. Newly organized cells in El Salvador have returned to establish strongholds in metropolitan Washington, D.C., and other U.S. cities. Prisons in El Salvador have become nerve centers, authorities say, where deported leaders from Los Angeles communicate with gang cliques across the United States.

A gang that once numbered a few thousand and was involved in street violence and

turf battles has morphed into an international network with as many as 50,000 members, the most hard-core engaging in extortion, immigrant smuggling and racketeering. In the last year, the federal government has brought racketeering cases against MS-13 members in Long Island, N.Y., and southern Maryland.

Across the country, more than 700 MS-13 members have been arrested this year under a new enforcement campaign that U.S. immigration authorities say will lead to more serious cases and longer sentences for gang members before they are deported.

"Ultimately, our job here is to enforce the immigration laws and then remove [criminal gang members] from the country," said John P. Torres, the acting director overseeing detention and removals for the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. But for a sizable number of MS-13 members, deportation is little more than a taxpayer-financed visit with friends and family before returning north.

"I think most of the police departments will agree that you're just getting them off the street for a couple of months," said FBI Assistant Director Chris Swecker, who is coordinating investigations across North America, where the gang operates in a loose network of cells.

Deportations have helped create an "unending chain" of gang members moving between the U.S. and Central America, said Rodrigo Avila, El Salvador's vice minister of security.

"It's a merry-go-round."

Turnaround in El Salvador

Cruz-Mendoza has been riding the merry-go-round for eight years.

He was a minor when he was deported in 1997 and again in 1998, federal immigration officials said.

In December 2003, he was convicted of attempted robbery, after he shoved a woman into a fence while trying to steal her purse at a South Los Angeles bus stop, court records show. As he demanded money, she said, he made threatening gestures and reached into his pocket, where police found a six-inch steak knife when he was arrested shortly thereafter.

In March 2004, he pleaded guilty to a second felony of drug possession, which was dismissed in a sentencing deal for the attempted robbery.

After serving little more than a year in jail, Cruz-Mendoza was deported for a third time in January, records and interviews show.

U.S. Border Patrol agents arrested him in Arizona a month later. At that point, he could have been charged with a felony for reentering the country after deportation, which could have landed him in federal prison for as long as 20 years.

Instead, federal court records show he struck another plea deal with the U.S. attorney's office in Arizona, admitting to a "petty offense" of being in the country illegally. He was ordered to serve 90 days and pay a \$10 fine, and was put on the July flight to San Salvador.

He shouldn't have gotten off that easy, federal prosecutors now acknowledge.

"We messed up," Patrick Schneider, chief of the criminal division for the U.S. attorney in Phoenix, told The Times.

At the San Salvador airport, Cruz-Mendoza is waiting to be interviewed by police. He talks about his plans to get back to the U.S. and make a profit in the process.

As an experienced border crosser, Cruz-Mendoza says, he can get up to \$3,000 per person by bringing others -- including MS-13 members -- north with him. After getting to Guatemala, he tells a reporter, he and his customers will catch buses to northern Mexico. Then, if all works out, he says he'll cross over with money in his pockets.

"I'm a hustler," he says. "You gotta do what you gotta do."

Soon, he and another MS-13 member from Washington are being interviewed by police, who are checking for outstanding local warrants.

One officer in blue fatigues looks at Cruz-Mendoza. "You part of a gang?" he asks in Spanish.

Cruz-Mendoza admits he belongs to MS-13. He's ordered to take off his shirt and drop his pants as the officer types information into a computer. A second officer begins snapping photos of his tattoos.

He moves to a second interrogation with two plainclothes officers in the police intelligence unit. He assures them he has no interest in staying in El Salvador.

"I always leave quickly because my family is up there," Cruz-Mendoza says. Salvadoran police say they have no basis to arrest returning gang members unless they commit a crime here.

As he hustles out of the airport, Cruz-Mendoza spots the MS-13 member from Washington, a 24-year-old with U.S. drug convictions who says he has been deported three times.

The East Coast gang member waves and calls out: "See you in L.A." By late September, Cruz-Mendoza is back somewhere in Los Angeles, according to family members in El Salvador.

#### Pivot Point for Growth

Perched on a saw table in a small patio in a suburb of San Salvador, where he operates his carpentry shop, Francisco "E.T." Campos reminisces about the early days.

He makes a sucking sound as he collapses his fingers, illustrating how Salvadoran teens absorbed the edgy L.A. street-gang style. Mara Salvatrucha grew explosively as the first waves of deportees arrived in San Salvador in the early 1990s.

Beefy, with a goatee and shaved head, Campos picked up the ways of MS-13 after immigrating to the Pico-Union area as a 14-year-old a quarter of a century ago.

Convictions for auto theft and drug possession landed him in California's penal system for juveniles, and later in state prison. He was sent back to El Salvador in 1992, just as a 12-year civil war was ending.

With the economy in shambles and coming-of-age boys hardened by the bloodshed, Campos and others had no problem finding MS-13 recruits. He remembers a single month in 1993 when 300 new members from a suburb of San Salvador joined the gang.

In just one day, he says in Spanish, he initiated 40 new members by beating them with his fists: "I almost broke my fingers."

Many of those who returned were social outcasts in a homeland they barely knew. Take Paul "Little Man" Jovel, who arrived in 1994.

Still boyish-looking at 29, he speaks in hushed tones and is quick to smile. He was just 9 when his mother brought him and his little sister north to a neighborhood near the Coliseum. Two years later, with his mom working long hours in a car seat factory, he was on the streets with MS-13 near MacArthur Park.

After doing time in California prisons for carjacking, he says, he was shipped back to El Salvador.

Many Salvadorans were wary of him because of his gangster style and tattoos on his forehead. Even a distant aunt and uncle who took him in were scared of him, he says.

He ended up with people who understood him -- other MS-13 members. He was convicted of car theft and spent nine years in four Salvadoran prisons. Contemplating his future in a rare period of freedom -- he's been out for nearly a year -- Jovel has removed his facial tattoos and says he wants to go straight. His goal is to return to the U.S., where he says he has an 11-year-old son he's never met.

"I'm gonna sneak in whatever way I can," he says.

By late October, gang members say, Jovel was back in Los Angeles.

The effects of deportations and continuing MS-13 recruitment rippled across El Salvador to places like San Miguel, an agricultural hub and the country's third-largest city. The area has become both a base of the gang's strength and a pivot point in the group's spread to the Washington area.

In a darkened cellar in a cinder-block home in San Miguel, 10 MS-13 members are listening to gangster rap and smoking marijuana. Here, out of view of police patrols, they're free to pull off their shirts and expose tattoos of the Marineros,

a Salvadoran branch of the gang formed in the city a decade ago.

Local gang members created the Marineros to carve out their own identity. They later sent members to the Washington area, where the cell is known as the Sailors, English for Marineros.

The move to the East Coast came after members met to work out which U.S. regions would be open to the new Salvadoran groups. With Southern California already claimed by existing cells, members agreed that Salvadoran branches could move to other parts of the U.S., according to gang members and U.S. law enforcement officials.

Some of the connections between the Salvadoran branches of the gang and their extensions in the U.S. flow through the Ciudad Barrios prison, in the mountains near San Miguel.

'Like a College'

Behind the pale walls of Ciudad Barrios, saws are buzzing and clouds of dust hang in the air of a carpentry shop. Inmates have put finishing touches on an elaborate blue, white and black plaque with MS-13 and Sailors logos wrapped around the seal of El Salvador.

Heads turn as an older inmate walks in.

At 43, Hugo "Flaco" Quintero is lean and angular -- one of the more understated prisoners here. But he carries a lot of weight. Quintero is part of a cadre of older deportees from Los Angeles who now call shots in this MS-13 stronghold 2,300 miles away from the gang's birthplace.

U.S. deportation policies helped create this place, Salvadoran officials say. About 60% of the gang members in the national prison system, by their account, are U.S. deportees or had fled the U.S. to avoid criminal prosecution. Close to 1,800 MS-13 members are in El Salvador's prisons, more than all other gangs combined.

The influx has helped overwhelm the entire system. Ciudad Barrios was designed to house only half of the nearly 1,000 inmates crammed into the facility.

MS-13 members have been isolated at Ciudad Barrios and another prison to avoid bloodshed with rivals. But this has created opportunities for deported Los Angeles leaders to turn the gang into a more potent criminal organization, authorities say. Ciudad Barrios is where investigators allege they intercepted letters ordering gang members to murder rivals.

"It's like a college for MS-13," said the FBI's Swecker, who is working with the Salvadorans on a range of investigations.

Murals pay homage to the group's L.A. roots. One says "MS" in eight-foot letters. Others tout the names of MS cells from across the continent.

Hundreds of shirtless, tattooed inmates bump shoulders in a grimy warren of bedless

cells, narrow passageways and shadowy stairwells. Their necks, backs, arms, chests and faces declare allegiance to the gang's Southern California territories: "Southside," "Normandie," "Western" and "Park View."

Quintero leads reporters on a tour of inmate-run programs. In one, gang members in aprons slide a sheet of cinnamon rolls into an oven. They sell the rolls for money to supplement prison meals of rice and beans.

Quintero's stature in Ciudad Barrios comes partly from his longevity with MS-13. He left his family in El Salvador to escape soldiers who were trying to force him to fight for the government during the civil war. With a few dollars his relatives scraped together, he made his way to MacArthur Park in 1989. He says he didn't know anyone until he met fellow Salvadorans in MS-13.

"They gave me some food, gave me some clothes," says Quintero, who quickly joined the gang. "That's my people -- what I am right now."

He landed a job at McDonald's, where he met his wife. Within a few years they had a son. But the pull of gang life landed him in state prison for drug possession, he said. Quintero was sent back to El Salvador in 1996, leaving behind his wife and son. Months after arriving, he was locked up again. He's now serving 25 years for murder -- a crime he says he did not commit.

Prison leaders say that street gangs, MS-13 in particular, are being used as scapegoats for El Salvador's violence and economic failings. "We're their toilet paper," says a 35-year-old Ciudad Barrios veteran, who gives his name only as "El Duke."

El Duke says inmates communicate with MS-13 members on the outside, partly to raise money for the programs they run on the inside. Last year, Los Angeles gang members helped provide nearly \$1,000 to buy wood and tools for the carpentry shop where inmates make furniture.

Astor Escalante, director of the Salvadoran prison system, said one of his challenges is rooting out corruption among guards, who earn less than \$300 a month. Gang members have paid guards to smuggle in cellphones, which they use to consult and communicate with members in Guatemala, Honduras and the U.S.

"We can't have that," Escalante said.

#### Inside the Beltway

At a busy residential crossroads in southern Maryland, a short and slim 17-year-old with "MS" tattooed on the back of his head fishes into the pockets of his baggy pants. He pulls out a calling card and a crumpled piece of paper with a phone number on it.

A reporter has asked to speak to the gang member, but "Freddy Krueger," as he's known on the streets, says he has to consult with someone -- a deported L.A. veteran at Ciudad Barrios prison in San Miguel. He punches in some numbers on a cellphone

and steps away.

Here in Langley Park, eight miles north of the Capitol, more than a dozen MS-13 members are circling on bikes and foot or monitoring comings and goings from stoops and front lawns. Some, like "El Indio," who has a three-inch scar across his forehead from a gang fight, are boyish teens in oversized shirts. Others, like "Player," are adults who show up in work clothes or polo shirts.

In Northern Virginia, south of the Capitol, members from Los Angeles started MS-13 branches in the early 1990s. But in Langley Park, many members trace their gang roots to Central America.

Today, there are at least 5,000 in the greater Washington area, including about 1,000 members in Maryland's Prince George's County, authorities say. That's more than twice recent estimates of MS-13's membership in Los Angeles County.

Members who joined the gang's Marineros clique in San Miguel migrated to Prince George's County and started the Sailors, said Sgt. George Norris, a Prince George's County police gang investigator.

Today, the Sailors are the "most violent and influential" MS branch in southern Maryland, Norris said. "They don't directly control the cliques, but what they say goes."

Sailors tend to be older gang members from El Salvador, some civil war veterans, in contrast to other MS-13 cliques in the area made up mostly of teenagers recruited locally, prosecutors say.

"I worry about ... people coming in who bring another level of sophistication about committing crime, money laundering and all that kind of thing," said Glenn F. Ivey, the elected prosecutor in Prince George's County.

Several Sailors are among 19 MS-13 members recently indicted on racketeering charges in southern Maryland after an investigation spearheaded by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The Sailors are accused of participating in an organized crime group involved in six murders and conspiracy to commit kidnapping, robbery and obstruction of justice.

The gang members regularly met to pay dues -- some of which went to prisoners in El Salvador -- and plot crimes, according to the indictment. They also allegedly discussed law enforcement tactics, tried to identify informants and maintained a cache of firearms to carry out their crimes.

The racketeering case rests partly on the slaying last year of 38-year-old Ashley Urias, a Salvadoran truck driver and father. Three Sailors, including two already sentenced on state murder charges, have been tied to the killing.

After immigrating from El Salvador, Urias and his wife cleaned hotels and worked other low-paying jobs. Athletic and watchful of his three children, family members say, he often warned them to steer clear of gangs.

On a May evening last year, Urias argued with MS-13 members while visiting a friend. It is not clear what happened, but he was beaten to death with a golf club and left in a Suitland, Md., cemetery, court records show.

"My husband always wanted to live as best as he could," his widow says in Spanish, as her small grandchild plays around the coffee table in her two-story home. "One's dream when coming to this country is to seek a better life, a safe future for the family. And we were on our way."

In nearby Langley Park, Freddy Krueger returns after placing his call to Ciudad Barrios prison. Now he's more talkative.

He was 13 and looking for excitement, he says, when he joined the gang in San Miguel. He says he knows many Sailors, including ones interviewed in El Salvador by The Times, but he belongs to a different MS-13 clique.

Last year, Salvadoran police rounded him up in an ongoing gang crackdown known as Mano Dura, or Firm Hand. After a 16-day detention, he says, he decided to escape the intense police scrutiny at home by heading to Maryland. The legacy of deportations, gang expansion and harsh police reactions in Central America is pushing more and more gang members like Freddy toward the U.S., according to law enforcement officials and gang members.

Traveling with four other MS-13 members, Freddy says, he crossed the Rio Grande in knee-deep water near Brownsville, Texas. The group evaded Border Patrol helicopters by hiding in brush, he says.

On Freddy's Maryland turf, evening shadows are filling the spaces between apartment buildings. Three police cars swarm into a parking lot. Officers line up Freddy and three other MS-13 members on their knees, making them keep their hands on their heads for half an hour. Freddy is singled out and taken away in squad car. Police later say he was arrested for trespassing.

The next day, Freddy is back on the street, one small player in an international gang.

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Special correspondent Alex Renderos in San Salvador and Times researcher Vicki Gallay contributed to this report.

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