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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

El Salvador: Activities of the 18th Street/Dieciocho gang; gang recruitment; treatment of people who refuse to join the gang

Information on the 18th Street, also known as Dieciocho (*Los Angeles Times* 17 Nov. 1996), gang activities, recruitment and treatment of people who refuse to join was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, a 2002 *Chronicle* article called "Gang Violence in El Salvador" explains the historical development of gangs in the country:

The largest contributing factor [to urban violence] is the surge of gangs that grew in [El Salvador's] urban areas following the end of the civil war, when many families who had immigrated to the United States lost their refugee status. Children of many such families had grown up in inner city neighbourhoods where they faced discrimination and learned gang violence as a means of survival and acceptance. After 1992, the Immigration and Naturalization Service policy on Salvadoran refugees shifted and families were sent back home. Young men, who had been raised entirely in the United States, were greeted with suspicion upon returning to an unfamiliar country coming out of a bloody war.

... these returning refugees introduced a new style of gang violence into one of Latin America's most violent countries. ... Today, gang involvement is on the rise. Police reports estimate that 20,000 young people (out of a population of 6.4 million) are gang members. Gang violence accounts for a high percentage of homicides in a country with one of the world's highest homicide rates.

A 15 February 2002 *MotherJones.com* report states that "many current and former gang members deported to El Salvador have been killed in recent years".

Alex Sanchez, a citizen of El Salvador, former gang member and program director of the Los Angeles and San Salvador-based youth organization Homies Unidos, now faces deportation from the United States and, according to Sanchez and his supporters, almost certain death (*MotherJones.com* 15 February 2002). Homies Unidos claims that five members of the youth organization have been deported back to El Salvador since 1999, and all five people were killed (*ibid.*). Sanchez and his supporters believe that these people were either killed by street gangs or right-wing vigilante groups (*ibid.*).

According to Amnesty International spokesperson, Mayra Gomez:

"Former death squad members are involved in a 'social cleansing' program They do actively target people such as alleged criminals, prostitutes, street children, and transvestites" (*ibid.*).

Information on the history, criminal activity, characteristics and trends of the 18th Street gang in the United States can be found on the Website of the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations (NAGIA). A report by Al Valdez, a District Attorney Investigator for Orange County, California, is available on the Website. The report states that in Los Angeles during the 1960s, immigrant youth and youth of mixed ancestry were unable to join a local gang where membership was reserved for "American citizens from a pure Hispanic background" (Valdez 2000). As a result, a young man nicknamed "Glover" began to recruit mixed-race youth to form a street gang called 18th Street (*ibid.*). A 17 November 1996 *Los Angeles Times* article reported that the gang was breaking with tradition by opening recruitment to all youth in a deliberate move to increase its membership. The gang's primary target group, according to the article, was immigrant youth (*ibid.*).

According to Valdez, the 18th Street gang is also known as the "Children's Army"

... due to its recruitment of elementary and middle-school aged youth. The gang specializes in early indoctrination to the rules of the gang with these young members, who are told that leaving the gang will result in their death or the deaths of their loved ones (2000).

The *Los Angeles Times* also described the process of gang recruitment:

A Santa Ana recruiter for the gang says he scouts middle schools for kids 11 to 13 who appear to be on the fringes of gang life. He confronts them, instilling fear, then backs off. The next time, he softens the approach, making his unsteady targets believe that he is now their friend, their protector.

With their resistance eroded, he promises action and excitement as part of the region's largest street gang. "I tell them you can get guns and drugs. You get [women]. ... You get backup."

The key, he says, is to "make it look glamorous," avoiding mention of jail and violence. "You'll scare them off," he says. "You've got to kind of bait them into it." (17 Nov. 1996).

One 15-year-old who wanted to leave the gang was shot to death by his fellow gang members in Oregon (*ibid.*).

No information was found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate regarding the treatment of youth who refuse to join or those associated with persons who refuse to join.

The gang's criminal activities are discussed in the Valdez report:

Like most gangs, 18th Street is involved in many types of criminal activities, including auto theft, carjacking, drive-by shootings, drug-sales, arms trafficking, extortion, rape, murder for hire, and murder. National and international drug trafficking seems to be 18th Street's main criminal activity. Intelligence indicates that 18th Street has established ties with the Mexican and Colombian drug cartels ... the gang also has ties to the Mexican Mafia prison gang and many black street gangs. ...

Tax collection is another area of criminal activity where 18th Street is well established. Typically, in an area that is claimed as territory by 18th Street, gang members will collect tax from any business: legitimate or criminal. ... Members of 18th Street then threaten to kill any individual who refuses to pay the tax (2000).

For information on the Salvadoran Mara Salvatrucha (MS) gang, please refer to SLV38088.E of 2 January 2002 and SLV33463.E of 11 January 2000.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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IRB Databases

LEXIS/NEXIS

Internet sites, including:

Amnesty International (AI)

Country Reports

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

La Prensa Grafica

Unsuccessful Attempt to obtain information from a freelance journalist who writes on gang activity in El Salvador

World News Connection (WNC)

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