

## 103 Arrested in MS-13 Sweep; U.S. Crackdown Includes 35 Suspects in Area

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### **Body**

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Federal immigration officials announced yesterday that they have lodged charges against **103** reputed members of Mara Salvatrucha -- one-third of them from the Washington **area** -- in a national **sweep** aimed at disrupting the fast-growing gang.

Michael J. Garcia, head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, acknowledged that the **arrests** affected only a sliver of Mara Salvatrucha's membership. But he pledged that many more would be locked up.

"This is the beginning. We will target our resources at the leaders . . . but we're going after all the members," Garcia said at a D.C. news conference. He said the initiative, which is being coordinated with police and other law enforcement agencies, soon will expand to members of other gangs, many of whom are in the country illegally.

Police and politicians in the Washington **area** have become alarmed by the growth of Mara Salvatrucha, known as **MS-13**. Local officials say it appears to be the most violent of the Latino gangs that have committed 11 slayings in Northern Virginia since 2000.

Garcia said the federal government also has become concerned that the group could be a homeland security risk, noting that it is believed to be involved in smuggling people into the **United States**.

The anti-gang initiative, known as Operation Community Shield, focused on the Washington and Baltimore **areas** as well as New York, Miami, Los Angeles and Newark, N.J. Most of the **arrests** took place over the last three weeks.

Among those **arrested** were three alleged **MS-13** leaders in Hollywood, Calif., Long Branch, N.J., and Port Washington, N.Y., officials said.

In the Washington **area**, federal agents brought immigration or customs charges against 22 alleged **MS-13** members from Northern Virginia, three from the District and 10 from the Maryland suburbs and Baltimore **area**, officials said.

One of those **arrested** on an immigration charge is a **suspect** in a January shooting in Alexandria that left one teenager dead and two wounded, said Allan Doody, special agent in charge of the Washington field office of

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement, part of the Department of Homeland Security. The man, a Salvadoran immigrant, has not been charged in that crime, Doody said.

Some of those targeted by the operation were found at their homes or jobs, officials said, but several of the area men caught up in the sweep were in jail on other charges. Authorities said they put immigration "detainers" on them to ensure that if they are acquitted, they will be turned over for processing as illegal immigrants.

In Alexandria, U.S. Attorney Paul J. McNulty noted that the Virginia arrests represent a small fraction of MS-13's membership. "Fairfax County estimated there are 2,000-plus, so you are talking about a very large population. . . . But it's an interesting thing to note that they've been able to marshal the resources to conduct this kind of operation," he said.

Authorities said the initiative was new in targeting MS-13 nationally. But immigration agents have worked on local gang task forces for years, and Doody said Immigration and Customs Enforcement has charged 220 alleged gang members in the District and Virginia with immigration or customs violations in the past 11/2 years. Most were deported, he said.

John Moore, director of the National Youth Gang Center, a research agency funded by the Department of Justice, said removing gang members from the United States could temporarily disrupt organizations such as MS-13.

"The question is whether they will stay out of the U.S." or sneak back in, he said. He added that authorities must supplement such actions with programs to keep youths from joining gangs.

"The gang situation is just too big to handle through suppression," he said.

MS-13 was formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadorans who had fled their country's brutal civil war. It has spread to numerous U.S. cities and drawn adherents from other countries. Of the 103 alleged MS-13 members charged in the current operation, 62 are from El Salvador, with the rest mainly from other Central American countries or Mexico, officials said.

In recent years, thousands of gang members have been sent back to Central America as part of an effort by U.S. officials to deport immigrants convicted of felonies. In their home countries, the gang members have formed MS-13 branches, which are blamed for spiraling crime.

Police in Honduras and El Salvador said they were delighted with the anti-gang sweep in the United States announced yesterday.

"It's very important that the police in all the countries join this effort," said Pedro Gonzalez, subdirector of national police in El Salvador.

Staff researcher Bart Beeson in Mexico City contributed to this report.

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