

INS Arrests 2 Latinos As Va. Gang Members; Pair Among Half-Dozen Sought in Crackdown

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Body

U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service agents began a **crackdown** on alleged **gang** activity **among** Latino immigrants with the **arrest** of two men in Arlington.

The men were identified as Omar Elvin Barrona-Mejia, 19, of the 3800 block of Old Dominion Boulevard, Alexandria, and Roberto Aguirre-Rodriguez, 23, of the 2700 block of South Veitch Street, Arlington. They were **arrested** by INS agents about 7 p.m. Wednesday near 27th and Adams streets in the Arna Valley section of Arlington, INS officials said.

The two men are **among** a group of illegal immigrants believed to be **members** of a **gang** known as "La Mara Loco Intocables," which means "the crazy untouchables" in Spanish, according to the INS.

The **arrests** were the first in an INS operation intended to break up Latino **gangs** in Northern **Virginia** and the District, dubbed "Operation Switchblade," which began in November 1993. INS agents had gone to the neighborhood looking for a **half-dozen** suspected **gang members** who are in the country illegally, and they plan to make more **arrests** soon, said James D. Goldman, assistant district director of investigations for the INS.

"They appear to be involved in a potpourri of thefts, larcenies and beatings," Goldman said of the **gang**, which operates in the Arlandria section of Alexandria and in the Arna Valley neighborhood in South Arlington.

Barrona-Mejia, who is from Honduras, faced a deportation order even before his **arrest**. Aguirre-Rodriguez, a Mexican who has been convicted of larceny twice in Arlington, according to Goldman, faces deportation proceedings.

The INS identified the men with the help of Arlington police, Goldman said.

Operation Switchblade is being handled by a six-agent task force, Goldman said.

The operation was started after Arlington police and residents informed the INS of **gang** activity, according to Goldman.

"Complaints from the community these Hispanic **gangs** to our attention. We will not tolerate the community being harassed by **gangs**," said William J. Carroll, director of the INS Washington District Office.

John Liss, who heads the Tenants' Support Committee in Arlandria, said he's concerned that immigrants not involved in crime might suffer from the INS action.

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"It's one thing to arrest people engaging in criminal activity, but we don't need others in the community being harassed," Liss said.

"I have no comment on this. I didn't call them [the INS]. They came in on their own, and they have a job to do," said Ted Hicks, president of the Arna Valley Civic Association.

Liss and other residents said La Mara is made up of about two dozen youths, most of them Salvadoran high school students from Arlandria.

The gang members wear blue handkerchiefs on their heads, authorities said.

At a town meeting in June, several Arna Valley residents said members of the group were responsible for spray-painting graffiti in the neighborhood, loitering and breaking into cars.

"They're basically alienated young folks who get together to do mischievous deeds and sometimes criminal activity," Liss said.

Graphic

MAP, LARRY FOGEL

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