

U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
“Border Insecurity: The Rise of MS-13 and other Transnational Criminal Organizations”

May 24, 2017

Ranking Member Claire McCaskill

Opening Statement

Thank you, Chairman Johnson. I want to begin by recognizing our three witnesses today and the critical jobs they do. I know firsthand from my time as a prosecutor that law enforcement officers go to work each day thinking not of themselves, but of the communities that they protect. This country owes these men and women in blue a debt of gratitude for the risks they take every day to keep us safe. Chief Manger, Chief Sini, and Detective Conley, the jobs you do are sometimes thankless, they are often underappreciated, but they are always essential.

Gang violence is a problem across this country, affecting communities big and small, tearing apart families, and taking the lives of too many. Gang members prey on the weak, recruit the young before they have a chance, and line their pockets by exploiting people in desperate situations. Every day, gangs fuel the growing drug and opioid epidemic that is gripping towns and cities across this nation. They bring drugs into our communities and violence onto our streets.

Today we are here to discuss one gang in particular, MS-13 - a gang that was started in Los Angeles in the 1980s and has since expanded to Central America and to cities across the country. There is no question that we should prosecute the members of MS-13 to the fullest extent of the law, and that criminal aliens in MS-13 need to be off our streets, out of our communities, and out of our country.

We can't successfully combat gangs like MS-13 without the help of witnesses and victims coming forward to report crime and cooperating with law enforcement. As a former prosecutor, I fully appreciate the tremendous role that these courageous individuals play in delivering justice.

Because of this, I am troubled to hear of a recent trend from communities across the nation that witnesses and victims are reluctant to come forward. Over the past few months it has been reported that victims and witnesses from immigrant communities in particular have been increasingly reluctant to come forward because of the fear created by this Administration's immigration policies. Just last month, the Los Angeles Police Department noticed a 25% decrease in the reporting of sexual assault cases since last year among Latina women.

It's not just fear of immigration enforcement that is preventing witnesses and victims from reporting. Victims of gang violence face additional hurdles to reporting. MS-13 makes retaliation against those who report them to law

enforcement a key tactic of their operation, and routinely victimizes members of the community where they live and operate.

As great a job as the law enforcement officers in front of us are doing, if community members fear reporting crime, we're making their jobs a lot tougher. Today as we discuss the problem of gang violence, I want to hear from each of you how we can better reach out to victims and witnesses in all communities and encourage them to work with law enforcement. Without them, these criminals will remain on our streets and the violence will only grow.

Combatting gang violence does not happen in a vacuum. Just as we need witnesses to come forward and law enforcement to pursue these criminals, we need prosecutors to bring cases and permanent United States Attorneys to provide leadership. We need to fund the grants that go to local law enforcement for community policing and to victims of crime for assistance after they testify. We also need to make sure we're supporting our educators and after school programs that provide children with alternatives to gangs. Finally, we need to come together and agree that these gang members, these criminals, are our priority for removal from this country.

Today we have asked the witnesses here to tell us what we can be doing better to combat gang violence in America. You are the experts - the frontline

officers who deal with these gangs every day. We want to know what we can do to help you keep our communities safe. I look forward to your testimony and to the opportunity to work together on this very serious problem.