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Testimony of

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Before the U.S. Senate Committee
On Homeland Security and Government Affairs

**“Border Insecurity,
The Rise of MS-13 and Other Transnational Gangs”**

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Introduction

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member McCaskill, and distinguished members of the Committee. It is my honor to address you today on behalf of the Citizens of Chelsea, Massachusetts and the State of Massachusetts.

My name is Scott Conley and I am a Detective with the Chelsea Police Department, Chelsea, Massachusetts. Chelsea is a city in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, United States, directly across the Mystic River from the city of Boston. As of 2017, Chelsea had an estimated population of 42,828. It is also the second most densely populated city in Massachusetts behind Somerville. With a total area of just 2.5 square miles, Chelsea is the smallest city in Massachusetts in terms of total area. Chelsea is a diverse, working-class community that contains a high level of industrial activity. It is one of only three Massachusetts cities in which the majority of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, alongside Lawrence and Holyoke. I have served my community as a law enforcement officer for over 22 years

To provide context for my testimony today, I have included a brief biography. I would highlight that I currently serve as a Task Force Officer with the Federal Bureau of Investigations, North Shore Gang Task Force and am a member of the Chelsea Police Department Gang Unit.

General Background Information on Mara Salvatrucha

In 2012, Mara Salvatrucha (MS) became the first, and remains the only, street gang to be designated by the United States government as a “transnational criminal organization.” This transnational criminal organization originated in the streets of Los Angeles, CA, in the 1980s with refugees fleeing a twelve-year civil war in El Salvador. The 1990s transformed the gang from a street gang to a structured transnational criminal organization. Mara Salvatrucha was incorporated into the Sureno gang structure, in which Sureno gang members conduct crimes and pay dues to the powerful La eMa prison gang, also known as the Mexican Mafia, in exchange for protection in prison. As a sign of its allegiance to La eMa, Mara Salvatrucha adopted the Sureno color of blue, added the number 13 – symbolic of M, or eme in Spanish, being the thirteenth letter of the alphabet

MS embraced the principal that gang membership is for life. The criminal organization replaced the family and any transgressions against the organization, real or perceived, became punishable by death. This discipline is an essential method by which the organization controls its members and achieves its objective – to gain as much influence and generate as much money as possible. Since its inception on the streets of Los Angeles, MS has evolved into one of the world’s most organized, structured, and violent criminal organizations, engaging in myriad localized and transnational crimes, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, robbery, extortion, assault, and murder. MS’s primary functioning principles center on violence, including murder, and a strict military structure of communication and command, headquartered in El Salvador and spread throughout various “programs” and “cliques” in the United States.

Two MS rules are held above all else. First, MS members are required to investigate and kill all informants, and at times their families. MS members are therefore constantly watching each other for



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signs of disloyalty. Second, MS members are required to attack and if possible kill all rival gang members, particularly members of 18th Street. Members gain status within the organization by accomplishing either of these goals. The clique, by extension, gains prominence with MS when one of its members kills a rival gang member or informant.

MS in Massachusetts, as in other states, is run by the incarcerated leadership of MS in El Salvador, known as "La Ranfla." La Ranfla establishes the policies and procedures that govern the criminal organization. They send orders to members of MS in the United States, including "green light" orders to kill suspected informants or those disloyal to MS.

Within the United States, MS is organized in the form of "cliques" — that is, smaller groups acting under the larger mantle of MS and operating in a specific region, city, or part of a city. The leaders of MS cliques are called the "palabras" — i.e., the "words" or "voices" — or the "runners." The leader of the clique is often referred to as the "first word," "first voice," or "runner," and the second in command is called the "second word" or "second voice."

To coordinate hundreds of cliques throughout the United States and Central America, La Ranfla separates the criminal organization into "programs." MS generally organizes its programs either by name — for example, major cliques, such as the Hollywood clique — or by geography, such as the L.A. Program and the East Coast Program. MS's use of this organizational technique originated in El Salvador in approximately 2007 and was later implemented in the United States in approximately 2011.

Grouping the various cliques into these programs creates a hierarchy that expedites the process of getting orders from leadership in El Salvador to the street and remitting money from the street back to leadership. The creation and composition of the programs, however, is fluid. Cliques frequently switch programs or choose to remain autonomous, typically as clique leader's change and gang leaders in El Salvador vie for power and control over U.S. cliques and their money. MS cliques work both independently and cooperatively to engage in criminal activity and assist one another in avoiding detection by law enforcement. The cliques operate under the umbrella rules of MS leadership in El Salvador.

Most of the cliques in Massachusetts fall under the East Coast Program, which also has cliques in Florida, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Virginia, and which also has a presence in California, Texas, and Ohio. If a clique does not fall under a particular program, that clique nevertheless falls under the umbrella of MS and holds meeting in which dues are collected and transferred to MS members in El Salvador. Refusal to join a program, however, is a sign of disloyalty and can have severe consequences.

MS maintains a strict and largely uniform initiation process. The process starts with a prospective member being recruited to "hang around" with members of the gang and be observed by the gang, sometimes for a period of months. These prospective members are referred to as "paros" and this period is sometimes referred to as "observacion." Paros are frequently recruited at local high schools in cities with large immigrant populations from Central America. This period starts with the paro hanging around drinking, smoking, and socializing with members of MS, and elevates over time to participation in



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increasingly violent criminal activity. Usually a paro is sponsored by a homeboy who serves as that individual's mentor/sponsor throughout the initiation process.

The clique meets and votes on whether a part warrants promotion to "chequeo." To become a chequeo, a paro must demonstrate his loyalty to the gang by doing whatever a homeboy or chequeo tells him to do and engaging in acts of violence, up to and including murder, on behalf of the gang. Chequeos are allowed closer access to members of MS and must continue to prove loyalty to the gang.

To become a homeboy, a chequeo in Massachusetts generally has to participate in the murder of a rival gang member, usually a member of the 18th Street gang. He must demonstrate loyalty to the gang above all else. The clique then holds a meeting in which the members vote to approve elevation to homeboy status and then "jump in" or "beat in" the chequeo – that is, members of the MS clique gather in a circle around the prospective member, knock him to the ground, and beat him with their hands and feet while one of the leaders of the clique counts aloud, slowly to thirteen.

MS members refer to one another by their gang names and often do not know fellow gang members except by these gang names. When a "chequeo" becomes a "homeboy", the gang often gives him a new gang name to replace any prior nickname.

MS maintains a close knit and reliable criminal network with cliques in at least forty-six states and the District of Columbia, as well as Canada and Central America. Accordingly, as law enforcement repeatedly observed over the years, MS members are extremely mobile and transient. After committing violent crimes, they frequently leave the jurisdiction and take up residence with an MS clique in another state or country.

Known as green lighting. If MS members identify a certain individual as a threat to the gang, MS leadership could green light that person, meaning other MS members have authorization – if not the obligation – to kill the individual. According to MS rules, only high-ranking gang members are authorized to issue a green light for another member of MS. Once an individual has green lighted, all members of MS are obligated to enforce the order, and kill the targeted individual if the opportunity arises. An individual can be green lighted by MS for a variety of infractions. If MS believes a member is cooperating with law enforcement, it will most assuredly result in a green light.

MS is a violent, transnational criminal organization whose mission is defined by violence – specifically, murdering and attempting to murder rival gang members and suspected informants. MS also has a significant operating objective making money through drug trafficking and other illegal activities to enable its members to buy guns and other weapons, cell phones to communicate with each other, and to support incarcerated members.

Though many (law enforcement, media, etc.) refer to Mara Salvatrucha as MS-13, La Ranfla no longer considers their gang to be incorporated into the Sureno gang structure or show allegiance to La eMa. As such, Mara Salvatrucha is now simply referred by gang members as MS. The reason for this change is due to the second rule where MS members are required to attack and if possible kill all rival gang members, particularly members of 18th Street. La Ema refuses Hispanic gang on gang violence in the



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California prison system. MS members violate this rule while serving prison sentences within the California prison systems. For these reasons, La Ranfla no longer considers MS to be aligned with La eMa. At this point, intelligence and law enforcement investigation reveals La Ranfla ordering MS members, recently deported from California, to kill an 18th Street gang member to remain in good standing within the gang. If the MS member fails to follow orders, La Ranfla issues a “green light” calling for the MS member’s death.

Unaccompanied Minors

The homicide rate in El Salvador is staggering. This violence stems from the gang war between MS and 18th Street. By April, 2015, El Salvador, a country the size of Massachusetts, experienced an average of 22 homicides a day. By September of 2015, El Salvador averaged over 50 homicides a day. As a result of this violence and attacks on the civilian populace, the government of El Salvador named both MS and 18th Street terrorist organizations. As a result of this violence, the United States experienced an influx of unaccompanied minors entering the country. Specifically, in 2013, 21,887 unaccompanied minors entered the country. In 2014, 53,515 entered the U.S. and in 2015, 27,840 entered the country. By October, 2015, 3000 unaccompanied minors were sent to the Greater Boston Area.

The number of unaccompanied minors released to US sponsors from FY14 to Jan FY 17, based on statistics from the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, illustrates the continued flow of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle into the United States, primarily residing in areas with an established Central American population.

Based on interviews, law enforcement investigation, and coordination meetings with the Transnational Anti-Gang Unit (TAG) in El Salvador, the North Shore Gang Task Force determined the following three types of unaccompanied minors:

- 1) Minors not associated with MS or 18th Street fleeing the violence and sent to the U.S. by either their mother or father to live with a relative.
- 2) Minors who are “paros” and “chequeos” sent by their mother or father, who wrongfully believe that by sending their children to U.S. will get their child out of the gang.
- 3) La Ranfla wants their homeboys/assassins in the U.S. to commit acts of violence.

In El Salvador, MS recruit children as young as eleven or twelve years old. Unlike MS cliques in the United States, to become a “homeboy” in El Salvador, a “paro” and “chequeo” must participate and kill five rival gang members. Thus, many times, by the time a child is fifteen years old, they are already serial killers.

The majority of unaccompanied minors fall into the first category listed above. The parent is truly concerned for their children’s welfare and quality of life. A small portion of the unaccompanied minors are the “paros” and “chequeos.” Their parents wrongfully believe that by sending their children to the United States, their children will leave the gang. However, this is the farthest from the truth. The smallest group of unaccompanied minors are “homeboys” being sent by the gang to bolster the ranks of MS cliques operating in the United States.



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On the trip to the United States, all three groups of unaccompanied minors travel together. The recruitment process begins on this trip. The “homeboys” ensure the “paros” and “chequeos” are continuing to follow the procedures for entrance into the gang. The “homeboys” utilize the “paros” and “chequeos” to gather intelligence on the non-gang member minors by determining where they lived in El Salvador and the identity of their relatives. They gather this intelligence to help them recruit new members into the gang.

Once the unaccompanied minors arrive at their destination, whether it's Boston or somewhere else in the United States, the MS gang members (paros, chequeos, and homeboys) report and join cliques in their new cities. Those unaccompanied minors not in the gang are approached and recruited. Those that refuse are threatened to join the gang. These threats range from simple assaults or threats to kill their relatives in El Salvador. Either way, the unaccompanied minors fleeing the violence are sucked into the gangs upon their arrival in the United States.

As such, MS clique membership continues to grow, not only in Boston, but throughout the United States. As the cliques grow, the “paros” and “chequeos” need to earn their elevation to “homeboy” status by committing crimes, including murder. As such, law enforcement has seen a rise in homicide rates throughout the country. These homicides are horrific as the MS members utilize the same brutal tactics they use in El Salvador. They use knives and machetes to hack apart their rival gang members and attempt to behead them and cut off their hands. In addition, many of the victims are minors who were unaccompanied minors fleeing the violence in El Salvador.

As law enforcement officers target MS members and incarcerate them or deport them, La Ranfla sends orders to the United States to recruit new members into those cliques. La Ranfla does not want to lose the communities under MS control, either in El Salvador or the United States.

Due to the nature of the “Programs” and the transient way of life, law enforcement notices a close connection between the MS cliques throughout the country. The MS members communicate via smart phone applications, such as ‘What’s Up.’ The Program Leaders host meetings where clique leaders travel from around the country to attend.

The criminal activities committed by this gang are not a local or state problem. The criminal activities span across North America. Law enforcement estimates several hundred MS members and associates in Massachusetts.

Law enforcement has to utilize a “combined resource” approach toward combating MS-13. It is not enough to make local arrests in local jurisdictions nor is it enough to just target the higher echelon members by federal indictments. This reactive approach may slow the organizations criminal activity for a short time in a localized region but will not address the gangs overall organizational structure which will immediately begin to replenish its numbers in areas that have an established MS-13 presence. Investigations over the past fifteen years have shown that without aggressive criminal prosecution targeting the entire structure both within the United States and Central America that the gang will continue to grow using illegal immigration as a tool to swell its ranks. A task force approach to the



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MS-13 problem is the only method that has proven to be affective. Using the assets of Federal, State and local law enforcement as well as the United States Attorney's Office working alongside local and state prosecutors is an approach that has been proven to be affective in combating MS-13 in Massachusetts.

Respectfully Submitted,

Scott Conley
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