

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Border Insecurity: The Rise of MS-13 and Other Transnational Criminal Organizations”
Wednesday, May 24, 2017

As submitted for the record:

Good morning and welcome.

During the Committee's examination of America's unsecure borders we have learned how transnational criminal organizations and drug cartels exploit American policies and our lack of border security to advance their criminal agenda. Today we continue that important work by discussing how the street gang Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13, and other Central American gangs affect communities throughout the United States.

MS-13 was born on the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s. Over the years, it has expanded domestically and into Central America. In the United States, the FBI has identified five hot spots with a concentrated MS-13 presence and violence: Los Angeles; Houston; the Washington D.C. region; Long Island, New York; and Boston. With an estimated 10,000 members in the United States and another 30,000 in Central America, MS-13 has expanded its criminal enterprise across borders by committing acts of violence, extortion, racketeering, human trafficking, and other crimes throughout the Western Hemisphere. Like other international organized criminal enterprises, MS-13 members in the U.S. sometimes communicate with leadership in El Salvador and receive instruction to carry out a variety of crimes including homicide.

In 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department designated MS-13 a transnational criminal organization and began targeted economic sanctions against the gang. This designation allows the government to use its many tools to go after the gang's financial and logistical operations. To this day, MS-13 remains the only street gang the U.S. government has designated as a transnational criminal organization.

The five FBI-designated MS-13 hot spots have received a sizeable proportion of the tens of thousands of unaccompanied children (UACs) who have entered the United States since the humanitarian crisis at the southwest border that began in 2012 and peaked in 2014. Many UACs, especially those from the Northern Triangle, undertake a dangerous, often violent journey from their home countries to the United States. Indeed, many are fleeing the very gang violence in their home countries that is now gripping American communities.

The law enforcement officials testifying today have identified the UAC population as highly vulnerable to MS-13 recruitment and exploitation. MS-13 has used American schools to recruit members and carry out acts of violence. The typical MS-13 member today is younger and even more violent than in years past.

Tragically, the victims of MS-13 violence are also getting younger. Suffolk County, New York, for example, has seen at least six teenagers murdered by the gang since October 2016. I thank Suffolk County Police Commissioner Sini and the other witnesses for appearing today to discuss the challenges this gang and other criminal syndicates pose in their communities.