



# **MARA SALVATRUCHA 13 (MS-13) INTELLIGENCE REPORT**

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE POLICE  
VIRGINIA FUSION CENTER**

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**LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE**



# MS-13 INTELLIGENCE REPORT



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# MS-13 INTELLIGENCE REPORT



## OVERVIEW

Mara Salvatrucha 13, or MS-13, is a transnational, mainly Hispanic, street gang notorious for its adherence to a methodology of extreme violence to enforce fear and establish street credibility. MS-13 diverges from the traditional American street gang model in that it maintains cross border organizational ties, and currently poses a serious threat throughout Central America, Mexico, and Canada, as well as domestically in the United States. In Virginia, the influx of Salvadoran immigrants to the Washington, DC metro area has created the second domestic center for the gang's American presence. Membership has been documented across the National Capitol Region and in central Virginia, making it the major gang threat to Northern Virginia and a major concern for the Commonwealth as a whole. Demographic change in the Commonwealth, combined with the potential expansion of MS-13 membership to non-Hispanic individuals, constitutes a serious potential threat to public safety.



## HISTORY

In the 1980's, more than a million refugees from the Central American country of El Salvador entered the United States as a result of the ongoing civil war in their home country and settled mainly in the Rampart area of Los Angeles, California, with a secondary cluster around Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> The California Salvadorans were not well accepted into the established Los Angeles Latino communities and were often targeted by members of the local Latino gangs, especially the Mexican gangs. This created the impetus for the formation of Mara Salvatrucha as a mechanism for protection within the new immigrant community. There are several background stories given for the name; however, the title appears to stem from a combination of the Salvadoran slang term for "mob/gang"- Mara (referencing the swarming behavior of jungle ants), the contraction of Salvadoran- Salva, and the slang term for "watch out"- Trucha, literally "watch out for the Salvadoran gang".<sup>2</sup> Initially, MS began as a merger between these recent immigrants who had either been involved with "La Mara", an established criminal street gang in El Salvador, or were former members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMNL), the central rebel paramilitary group during the civil war. These former FMNL affiliates were trained guerilla fighters,



<sup>1</sup> Valdez, AI. A Guide to Understanding Street Gangs, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.

<sup>2</sup> AFOSI MS-13 Special product, July 6, 2005



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possessing organizational and weapons skills which they brought to the gang.<sup>3</sup> Initially small and marginalized, the Mara Salvatrucha gained valuable turf as a result of the gang's rivalry with the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang during the early 1990's. Although there was no clear winner, Mara Salvatrucha succeeded in gaining control of some drug distribution locations in the Rampart section of Los Angeles.

This led to an alliance between the Mexican Mafia prison gang and the Mara Salvatrucha in which MS cliques in Los Angeles agreed to serve as "street muscle" for the Mexican Mafia's drug operations. This alliance created a close relationship between the two groups, and Mara Salvatrucha gained a designation as a gang under the Southern California alignment (Sureño 13) affiliated with the Mexican Mafia, adding the 13 moniker to the name.<sup>4</sup> After a series of immigration initiatives in the 1990's, many MS-13 members who were illegally in the United States ended up being deported to their nation of origin, where they formed cliques that came to dominate the local street subculture. In turn, these new gang members followed the illegal migration routes back to the United States, creating a loop effect and cementing ties between the two nations. Currently, MS-13 is involved in a variety of criminal enterprises and is willing to commit almost any crime for monetary compensation. They have been involved in aggravated assaults, auto thefts, burglaries, car jacking, extortion, murder, narcotics sales, weapons smuggling and prostitution.<sup>5</sup>



## GANG ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

MS-13 is best viewed in terms of three major branch spheres: a Central American sphere (El Salvador, Guatemala), a Senior sphere (Los Angeles & U.S. West Coast), and a Junior sphere (Washington Metro & U.S. East Coast). Each of these spheres contains individual sub-sets, known as cliques.<sup>6</sup> There can be more than one clique sharing the same name; for example, there could be three cliques with the same name in California, Virginia and Florida at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Estimates of the overall formal organization of MS-13 differ among sources and location. It does appear that within the United States currently, the gang does not have a single, defined leader or a centralized command and control structure directing the daily activities of all the cliques. MS-13 cliques generally range in size from 10-80 members and comprise the bulk of the formal

<sup>3</sup> Castro, Alvi. Mara Salvatrucha Street Gang, ICE Report, March 2005

<sup>4</sup> National Drug Intelligence Center Gang Profile MS-13, November 2002

<sup>5</sup> Et Al

<sup>6</sup> CA STTAC Intelligence Estimate, July 25, 2006

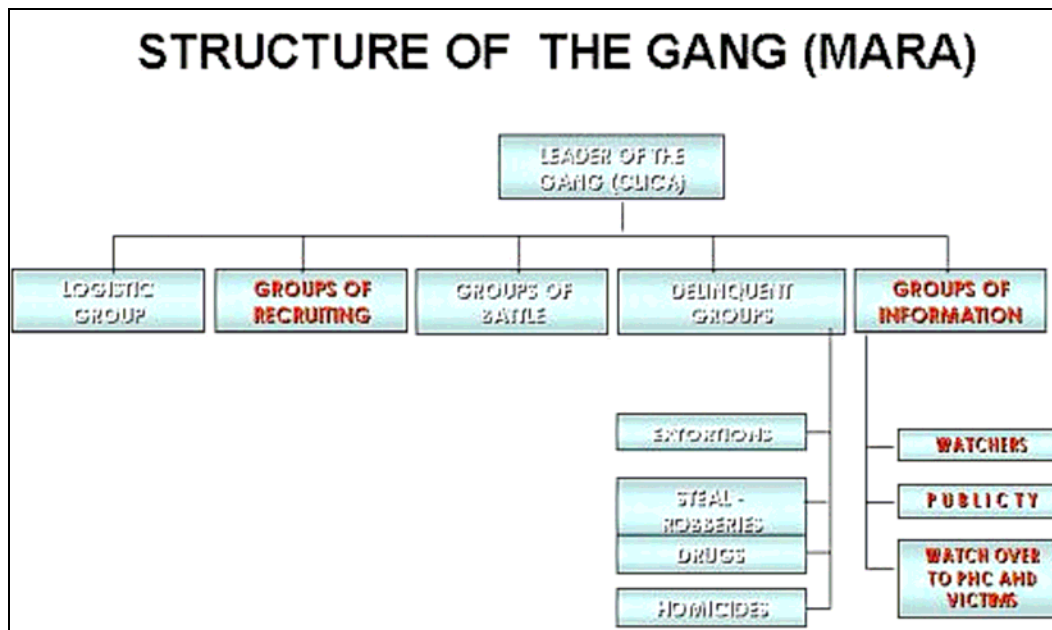
<sup>7</sup> Logan, Sam & Ashley Morse MS-13 Organization and US Response 2008



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MS-13 organization. They take their cues from the more senior cliques mostly based in Los Angeles. Whenever a more senior clique declares another gang as an enemy, all junior cliques follow suit and make the same declaration.<sup>8</sup> This is also the case when alliances are formed. The individual cliques appear less likely to have “official” leaders. Senior members within the cliques apparently lead meetings and plan criminal activities, but there appear to be few discernible formally assigned positions. Interestingly, while East Coast sphere cliques are typically junior, they have tended to demonstrate more interest in formal structure than their West Coast brethren. The opposite appears true in Central America, however. In El Salvador, the MS-13 gang cliques are extremely well organized, following a standard systematic command hierarchy that roughly corresponds to the table below.<sup>9</sup> Salvadoran law enforcement authorities consider the MS-13 gang an organized crime group due to its tight hierarchy and centralized command.



Some trend information suggests the Salvadoran model may be the future in the U.S. The implied communications ties between El Salvador and the U.S. cliques, as well as the presence of noted senior figure Nelson Camandarie, who is rumored to move between Los Angeles and El Salvador deploying senior MS-13 members on various missions, would seem to suggest an increasing level of central control. While he has not been conclusively determined to be the leader of MS-13, Camandarie has been

<sup>8</sup> AFOSI

<sup>9</sup> Boraz, Stephen & Thomas Bruneau. Are the Maras Overwhelming Governments in Central America. Military Review. December 2006





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documented to have traveled within the United States and possibly internationally to facilitate improvements in the gang's activity. Reports from Honduras in 2004 further indicate that the various Central American cliques held integration discussions there to move toward a more formal unitary leadership structure.<sup>10</sup>

### SYMBOLS AND IDENTIFICATION

As with most street gangs, symbology plays an important role in cementing gang identity as well as demonstrating to the neighborhood and other gang members an individual's commitment and integration into the gang community. While there are numerous signs and symbols associated with MS-13 members, the following four major indices are generally accepted:

#### ***The Devils Horns:***<sup>11</sup>



This hand sign looks like a set of horns displayed because the index and pinky fingers are pushed out in an exaggerated manner. The two middle fingers are held against the palm and the thumb is placed on top of them. It can also be flashed two handed, with the heel of the hands meeting and the index fingers creating the horns. The symbol has conflicting origin stories, but the general story points to the early



founder's fascination with heavy metal music and satanic practices in California, which would be profoundly shocking to the devoutly catholic Salvadoran community. The sign also appears to be an inverted "M".

#### ***Colors:***<sup>12</sup>

MS-13 members typically will wear a combination of light blue and white clothing, appearing to favor the Nike brand. Some intelligence indicates that the group is adopting Dallas Cowboys football apparel, which follows the light blue and white theme perfectly. Senior gang members may wear a blue and black color combination in addition to the light blue and white mentioned above. Members also may favor black and white Nike athletic shoes. Members can be identified by their blue bandanas, while senior members appear to wear black



ones as well. It should be noted that the national flag of El Salvador is a three field bi-

<sup>10</sup> Castro, Alvi. Mara Salvatrucha Street Gang, ICE Report, March 2005

<sup>11</sup> DOJ MS-13 Tattoo & Graffiti Identification Book, May 2005

<sup>12</sup> Valdez, Al. A Guide to Understanding Street Gangs, 2005



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color, blue-white-blue, and the faction color of the southern California gang alignment is also blue.

### **Tattoos:**<sup>13</sup>

MS-13 members favor prominent tattoos on their chest, back, and arms. Most tattoos are a form of "MS" or "MS-13" and can be in standard numerals, roman numerals or any combination of the two. They may also include a clique name or telephone area code, "Salvadoran Pride," or "Mara". Also popular are Mickey Mouse tattoos, which indicates the gang's affiliation with the Mexican Mafia (Mickey Mouse = MM = Mexican Mafia) as well graphical representations of the "Devils Horns". Many MS tattoos also incorporate some satanic imagery which follows on the theme of the "devils horns" in instilling fear among the largely Catholic Hispanic population. On the East Coast, some members may use "EME" or "ESE" as tattoos (Spanish for the letters M & S). Some members may display "SWP" (Salvadorans With Pride), as well as common general Hispanic gang tattoo motifs such as the three dots, theatrical faces, pachuco cross and teardrops.



### **Gang Graffiti:**<sup>14</sup>

As with most other gangs, graffiti is used to mark and claim territory. In the case of MS-13, the various combinations of the symbology alluded to above (devils horns, 13, various combinations of each, as well as divergent color schemes) in paint tags are demonstrative of some level of presence.



<sup>13</sup> DOJ MS-13 Tattoo & Graffiti ID Book May 2005

<sup>14</sup> Valdez, DOJ et al



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### RIVALS

The main enemy of MS-13 is the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang (M-18), also with its origins in the Rampart section of Los Angeles. M-18 is the older gang, founded in the 1960's with similar origins. It was founded by disaffected Mexican migrants who were not accepted by the established gangs. 18<sup>th</sup> Street also has the distinction of being the first multi-



ethnic gang, with some documented white and Asian cliques being enfolded into the gang structure.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1990's, M-18 had grown into an established gang presence engaged in an early struggle with MS-13 over drug sale hotspots in Rampart. This initial bad blood between the two gangs has continued to the present day. It should be noted that the M-18 gang has followed a similar path transnationally along with MS-13, and is now one of the major gangs throughout Central America as well. The combat is not limited to the street, however, as MS-13 launched a bloody

series of coordinated attacks against M-18 members across Guatemalan prisons in 2005 resulting in 31 deaths.<sup>16</sup> Cliques of the two gangs will engage in violent warfare wherever they encounter each other. In addition to this traditional gang rivalry, MS-13 has shown its commitment to violent expansion wherever it may feel its interests are served. A hallmark of MS-13 is their affinity for, and use of, the machete to kill and mutilate foes, a tactic which has only increased their reputation. Other known street gangs, such as the Bloods, have been in armed conflict with MS-13 on a regional basis as these groups clash over drug distribution and territory.

### RECRUITMENT

MS-13 gang membership appeals to youth in the same way that gangs have always appealed to them: protection, material gain, and belonging. There is however some factors which are specific to the Hispanic gang experience and MS-13 in particular. As migrants move legally or illegally into American communities, they face language barriers, limited employment options, and victimization by native gangs already operating in the area.<sup>17</sup> Faced with these problems, gang membership is an easy option and seeking affiliation a natural act. MS-13 also targets potential youth recruits in a particular type of activity, known as a "Skip Party". These involve the organized skipping of school by up to 50-100 students, who will then go to a predetermined location,

<sup>15</sup> CRS Gangs in Central America, January 11, 2007

<sup>16</sup> [CNN](#). *Guatemalan Prison Riots Kill Dozens*. August 16, 2005

<sup>17</sup> Bureau of Justice Assistance, DOJ, National Gang Threat Assessment 2005





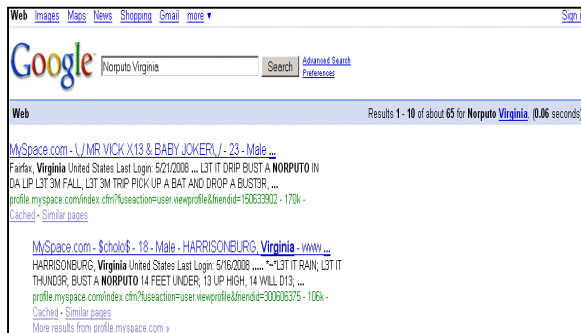
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usually a private residence, where gang members will ply them with drugs, alcohol and sex as inducement to embrace the gang lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, multiple motel rooms are rented for this purpose. A potentially disturbing trend that has been noted recently is the movement of membership openings away from purely Salvadoran and Hispanic members to a more multi-ethnic grouping. The further development of this trend may serve to further increase the appeal of the gang to a wider scope of recruits and open inroads into additional communities.

### WEB PRESENCE

MS-13 like other violent street gangs, including the Bloods and the Crips, may have an extensive presence on the internet. In fact, the Federal Bureau of Investigation states on its website that MS-13 is using the Internet to recruit new members.<sup>19</sup> Groups like MS-13 realize that embracing technology is extremely beneficial to the organization. The Virginia Fusion Center conducts periodic searches using keywords used by MS-13 in order to discover possible



affiliates or members sites. A Google search for the using the terms “Norputo”<sup>20</sup> and “Virginia” returned hits for Myspace sites where the owner of the site uses terminology consistent with MS-13. Another problem law enforcement may encounter is that gang affiliates and members are making their profiles private. This will force law enforcement to form friendships and to integrate within the communities in order to

be more proactive and gather intelligence.

### INTERNATIONAL SCOPE

MS-13 is a true transnational gang, with documented cliques throughout Central America, the United States and Canada. Many Latin American countries are facing serious crime problems associated with gangs, but the largest and most violent gangs in the region operate in Central America. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are at

<sup>18</sup> UMD MS-13 Gangs in MD PST Program

<sup>19</sup> [FBI Headline Archive](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Urban dictionary](#) (derogative term used by Sur-13 affiliates against Norteno rivals)



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the epicenter of this crisis, currently holding some of the highest murder rates in the world. The major gangs operating in Central America with ties to the United States are

### Multinational gang

The Los Angeles-born street gang Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, operates in 34 states plus the District of Columbia and at least five other countries. States and countries with the largest concentrations (more than six cliques) of MS-13 are in yellow.



Sources: National Drug Intelligence Center, ESRI, Times research

MS-13 and their main rival, the “18<sup>th</sup> Street” gang.<sup>21</sup> The effects of prolonged civil conflicts, including the widespread proliferation of firearms and explosives since those conflicts ended, have contributed to this gang problem, along with, ironically, U.S. immigration policy. By the mid-1990’s, the United States began deporting large numbers of illegal immigrants, many with gang-related criminal convictions, back to the region. Between 1994 and 2005, an estimated 50,000 of these convicted criminals were sent back to their Central American nations of origin.<sup>22</sup> This has created conditions for the emergence of a new phenomenon in domestic criminal gang investigation. For example, some gang members in Maryland were found to be in

direct telephone contact with other MS-13 members in cities across the country and, on several occasions, with MS-13 members in El Salvador.<sup>23</sup> There is also evidence from criminal cases that MS-13 members share intelligence information and, in some cases in the U.S., that cliques in one area have loaned weapons to members of another MS-13 clique.<sup>24</sup> This evidence of contact, communication, and cooperation could be taken as an indication that the MS-13 is evolving into a sophisticated transnational gang with necessary logistical and support connections.

## DOMESTIC PRESENCE

MS-13 is estimated to have some 20,000 members in the U.S., with at least some level of presence in around 33 states.<sup>25</sup> The domestic arm of the gang revolves around the Los Angeles and Washington, DC regions, which were and are the primary areas of Salvadoran immigrant settlement.<sup>26</sup> The spread of MS-13 cliques across the country appears to have followed the patterns of migration as immigrant communities spread, and tend to also follow the patterns in the illegal drug market, a major moneymaking activity of gangs. While the concentration of gang members appears situated in urban areas, it must be noted wherever there is a market for illegal substances, there will be a

<sup>21</sup> CRS The MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threat

<sup>22</sup> LA Times, Gang Uses Deportation to Its Advantage to Flourish In the US, October 30, 2005

<sup>23</sup> Washington Post, MS-13 Case Adds Salvadoran Inmates, June 6, 2007

<sup>24</sup> FBI IIR 4235106308

<sup>25</sup> Boraz & Bruneau 2006

<sup>26</sup> The Maldon Institute, Mara Salvatrucha 13- A Growing Threat, May 9, 2005 (13)

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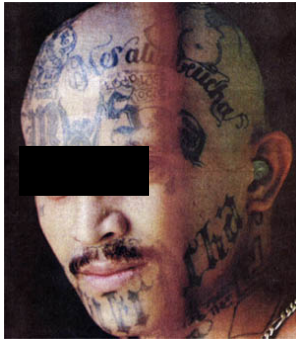
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(Division III), and as far south as Pittsylvania (Division VI) and Bristol (Division IV).<sup>31</sup> Based on population charting, the spread of MS-13 in Virginia does appear to follow the national ethnic trend of migration mentioned previously.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

MS-13 is a rapidly evolving, active and dangerous transnational gang, which given its past history will continue to present a clear and present danger to public safety, both nationally and in Virginia. It appears apparent that with the projected demographic trends for the future Hispanic population changes across the state, the potential for MS-



13 to present a viable statewide threat is a clear and emerging problem. Surface review of industrial development information shows an interesting similarity between some industries and the current reported gang presence from the last data series obtained by the VFC.<sup>33</sup> This may indicate that some industries are functioning as distribution nodes for the advance of vulnerable populations in regards to MS-13 membership. Current trends also indicate the gang is becoming savvier concerning law enforcement attention, seeking to hide, rather than flaunt, presence in localities.<sup>34</sup> Further study of these phenomena will be conducted. While the front lines of this fight have been waged in the northern part of the Commonwealth, the long reach of the adversary demonstrates that a comprehensive strategy of full state scope is required to stave off a potential violent outcome. This will require a coordinated and planned approach, involving resources, oversight and education throughout the full spectrum of the Virginia law enforcement community in close partnership with Federal agencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The VFC has noted some intelligence deficiencies related to MS-13 during the preparation of this report. In an effort to develop a comprehensive plan for addressing the threat of MS-13 in the Commonwealth, it is important to fully determine the extent to which the gang is present in Virginia. It is also important to determine if this gang is actively planning to target specific areas, industries and populations for expansion. To determine this, it is strongly advised that the following intelligence areas be addressed:

<sup>31</sup> VSP TIPS C0801491, C081417, C081139, C080547, C080196, C050310

<sup>32</sup> VDOT Census Data, 2000

<sup>33</sup> Comparison of VSP DTGIU Data mapping with VEDP Industrial data 2008

<sup>34</sup> [Gangs Across America](#)





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- Further develop intelligence sources on members and associates of MS-13 throughout Virginia
- Identify and establish more human intelligence sources in the Hispanic community, especially in rural areas vulnerable to MS-13 infiltration
- Determine the operational goals of MS-13 in regards to Virginia and regionally (MD and NC in particular)
- Further develop regular intelligence reporting regarding gang activity from all regions
- Identify and monitor web forums and social networking sites used by gang members
- Determine means of communication and emerging technology used by threat groups
- Further identify the possible fostering of current alliances between MS-13 and other identified gangs in the Commonwealth
- Identify evolving tactics and methodology utilized and/or advocated by threat groups
- Closely monitor trend information regarding recruitment of extremists, most notably those individuals and groups seeking affirmation and identity by employing violence
- Identify the transnational linkages between overseas MS-13 cliques and Virginia cliques in order to understand the potential ramifications for Virginia law enforcement interests
- Further identify the types and extent of identified gang trends affecting Virginia
- Attempt to further substantiate potential trend activity in terms of demography, industry, nationality and other factors affecting the growing Hispanic population in Virginia
- Identify, monitor and document the sources and mechanisms of gang recruitment and control
- Encourage public and private partners to remain alert and report activity indicative of MS-13 presence: Gang tags, Symbols, and Social networks

Gathering information based on these recommendations will allow the Virginia Fusion Center and their law enforcement and homeland security partners the ability to moderate and prevent future gang crime related to MS-13 in the Commonwealth. Any intelligence regarding these recommendations should be forwarded to the Virginia Fusion Center by calling (804) 674-2196 or by e-mail at [VFC@vsp.virginia.gov](mailto:VFC@vsp.virginia.gov).

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# MS-13 INTELLIGENCE REPORT



## APPENDIX A:<sup>35</sup> MS-13 SLANG

Terrones	blacks
tintos	blacks
wilas	letters/correspondence
feria	money
pinta	state prison
material	drugs
work	sell drugs
cacas	crazy raiders
wonders	wanderers
jale	job
catrachos	honduran
sarco	someone with light-colored eyes
keister	secreting in rectum
collecting rent	extortion money
touch up	non-lethal assault
cerotes	pieces of shit
el moro	youngster
gri-gri	crystal meth
maje	youngster
candy	intent to kill
green light	order to assault
give a pass	dispensation from a green light
senor	slang for EME member
traquetero	street level drug dealer
paper	money
the L	Mara salvatrucha leeward clique
coro	mara salvatrucha coronado clique
taxes	extortion money
chapines	guatemalan
paper	legal document showing a person to have cooperated with police
tres tables	\$300
hand	5 kilograms
tripa	3 kilograms
big homies	EME
creditcheck	background to ascertain standing within the MS gang

<sup>35</sup> Virginia Gang Investigator's Association-2008



# MS-13 INTELLIGENCE REPORT



## APPENDIX B:<sup>36</sup> MS-13 ALPHABET

A - 5  
b - 13  
c - 7  
D - 17  
E - 3  
F - 7  
G - 7  
H - #  
I - !  
J - ?  
K - 15  
L - LL 7 - 77  
M - III  
N - II  
N - II  
O - 0  
P - 12  
Q - Q  
R - 12  
S - \$  
T - T  
U - U  
V - V  
W - W  
X - X  
Y - Y  
Z - Z

<sup>36</sup> DHS/ICE NY April 2005