MS13 & Co.

#MS13andCompany

InSight Crime
ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATION
OF ORGANIZED CRIME
MS13 & Co.

January 2022

Authors:
Juan José Martínez D’Aubuisson – Investigator
Carlos García – Investigator

Editing:
Chris Dalby – Managing Editor
Alex Papadovassilakis – Investigator
Laura N. Ávila – Project Manager
Steven Dudley – Project Director

Translations:
Gabrielle Gorder, Diego García, and María Luisa Valencia – Translation

Layout and design:
Ana Isabel Rico, Juan José Restrepo, María Isabel Gaviria – Graphic Design
Elisa Roldán – Creative Direction
# Table of Contents

## 1 How the MS13 Became Lords of the Trash Dump in Honduras .............................................................. 6

- A Leader Named Porky ................................................................. 8
- The Captain of the Trash Site ......................................................... 9
- The Education of Porky ................................................................ 10
- The ‘Ambassador of Recycling’ ..................................................... 12
- The MS13’s Wars ....................................................................... 13
- ‘Let Them In’ .............................................................................. 14
- Porky’s Plan ............................................................................... 15
- The Origin of Porky’s Escape ....................................................... 17
- Porky’s Escape .......................................................................... 19
- Horse Bites ................................................................................ 20

## 2 The Omnipresent Business of the MS13 in El Salvador ............................................................23

- The Man They Call Hutch ............................................................. 24
- The Mafia Born as a Gang .............................................................. 27
- The Start of the Business ............................................................... 31
- Prosecuting the Mafia ................................................................. 33
- A Mafia of Bureaucrats ................................................................. 34
- Surviving the MS13 .................................................................... 35

## 3 When the MS13 Played Possum in Guatemala ............37

- The MS13’s Beginnings in Guatemala ........................................... 38
- The Yin Yang Gang ..................................................................... 39
- A Virus Infects El Sur .................................................................. 42
- Caballo Loco’s Hood ................................................................... 43
A Leader Emerges................................................................. 44
Farewell to El Sur............................................................... 45
A Band of Professionals .................................................. 47
The Possum Strategy ....................................................... 49
The MS13: A Gang for All ............................................... 51

4 The Birth of the MS13’s Mexico Program.................. 53

El Flaco .............................................................................. 54
The MS13’s Evolution ...................................................... 55
The Ranfla’s Monopoly ................................................... 56
The Mexico Program ....................................................... 57
The End of the Truce ....................................................... 60
Hunting Down Flaco ....................................................... 62
The Fall ............................................................................ 65

Related Content ............................................................. 67
From a small band of deportees forcibly returned from Los Angeles, the MS13 has grown into a hydra. It is at once a social circle that provides protection and belonging, an extortion powerhouse shaking down the rich and the poor, a parallel government regulating the daily lives of thousands.

This investigation, carried out over several years and featuring interviews with some of the most influential MS13 leaders, looks at how this transformation took place in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico and just how unstoppable the gang has become.
Where Honduras ends, there are no borders, no guards, no gate post. This is where a nation vanishes with no fanfare.

For decades, this has been the dumping ground for the industrial refuse of the Honduran coast. Plastic, tin cans, leftover food are left here to rot. And so are the leftover humans, the orphans, the sick, the widowed, the disabled, those who want to hide and think that, among the trash, they can escape their past. And even death.

In this open-sky dump, in El Ocotillo near the northwestern city of San Pedro Sula, dozens of trucks roll in every day with a city’s refuse. They roll through the dunes of detritus and abandon their fetid cargo in any empty space. Those whom society has deemed unwanted climb into the rot, searching for anything they can use, plastic, tin cans, clothes and food. They compete against each other, and against the vultures and dogs.

It’s midday and the heat is suffocating. A smell of pestilence floats over the dump, overwhelming everything. Another truck arrives and the residents get ready. The lorry reverses, beeping as it goes, as if it could warn them away.
Two boys are the first into the new pile. A vulture ventures nearby, gets a whack from a stick and hops away, staring at them with vengeful eyes. An older man pulls out a bag filled with yellowish lumps that may have once been chicken breasts. They are covered in flies. Dogs poke their muzzles in, and pull out their share, weathering clubbing blows if they venture too close to anyone.

The man walks off with his bag of chicken and his young son. He smiles and says it’s to feed his pig.

Three children find old plastic bottles with remnants of soda inside and swig from them. Another finds a strip of candy, long expired, and shares it with his friends.

Out of the trash pile comes the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13). Two young men, well-dressed, one’s shirt bright white, the other bright red. Both wear Nike Cortez, the gang members’ shoe de rigueur. Gold chains and shiny rings glint in the sun. Both tell me that, when they joined the gang as kids, they never dreamed they’d end up overseeing the largest trash dump in Honduras. But here, dreams are irrelevant.

They’re friendly though, polite and respectful, smartphones in hand. They reiterate what they told me the previous day on the phone. I can move about the site and speak with whoever I want. That permission did not come from a government official, nor a company executive from Sulambiente, the firm that runs the dump. It came from a high-ranking MS13 officer.

This is mara territory.
The MS13 dominates this trash site, as it does hundreds of neighborhoods and towns in Honduras. It has become a shadow government, implementing its own laws, rules and taxes, which Hondurans must respect as much as the official ones.

The leaders of this colossal structure have been pursued and prosecuted by the Honduran and American governments. Alias “Porky,” the foremost MS13 leader in Honduras, has a $100,000 reward on his head following his audacious escape from a courthouse in the north of the country.

Under Porky’s rule, the MS13 has become a highly diverse criminal and social enterprise. Its members could be fighting to the death against teenagers from small, local gangs. Or they might be brokering deals with drug traffickers or high-ranking government officials. Its range of adversaries is broad: kids with guns on one side, US agents on the other.

### A Leader Named Porky

**El Pozo maximum security prison, Santa Bárbara - July 2019**

One of the most powerful men in Honduras strode out from a vast, gun-metal grey building. He goes by Alexander Mendoza, though his name may also be Yulan Adonay Archaga Carías. Honduras’ labyrinthine bureaucracy and government corruption mean it is never certain what the real names of MS13 gang members really are. They are able to buy documentation supporting multiple names and identities. But within the MS13, he is known as Porky.

This is not a normal day in the life of a gang researcher. The same morning, I had interviewed Nahúm Medina, alias “Tacoma,” the leader of rival gang Barrio 18 in Honduras. Tacoma is a large man, his face covered in tattoos and his body festooned with five gold chains and shiny rings and earrings. He wore Nike Cortez shoes, just like the MS13 gang members at the trash dump. He emerged from his prison wing flanked by half a dozen bodyguards, barely concealing the handguns under their shirts.

The MS13 has more territory and more members in Honduras than rivals Barrio 18, so an even more ostentatious display could have been on the cards. But Porky came out in a sleeveless white tank top, shorts and old sneakers. A slim, dark-skinned man, he has almond-shaped eyes and a calm demeanor.

He was accompanied by just two other gang members, both better dressed than he. While Tacoma barely shook my hand and looked away, Porky greeted me with a firm, double-handed shake, then looked me in the eyes and said: “Pleased to meet you, how can I help?”. 
There are no bars or locks. Inmates here live in concrete cells with large bulletproof glass windows. Custodians can see what they do 24 hours a day. I spoke to Porky inside one of these structures. He sat in the same chair as Tacoma. It still had a sheen of sweat from his blood enemy.

As Porky’s recounted his life, it seemed to mirror that of the MS13 in Honduras.

The gang began as a group of glue-sniffing boys looking for respect, the story goes. Porky narrated the entire saga of the birth of Central America’s street gangs: the original members initiated in Los Angeles, imprisoned in California, deported to their countries of birth, subjected to poverty, before teaming up with others like them, without families, to create a new sense of belonging.

According to Porky, he was one of those kids without a family. He said he ran away from home in the early 1990s at the age of 10, as soon as he was old enough to do so. He spent various months living on the streets of San Pedro Sula. He teamed up with other kids, they stole wallets and watches in the city center and sold them for paint thinner, one of the hardest drugs they could get.

Porky and his crew had only one objective: getting tomorrow’s hit. These little nomads wandered aimlessly through the industrial capital of Honduras.

But one night, as it was raining, Alexander Mendoza took shelter in an abandoned building where others soon joined him. This included a group of young men, smoking marijuana, wearing Nike Cortez shoes and speaking a bizarre dialect. They never left Porky’s life.

They were members of the MS13, including alias “Indio,” of a gang cell, or “clique,” known as the Leeward Locos Salvatrucha. As per the gang leader’s tale, meeting Indio in that abandoned building was the moment he stopped being Alexander Mendoza and became Porky.

The Captain of the Trash Site

San Pedro Sula municipal trash dump - September 2021

The trash dump in San Pedro Sula has its own caste system. In September 2021, the “Captain,” the oldest collector on site, waves his arthritis-riddled hands, and the other dump-dwellers move out the way. The incoming truck is for him alone. It’s not carrying anything special but the Captain has decided he has first pick.

Two boys working for him frantically sort through the plastic with sticks and put their chosen treasure into nylon bags. They work quickly, with just 10 minutes before a bulldozer arrives to push the new trash into a mountain of piled up refuse.
The MS13 has tasked the Captain with maintaining order on the site. But everyone collecting trash, at some level, works for the gang. All of the plastic, copper and nylon is sold by the kilogram to the MS13 at the end of each day, at a lower price than the official recycling companies would pay.

The MS13 then stores these materials, sorts them out and sells them on to Honduras' national recycling companies via a broker. There are various such companies operating in this part of Honduras, but the biggest chunk of these materials are sold to Invema, a recycling firm that operates across Central America and the Caribbean.

The MS13 tolerates no competitors on the site. They are the only acceptable trading partner. If somebody tries to smuggle trash out and seek a better price elsewhere, they will likely face tough reprisals.

**The Education of Porky**

*El Pozo maximum security prison, Santa Bárbara, El Salvador - July 2019.*

Continuing his story, Porky described how, after that rainy night in San Pedro Sula, he never left the MS13 or Indio, who led the band of deported gang members. Indio was born in San Pedro Sula but moved to Los Angeles as a young boy. Like many Hondurans and Guatemalans, he joined the gang when it was a ramshackle band of Salvadorans that had set up shop stateside. Central American recruits were seen as one and the same by the other communities in Los Angeles, and the Hondurans certainly had far more in common with Salvadorans than those from farther afield.
Indio was good with weapons, not shooting them but fixing them. In 1993, he worked in Armería López, a known gunsmith in central San Pedro Sula, which has remained there to this day.

A faded advert adorns the shop wall. An older man’s gun has jammed and he falls, shot by a younger man, whose pistol has worked because he got it from Armería López. “Que no le suceda esto [Don’t let this happen to you],” reads the text.

Indio found a way to make a living there. Being a gangster in the 1990s offered no guaranteed income. Systematic extortion networks were a decade away. Drug peddling, murder-for-hire, kidnapping and robbery were dominated by local gangs.

Indio would impart to Porky the skills he learned at Armería López. He taught him to clean and repair handguns, including how to make spare parts from steel tubes and shotgun shells, Porky explained.

While they cleaned the rust off gun barrels, Indio told Porky stories of the MS13. How it started as a group of Salvadoran heavy metal fans hanging out in Los Angeles. How the gang made their first enemies in the city. How the rivalry between MS13 and Barrio 18 began, how they hunted each other in the United States and back home, how it was worth laying down’s one life for honor.

According to Porky, 1993 saw Barrio 18 kill their first MS13 member on Honduran soil. They shot a gang member, named Sored, of the Leeward clique. In retaliation, the MS13 killed a man identified by Porky as alias “Pirata” from Barrio 18. The bloody back and forth continues to this day.

The MS13 spread throughout San Pedro Sula and nearby cities. The deportees returned and recruited an entire generation of poor boys and teenagers. By 1994, the Tercera Calle (Third Street) in the city center became the group’s hub. There, Morazánico High School became a fertile recruiting ground that would spawn many future MS13 leaders. Indio was a godfather to them all.

And around the school, along Third Street, the teenage gang members could indulge in one of their pastimes: chasing girls.

“That's where we went to flirt. To see the dolls. The group met up there to see if we could pick someone up,” said Porky.

One of those girls remembers those times very clearly. For her, leaving school was like going to a party. The emeesees waited outside, much to the distaste of the schoolchildren’s parents.

A well-known emeese known as “Noise,” from the Normandie clique, had nailed down his routine. When the school let out, he would turn on a battery-powered radio and show off the breakdancing skills he had learned in California. This daily show would attract plenty of young boys and girls who would form a dance circle. Sometimes, buoyed by the support, Noise would even rap.
Nearby, in a small shop named Salsita Picante, other emeeses bought sodas while their comrades played in a nearby video game arcade. Simple stories in simple places. But that is how the most powerful gang in Honduras got started.

**The ‘Ambassador of Recycling’**

**Río de Piedra, San Pedro Sula - July 2018**

At an upmarket restaurant in San Pedro Sula, InSight Crime met with George Gatlin, the director-general of Invema, a company that allegedly buys tons of recycled materials from the MS13’s brokers. Gatlin has also repeatedly stated his company’s goal of improving the quality of life of those living on trash sites and who often sell scrap to his company.

Requests for an updated comment from Invema and George Gatlin were not returned by publication time.

While we dine on lobster in Rio de Piedra, one of the city’s most expensive neighborhoods, Gatlin says it is difficult to know who is behind each sale. But speak to the Invema employees responsible for day-to-day interactions in the dump, and they tell a different story. Just days before the seafood dinner, multiple Invema workers confirmed to InSight Crime that everybody knows the MS13 is a major supplier, but the company looks the other way.

When asked about the MS13 selling trash for recycling, Gatlin seemed unconcerned. He told me that Invema buys tens of thousands of dollars worth of scrap every day from companies and factories across northern Honduras. It is impossible, he said, to track how every bit was collected and if gangs were behind some of it. And it does not seem that implementing such tracking is a priority for the company.

The dinner is lavish. There are four of us at the table but it would take 10 people to polish off the banquet of lobster. Two waiters seal up the leftovers in plastic bags and throw them in the trash.

The next morning, a garbage truck will pick it up and head to the dump. Those living there know how to tell which trucks come from which area. They know the ones coming from Rio de Piedra, filled with good restaurants, often carry good scraps. The people, the vultures and the dogs will fight over our scraps. The winners will dine on lobster.
The MS13’s Wars

**El Pozo maximum security prison, Santa Bárbara - July 2019**

Porky explained that killings among the MS13 soared in the first half of the 1990s, as the deportees kept arriving and the conflict with Barrio 18 and other gangs kept going. In the gang world, death always spelled more death.

Little by little, Indio and Porky stopped playing video games. MS13 members no longer visited the Morazánico girls, as there they had become easy prey for their enemies. The war forced them to grow up fast. Teenagers aren’t supposed to bury the dead.

Indio was killed in 1997. He didn’t fall in battle, but while working. He had been paid a pittance to repair the screw on an electric light bulb. He was on a ladder when the dieciocheros (eighteens), a term used for Barrio 18 members, shot him. After burying Indio, the first death of one of his “own,” Porky decided to formally join the gang. He wanted to avenge Indio’s death. But in the gang world, killing an enemy is like scoring a goal, and goals only count if you belong to a team.

The MS13 remained a set of individual cliques without centralized leadership. They expanded as they fought, absorbing dozens of smaller groups into their horizontal hierarchy, with many leaders holding equal power.

“The gang began gaining the most strength with the prison fire. From then on, we were more solid because we needed to be,” said Porky.

He was referring to the fire that broke out at the old San Pedro Sula prison on the night of May 17, 2004. That night, 107 men burned to death. All of them were MS13.

Those were hard times to be a gang member in Honduras. The government had made them Public Enemy Number One. The war against the gangs was a pillar of the electoral campaign of then-president Ricardo Maduro, who had lost a child to kidnappers years earlier. It remained a pillar of his administration. “Safe Honduras” was his motto. During his term, the “anti-maras law” was approved, permitting sentences of up to 30 years for those found to belong to a gang.

In April 2003, one year into Maduro’s term, the El Porvenir prison in northern Honduras saw a series of incidents: a riot and a fire were followed by guards shooting prisoners. This led to the deaths of 69 inmates, including 61 members of the Barrio 18 gang. That same year, on the streets, death squads grew in strength, many of them endorsed by authorities and made up of active and former police and army personnel. These death squads murdered and disappeared dozens of gang members and gang collaborators.
I spoke with alias “Liebre,” one of the survivors now held at El Pozo maximum security prison. According to him, they didn’t simply burn to death. He sustains the fire was started on purpose.

Liebre survived the fire but he lost part of his ears, almost all his hair and was severely scarred.

Any accusation that the fire was started on purpose has never been proven. Officially, it was due to an electrical short-circuit.

Human rights organizations and the relatives of some of the victims later sued the Honduran state before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) in Costa Rica.

In 2012, they reached a settlement. The Honduran state compensated the families and recognized its “responsibility for the deaths of 107 persons who were being held in the prison in the city of San Pedro Sula,” according to the IACHR verdict.

In the wake of the fire, said Porky, the MS13 had to get better organized or risk being destroyed. This marked the start of a period of rapid growth. They expanded into extortion, shaking down large businesses in the transportation sector and outlets distributing food and beverages. They made agreements with large cartels and small dealers alike to centralize their distribution channels. And they made agreements with the companies selling recycled garbage in San Pedro Sula.

‘Let Them In’

*San Pedro Sula municipal trash site - September 2021*

It is two o’clock in the afternoon and the armed guards who protect the entrance to the municipal dump are getting nervous. This visit was not overseen by any state representative, nor the company that administers it. It was set up by a high-ranking commander within the MS13.

The land the dump is located on belongs to the San Pedro Sula local government, which granted a million-dollar contract to a company called Sulambiente to run the garbage dump in 2014, according to an investigation by Honduran media Expediente Público.

That same investigation found that Sulambiente, until 2016, was partly owned by Nasry Asfura, the outgoing mayor of the capital city of Tegucigalpa (2014-2022) and runner-up in the 2021 presidential elections, through a network of companies with shares in the garbage firm.
In 2011, Asfura denied any such ownership or having any connection to Sulambiente.

Part of Sulambiente’s obligations, as delineated in an initial concession with the city in 2001, was to turn the noxious dump into a properly managed landfill, including ensuring that nobody lived there or made a living rummaging through the trash. It also had to ensure the collection of solid waste with modern garbage trucks from across the city.

But the work never took place, as the San Pedro Sula municipal government voided the tender in 2002. That was the catalyst for a long legal battle between the city government and Sulambiente, resolved only in 2011, when the municipality had to pay $8.1 million in damages to the company despite Sulambiente having never collected a single piece of trash in the city, according to Expediente Público’s findings.

In 2014, Sulambiente secured a new contract to run the trash site for 14 years. There, according to two sources within Sulambiente, and four separate sources within the MS13, Sulambiente maintains an agreement with the gang so as to not interfere in each other’s business. The same sources agreed that Sulambiente continues to charge the municipality for its garbage collection service while the MS13 controls the area and makes money by selling the trash.

In a written response to InSight Crime, Sulambiente denied any knowledge of any agreement with MS13. “Sulambiente, its shareholders, executives and employees are committed to following the law and...our operations take place under the rules of the...contract and in observance of the norms that govern this country,” said the statement. “Sulambiente...is not aware of any “so-called” agreement on the part of the group you mention.”

Two security guards stop me at the entrance to the dump. Journalists or investigators of any kind are prohibited from entering. I explain to them that I already arranged my entrance with “the guys,” but they are bewildered and don’t know what to do. Then a youthful voice comes over one of their radios. “Don’t ask them anything, guard, let them in. Don’t ask them anything, don’t ask them for anything. Let them in.”

They open the gate.

**Porky’s Plan**

*El Pozo maximum security prison, Santa Bárbara - July 2019*

Porky’s seat was already covered with sweat. It’s the same chair where his staunchest enemy, Tacoma, also sat. The heat in the cell was suffocating, but Porky wanted to keep talking about how the MS13 went from being a gang to a more organized mafia.
First, he explained why he decided not to extort more from the small businesses and residents in neighborhoods controlled by MS13. This allowed him to gain the trust of locals in the areas where he operated and to focus on other businesses, such as drug trafficking.

Proof that the MS13 had entered the big leagues of organized crime in Honduras came in 2015 when the government implemented its first major offensive against the gang. It was called Operation Avalanche, in which dozens of heavy caliber weapons and chemicals were seized. According to the prosecutors on the case, the MS13 manufactured certain synthetic drugs for different Colombian cartels with an important Honduran intermediary named David Elias Campbell, known to the MS13 as “Viejo Campbell.”

A major surprise in the investigation was the sheer range of businesses with links to or that were directly managed by the MS13. Documents from Operation Avalanche seen by InSight Crime list laundromats, car dealerships, bars, transport companies, taxis, laboratories and even a hospital and a clinic: 112 properties in total. The authorities also seized $575,000 in cash and $220,000 from bank accounts. It may not seem like much, but in Honduras, this is a real fortune.

Porky didn’t go into detail about such dealings during our conversation, but days later, I met with the owner of a business allegedly linked to the MS13 -- one that did not appear in the Avalanche papers and continues to operate from the shadows. This individual manages it, makes it profitable and allows the MS13 to launder money through its accounts.

If the MS13 needs his services, he has no choice but to provide them for free. In exchange, the MS13 does not extort him and makes sure no one else does either. They provide him with significant amounts of money, eliminate his competition if he so requests. With that, his business has protection from one of the most powerful mafias in Honduras.

“I am not a gang member, I work for the Mara Salvatrucha,” he told me at the end of our chat.

Back at El Pozo, I asked Porky about the violence. As he put it, the MS13 is more of a business than a gang. However, he is not shy in telling me that a structure like this can’t focus solely on making money. “You have to defend what you have won, with gunfire,” he said.

But once again, I had to look for more details elsewhere. In October 2021, I met a man named “Roto” in a coffee shop in San Pedro Sula. Roto is a former gang member who now serves the MS13 in an administrative role. During his years as a gangster, around 2007, he was part of a select group organized by Porky after the prison fire.
The group was made up of elite hitmen, trained to take out special targets. Roto was trained to use rifles, grenades and explosives. He was a living emblem of Porky’s aim to defend what had been earned.

“They put dolls between trees, they have you shoot into the undergrowth, they teach you to use a knife and a machete,” he said. “If they capture someone from the opposing side [Barrio 18], they make him run like a deer so he can be hunted.”

He witnessed firsthand a Barrio 18 member used for such training.

“When we arrived, they told us he was going to come out and we had to kill him. My cousin said he would kill him with a machete. Another one said he would do it with a gun. They were choosing their weapons. Then, they brought out the Barrio 18 member. He was crying and trying to jump here and there … Porky was in a hammock, he just laughed as the guy screamed,” explained Roto.

Back at El Pozo, the heat was almost unbearable. I dried my face with my shirt, trying to pull myself together and asked Porky whether it was difficult to convince gang members to stop extortion, a practice that had been so lucrative for so long.

“No, Juan, it wasn’t difficult,” he responded. “You have to understand that there is money on both sides, there is even more money in other things.”

In drugs?

Porky laughed. “No, man, we can’t live from drugs alone.”

It was all part of a structured, long-term plan. According to Roto, intelligence agents and two lawyers linked to the MS13, Porky financed the careers of law students and recruited accountants and administrators to start and oversee businesses. Porky was training the MS13’s muscles and brain.

The Origin of Porky’s Escape

*El Pozo maximum security prison, Santa Bárbara - October 2019*

Porky’s high-profile escape in February 2020 had seemingly begun months earlier, on October 6, 2019, with the death of his cellmate, Nery López Sanabria.

López was arrested along with his wife in June 2018, following an investigation into the Valle cartel, a criminal organization that trafficked cocaine from Central America to the United States.

According to the Honduran Attorney General’s Office, when López was arrested, security forces found $200,000, two firearms and two grenades. But the discovery that preceded his death were the notebooks.
In a video call with López’s lawyer, Carlos Chajtur, he told me his client was never accused of drug trafficking in Honduras, but rather of illegally carrying firearms and explosives, using a false identity and money laundering.

However, he was charged with cocaine trafficking in the United States. Therefore, US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents reportedly met with Chajtur and made him an interesting offer. He would not be extradited and receive other benefits, if he could get them the notebooks.

Those notebooks contained fascinating details about Tony Hernández, the brother of Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández, including details and finances of cocaine trafficking operations he was allegedly involved in.

According to prosecutors, the notebooks revealed payments made to soldiers manning aircraft radars in order to allow illegal flights to pass by. Next to another column of figures were three initials: JOH - Juan Orlando Hernández, the president who will leave office at the end of January 2022.

Chajtur tells me that his client, fearful of being extradited, agreed to testify against the names that appeared in the notebook. López spoke privately with DEA agents, but the information was allegedly leaked and the Honduran authorities found out what Lopez had told the Americans.

The countdown to October 6 began.

On that day, the director of El Pozo prison, Pedro Idelfonso Armas, and three guards escorted López out of his cell. López was standing, handcuffed and dressed in white, when a guard in a brown shirt with his face covered went to a red metal door and opened it with a key.

López likely knew what was coming. Since his arrest in 2018, he had been held at the Marco Aurelio Soto prison, in Támara, on the outskirts of the capital city of Tegucigalpa, where he was subjected to threats and beatings, as well as a botched poisoning plot.

According to documents in Chajtur’s possession, the attempt to poison him failed because López tasted the venom and stopped eating. He was saved from death, but not from long-lasting and painful stomach ulcers.

He was then transferred to El Pozo, reportedly after trying to escape from jail. Other senior ranking MS13 leaders and more than 300 rank-and-file gang members were also imprisoned there. Chajtur made several public denunciations in which he accused the government of mistreating López, whose life he said was in danger. It didn’t save him.

Security camera footage from October 6 shows a young man entering with a gun. The man fires several shots at López, who then falls to the ground. Behind the man with the gun are five more individuals wielding knives, who threaten prison director Pedro Armas and the guards who do nothing to help.
The man with the gun approaches López, who lies motionless on his stomach, and fires several shots into his head. The floor and the wall are splattered with red. A second man, wearing blue shorts, approaches the body and stabs him 14 times in the back and legs.

A third man with short hair hesitates. He approaches with his knife but then steps back. The man in blue shorts gives the gunman a new magazine. He almost drops it, but catches it, reloads and fires again several times. The short-haired man gets over his nerves, and sinks his knife into López four more times. The man in blue then stabs the remains a further three times and they all leave through the same door, closing it behind them.

The gunman was José Luis Orellana, known as “Ninguno” (Nobody). The man with the light blue pants is Víctor Pavón, also known as “Pelón.” And the hesitant man with the short hair is Ricardo Gutiérrez, also known as “Buerro.” They were all inmates at the prison and they are all MS13 members. All three of them acted under Porky’s orders.

**Porky’s Escape**

*The courthouse, El Progreso - February 2020*

After the death of his client, Chajtur denounced the government’s alleged complicity to anyone that would listen and even accused President Hernández of being involved in the crime. According to Chajtur, it was the president himself, who, faced with the prospect of information on his alleged involvement in drug trafficking finding its way to the DEA, ordered López’s death. President Hernández has repeatedly denied any involvement in drug trafficking or any knowledge about his brother’s criminal activities.

Chajtur told me that he received several death threats. He did not stop. On December 2019, less than two months after López’s death, several armed men entered a coffee shop in the city of Copán and murdered José Luis Pinto, Chajtur’s law firm partner.

Pinto, in addition to being part of the team that represented Nery López, was the lawyer for López’s parents and several members of the Valle Cartel.

Pinto’s murder was not the end of it. In December 2019, Pedro Armas, El Pozo’s prison director and one of the witnesses to López’s murder, was killed while driving on the Pan-American Highway.

Shortly afterwards, on February 13, 2020, Porky left the Támara prison to attend a court hearing in the city of El Progreso, some 28 kilometers from San Pedro Sula. He was transported by van, not by helicopter, as was the norm. Barely any security guards accompanied him, and the military police were not given prior notice, as protocol dictates when such a high-profile
inmate is in on the move. Upon arriving at the courthouse in the city of El Progreso, northern Honduras, an MS13 squad barged in and helped him escape in a hail of bullets.

Security footage shows two groups of men dressed in military police uniforms arriving on the scene. The first group was escorting a man in handcuffs, a false prisoner used as a decoy. The second was escorting a man dressed in a black tunic that is generally used to protect the identity of a witness or victim. This time, it was used to hide weapons and ammunition.

Once inside, the two groups of gang members unleashed hell. Shots, threats and blows. One of the gang members was killed as well as four government officials. Porky got away.

The long list of casualties that began the day López was killed was almost finished. During this time, Ninguno, the main assassin in López's murder, had been transferred to Támara prison.

There, in July 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, with prisons closed to visitors, lawyers, doctors and anyone who did not work inside, Ninguno repeated his feat. This time, by shooting one of the MS13's longtime foes: Ricky Alexander Zelaya Camacho, a high-ranking Barrio 18 leader known as “Boxer Huber.”

Once again, a military policeman opened the door that let Ninguno in to commit the deed.

**Horse Bites**

*San Pedro Sula municipal trash dump - October 2021*

The garbage dump dwellers gaze at me fearfully. When politicians, businessmen or journalists have visited in the past, they have been forced to vacate the area for a few days. They believe, perhaps, that like everyone else, I have come to take something away from them.

It is half past three in the afternoon. A scrawny horse chews a plastic bag in a futile effort to get some nutrients out of it. It may be the saddest animal in the world. The horse has scabies and is missing an eye. He probably had a bad infection and the empty, unhealthy socket is all that is left. It is hooked up to a cart that is being loaded with plastic by its owner. It will likely die here and then be eaten. The horse sees me, stops chewing and gives me a surly, one-eyed gaze.

“Don’t take photos of it. It doesn’t like it. It will bite you,” his owner yells at me, equally unfriendly.
There is an art to moving among the garbage. Ronaldo is 14 years old and he has mastered this art. He guides me, shows me where to step. If you stay too long in one spot, the garbage acts like quicksand, it begins to swallow you.
Ronaldo wanted to join the army but he was too young. Then, he asked to join the MS13 but they also told him no. Yet, he remains respectful. He hopes the MS13 will see his potential, he thinks he is being tested. Eventually, he hopes he will end up managing a business like the trash site for the gang.

It may be a trash dump but there is always the possibility of finding lobster for dinner.
When strolling through Las Margaritas, a neighborhood of over 15,000 people in the city of Soyapango, El Salvador, crossing paths with the MS13 is all but assured. There, almost all facets of daily life are linked to the gang in one way or another.

If someone wants to buy the most essential of items, such as gasoline, they must go through the MS13, which distributes tanks full of fuel to local shops. If they want bread, the gang also provides, from one of at least three MS13 bakeries in the community. There are other bakeries, of course, but they buy their flour exclusively from the gang.

The same goes for public transport. If someone wants to leave Las Margaritas but does not have a car, they have just two options: use a taxi belonging to the gang or board a bus on one of two routes out, both systematically extorted by the MS13.

Even those lucky enough to have their own vehicle cannot escape the gang. Motorcycles in need of spare parts or a simple oil change can be serviced at one of three garages belonging to the MS13. Anyone with a car must pay $10 a month as a “parking fee,” or $15 if they own a truck or van.
Likewise, those looking to relax with a joint of marijuana after work don’t have any option other than buying from a so-called emeesee (a nickname for MS13 members spelled phonetically in Spanish). The same goes for a rock of crack or a line of cocaine. Those with lesser vices, like sipping a cold beer, can also buy from the MS13.

And with Las Margaritas lacking drinkable tap water, the MS13 has its own supply of bottled water to sell.

“They control everything. Even if there are issues with domestic violence, it’s forbidden to call the police. You have to speak with them and they take care of it,” said one older woman belonging to a neighborhood association in Las Margaritas.

But it was not always like this. The woman, who has lived in Las Margaritas for decades, says she has seen the MS13 grow from a band of young men loitering on street corners to an all-powerful mafia in control of her life and that of thousands more in the neighborhood.

The Man They Call Hutch

Hutch is a former member of the MS13. He’s in his 40s and was part of the first wave of emeeses in El Salvador. An old-school gangster, he founded one of the gang’s first cells, or cliques, in Las Margaritas.

However, after becoming one of the most important members of the gang, Hutch switched sides and sought to bring down the most powerful emeeses in El Salvador. It did not go well.

Now, after spending 21 years in prison, Hutch has a target on his back. The MS13 is hunting him, not only for his failed attempt at revolution, but also because he knows some of the gang’s innermost secrets.

InSight Crime spoke with Hutch in a dimly lit bar, one of those hidden dens where couples in an illicit tryst might meet in secret, somewhere in El Salvador in August 2021. Hutch carefully weighs up everything he does. He is acutely aware of the risks he faces and asked to meet somewhere where he could easily hop a fence and escape.

He never settles. If the waiter approaches, he falls quiet. If a customer heads to the bathroom, Hutch’s eyes follow them there. If I reach into my bag, he tenses up and watches my hand, like a cat ready to pounce. He calms down when he sees but it’s a pen but stiffens again when the customer goes back to his table. He seems like a predator trapped in a cage.

Hutch explains that the MS13 hierarchy in Las Margaritas is well-defined. There are three large cliques: the Criminal Mafiosos, Big Gangster and Big Crazys. Hutch belonged to the latter.
There is another, smaller clique, without much territory but with an outlandish name: El Oscuro Mundo (The Dark World). The three larger groups were all founded in El Salvador by MS13 members deported from the United States.

They each have an illustrious history in the underworld, controlling vast parts of Las Margaritas and each with their own leader and support base.

Within the gang, there is no room for indecisive leadership or lukewarm members. From the moment someone signals they want to join the gang, there is no turning back. The gang works like an anthill, where no individual is more important than the colony, and where the sacrifice of some might be needed for the rest to thrive.

At the bottom of the anthill lie the paros. These are local residents, often minors, who are not formally part of the gang but carry out favors for fully-fledged members. Depending on how often they are called upon, they can also become a paro firme (reliable).

Then come the postes, teenagers seeking to prove their worth and join the gang. As lookouts, they provide the MS13’s eyes and ears, standing guard for up to 12 hours at a time. They report on neighborhood goings-on, from police incursions to sightings of unknown vehicles.

“The job of a poste is complex, as they take turns standing guard. They must keep their eyes open, day or night, rain or shine,” explains Hutch.
“The poste wants to be a gang member. And when they have shown a keen mind, someone might ask them if they plan on remaining in that post forever or if they want to be a chequeo?” he adds.

Chequeos are youngsters between 15 and 20 years old, who started off as paros and spent several years as postes. They can be relied on to handle more important tasks.

“The chequeo is important, someone who is listened to. They have shown they can be trusted, and that they can kill. They are ready for action and to start earning for the gang. They have earned higher privileges, such as attending a miring (gang meetings). There are even exclusive meetings for chequeos, overseen by a homeboy (an official gang member),” says Hutch.

The chequeo has the authority to strike against any person in the neighborhood whose intentions are deemed hostile. They carry a weapon, have nicknames, and can use a gangster’s clothes and haircut. The chequeo is, essentially, a member of the MS13.

“As a leader, you have to keep an eye on a chequeo. If you see he’s good at doing business, you use him for that. If you see he’s good at using violence, then you send him to be violent. If you feel a chequeo can kill without fuss, you can give him a tougher assignment, like killing a cop or a guard. If he comes back alive, he can go on to be a homeboy. If he fulfills his mission but is killed, he’ll be remembered as someone who died for the neighborhood,” Hutch continues.

“Some chequeos receive a beat-down – part of the ritual to become a homeboy. But if you think the chequeo knows a lot about the gang and could represent some sort of threat, it’s better to kill them and bury the body. Better to do that now than risk them spilling the beans tomorrow,” the former gang leader says.

It takes around six years of experience for a chequeo to become a homeboy. Those who make it have already proven they can live off the gang’s businesses and extortions. They have killed at least three people and demonstrated their commitment to the MS13.

But homeboys are rare among the MS13’s ranks. According to estimates provided to InSight Crime’s by a range of sources, from prosecutors to judges to gang members, homeboys make up less than ten percent of a clique’s membership in El Salvador, at least on the streets. Most members are paros, postes and chequeos, with the majority of the homeboys in prison.

Within the gang’s structure, women play less visible but nonetheless crucial roles. They make up the bulk of the social circle surrounding the gang. Women transmit orders, look after the gang leaders’ children, and collect most extortion payments. Women can also be asked to hide weapons or to open bank accounts in their name, for the gang to use.
Women are an important part of the MS13, but they are by no means protagonists.

At the upper echelons of the cliques in Las Margaritas, and across the country, are the bosses, or ranfleros. With two bosses ordinarily assigned to each clique, they are in charge of organization and management. One stays on the street, overseeing the gang’s day-to-day activities like some sort of manager. The other boss is in prison, the pair working together to dominate a large chunk of territory.

Yet the overall number of homeboys and ranfleros has declined in recent years. Hardline state measures aimed at cutting communication between gang members in jail and those on the outside appear to have been effective. Starting in 2016, the jails housing gang members came under increasingly tight controlled. And aside from the MS13’s ambitious deals with the government, most decisions within the gang now fall to members on the streets. This has been one of the most profound changes within the MS13 in recent years, according to official sources and gang members who spoke to InSight Crime.

The MS13’s ongoing war with Salvadoran authorities has also left some cliques bruised and short on trusted members, with dozens now led by chequeos under 20 years of age.

The Mafia Born as a Gang

Hutch doesn’t remember much about life before the MS13. He was a poor kid from Soyapango who came from a poor home and went to a poor school. Nothing much worth remembering, he says.

In the early 1990s, waves of deported gang members arrived in El Salvador and booted out the local gangs that once dominated Las Margaritas. These smaller groups were progressively wiped out, their territory and members going to the MS13 or arch rivals the 18th Street (Barrio 18), the other great California-born gang that spread across Central America.

At the time, the MS13 was still little more than a group of young men who had all
been deported from Los Angeles. They didn’t get up to much: mostly smoking
weed and meeting with local youth to tell them LA was the city of the future and
that they should join the MS13.

Hutch jumped right in. Only two years after getting to know his first emeese,
he had the “honor” of receiving the beat-down initiation. Twelve homeboys
pounded him in succession, in groups of four, he told me. Then he received
his taca (nickname) and became part of the gang collective. Gaining that
membership was a big deal in Soyapango and El Salvador as a whole.

Hutch was now part of the anthill.

He then met Mauricio Solano, one of the hundreds of MS13 members deported in
the early 1990s. Solano had been a founding member of a local gang in the 1980s,
dubbed “the Cona” for defending the Los Conacastes neighborhood in Soyapango.

Solano was taller than most and, from a young age, showed a predilection for
fights, knives, marijuana and the streets.

In an attempt to keep him away from gang life and El Salvador’s raging Civil
War, his family sent him to Los Angeles in the 1980s. Ironically, to save him
from gangs, they had sent him to the Mecca for gangs of all shapes and sizes.

Mauricio Solano was one of the first emeeses, entering the gang when it was
little more than a group of Satanic heavy metal aficionados. When Solano
entered, the rites and meetings took place in cemeteries, and the MS (the 13
was added later) was little more than a local problem for police.

Solano received the nickname “Ozi,” after Ozzy Osbourne, the lead singer
of Black Sabbath and one of the gang’s early idols. He joined the Coronado
Little Psyco clique, based along South Coronado Street, two blocks from
MacArthur Park in LA.

Ozi was a visionary in the gang world, he was one of the first to tattoo his face.
After spending three years in prison in Los Angeles, he returned to El Salvador
in 1991. But unlike most deported emeeses, who saw a return to the country
they once fled as a curse, Ozi saw an opportunity.

Most returning gang members simply replicated their stateside cliques in El
Salvador, such as the Normandie, Fulton, Novena and 7-11. Ozi took a different
approach, creating local cliques, named after the territory they now wanted
to control. He became a reference for many MS13 members and was seen as a
symbol of leadership and modernity by local gangs.

“Ozi was the first strong mara leader. Everyone looked to him to make decisions
as he had the full support of cliques over there [in the US],” said Hutch.
At least two dozen emeesses interviewed by InSight Crime in recent years agree that, in the early 1990s, Ozi was the closest thing to a leader the MS13 had in El Salvador.

The first two local cliques founded outside California became known as the Sansivar Locos and the Harrison Locos, based in San Salvador’s neighborhood of San Jacinto. They were autonomous and didn’t answer to those who had returned from LA. They were ready to absorb the knowledge and the culture of the deported but not their orders.

This push for independence within the MS13 became known as the “503 Movement,” based on El Salvador’s international dial code.

But Ozi didn’t last long. He died in 1995, in San Salvador’s Mariona prison, just four years after his return. The prison bosses there had a feud with Ozi and he was stabbed to death just 40 minutes after arriving at the jail. The California-born gangs did not control the prisons yet. That would come later.

“They gave us back the body that same day, with stab-wounds all over. He was barely recognizable. It looked like they had knifed him with more gusto wherever they saw gang tattoos,” said Nancy, Ozi’s former girlfriend and mother to one of his sons, speaking to InSight Crime at a pizzeria in El Salvador in early 2015.

But, by then, Ozi had left behind a trail of cliques throughout El Salvador and set off a gang movement that would be impossible to stop.
Ozi’s successor was a rail-thin gangster with a mind like a shark. His name is Borromeo Enrique Henríquez Solórzano, and he leads the MS13 in El Salvador to this day.

Borromeo was one of the first emeees, baptized as “Diablito” into the Hollywood Locos clique in Los Angeles. He returned to El Salvador in 1991, at the age of thirteen.

For over two decades, Diablito has been one of the most powerful and influential men in El Salvador. But in the mid-1990s, he was simply a gang member with minimal clout.

“The first time I saw him, he was working as a driver’s assistant on a minibus along Route G. He was a skinny kid, quite small but very nice,” explained Hutch.

But in no time at all, this young emeese started his own clique in Las Margaritas, the Big Crazys, which Hutch would join two years later.

Hutch was told to spread the word far and wide that this clique had been founded by Diablito de Hollywood. And the leader would soon replicate his success throughout the capital and western El Salvador, starting up new cliques as he went. Because of him, the MS13 spread like a virus among the young men of El Salvador.
The Start of the Business

Back in the 1990s, the MS13 provided little financial gain for its young members.

“At the beginning, nobody was extorting. It didn’t exist. It was up to every gang member to pay a fee. We had to pay 100 colones to the clique every Sunday. Those who didn’t get beaten up and had to settle the debt the next Sunday. If they still couldn’t pay, they would be beaten again until eventually, they wound up dead,” explained Hutch.

At the time, being a gang member did not bring with it improved economic status. It was rather a refuge where young men could find prestige, respect, a sense of belonging, a family.

This was confirmed by dozens of testimonies gathered from veteran gang members, collected for the first academic research into Salvadoran gangs, carried out by the Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas -- UCA) in El Salvador and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Veterans from the 1990s also speak of a feeling of solidarity between the first Salvadoran homeboys.

“In those years, we did get into kidnappings and car theft, we sold marijuana and crack but not much, it was a different vibe...it was about connecting with your friends. There was brotherhood, but no money,” said Hutch.
In 2000, Hutch was arrested and sentenced for a long list of crimes, including a number of murders. Thus began his odyssey through the Salvadoran prison system, where gangs were pariahs. The prison bosses at the time shunned and mistreated them. Being a gang member was nothing to brag about in the prison world. Criminals they might be, but penniless ones. The MS13 was something of a clandestine unit within Salvadoran prisons.

To shake this predicament, the gang had to create a hierarchy and a communications system without the prison bosses catching on. According to multiple gang members involved in this transition, the man who organized all of this from inside prison was the same man who returned to El Salvador, aged 13, and became Ozi’s heir: Borromeo Henríquez Solórzano, Diablito de Hollywood.

This new structure not only allowed the MS13 to carry out more comprehensive attacks on their rivals Barrio 18, but also laid the foundation for the gang to start earning real money.

From behind bars, the clique leaders fashioned a system for sending orders to homeboys on the street. Hutch was one those leaders. He ordered his followers in Las Margaritas to make lists of all legal and illicit businesses in and around the neighborhood, along with the names and phone numbers of the owners. It was the start of MS13’s extortion habit.

Those in jail made the calls, the victims paid up, those on the streets collected the rent and those in jail allocated the resources. A vicious circle, if ever there was one.

The first to be extorted were local drug peddlers. They were easy prey as the traffickers generally had no way of retaliating, nor could they go to the police. Next came the bus companies, and then anyone with any type of business in gang territory.

In 2002, Hutch’s clique, the Big Crazys, buoyed by a constant stream of extortion funds, began looking at investment opportunities. Hutch decided to open three bars in Soyapango. He also purchased four Toyota Hilux pick-up trucks at auctions in California and resold them in El Salvador. The clique also began buying drugs from the Acajutla Locos, a clique specialized in raiding boats carrying cocaine north to Mexico, according to Hutch and ongoing investigations led by the El Salvador Attorney General’s Office. This also meant the Big Crazys had to arm up to protect what they had earned and stolen.

The Big Crazys cooked this cocaine and turned into crack. In less than a month, a kilogram of crack could be sold for at least $15,000. This, in turn, allowed the clique to bring in more chequeos and take over more territory.
It was not just Hutch’s clique that prospered thanks to extortion. Many others became dependent on this criminal economy. Over time, the MS13 evolved. No longer a refuge for teenagers seeking respect, it became a mafia.

**Prosecuting the Mafia**

The prosecutor is chatty, one of those sources who when asked a sole question starts to give answers on a range of topics in a structured way. He speaks clearly, without getting lost in technicalities. He also possesses that unique linguistic quality of cursing on every fourth word.

His work, for years now, has been to track the gangs through their money. He seeks to know where and how they launder, invest and spend it. For the last six years, he has been devoted to hunting the MS13.

“Look, man, these MS sons of bitches, when it comes to investing and making money, they’re experts,” he says.

Currently, the prosecutor is focused on investigating a group of Soyapango’s most powerful and richest cliques. They operate in Las Margaritas and his targets include the Big Crazys, founded by Diablito de Hollywood and once led by Hutch.

According to his information, the cliques in Las Margaritas have bought 136 vehicles in the last two years, putting them to use as taxis or with Uber. Most MS13 cliques take part in this business, he says, but not on this scale.

The prosecutor confirms what Hutch said: the MS13 are involved in every business in Las Margaritas. But beyond owning businesses and extorting others, he believes the MS13 has pumped their money into a broad investment portfolio spanning all corners of El Salvador.

But he is not the only one grappling with the MS13's ever-increasing business enterprise.

At least one mayor and two municipal employees, in San Salvador and other major cities, told InSight Crime that a decent chunk of their municipality was under near-total MS13 control.

While extortion continued to be a major earner throughout the country in 2021, the gang has *now learned* that it is far more lucrative, and far less dangerous, to look at other kinds of business. They are no longer spending the extortion earnings but investing them cautiously.
One of the largest cases the Attorney General’s Office has put together concerning the MS13 is named Operation Cuscatlán. InSight Crime had access to the case files, which describe the MS13’s quasi-bureaucratic network where gang members are largely occupied with maximizing their business interests and not with fighting against Barrio 18 and other enemies.

Operation Cuscatlán is the third large-scale attempt by Salvadoran authorities to go after the MS13’s finances. The documents show how maximizing profit has become an obsession for gang leaders. It also shows how numerous assassinations carried out by MS13 members against their own brethren were done over money issues.

The gang was biting its own tail.

A Mafia of Bureaucrats

In April 2021, one of the two main witnesses in the Cuscatlán case spoke to InSight Crime at his home in El Salvador. The founder of the Sancocos Locos, one of the most important cliques in the country, he was a highly influential leader of the MS13 from 2000 until 2017. He now lives in a closed-off condominium, with private security guards at the door.

We will refer to him as Witness, having pledged to keep his identity secure. However, the MS13 knows very well who he is, according to the prosecutor, Hutch, other judicial sources and at least five other MS13 members.

Witness was one of the first emeese in El Salvador and he was one of the first to teach the gang how to traffic cocaine and its derivatives. He set up trafficking routes and business deals with local traffickers and others in Guatemala. He taught others how to turn cocaine into crack to get better returns. And in the 2000s, he made sure the cliques were the main clients of the MS13’s cocaine business.

“The cliques bought the drugs. They would buy in kilograms, then sell it to the homeboys in ounces, who would then sell it in smaller portions and get their share,” Witness told InSight Crime.

Witness was a founding member of the MS13’s ranfla, the group of men who have led the gang for almost 20 years from behind bars. The same group now led by Diablito de Hollywood. Witness also pushed hard for the cliques to adopt the pyramid structure that allowed the MS13 to spread in the 2010s.

Witness said he spent much of his life in prison, from 2002 to 2017. In 2015, Diablito demanded that Witness turn over all his drug trafficking routes and contacts in the world of cocaine distribution. The leader wanted to reduce independence among the cliques and centralize the MS13’s business. But Witness refused. He considered himself a cut above the average gangster,
and saw himself as a man of prestige and power within the MS13. Diablito sentenced him to death.

Although Witness was able to stave off being killed, he lost all privileges within the gang when he got out of jail and was treated as if he was a chequeo. Witness turned himself in to the police, deserting the gang.

Investigators welcomed him and met almost his every demand in exchange for information on the MS13, how it was organized, how it did business, and its ties to politicians, businessmen, churches and drug traffickers.

One of his demands was a private residence, which he obtained and where he met with InSight Crime, as well as armed bodyguards to protect him. However, it was not a one-way street.

Witness swore that the investigators kept all of his money, along with his information.

“They stole thousands of dollars I had hidden away. They also kept some drugs and even weapons. But anyway, it is what it is, what can I do about it?” said a weary Witness.

Prosecutors asked him to speak about the MS13’s new business strategies, how it laundered money and which properties and businesses it operated. On the heels of this, Operation Cuscatlán saw prosecutors seize properties, vehicles and other goods. 520 people were formally charged with being part of the MS13. This included Diablito de Hollywood, who received 39 more years in prison as a consequence, along with almost all the ranfla.

Witness delivered phone numbers, bank account details, and MS13 contacts outside El Salvador – his testimony remains arguably the most definitive insight Salvadoran authorities have ever obtained into the MS13’s inner workings.

Witness now spends his days in his private residence, in the presence of armed guards, never daring to go outside. He knows the MS13 does not easily forget.

**Surviving the MS13**

Hutch got out of prison just a month before InSight Crime met him in that backstreet drinking den. At the time, he did not fully understand the complicated backdrop into which he was stepping. El Salvador was no longer the same country he had known.

He left prison with what he had on him and after years without speaking to anyone on the outside. Hutch spent two nights in the outpost the army and police had set up outside the prison. He did not have enough money for a bus fare and, even if he did, he had nowhere to go. He was an orphan in every sense of the word. He had neither family nor gang to turn to.
After two days and nights of withstanding hunger, rain and insults from the police, two women arrived outside the outpost. These two lawyers had come to pick up another prisoner who was being released but had got the day wrong. Upon seeing Hutch so helpless, they offered a helping hand.

They gave him the clothes they had brought for their client, they fed him and offered him a lift to San Salvador. Hutch gladly accepted, walked up to their red sedan and opened the back door. Inside, an MS13 gang member pointed a 9mm pistol at him.

“Get in, brother,” said the young emeese. Hutch simply turned around and walked back to the outpost while reciting Psalm 91 from the Bible. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” The gangster did not shoot.

Hutch tolerated rain, hunger and insults for another two days until an old police officer asked him some questions and gave him the contact of a person who has dedicated their life to seemingly lost causes.

Out of concern for their safety, this person shall remain anonymous. But Hutch lives with them now.

Even now, however, Hutch knows the gang he once belonged to will not easily forget him.
When the MS13 Played Possum in Guatemala

In this run-down neighborhood in Guatemala City, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) does not exist. And yet, there are still a host of emeeses, as the gang’s members are known.

One of the walls at the entrance to the community is emblazoned with graffiti claiming the presence of a gang and a specific clique, “Mara Salvatrucha 13 - Tiny Locos.” In a corner at the end of the wall, a boy wearing tall socks and a pair of knock-off Nike Cortez sneakers, the gang’s trademark shoe, scowled at me as he spoke through his headphones - likely announcing my arrival.

I guessed correctly. Three more boys were waiting for me on the next block. They watched me pass by with scathing eyes and informed the others. The further I ventured into the neighborhood, the more visible the MS13's presence became. If the first guy had imitation shoes, those in the next alley wore originals. Those standing in the following pathway have tattoos and, even though it is cold, they take off their shirts to flaunt them.

But despite the undeniable presence of the MS13’s members, all of my sources agreed that the MS13 does not officially exist here.

Caballo Loco (Crazy Horse), the most veteran emeese in the neighborhood, guided me through the alleys and pointed out the gang members, their graffiti and their hideouts.
He is protected by slum rules, those that grant veteran bandits a godlike status. The seasoned gang member recounts each of the street corner’s bloody tales and explains, with tremendous patience, the logic that allows dozens of neighborhoods in the Guatemalan capital to be filled with gang members even though they don’t belong to the MS13.

### The MS13’s Beginnings in Guatemala

I met Amable after some poor directions led me to go around in circles near Guatemala City’s cathedral one day in April 2021. Amable no longer looked or spoke like a gang member. He had long ditched the baggy clothes, the Nike Cortez and the killer’s stare.

Amable now wore tailored pants and leather shoes. He had a job, and the two letters he once proudly displayed on his torso - “M” and “S” - were hidden behind his button-down shirt. He was accompanied by Furiosa, a grey pitbull with a huge metal chain around its neck. In contrast to her companion, Furiosa definitely had the look of a murderer, but Amable swore it has never attacked anyone, at least without a motive.

“She’s calm. The chain is just so people don’t get nervous,” says Amable, counting on Furiosa’s good manners.

Amable used to be a member of the MS13. In some ways, he still was. His skin still bore the gang’s two letters, and although not linked to any active clique, he said that he still carried the neighborhood in his heart. He said he still felt that he belonged to the group that served as his family for so long.

The story that binds Amable to the MS13 began in the early 1980s in Guatemala City. He was just a few months old when he had his first respiratory crisis. For the next four years, Amable’s breathing difficulties left him with severe asthma. He recovered but eventually suffered a bout of pneumonia, which ravaged his already weak lungs.

His mother, overwhelmed by her son’s increasingly frequent and aggressive illnesses, decided to leave the occasionally chilly Guatemalan capital. They moved to El Salvador, to the city of Sonsonate, on the country’s Pacific coast. She thought that the heat and humidity of the Pacific would help her son’s lungs to heal. She was right, but then poverty struck.

His mother never studied. She supported her family by making piñatas. From the time he could remember until he was 12 years old, Amable sat next to his mother as she twisted wire and assembled the piñatas so he could buy food.
That lasted until the early 1990s, when his mother became ill. A case of appendicitis was missed by a doctor, turned into peritonitis and she was bedridden for months. Amable had to assemble the piñatas on his own. But they weren’t as pretty as the ones his mother made, so almost no one bought them.

Over time, with food money running low, Amable mastered how to steal food, often from big birthday parties and weddings. He also learned how to trick supermarket cashiers so he could shoplift with impunity.

It was around that time that he stumbled upon the MS13.

“The first one who reached out was a friend’s brother. ‘La Mara Salvatrucha,’ he yelled. – ‘La Mara Salvatrucha’– I responded, without really knowing what it meant. From that moment on, no-one could peel me away from them,” Amable said, laughing.

In 1994, life for the MS13 in Sonsonate was violent but fun. The Salvadoran civil war had ended and gang members deported from California were recruiting poor children and adolescents from the city's neighborhoods. Life was about dancing, getting high, stealing and chasing girls. If any member of the Barrio 18 - the MS13’s arch-rivals - showed up, half-hearted fights with bats and chains might break out.

But this state of affairs didn’t last long. Bullets began to fly and blood began to flow. The MS13’s first cliques in El Salvador were quickly established and led to many conflicts and rivalries. The dynamic no longer worked for Amable. For him, the MS13 had always been more about parties than funerals. He returned to Guatemala alone, a country he had not forgotten but had never really got to know.

**The Yin Yang Gang**

In the early 1990s, California-born gangs like the MS13 adapted to life in Central America. They recruited almost anyone who wanted to join, according to Amable and numerous veteran gang members who spoke to InSight Crime but asked to remain anonymous.

“The 1990s were the golden years for the gangs,” said Amable.

The gang was a family, albeit a dysfunctional one, with no parens but with hundreds of brothers. The deported gang members that landed in Guatemala taught their new friends about clothes, secret codewords and sneaker brands. They were told what words they could use and what colors were correct, but received little training in carrying out violence. It wasn’t imperative.
At the time, the MS13 and Barrio 18’s interactions were governed by an old gang truce, settled in Los Angeles, California. It was a truce by which the gangs coexisted, communicated, grouped against common enemies and fought one another with honor. One on one, machete against bat, knife against chain. This street pact was known as “El Sur” (The South). And El Sur was, in the 1990s, the law of the land in the Guatemalan capital and surroundings.

In 1995, after moving back to Guatemala City, Amable wandered the city streets looking for his family: the MS13. He found some graffiti, heard some rumors, but months passed and he was still alone. He gathered food as he could, stole some clothes and begged for money at traffic lights. His family was nowhere to be found.

One Saturday, as he wandered around the city, Amable wound up at a street party near a small hill in downtown Guatemala City known as “Cerrito del Carmen,” adorned with a church and surrounded by working-class communities.

That day, the community was celebrating the Virgin Mary, with locals dancing cumbia and drinking cheap liquor. Between drinks, some boys told Amable about a nearby alley where gang members used to meet up. He could not wait to find out more.

“I was crazy about it. I only thought about the MS. It was already in my heart,” Amable told me on one unusually cold afternoon, while eating pizza in a small restaurant in Guatemala City’s Historic Center.
When Amable found the alley in question, he stumbled upon a group of gang members. “Go to the Barrio 18, you son of a bitch,” they yelled at him. As street rules dictate, Amable did not back down: “The Mara Salvatrucha, you stupid sons of bitches,” he replied. Since coming back to Guatemala, this was his first opportunity, and perhaps his last, to defend the gang so entrenched in his heart.

But instead of beating him up, the gang members patted him on the back. Amable’s apparent rivals were actually members of the MS13 setting a trap for dieciocheros, as Barrio 18 members are known. It was also a test for emeeses, one which Amable passed with flying colors. From that day on, he was no longer left alone to wander the streets of Guatemala City like a lost animal. He had found his family.

Back then, Amable’s group didn’t get up to much. The MS13 was little more than a rumor in the city’s slums. They lived in the “Yin Yang House,” an abandoned building in front of Cerrito del Carmen. Engraved in cement at the building’s entrance was the Yin Yang symbol, the oriental sign representing duality. The previous owners most likely thought it was elegant, or whoever built the building perhaps liked it and decided to put it there. In any case, the symbol inspired limitless stories and legends among the young gang members. They felt incredibly special for living in such a cool house.

It was there that these first emeeses threw parties, invited over girls and took drugs until they passed out. Bloody episodes were few and far between. Amable could only recall two: the time that Casco, a Honduran MS13 member who arrived in Guatemala in search of adventure, blew his brains out playing Russian roulette. The second occurred months later when Security, from the same gang, blew his head off playing exactly the same game, with the same gun, in the same house.

At the time, those were the only bodies the young gang members had to dispose of. Other local gangs were not a threat. The El Sur non-aggression pact protected the party lifestyle.

By 1996, Amable had become a small-time gang leader, leading a couple of dozen homeless boys. They took control of Cerrito del Carmen and the surrounding area.
But Amable and his friends lived like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys: as if they would never grow up.

**A Virus Infects El Sur**

That same year, in 1996, when Amable and dozens of boys from Cerrito del Carmen were fooling around as gangsters, a surly child entered the juvenile detention center in San José Pinula, on the outskirts of Guatemala City. He seemed angry at the world and everyone around him. His name was David Ixcol.

The boy came from one of the roughest slums in the dense urban sprawl surrounding Guatemala City: Ciudad del Sol. He belonged to one of the first MS13 cliques in the country, the Coronados Locos Salvatrucha. He arrived at the detention center having just dethroned the clique’s leader, Huevo Loco (Crazy Egg). This was no mean feat. Huevo Loco was violent and aggressive, his face scarred by an old bullet wound. And Ciudad del Sol was no place for the weak. The El Sur pact had little influence there. The slum was also home to the so-called CDS, a contraband network specialized in mugging and smuggling, as well as older gangs like the Breikeros, united by their love of hip-hop and breakdancing.

In no time at all, David Ixcol would make a name for himself as El Soldado (Soldier) of the Coronados clique. Days after entering the detention center, he fashioned a shiv and waited for nightfall. Ignoring the non-aggression pact between the gangs, Ixcol grabbed a Barrio 18 member in his sleep, took out the shiv and brutally drew an X across his neck and chest, defacing the number 18 tattooed on his torso.

Rattled by the incident, the different gang leaders held a meeting for fear that the much-loved pact could be ruined. Soldier defended himself, arguing that if the victim had been a true gang member, he would never have allowed himself to be attacked that way. When pressed further, Soldier shrugged off the accusations and said he had no interest in explaining himself to people who preferred talking to fighting.

It was that day - although nobody knew it at the time - that Soldier from the Coronados broke the El Sur pact. For a while, the cracks could be papered over and the party lifestyle could continue, but soon, the gangs would be brutally forced to accept that era had come to an end.

Soldier served a short sentence but was back in the same detention center the following year, in 1997. He was facing more serious charges this time but had an improved entourage. He entered the center in San José Pinula with a handful of emeesses that still lead the MS13 today: El Brown, El Mamut, El Psico, and the youngest of all: Célbin.
Soldier and his friends asked to be transferred to a larger facility, known as Gaviotas. In there, minors and adults were mixed in together, and there was a well-established nucleus of MS13 members. The director in San José Pinula transferred them with pleasure, happy to pass on his problems to someone else. The only one left behind was Célbin.

Other gang members detained at the time told InSight Crime of the furious tantrum Célbin threw when he was told the news. He was too young and too small to be housed in Gaviotas, where he would likely be mistreated and abused.

Celbín was left alone, bitter and grumbling, a skinny boy of 13 or 14 years of age. He had grown up on the streets of Ciudad del Sol and was raised by the MS13 from a young age. But that day, Célbin was left without his family.

Soldado and his friends soon established themselves as the leaders of Gaviotas, both for the MS13 and other imprisoned gang members. Soldier made a name for himself and was backed by most of the detainees, regardless of their gang allegiances. And it didn’t take long for the MS13, though a scattered and disjointed gang, to call Soldier its leader.

Back in San José Pinula, Célbin had also carved out a small kingdom for himself in the juvenile detention center. But just like his mentor, Soldier, Célbin never saw the benefits of El Sur. It was an obstacle that prevented him from reaching his enemies. The pact was a burden for Celbín and he would soon remove it, but not before using it to his advantage.

**Caballo Loco’s Hood**

In 1996, not all gang members lived in the never-never land of El Sur.

Caballo Loco grew up in one of the least hospitable parts of Guatemala City, where many lived from what others threw away. They sorted the garbage, stacked it, hoarded it and sold it. Sometimes, they used it or even ate it.

When he was 12, Caballo Loco created a small gang with his friend Julián. Neither was in school and their job was to sift through the trash, looking for anything valuable. They were partial to a bit of theft and would fight with anyone up for a scuffle. Later, their crew was joined by two other boys, but the worst they got up to was stealing trash or breaking lampposts. Until the MS13 arrived.

The first emeese to arrive in the neighborhood was known as Skiny, a Salvadoran gang member deported from the United States and a member of the so-called Normandie clique of the MS13. He told the boys about the wonders of gang life, about how they could finally find a home, a meaning, an identity. He said they could ditch the half-life they were living now and truly begin to exist.
He was offering a fresh start. But the problem was he never told them how to get started. Rather, Skiny left the neighborhood, and they never saw him again.

The boys did have a few ideas about how to get going, and Skiny had told stories about his own initiation. The rest was up to their imagination.

So, on one morning in June 1996, the four boys from the garbage dump formed a circle and flung themselves at one another, the idea being to fight it out and decide on a leader. The melee ended when Perro Loco went down, leaving his friend Julián as the last man standing.

With their leader defined, they all chose a new alias and the clique was born. It was baptized the Tinys Locos Salvatrucha, a reference to the founding members - all children - and their parent organization, the Mara Salvatrucha 13. The gangs take your weakness and turn it into a strength. Or, at the very least, you end up with a cool nickname.

**A Leader Emerges**

The gangs have a novel way of naming new members. You take something used to embarrass them and turn it into a strength. Someone with an ugly face might become El Engendero (The Freak). Someone shy or reserved could be named Serio (Serious).

Célbin, the boy who cried when he was separated from Soldado de Coronado and the other gang members from Ciudad del Sol, had grown up on the street. He was thus named El Vago (the Drifter), of the Coronados Locos Salvatrucha clique.

Soldado de Coronado, who had infamously defaced the tattoo of a jailed Barrio 18 member with his knife, retired from the gang in the late 1990s. He was a fleeting leader, a violent but short-lasting blaze. Vago was different. He became a leader not only for the emeesees detained in the Pavoncito prison near Guatemala City, but also for all of the gang members imprisoned at the jail. He organized secret meetings at night and coordinated with gang members on the outside to amass a small arsenal.

Vago organized a prison riot on December 23, 2002. He and his fellow gang members launched an attack on the prison's de facto leaders, mostly long-time criminals with connections to Guatemalan military elites and who had access to firearms inside the jail.

Indeed, from the early 1990s up until that day in 2002, gang members had been outcasts in the country's prison system. They were the lowest of the low in the criminal underworld - conflictive, rowdy, and rebellious. They committed
crimes, but not ones that made them any real money. And after a decade of enduring rape, torture, beatings and robberies behind prison walls, they were ready to rise up and take on their abusers.

The December 2002 uprising lasted 24 hours. Fourteen bodies, those of the prison capos and their henchmen, were riddled with bullets and machete wounds. Vago, aside from leading the rebellion, had also beheaded Julio Cesar Beteta, the prison’s top boss and the cousin of a well-known military official. He grabbed Beteta’s head by the hair and paraded it in front of dozens of journalists gathered outside the prison. One of those in attendance, who asked not to be named, told InSight Crime that Vago spent at least an hour carrying the head around.

It was then that Vago decided to change his name. He ceased to be Vago and was reborn as Diabólico. Back then, he was a respected leader within the gang. But ever since that day in 2002, he has been the one steering the MS13 ship in Guatemala.

An official inspect a prison cell after the 2005 Pavoncito massacre, with the words “El Sur” written on the far wall. Source: Archive of Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson

Farewell to El Sur

On August 15, 2005, the MS13 tore up the pact of El Sur. It all went down in a jail in Escuintla, 60 kilometers south of Guatemala City, where dozens of emeese attacked their Barrio 18 counterparts with bullets and machetes. [LINK]

It was an ambush, a betrayal. The army of gang members that had banded together to defeat the Pavoncito prison bosses just three years ago, was dissolved by the MS13’s bullets.

Unsurprisingly, the attack was organized and led by Diabólico.
The Escuintla riot was followed by three more in other prisons. Even juvenile detention centers played host to the bloodshed. The lust for war had penetrated Guatemala's gangs ever since that boy from Ciudad del Sol slit the tattooed chest of a sleeping Barrio 18 detainee. At the time, the gangs ignored him and continued to honor the pact. This time, that was no longer an option.

El Sur was dead and, with its demise, a whole new way of life came to the slums.

The MS13, under Diabólico's command, closed its ranks. They no longer wanted to expand. Whoever wanted to leave was allowed to do so. One of those deserters was Amable.

He left the gang when it stopped being fun. On one occasion, in prison, MS13 members close to Diabólico held a trial for him. One of the charges against Amable was that he had previously been good friends with a member of the Barrio 18. Amable defended himself, saying his behavior was in line with the rules at that time, established by El Sur. The MS13 branded him a coward and threatened to kill him. Enough was enough for Amable, who was always more interested in parties than funerals - especially with his own funeral on the horizon.

“Do you miss your gang?” I asked Amable, years later, in downtown Guatemala City.

“I miss the gang I knew, yes. Those were good times. Now everything is screwed up. Everything is money. It is not like before. There’s no brotherhood among gangsters anymore.”
“If you could go back to those times, would you?”

“Yes, I actually would. But now the gang is tainted with a lust for money.”

Amable spoke earnestly while we talked outside an old building that once housed the first MS13 members in the city. Following Amable’s gaze, I spotted an old symbol, a piece of graffiti, almost worn away by storms, paint and the passage of time. It was the symbol of yin yang.

The era of party gangs ended in August 2005. It was a way of life that appealed to many Guatemalan children and teenagers left over from the armed conflict. They came to Guatemala City fleeing war and poverty and found themselves lost in a strange place, many without family. That era, when gangs were a haven, lasted less than ten years.

Then came the money. The times of easy-going gangsters like Amable faded away, like an old tattoo, like graffiti in the rain.

**A Band of Professionals**

“The MS13’s structure is much smaller than the Barrio 18, but it’s much more organized.

They're smarter. They try not to appear weak and to avoid appearing like gang members at all,” a former Guatemalan police officer told me in May 2021. “They have people studying law, business administration. They're a mafia.”

The former officer spent five years pursuing the MS13, or trying to. After so long chasing the gang, he has a touch of admiration for them.

“They're not like the Barrio 18. They have a leadership circle made up of nine people, all of them in jail. They divide their territory into three sectors of Guatemala City. There are as many as eight cliques in each sector, and all of them report to the head of that zone. That person then reports to the nine leaders in jail,” the former officer said.

“Leading the group of nine is a gang member from Ciudad del Sol: Jorge Yahír De León Hernández. He's been the leader for more than a decade,” said the former officer.

Jorge Yahír is none other than Célbin. He later became Vago and finally Diabólico. That skinny kid throwing a tantrum is the one that went on to change the direction of Guatemala's gangs.

The former police officer said that the MS13 was an enigma for authorities for many years.
Just when investigators thought they’d found a line of investigation to pursue, the gang would murder the prosecutor assigned to the case. If the police found a key witness within the gang, they would disappear without a trace. Authorities could spend months without hearing anything or arresting any gang members. Then, all of a sudden, the gang would crop up again under the noses of the police.

“In my opinion, the way they extort is different to the Barrio 18. [Barrio 18 gang members] just come and ask for money and say that if you don't pay, they’ll kill you. But these guys [MS13 gang members] sell protection. I had to investigate a case like this, involving sweet vendors on the Chimaltenango [bus] route,” the former cop said.

He was talking about July 2017, when bus drivers on a route from downtown Guatemala City to Chimaltenango, a town 50 kilometers from the capital, complained to the MS13. Despite paying the exorbitant extortion fees demanded by the gang, other criminals kept preying on the route. The promised protection wasn’t working. Under the guise of selling candy or cigarettes, small-time punks would board the buses and assault the passengers. This called the MS13’s power into question, and, above all, their capacity to control the route. If they couldn’t protect the buses from these petty thieves, then why would the drivers keep paying them for protection?

At least 13 would-be extortionists died between July and August 2017, according to the former police officer and documents from the Attorney General's Office obtained by InSight Crime.

This time round, simply kidnapping and burying them in a far away field wasn’t enough. The MS13 wanted to showcase its power for all to see. Four were shot dead at a gas station on July 28 that year. Eight others were killed the next day, and one more on a road heading out of Guatemala City. On July 31, two more were murdered at a restaurant in El Tejar, a small town on the same bus route.

This particular bus route is long. And the deaths, scattered like bread crumbs along it, left a trail leading straight to the MS13. The former police officer knew it and tried to convince his superiors that this was a single case, rather than a series of unconnected crimes. But his efforts were in vain. The MS13 got away with it. The cases couldn’t be linked, and the gang returned to the shadows.

“The [MS13] keeps extorting. But they've evolved. Now, for example, they have businesses. Many of the [moto taxis] are theirs. Many of the used cars sold in Zone 13 are also theirs. A number of corner spots used to deal drugs are theirs too. But they are counting on going unnoticed,” said the former cop.

He added the gang succeeds in operating in the shadows because there aren’t that many of them.
“Each clique has between four and eight members, no more. They are what they are. They don’t accept anyone else,” said the cop.

According to the former police officer and 35 other people interviewed in five focus groups in the Guatemalan capital, the MS13 has diversified its ways of making money. The gang no longer depends on extortion as its main source of income and has instead started setting up its own businesses.

Over time, extortion has skyrocketed in Guatemala, according to data from the Attorney General’s Office. In 2004, with the MS13 under Diabólico’s control, authorities registered just 738 extortion complaints. That figure rose to 9,430 complaints in 2010, before hitting 15,495 by 2019. 2020 saw a sharp decline, with just 13,116 complaints, possibly a result of the lockdowns brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Extortion bounced back in the first five months of 2021, with a reported 11 percent increase in complaints compared to the same period in 2020. But the data doesn’t tell the whole story. According to several sources in the police and Attorney General’s Office, most extortion crimes go unreported.

Today, a decent chunk of extortion threats are made by “imitators,” or so-called “copycats,” who pose as members of the MS13 or Barrio 18 despite not being members, according to Guatemalan authorities.

When asked about the parameters that define whether or not someone is a gang member or a copycat, sources within the Attorney General’s Office said it’s quite clear in the case of the MS13. If they’re under Diabólico’s command, they’re MS13. If not, they’re a copycat.

The Possum Strategy

August 15, 2017, marked the 12th anniversary of the massacre that tore apart El Sur. The MS13 and the Barrio 18 tend to commemorate this day in typical street-gang fashion: with gunshots.

The former police officer knew this and alerted his colleagues. But August 15 came and nothing happened.

As it transpired, a truck transporting an MS13 prisoner from a prison in southern Guatemala to a hospital in the capital was delayed for bureaucratic reasons, and made the journey on August 16 instead of the previous day. The convict, Anderson Cabrera Cifuentes, was a member of the Vatos Locos clique and had been sentenced to over 100 years in prison for extortion and a string of murders. According to sources in the Attorney General’s Office, this included the 2010 murder of a police investigator and the killing of five shopkeepers who refused to pay extortion fees.
That day, an MS13 commando attacked the hospital, murdering two correctional officers that accompanied Cabrera Cifuentes and two hospital security guards, as well as two teenagers and one other individual. On fleeing the scene, the attackers took Cabrera Cifuentes with them.

The MS13 disappeared again.

This was the second-to-last major showing of the MS13 in Guatemala. The only subsequent time the gang has been in the spotlight came with the death of Cabrera Cifuentes on October 4, 2018. He decided to shoot himself in the head rather than returning to jail.

Since then, the MS13 has been a minor player when it comes to violence in Guatemala.

Instead, the gang’s appearances have been largely enigmatic.

On December 22, 2019, Diabólico and his gang again emerged from the shadows. This time, he wasn’t parading around the head of any decapitated prison boss, nor was the gang accused of some audacious, bloody rescue. Instead, Diabólico welcomed a team of Spanish journalists to the Fraijanes II Prison in Guatemala City to talk up a dental clinic and t-shirt printing business the gang operates behind bars.

Other media outlets came to the prison after that interview. The majority of them came at Diabólico’s request. In these interviews, the leader - less skilled with words than a machete - put together a smooth pitch in which he presented - or at least tried to - the MS13 as an organization that fought to end extortion, like someone trying to kick a bad habit.

When interacting with journalists, Diabólico never fails to mention the MS13’s distaste for fighting. He consistently says he doesn’t want to be seen like the MS13 in El Salvador or Honduras: crammed into tiny prison cells and being killed by the police and military. He insists that they’re no longer a threat. Rather, if the government were to give them a chance, they would quit extortion and committing crimes altogether. They’d go back to being a group made up of working gang members.

In 2021, authorities transferred 194 MS13 members, including Diabólico and other leaders, from the Fraijanes II maximum-security prison to a prison with less restrictive measures: Pavoncito. The prison where everything began, where 19 years ago a group of lowly gang members rose up against the Guatemalan prison elites and put them to the sword. When El Sur was still alive.

Despite my best efforts, and unlike other journalists summoned by Diabólico, I did not manage to speak with the gang leader in person. On arriving at Pavoncito to meet him, in May 2021, his fellow gang members told me Diabólico was “tending to other matters.” They said it would not be possible to see him and that I should come back tomorrow.
The following day, a prison officer told me that Guatemalan authorities had blocked my entry to any jail in the country’s penitentiary system, instructing officials not to speak with me.

But I still managed to speak to Diabólico, albeit through other means. Part of the deal was not revealing how. During these exchanges, I asked the MS13 leader if he was planning on dissolving the gang. He replied with a slightly ambiguous “no.” Rather, he said he was trying to push the gang, step by step, towards giving up on crime and other acts of violence. He stressed there is no threat to the country, nor the government of President Alejandro Giammattei. He wasn’t trying to squeeze the government between a rock and a hard place. He knows that he can’t do that, not anymore at least.

Diabólico’s words sound more like a sly form of surrender than a threat. It's normal. Nobody makes a threat without knowing they're on the winning side. There are only 194 gang members in Pavoncito.

“They [the MS13] don’t number even 400 in jail, the majority have long sentences. In the streets they have 300 members at best,” a former organized crime prosecutor told InSight Crime.

He believes the MS13 has opted for what he calls the “possum strategy.” Move in silence, in the shadows, and play dead in the face of danger. And once the threat has passed, keep on going. As an evolutionary strategy, it’s not the most honorable or something that inspires tall tales. But one thing is certain. No hunter cares about having the head of a possum displayed on the wall.

**The MS13: A Gang for All**

One afternoon in May 2021, strolling through the same neighborhood where Caballo Loco founded a clique with his friends, the veteran gang member told me his group never really got off the ground. It never had the time to. Around 1999, just two years after they formed, they started fighting with another, stronger clique: the Normandie Locos Salvatrucha, one of the MS13’s largest and most notorious factions.

The war ended with two of the clique’s four founding members dead. In the aftermath, Diabólico banned anyone else from establishing an MS13 clique in the area. The kids from the trash heap had turned out to be very problematic. The MS13 was banned, but it is still very much present.

The MS13 is a brand. It doesn’t belong to anyone. Born in Los Angeles, California, the gang has grown, expanded, spread its wings and run free through the poorest neighborhoods of an entire region.

Even in Guatemala, where Diabólico is its undisputed leader, the MS13 brand has a life of its own.
Regardless of what Diabólico or the other eight MS13 leaders thought, gang members still stood guard on the neighborhood street corners in and around the city’s trash dump. Caballo Loco took me to the very bottom of the community, a place of narrow streets and mud. He showed me the alley where they came up with their own initiation ritual. He pointed out the precise spots where his friends - and enemies - were killed. He told me we should stop walking and not push our luck. We shouldn’t go where the neighborhood drug dealers sell little packets of marijuana and crack.

This is the MS13. A brand, not a transnational gang, despite what different government officials, police officers, the FBI, academics, journalists and former US President Donald Trump have all stubbornly insisted. The MS13 is within everyone’s, and that has allowed it to expand and survive.

The boys running the street corners in this community, with their little bags of marijuana and crack, who paint walls - and their own bodies - with the letters “M” and “S,” couldn’t care less if Diabólico recognized them as gang members. They’ll show their loyalty to the gang whenever they can.

And anyone receiving an extortion threat or being shot by a gang member doesn’t care if the orders came from Diabólico, the boy from Ciudad del Sol who tore apart El Sur.
On March 2, 2021, El Salvador police announced an unexpected arrest: that of Hugo Armando Quinteros Mineros, alias “Flaco,” of the Francis Locos clique. His capture took authorities by surprise. For they believed Flaco was abroad, running one of the MS13’s most ambitious projects: the Mexico Program.

On the day of his arrest, Flaco looked worn out, his drawn face worthy of his nickname, meaning “Skinny.” He had plenty to worry about.

Flaco was among the most-wanted fugitives in El Salvador and the United States and was one of 14 gang leaders accused of terrorism by the US Department of Justice in January 2021.

The veteran gang member had spent a lengthy stint on the run after being deported from Mexico in 2019 and subsequently granted liberty by the Salvadoran court system for unclear reasons. Even now, the US has requested his extradition, but there have been no updates on his case since shortly after his arrest last March.

The MS13’s Mexico program, meanwhile, has kept chugging along.
**El Flaco**

Flaco’s reputation among the MS13 is legendary. He was one of the original emeeses (the phonetic spelling for MS13 members) who left El Salvador for California to avoid joining the military during the country’s civil war in the 1980s.

He settled near MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, where he earned his nickname in the Francis Locos clique. He survived on the streets, started a family, and ended up being deported back to El Salvador in 1996, according to a *Los Angeles Times* report from 2005.

To cap off the 1990s, Flaco played a crucial part in bringing the MS13’s structure from California to El Salvador until he was jailed in 1999. In 2002, Flaco helped lay the groundwork for the gang’s prison leadership following a series of confrontations and animosity with other prison gangs.

That first configuration of the imprisoned MS13 leaders was christened the Ranfla, with Flaco one of its main architects.

Today, the so-called homeboys that make up much of the gang’s membership speak of the 50-year-old veteran with respect. He is known as «Viejo Flaco» (Old Flaco) due to his lengthy career with the gang. With time, Flaco became a ranflero (leader) at the Ciudad Barrios prison, an El Salvador jail long associated with the MS13.

He was the gang’s sole leader until 2012 when other ranfleros were sent to the prison amid a truce between El Salvador’s main gangs, facilitated by the government.
The MS13’s Evolution

In March 2012, the government of El Salvador, led by then-president Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional - FMLN), sealed a pact with jailed leaders of the MS13 and rivals Barrio 18.

The gangs agreed to lower the country's homicide rate in exchange for securing benefits for their members behind bars.

The MS13’s leadership was transferred to the Ciudad Barrios prison, the group's stronghold.

According to El Faro, the transfers included the gang's two foremost leaders, Enrique Borromeo Henriquez Solorzano, alias “Diablito de Hollywood,” and his right-hand man, Marvin Adaly Quintanilla Ramos, alias “Peewee” or “Piwi.”

The pair met with Flaco and others to shape the aforementioned truce, all while participating in church ceremonies, partying, speaking to journalists and politicians, and taking advantage of the conjugal visits permitted by authorities.

The MS13 kept up its end of the deal. Homicides dropped to historic lows in 2012, and the government flouted the statistics. Authorities believed they had control of the situation thanks to the new pact, but the Ranfla was scheming behind the scenes. While its members were lying low and avoiding violence, the MS13 was quietly rebuilding. Its leaders were all together again, ready to launch a series of new ideas.

The Ranfla focused its energy on coming up with larger, more profitable businesses, which were sorely needed as the gang's prison membership was expanding. The MS13 needed to make the jump from being a gang to a full-blown criminal enterprise.

While homicides remained low, the MS13 looked for businesses that could be used for laundering money from extortion -- the gang's primary source of income. But to do this, the gang needed to build a parallel structure: a second Ranfla on the street that reported directly to the prison bosses.

This group was made up of homeboys who knew how the Ranfla operated. They were trustworthy, experienced, level-headed and, crucially, not in prison. The gang called this group La Federación (The Federation).

Peewee oversaw the Federation from behind bars. He had spent 12 years in prison for murder and throwing grenades at the police in 1999, according to court records obtained by InSight Crime. The Ranfla trusted him, and he knew exactly how Diablito, who had brought Peewee into the gang in 1994, liked things done.
On his release from prison in October 2013, Peewee became the top ranflero on the streets, where he already had a wide network of contacts.

After getting out of jail, one of his first moves was to visit his friend, Juan José Gutiérrez Barahona, alias “Extraño.”

The Ranfla’s Monopoly

Extraño was part of the old guard. A member of the San Cocos Locos Salvatruchos clique, he was an experienced “tumbador” (a term used for thieves who target drug shipments) and a handy drug cook. For years, he ran a drug trafficking ring in El Salvador’s western department of Sonsonate, where the San Cocos Locos clique reigns supreme.

He had just moved a shipment of marijuana and crystal meth from Mexico City down to El Salvador when Peewee turned up at his house. The newly released prisoner had come looking for guidance, having not set foot on the streets for more than a decade.

The Ranfla had entrusted Peewee with the gargantuan task of telling gang members with profitable businesses that these were going to be monopolized and would fall under the leadership’s supervision and control. But to do this, he needed contacts.
The news came as a shock to Extraño, who later told InSight Crime that MS13 leaders asked for a list of his drug suppliers, his prices, and quantities sold. The Ranfla had also decided that drugs would only be purchased from large distributors linked to the MS13 and sold between the gang’s cliques.

Extraño put Peewee in touch with suppliers in Sonsonate who could provide him with drugs and people to transport shipments.

Extraño also shared his expertise. He told the Ranfla how to use “caletas,” or cars with hollowed-out compartments used to hide contraband, and showed Peewee the workshops where he designed these spaces. He also taught the Ranfla how to get the most out of a kilogram of cocaine, cutting it and mixing it with baking soda and other substitutes to sell more for less.

He proposed buying debts from drug addicts and getting them to work for the MS13. The gang then used some of these profits to buy and manage businesses in Sonsonate, including two hotels, according to documents from a major anti-gang case in El Salvador, known as Operation Jaque. Years later, with a hint of pride, Extraño told InSight Crime that Peewee copied his ideas.

Human smuggling was also monopolized by the gang. Any migrant smuggler known to the MS13 was charged $200 for each person taken out of El Salvador. If they didn’t pay, “we would attack their houses with rifles and all that shit,” explained Extraño. Then came other criminal economies, such as arms trafficking and illegally importing foreign cars.

**The Mexico Program**

Flaco left the Ciudad Barrios prison at the start of 2014.

His experience, power and continued clout would place him at the very top of the Federation. Despite spending years behind bars, he immediately took over the Los Angeles Program in El Salvador.

The MS13 is divided into hundreds of cells, or cliques, operating in over seven countries in the Americas and Europe. The so-called ‘programs’ are the MS13’s way of banding these cliques together. An unspecified number of cliques fall under each program, corresponding to a specific geographical area or historical ties, such as the East Coast Program in the United States or the Los Angeles Program in El Salvador.

The Los Angeles Program, made up of homeboys deported from the United States, was tasked with tracking down fellow deportees so that they could help collect money for the gang.
Flaco had international contacts and already had plans to start a program in Mexico. He wanted to break into new drug markets and use the Mexico route to smuggle migrants north. When he shared his idea with Extraño and the Ranfla, they embraced it with open arms.

Mexico had long been a transit country for MS13 members bound for the United States.

Typically, they would take the infamous cargo train, known as La Bestia (The Beast), connecting southern Mexico to the US border. In 2014, a number of MS13 gang members were floating around on the freight train’s route, albeit without any discernible structure. That is, until Flaco arrived.

Flaco came to Mexico with a fellow gang member, Francisco Javier Román Bardales, alias “Veterano.” Flaco and Veterano would work together to set up a branch of the Ranfla in Mexico, according to alias “Boxer,” a homeboy who spends his time smuggling people along the Mexico migrant route.

“I brought [Flaco and Veterano] from Chiapas to [Mexico City]. They came with enough money, enough to settle anywhere,” said Boxer.

Flaco’s excursions in Mexico City were captured in a photo posted on Facebook by a gang member named Gerardo Arias, or “Guanaco,” in July 2014. In one shot, the pair can be seen standing outside the famous Azteca Stadium.

Guanaco’s Facebook account provided a trove of information on his criminal activities in Mexico. At one point, his profile photo showed a hand handcuffed to a chair, with the caption, “I’m fucked. Arrested for [being] a coyote, don’t give a shit.” Some photos pictured him riding The Beast alongside gang members making the MS13’s signature devil horns hand sign, while others showed Guanaco with homeboys in a house in Celaya, a city in central Mexico where Flaco would eventually set up shop.

Flaco and Veterano managed to obtain Mexican papers so they could move freely around the country. They headed to Celaya in the hope of meeting members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación - CJNG), according to court documents from Operation Jaque. At that time, Celaya had become a hotspot for MS13 members riding the railway north, as well as a renowned drug trafficking enclave.
Flaco and Veterano eventually managed to reach the CJNG, Boxer told InSight Crime. Thanks to the new hook-up, the MS13 managed to acquire a plentiful supply of marijuana, which it sent to Guatemala and El Salvador using new routes.

These were the same routes used to smuggle Salvadorans out of the country, and Flaco personally went to El Salvador to bring the migrants to Mexico, pocketing half of the profits himself. Among his clients were several gang members heading north, who Flaco also charged.

In the eyes of the gang, Flaco was not doing anything wrong. He was following a gang rule that allowed members to have a side hustle, as long as it didn’t interfere with the gang’s interests.

According to documents from El Salvador’s Attorney General’s Office (Fiscalía General de la República de El Salvador - FGR), these gang members managed to move up to 40 kilograms of marijuana per month, sold for between $750 and $1,000 per kilogram and distributed in El Salvador through a network of homeboys, precisely as Extraño had taught the Ranfla to do.

Flaco controlled the drug business from Mexico, operating in several states along the freight train route, including Chiapas, the State of Mexico, Querétaro and Guanajuato.

He used the profits to buy weapons for the gang, and built a bar and a car lot in Celaya where he settled with his partner. The profits from those two businesses were his own. Over time, as his profits accrued, his human smuggling operation became more sophisticated and he hired a group of coyotes to operate the migrant route for him.

As Flaco’s illicit business continued to grow, his wife took charge of paying safe houses in Chiapas used to host migrants. The Ranfla and the Federation backed him and gave him the freedom to operate. As long as they received a cut of the profits, they were happy with Flaco’s expanding operations.

In light of his success, Flaco was named the leader of the MS13’s Mexico Program, a movement that began as a pipe dream among a small group of homeboys close to Flaco and the Ranfla. The program’s area of influence stretched from Chiapas to Celaya and mainly served an escape route for Salvadoran gang members fleeing the country.

However, not everyone was happy. Flaco and Veterano’s involvement with the CJNG and other Mexican criminal groups did not sit well with some of the homeboys who had lived in Mexico for years. This included Boxer, who told InSight Crime that “the essence of the MS13 was being distorted. The essence of the mara is gangsterism. When they wanted to change that, it ceased to be the mara,” he told InSight Crime.
For Boxer, Flaco was putting his own business interests ahead of the gang’s. He had even stopped being the Ranfla’s main contact in Mexico, having been forced to make way for Flaco. Flaco’s attitude, alien to the die-hard Los Angeles members, soon became a source of discomfort for many.

Back in El Salvador, Peewee and the Federation already controlled a number of drug routes scattered across the country. One clique operating on the western border with Guatemala, the Fulton Locos Salvatruchos, soon discovered that MS13 members were moving goods and people into Mexico without informing the Federation. In response, the Federation confiscated the drugs and those responsible were reprimanded.

**The End of the Truce**

By early 2015, El Salvador’s gang truce was in tatters.

The pact, begun during the administration of former president Funes and continued under his successor, Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019), abruptly came to an end on February 19.

That day, Cerén’s administration all but gave up on the truce, sending members of the Ranfla back to the high-security prison they had escaped as part of the deal. In response, the MS13 unleashed its fury, taking aim at the police, military and prison guards.

In a fit of rage, the Ranfla ordered the assassinations of various officials with the aim of pressuring Cerén’s new government into negotiating with them. Flaco was among those issuing death orders to execute El Salvador police.

Gang members gave no quarter, slaying security forces indiscriminately while the government fought back. The year 2015 would become the most violent in El Salvador’s post-war history, with some 105 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, in Mexico, Flaco and his program welcomed a wave of terrified homeboys fleeing El Salvador police.

In November that year, the Federation sent two homeboys to Mexico – Miguel Ángel Serrano Medina, alias “Cabro,” and Pedro Benjamín Rivas Zelaya, alias “Sniper” – with $1,500 to get there, according to documents compiled in Operation Jaque. Flaco helped them get into the country under the radar but naturally billed them for the trip.

In Mexico, Cabro and Sniper were supposed to meet with the country’s top drug trafficker, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias “El Chapo,” to negotiate drugs and arms dealings, according to intercepted phone calls included in a formal Attorney General’s Office accusation against another MS13 member implicated in Operation Jaque. The alleged meeting never took place, but that didn’t stop Sniper from sending drugs back to El Salvador.
Meanwhile, more and more MS13 gang members were popping up across Mexico. Marlon Antonio Menjívar Portillo, alias “Rojo,” and Jorge Alexander de la Cruz, alias “Krueger,” came to Celaya to shore up Flaco’s drug trafficking and human smuggling businesses.

As the exodus continued, some of the MS13’s members wound up in Mexican prisons and got in touch with other groups from the country’s criminal underworld, according to one emeese who spoke to gang investigators in El Salvador as part of Operation Jaque.

But around this time, the gang was beset with internal divisions. There were many reasons for this, largely revolving around what Boxer had said: the Ranfla was no longer looking out for the gang and was instead focusing on its own profits. Eventually, in 2015, a group of imprisoned gang members in El Salvador lost patience with the Ranfla. Among the rebels was Walter Antonio Carrillo Alfaro, alias “Shorty,” who accused the leaders of using the truce to generate lucrative income streams for themselves. At the Ilopango prison near San Salvador, Shorty decided to stoke a rebel movement dubbed the MS13 Revolucionarios (MS13 Revolutionaries).

The Ranfla was outraged. And on January 6, 2016, Peewee ordered Shorty’s assassination. His death would mark a key moment in the MS13’s internal war of succession, with those who had backed Shorty realizing the Ranfla had gone in another direction.

Soon after the rebellion, on April 1, 2016, the El Salvador congress approved a set of hardline prison measures, including banning visits, that severely impaired the Ranfla’s ability to communicate with gang members on the outside. In response, Peewee held several meetings with the Federation with the aim of rolling out a new plan known as the “Mara Project.” The crux of the plan was to collect extortion from all of the gang’s cliques and use it to buy weapons destined for a group of 500 elite homeboys charged with gunning down members of the El Salvador government’s security cabinet. The plan was initiated in April 2016, with messages exiting the prison with the names of those to be targeted.

But, in the end, the elaborate Mara Project never came to fruition. For the increasingly ambitious and money-hungry Ranfla, it was all about business.

In its quest for more riches, the Ranfla began shaking down marijuana shipments that its own members had sent back from Mexico. In March 2016, the Fulton Locos clique seized 19 kilograms of cannabis belonging to an MS13 member who had apparently not reported the shipment. Aside from the Ranfla, much of this money ended up in Peewee’s pockets, according to Extraño. It was just like Flaco’s side hustles in Mexico.
Hunting Down Flaco

In late 2016, another uprising was brewing. A rebel group made up of MS13 members from different cliques was furious at the Ranfla’s abuse of power, especially after Shorty’s death.

This new group of nearly thirty gang members called themselves the 503 Program, in reference to El Salvador’s international dial code. It was the MS13’s first major fracture.

The movement made its way to the streets with the help of Herbert William Meléndez Barrientos, alias “Tiburón” (Shark), an experienced gang member whose own clique wanted him dead at the time. Tiburón took over the 503 Program and fled to Mexico to avoid his impending assassination. He was well-versed in shipping marijuana between both countries, having sold Mexican cannabis to different gang cliques in El Salvador.

After a long stint in the MS13, Tiburón was now an enemy of the Ranfla and the entire gang. His hatred for the gang’s commanders grew fiercer when Flaco and other leaders ordered his sister’s death. From his base in the State of Mexico, Tiburón spent his time recruiting homeboys recently released from prison to the 503 Program so that he could go after Flaco.

The Mara Salvatrucha’s internal war had moved to Mexico.

By 2016, Mexico was a safe haven for gangsters, spanning almost every branch of the MS13. There were those loyal to the Ranfla and the Mexico program, those loyal to the 503 Program, and others in Tijuana, on Mexico’s border with the United States, far removed from the infighting back in El Salvador.

One of those in Tijuana was Alexander Flores Pacheco, alias “Mula,” a long-time operator in the city who was deported from the US to El Salvador in 2000 but later returned to Tijuana to work for the Mexican mafia, a powerful criminal group operating out of Californian prisons and banding together up to 50 gangs.

Mula had become a mafia man after his time in US state and federal prisons. His job at the border was to triangulate drugs between drug lords and mafia members in the United States.

Though little is known about Mula’s links to Mexican cartels - the Tijuana Cartel, Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG all operate in and around the city - his profile raised both intrigue and hostility from his fellow gang members. Some disgruntled gang members complained Mula was earning more money for the Mexican Mafia than for the Mara Salvatrucha, three MS13 members told InSight Crime.
The Mexico Program heard about Mula’s exploits in Tijuana and saw an opportunity to expand its business portfolio. According to one veteran MS13 member who spent time in Mexico, Rojo contacted Mula and told him the Ranfla needed his contacts to establish a single drug distribution route across Mexico.

Surprised, Mula said he could help them find cheaper crystal meth and cocaine suppliers, but that was all. He made it clear that his loyalties lay with the Mexican Mafia. Flaco’s men went quiet.

César Humberto López Larios, alias “Greñas,” of the Stoner Locos Salvatruchos // FBI Website
“They dropped it,” recalled the homeboy.

With that, the geographical scope of the MS13’s Mexico Program was capped at Celaya, in central Mexico. The North was not within their reach.

Years later, another MS13 member would pass through Celaya and Tijuana. His name was César C alias “Greñas,” a gang member deported from the United States to El Salvador in July 2017 for extorting Salvadorans from his base in California and for ordering the deaths of multiple police officers. He lived a life of luxury but faced life in jail as a result of his exploits.

But Greñas escaped from prison and soon came to Mexico to foster relationships with drug traffickers in Celaya, a task that made the Mexico Program uncomfortable.

In the meantime, Tiburón and his 503 Program were itching to take down Flaco and the Mexico Program. Alongside two of his homeboys, Tiburón frequently travelled from the State of Mexico to Celaya in search of Flaco but did not find him. His patience wearing thin, Tiburón made a WhatsApp video threatening Flaco that was forwarded to several gang members and viewed by InSight Crime.

“Mara Salvatrucha, here it is. We are from the MS13’s 503 Program. Tell Flaco, Veteranano, Krug [Krueger] that the party is over. They fucked up, they sold out the gang, they profited from the Mara, homie,” said Tiburón, accompanied by four armed men.

“Are we the rats, are we from the Zetas cartel? Hell no! We are the MS13. We’ve put [sic] our brains, minds and balls into the gang, homie. We’re telling Flaco, Veteranano, Krug that you don’t get in bed with the snitches, the truce assholes. We are 100 percent MS13 pride, homie. And here’s a shout-out to all the loyal homeboys, homie. And we’re telling Flaco that he’s going to see us soon. We are here in Guanajuato, Celaya as the MS13, homie, 503 Program.”

For Flaco, the video was a serious insult. After the recording circulated in several countries, Flaco ordered the assassination of Tiburón’s brother on the streets of El Salvador, according to Extraño. Alias “Chato” became Tiburón’s second relative killed on Flaco’s order, after his sister was murdered.

Tiburón was arrested months later in the State of Mexico and deported to El Salvador in mid-April 2018. He never was able to exact his revenge on Flaco.
The Fall

It did not take long for Flaco to follow suit. On January 11, 2019, after almost five years in Mexico, he was arrested in Celaya and deported to El Salvador. Twenty days later, he was sent to an infamous gang prison in Zacatecoluca, known as “Zacatraz,” on homicide charges.

There, he was reunited with the Ranfla, but not for long. For reasons still unclear, the veteran gang member, who had previously been on the El Salvador police’s list of most wanted criminals, was set free. An FBI alert published in early 2021 confirmed that Flaco was at large.

For a while, Flaco duped authorities into thinking he’d returned to Mexico. “He felt very smart for concealing his real location,” an agent that took part in his arrest told InSight Crime.

In the end, it came down to a clumsy mistake. The FBI had tapped a host of phones in an attempt to catch their man. And one day, with Flaco’s appetite getting the better of him, he called up a fast food restaurant to place an order, revealing his location in Usulután, a town in southern El Salvador. On March 2, 2021, he was detained by El Salvador police and Interpol agents.

The wiretaps showed just how important Flaco was within the MS13. FBI agents used this to their advantage, keeping him hidden for so long to try and convince the Ranfla that Flaco had turned on them and become an informant.

Many of his associates remain at large. Rojo, Krueger and Veterano continue to run the Mexico Program for the MS13 and operate in the State of Mexico along the train route which brings migrants north, according to one gang member who spoke to InSight Crime but asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

The fate of others remains ambiguous. Greñas, the MS13 member in Mexico who made the Ranfla nervous, is still wanted by the FBI but Boxer told InSight Crime that Flaco had him killed and “chopped into little pieces.”

As for Flaco, despite his importance to the MS13, El Salvador’s Supreme Court of Justice has stalled Flaco’s extradition request. This is not unusual, it has done the same for three of his Ranfla colleagues and another highly touted MS13 member, Armando Eliú Melgar Díaz, alias “Blue.” This makes Flaco’s legal situation ambiguous: he currently faces no other charges in the Salvadoran justice system.
Wanted flyers for “Krueger,” “Rojo” and “Veterano” on the portal for the PNC’s 100Most Wanted / PNC Webpage
Related Content

Don’t miss out on InSight Crime’s past investigations into organized crime dynamics in Central America, including how the MS13 and Barrio 18 have amassed power, and the way governments have cracked down in response.

Gangsters and Preachers - The Culture of Sexism Inside the MS13
EL SALVADOR / 15 JUN 2022

The MS13 gang and the Pentecostal Church appear to be polar opposites. But some similarities unite them.

READ HERE >

Gangs, Vendors and Political Capital in Downtown San Salvador
EL SALVADOR / 1 OCT 2020

In San Salvador’s bustling Historic Center, nothing gets done without going through the gangs.

READ HERE >

MS13 in the Americas: Major Findings
EL SALVADOR / 16 FEB 2018

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) is one of the world’s largest and arguably most violent street gangs. After relatively humble beginnings in Los Angeles in the 1980s, it has spread to more than...
InSight Crime is a think tank and media organization that seeks to deepen and inform the debate about organized crime and citizen security in the Americas by providing regular reporting, analysis, data, investigation, and policy suggestions on how to tackle the multiple challenges they present.

It does this by fusing investigative journalism with academic rigor, building its analysis from extensive ground research, which includes speaking to all the actors, legal and illegal. As well as its published work on this website, it works with a network of experts and partners in the region to provide bespoke risk analysis, diagnostics, and opportunities for positive intervention.

*For more information, visit insightcrime.org*