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## 15 The Threat of Armed Street Gangs in America

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### INTRODUCTION

The current threats to our national security from armed street gangs are a real and a frightening reality. Gang organizations can develop from low-level criminal groups to become highly organized in structure with developed ideological views. What begins as a group of impressionable and alienated young adults forming gangs has the potential to evolve into widespread armed criminal organizations across numerous jurisdictions. To control and prevent the threats posed by armed street gangs, the common social development and psychology of such organizations must be fully explored. In particular, criminal organizations such as MS-13 and neo-Nazi-based/skinhead gangs must be understood, based on their activities, as evolving and moving toward the status of the hyperorganized armed groups with structures and belief systems. As street-gang membership in the United States has reached numbers estimated around 700,000, the threat to our communities cannot be ignored.<sup>1</sup> With key factors present, the movement from armed street gangs to organizations that create domestic threats to U.S. national security is quite possible.

### ORIGINS

Throughout American history and the development of organized communities, there have been groups with different interests and activities outside the established mainstream society.<sup>2</sup> Often led by negatively controlling and charismatic leaders with different interests, they begin a process of claiming territory, while encouraging members of a

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social group to engage in deviant acts.<sup>3</sup> It has been difficult, if not impossible, in the twenty-first century, as it has been in the past, to develop an all-encompassing definition of such social organizations that ultimately emerge as gangs within American society. When individuals with a negative purpose begin to assemble on a regular basis, they are first seen as a distinct cluster by the members of a given community.<sup>4</sup> Once assembled, the newly formed members begin to engage in activities that result in a negative response from the authorities and community at large. A labeling process and a new negative identity then become adopted by the assembled group as it moves toward learning new forms of criminal behavior.<sup>5</sup>

All assemblies of young people in the United States go through this process whether they are Caucasian or part of a minority population, such as African Americans or Hispanics. Regardless of race, gangs thrive when certain conditions in a community are present. Young people existing in a working- and lower-class population, whether rural or urban, are potential gang members of the future.<sup>6</sup> An area of the nation with continuous poverty, low education rates, and decreased social opportunities also can raise the potential for street gangs to emerge.<sup>7</sup> The neighborhoods from which individual members of gangs originate have a strong psychological impact on the lives of young people. Impoverished neighborhoods where young people dwell can create an atmosphere in which they feel opportunities for advancement and respect are nonexistent, especially if they are young people who are first-generation Americans.<sup>8</sup> A “left behind” culture develops among potential and current gang members as others find ways to move up the economic and social ladders. Having little option or support from family, schools, or other social influences, the remaining young people are pulled together in a social vacuum struggling to find some identity among themselves.<sup>9</sup> The quality of home life and a sense of group identity are crucial factors in youth development.

Juvenile gang delinquency and criminal behavior are a result of poor socialization and an inability to accept the rules of society. The child is exposed to cultural and societal expectations by agents of socialization—parents and family, the schools, peers, the media, religion—that should influence a young person to act in accordance with the law and ethical societal norms. The socialization that takes place at an early stage in a child’s life is known as primary socialization. The primary influence on young people is parents and the immediate family.<sup>10</sup> The key here is that primary socialization is not always successful, as many families fail to properly socialize their children.<sup>11</sup> When the parenting of a child is inadequate, a child’s maturation process may potentially be damaged and the end result is antisocial or criminal behavior by the young person.<sup>12</sup> Over time many young people develop voids in their social developments that are ultimately filled by negative or socially undesirable beliefs and behaviors. If a young adult is devoid of opportunities for advancement and the possibility to earn respect and develop an identity/purpose in his or her life, in addition to missing positive social influences the young adult is left vulnerable to filling these voids through socially undesirable outlets. Gang culture is one realm in which these voids may be filled in a relatively immediate manner for these young adults. It gives them a sense of belonging, identity, and a purpose.<sup>13</sup> It creates an earlier social purpose of being part of a society of “us versus them” struggling to exist in an unfriendly and unforgiving environment.

It is also possible to describe the situation in terms of social disabilities. Social disabilities are manifested behaviors that are socially disabling and unacceptable. This is a key notion in what fosters gang behavior since in normal society, social disabilities effectively lower a person's self-esteem and make one view society negatively.<sup>14</sup> It can lead to a decreased participation in healthy social environments, such as school and community functions, thus resulting in outward rebellion against parents, teachers, police officers, and all those with authority. This also leads to an increased dependence on the acceptance of the gang and fuels any activity that might help the individual's status within the gang.<sup>15</sup>

A gang is any group of individuals who gather for an illicit purpose.<sup>16</sup> However, when rules, leadership, customs, and punishments become established and practiced within a gang organization, such a gang can now develop into what can be classified as an ethnic street power organization that terrorizes a local community, or "thug-life street gang," such as the Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, or MS-13. The word "thug," from the Hindustani word for deception, came from the original "Thugee" Indian thief terror gang. It is interesting to note that the Thugee gang provides us with an early example of an organized domestic terror gang whose psychological makeup was no different from that of current "thug-life street gangs."<sup>17</sup> A gang that doesn't reach the heights of becoming a major street power organization may develop and organize into a powerful street-based racial hate gang such as the current neo-Nazi/skinhead organizations.

A group of delinquents who evolve their organization from a small group of juvenile delinquents into a budding thug-life street gang or a racial hate gang actually change the makeup of the gang in order to grow. Like an onion, most thug-life street gangs or racial hate gangs develop into layers. At the center is the leader(s) of a gang who determines at what level of criminal activity the gang will function and what strategic criminal objectives need to be accomplished in a given area. Characteristics of the leader(s) are reflected in the day-to-day criminal activities of the gang. The leader is all-powerful. The next layer is the hard-core gang members. They are usually the older gang members, the individuals who are culturally and criminally enmeshed in the gang and are at risk of being so for life. Most violent gang activity and crime, as well as the majority of recruiting of young people, emanate from this portion of the gang organization. Hard-core gang members usually make up about 10–15 percent of the total gang membership.<sup>18</sup> This is followed by the associate gang members, who have usually made a personal commitment to the gang culture and are dedicated to achieving the level of recognition needed to attain hard-core status. The next level is the fringe level of gang participation. The fringe gang member is still able to function outside of the gang structure and has not made a total commitment to a life in the criminal gang culture. This type of member drifts in and out of the gang and seems to lack direction. The final level of gang membership is entry-level, or "wannabe," caste. It is important to understand that "wannabe" personnel are not actually gang members. They are youth who view the gang as an exciting place to be, a place where they could become "somebody" on the street. They are viewed as the future members of the gangs.<sup>19</sup> Wannabes may emulate gang dress, graffiti, hand signs, and other gang cultural symbols, and they may associate with known gang members, but they have

not yet been accepted fully into the gang. Therefore they may engage in violent acts like the hard-core members in order to prove themselves.

Each layer of a developed street gang has been found in general to have differences in measured intelligence, impulse control, school performance, and group dependence. It is interesting to note the organizational parallel between a street gang and the military. Rank, structure, and clothing indicators are important in understanding the power structure and allegiance to a group within both military units and street gangs.<sup>20</sup>

With such a structure in place, rules and customs set by the leader(s) allow the gang to develop its culture and propaganda, which serve as an alluring attractive force for a young person looking to fill the voids in his or her life. As the culture and image of the gang develop, the gang is able to recruit in an organized fashion through the efforts of the hard-core members through seduction. For a long time gangs have used this technique to recruit new members. They create glorified fraternal myths about the gang that are very attractive to young recruits, and very often these myths become the foundation for young recruits.<sup>21</sup> For a group such as MS-13 or the neo-Nazi street gang, an easily communicated “us versus them” emotional appeal is a powerful recruiting and selling point on the merits of such organizations. Many armed gangs take the “obligation approach” by teaching young people that joining the gang helps the community.<sup>22</sup> The most powerful of these trappings, however, are the promises of money, sex, and glamour. The symbols of the gang (the graffiti, hand signs, colors, tattoos, clothing, etc.) can create a visual attraction for young people. Young people realize that with these symbols they are part of something organized and powerful. Parties are also very useful ways for recruiters to seduce young people into the gang. At the party they have fun, come under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and believe the rhetoric they are bombarded with by other gang members. In other cases, street gangs may use a coercive approach to recruitment through intimidation.<sup>23</sup> Coercion and intimidation tactics may also include both physical and psychological tactics.<sup>24</sup>

For hate-based street gangs, we must make a major differentiation from other street gangs. All major established gangs have similar recruiting, structure, and psychological differences depending on the membership status of the individual in the group. However, hate-based groups have a focus on extreme hatred of a particular group in society and a greater social belief system in the “us versus them” attitude. This is notable in terms of the development of the belief structure of this type of group, which goes beyond a need to fill voids; instead it pushes them toward adopting and adhering to reactionary, racist, or anti-Semitic ideology.<sup>25</sup>

## **FROM STREET GANG TO ORGANIZED ARMED GROUP**

The tougher stage of development from a local street gang to an organized armed group can be explored with an understanding that a thug-life street gang or hate-based gang can move toward a much more violent and dangerous extremist organization. The terms “extremist” and “radical” are often used to label those who advocate for or use violence against the will of the larger social body, but they are also used by some to describe those who advocate for or use violence to enforce their wills on the social body, such as a government or majority constituency.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that street gangs are

not usually considered extremist organizations since the common perception is that they do not take a position in the realm of politics, while they place their focus on profit from illegal criminal enterprises or local power struggles on the street. In reality, upon reaching a high point in its development, a developing street gang does reach a political stage in terms of influencing the culture in a neighborhood and can challenge legitimate democratic institutions for the purpose of protecting the values of the gang organization and its ability to engage in illegal activities. Street gangs also began as youths who were the outsiders in the community and soon realized that the armed muscle of their organization could demonstrate power on many scales. Once a group has reached significant power through acquiring money, weapons, and a large number of members, it can now fully influence the political and cultural environments of its location for its own benefit. For example, the thug-life street gang the “Crips” was a rebirth of a gang previously called “The Crips,” founded in Los Angeles, California, in 1969 by 15-year-old Raymond Washington and Stanley “Tookie” Wilson. Washington initially called the gang the “Baby Avenues” or “Crips” in an attempt to emulate older gangs and activities carried out by the politically active Black Panthers organization.<sup>27</sup> While the origins of the name “Crips” is not clearly known, it has been suggested by many that the gang’s name change from “Crips” to “Crips” was made to reflect the new abbreviated motto and status of the gang when it reached a point of power as a “Community Revolution in Progress.”<sup>28</sup>

When a group goes from a street gang to an armed organization with extremist characteristics, it is also clear that the research within the walls of such a group is extremely limited. While a totally all-encompassing theory is impossible to build, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) bulletin for law enforcement has described the seven stages of hate that help show the evolution from a small gang to a fully developed armed and organized criminal group. These seven stages, while developed to understand extremist groups, are easily applicable in understanding the development from a formation point early in the history of the gang to the execution of its goals as a major armed street organization.

### **Stage 1**

Hate is an emotional fire that often goes cold over time. To maintain a constant state of hatred requires a constant rekindling of hate that is accomplished much more easily in a group surrounding. Irrational haters seldom hate alone. They feel compelled, almost driven, to entreat others to hate as they do. Groups, besides rekindling hate, also provide peer validation, which bolsters a sense of self-worth while at the same time preventing introspection that reveals personal insecurities. Frustrated and angry, individuals that are otherwise ineffective as threats to others now become empowered when they join groups that also provide anonymity and diminished accountability for criminal hatred-driven actions.<sup>29</sup> The hatred against police, the community, and rival gangs can be constantly maintained by key members in a gang in order to keep personnel motivated and loyal to the gang.

### **Stage 2**

A gang can form identities through symbols, rituals, and mythologies that enhance the members’ status as having power while degrading the people who are a source of their hate. For example, skinhead groups may adopt the swastika, the Iron Cross, the

Confederate flag, and other supremacist symbols. Thug-life street gangs such as the Bloods or Crips use hand signals and specific graffiti symbols. Group-specific symbols or clothing often differentiate hate groups from original street gangs looking for money and respect.<sup>30</sup> Group rituals, such as secret hand signals and secret greetings, further fortify members as members of an almost mystical and religious organization.<sup>31</sup> Gangs then incorporate some form of self-sacrifice to their codes, which allows members to willingly jeopardize their well-beings for the greater good of the causes. Giving one's life to a cause provides the ultimate sense of value and worth to life to an individual that has fallen for ideology. Skinheads and neo-Nazi organizations often see themselves as soldiers in a race war and potential martyrs for the cause of a pure white race. Likewise Hispanic street gangs such as MS-13 or the Latin Kings foster the belief that they must strive against a white America that is denying them true liberty and opportunities.

### **Stage 3**

Hate is the sustenance that emotionally and psychologically binds haters to one another and to a common cause. By constantly verbally debasing the object of their hate, haters enhance their self-images as powerful, as well as their groups' status as legitimate. Graffiti, for example, on buildings done by thug-life street gangs is demonstrative of this point. In fact, researchers have found that the more often a person thinks about aggression, the greater the chance for aggressive behavior to occur in a given society.<sup>32</sup> Thus, after constant verbal denigration of members of the community or rival gangs, the gang members in an organization progress to the next stage of development.

### **Stage 4**

Hate, by its nature, changes incrementally. Time cools the emotionally charged fire of hate, thus forcing the hater to look inward toward him- or herself. To avoid introspection, leaders of a gang or the hard-core gang members may use ever-increasing degrees of rhetoric and violence to maintain high levels of agitation and anger. Taunts and offensive gestures serve this purpose. In this stage, again using skinheads as an example, they typically shout racial slurs from moving cars or from afar. The hand signals and graffiti by thug-life street gangs or hate-based groups that use Nazi salutes often accompany comments toward the targets of hate. Most gangs claim control of turf proximate to the neighborhoods in which they dwell. One study indicated that a majority of gang-related crimes occur when a gang member of a target group travels through the group's perceived turf.<sup>33</sup>

### **Stage 5**

This stage is critical because it differentiates vocally abusive gang members from physically abusive ones. In this stage, the group becomes more aggressive, prowling its area seeking vulnerable targets. Violence unites a gang and further isolates it from mainstream society. Gangs, almost without exception, attack in groups and target single victims where opportunity for success is likely. Research has shown that physical violence and the element of thrill seeking are rampant in young delinquents. Researchers have found that 60 percent of hate offenders were "thrill seekers."<sup>34</sup> The adrenaline "high" intoxicates the attackers. The initial adrenaline surge lasts for several minutes; however, the effects

of adrenaline keep the body in a state of heightened alert for up to several days. Each successive anger-provoking thought or action builds on residual adrenaline and triggers a more violent response than the one that originally initiated the sequence of attack. Anger builds on more anger. The adrenaline high combined with hate becomes a deadly combination when directed at a target. Hard-core members of gangs often keep themselves at a level where the slightest provocation triggers aggression toward others.<sup>35</sup>

### **Stage 6**

Several studies confirm that a large number of attacks involve weapons. Some attackers use firearms to commit crimes, but some attackers prefer weapons, such as broken bottles, baseball bats, blunt objects, screwdrivers, and belt buckles, that increase the level of injuries on victims. These types of weapons require the attacker to be in close proximity to the victim, which further demonstrates the depth of personal anger, as opposed to discharging firearms at a distance, thus avoiding personal contact. Close-in onslaughts require the assailants to see their victims eye-to-eye and to become bloodied during the assault. Hands-on violence allows groups to express their hate toward the intended targets in a way a gun cannot. Personal contact empowers and fulfills a deep-seated need to have dominance over a target.

### **Stage 7**

The ultimate goal of people with hatred in a gang is to destroy the object of their hate. Mastery over life and death imbues the hater with feelings of omnipotence and power. With this power comes a great sense of self-worth and value. These are the very qualities that group members lack and have desired from the beginning when they first associated with a local gang. However, in reality, hate physically and psychologically destroys both the hater and the target.<sup>36</sup> As more and more members of a gang go through these stages, the more the organization gets dedicated members that will help the organization grow and engage in more daring criminal acts as well as recruit new members for the future.

## **A LOOK AT ARMED SKINHEAD AND NEO-NAZI GANGS**

Extremism in any organization serves as an emotional outlet for severe feelings being experienced by a person. In examining Nazi-doctrine-based gangs such as the skinheads or neo-Nazi organizations, we can see a clearer development of organizations that are becoming more sophisticated and closer toward dangerous groups capable of organized attacks and security breaches in American society.

Skinheads and neo-Nazi organizations began as gangs based primarily on hate and may in fact not necessarily have particular neighborhoods or turfs that they feel a need to defend.<sup>37</sup> In terms of contemporary American history, early skinhead and Nazi-based gangs focused on hatred toward African American and Jewish citizens. However, in the early 1970s such groups did not per se believe in Nazism and Nazi doctrine.<sup>38</sup> Skinhead groups in the 1970s in the United States were a developed offshoot from skinhead punk rock groups in Britain and were considered just local nuisances by law enforcement groups. In the later twentieth century, skinheads were at one point the visible foot soldiers for more organized neo-Nazi groups that did adopt Nazi doctrine as valid. Many of these politically focused Nazi-doctrine groups, such as the White Aryan Resistance

Group, the National Alliance, the Church of the Creator, and the New Order, have imploded and collapsed with the arrest of their leaders by the end of 2004.<sup>39</sup> This has left many skinheads on their own to form local gangs. It is likely at this time that skinhead and neo-Nazi gangs that are growing in vast numbers are in a free-for-all phase with new and unaffiliated street gangs proliferating rapidly.<sup>40</sup> Groups such as the Hammerskin Nation and the Vinlanders are consolidating skinhead and neo-Nazi gang members across the country, establishing a uniform code of appearances and conduct to avoid detection as more young people are engaging in gang activity in smaller groups.<sup>41</sup> Today's skinhead and neo-Nazi gang members are more violent and more technically savvy, using the Internet to organize and grow. While an established gang is dangerous, newly emerging skinhead and neo-Nazi gangs and wannabes that wish to join them are unknown to local law enforcement and the federal government. Such young adults are looking to prove their worth and are likely to engage in more violent acts than seen previously. Additionally adult members of such organizations now indoctrinate young people toward the worship of "Holy Father Hitler" and include a religious component of their organization that is impressed strongly upon young adults. Adult members teach the younger members that their violence and views toward minorities and Jews is the first step toward the revolutionary creation of a fascist political state, or "Fourth Reich," in America. Such a movement in America would strip all nonwhite citizens of constitutional protections and deport immigrants and foreign nationals. Each of these young adults is a virtual "human hand grenade" waiting to go off in a neighborhood or toward law enforcement personnel as more hate-based gangs emerge and grow both in size and in the nature of their criminal activities. Hate-based gangs in particular have now found a way to have an edge over thug-life street gangs, which jeopardizes our national security.

### **THE HIDDEN DANGER WITHIN THE RANKS**

With the pressing need to meet recruiting goals for the U.S. armed services, the current rush to get new recruits has allowed neo-Nazi street gangs a new opportunity. Neo-Nazi groups dream of a race war, counterrevolution, and violence among the U.S. population. Serving in the U.S. military offers the members of these groups a new opportunity to learn new fighting skills to enhance their hate-based street organizations. Adult leaders of hate-based street gangs encourage younger members to enlist in the U.S. military. The possibility of receiving advanced training and having access to weapons is guaranteed according to a 1998 study commissioned by the Department of Defense.<sup>42</sup>

Soldiers are trained to be skilled and proficient with military weapons and intense combat tactics and to understand organized violence on the battlefield. The reality is that military recruiters and base commanders around the world are looking the other way at suspected hate-based-street-gang members in the ranks. Although there is a need to bend to pressure to keep the ranks filled, once hate-based street gangs have made it inside a unit, they begin to use the Internet and other methods of communication to link up with fellow members.<sup>43</sup> Military investigators have uncovered an online network of 57 skinhead/neo-Nazi gang members who are also active-duty military personnel notably at Fort Lewis, Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, Fort Stewart, and Camp Pendleton.<sup>44</sup> Department of Defense gang detective Scott Barfield noted in *Intelligence Report* the rise of hate-based-gang

graffiti in Baghdad, noting that when it comes to such activity that is blatantly out in the open, “That’s a problem.”<sup>45</sup> When hate-based-street-gang members return to the United States or from a local base, they are now fit and trained and possess established contacts of colleagues that are all over the country. Such gang members by themselves hurt military readiness, unit cohesion, and morale by being in the ranks. It is not surprising that other street gangs such as the Crips, Bloods, and Latin Kings are now following suit and have their members joining the ranks of our military to balance the power on the streets of America. The potential time bomb of gang violence in the future is staggering to even imagine. However, while hate-based groups may be posing a threat in American communities and within U.S. military units, there is one thug-life street gang that has reached a point of development that can only be described using one word—epidemic.

### **MS-13—THE MOST DANGEROUS GANG IN AMERICA**

Of all the thug-life street and ethnic-based street gangs operating within America, there is no question that MS-13 is a major leader. With violent killings and criminal activity committed by this Los Angeles–based street gang at an all-time high, MS-13 has gone from obscurity to infamous notoriety.<sup>46</sup> It is considered the fastest-growing, most violent, and least understood of the nation’s armed street gangs. With the focus on the war on terrorism by federal law enforcement, the past few years have allowed this unique gang to reach an estimated size of 8,000 to 10,000 members in 33 states, and tens of thousands in Central America.<sup>47</sup> Membership worldwide is believed to exceed 100,000 members.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Origins of MS-13**

Composed mostly of Salvadorans and other Central Americans, MS-13 began in the 1980s by children fleeing the civil war in El Salvador.<sup>49</sup> Once arriving in the United States from the violent turmoil of El Salvador, they quickly faced new violence from Mexican gangs in the inner-city Los Angeles neighborhoods. El Salvadorans soon responded by banding together as groups of young people in a “*mara*,” or small gang unit, composed of *salvatruchas*, or street-hardened El Salvadorans.<sup>50</sup> The number 13 was added as a number signifying southern California to officially mark the emergence of the “wild El Salvadorans” of southern California. As El Salvadoran, and later Central American, youth found more opposition from Mexican gangs and economic opportunities to advance in their hometowns, MS-13 began to seek out former El Salvadoran paramilitaries that had received military training.<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that many of the paramilitaries were possibly trained or received their weapons from U.S. personnel during the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> This recruitment of paramilitaries is key because it changed the organization from a low-level street gang to an organization that was disciplined enough to engage in extortion and drug trafficking across different borders.<sup>53</sup>

As MS-13 began to grow and begin operating in the New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, areas, the initial response by the federal government was to employ the FBI and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers in using immigration laws as an antigang measure. The FBI and ICE worked together to deport hundreds of the gang members since most hard-core gang members were undocumented aliens. Members returning to El Salvador or their nations of origin responded by reorganizing themselves

abroad and created outposts for MS-13 in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.<sup>54</sup> To the surprise of federal law enforcement, deported members returned to the United States together with new recruits to spread through the United States in different locations. In addition MS-13 has allowed different races to join the gang organization in an effort to overpower other existing thug-life street gangs or local street-gang organizations. The organization has leaders in a given area, but one MS-13 clique in a city doesn't have complete authority over other MS-13 groups operating in distant locations. Local MS-13 units, or "*clicas*" have local leaders and treasurers who answer to the leaders of MS-13, but otherwise the local MS-13 groups operate independently.<sup>55</sup> With no clear hierarchy or structure to the entire organization, it is difficult to contain the organization, since making an arrest of one leader doesn't put a command/control dent in the organization as a whole as it does in the case of organized crime groups such as the Italian Mafia. Taking out the heart of the leadership is very hard when combating MS-13 if there is no definitive leadership for the organization as a whole.<sup>56</sup> According to the *Washington Times*, MS-13 "is thought to have established a major smuggling center" in Mexico that has helped the rise of cocaine distribution in the country at this time.<sup>57</sup> There are also numerous reports that MS-13 members have been sent to Arizona to target border guards and Minuteman Project volunteers.<sup>58</sup> Today MS-13 criminal activities at last count include international drug smuggling and sales, black-market gun sales, human trafficking, assassinations for hire, theft, and assaults on law enforcement officials. With the rapid increase of money and power, MS-13 may now in fact be moving toward a national command structure for all MS-13 cliques in the United States. According to a 2004 report by the National Drug Intelligence Center, MS-13 "may be increasing its coordination with MS-13 chapters in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia, and New York City, possibly signaling an attempt to build a national command structure."<sup>59</sup> On New York's Long Island, in 2003, an MS-13 leader arrived from the West Coast to try to organize these various cliques or sets into a more formal structure.<sup>60</sup> In northern Virginia, U.S. attorney Paul McNulty observed that "in some of the violent crimes occurring in the area, there seems to be a kind of approval process in some kind of hierarchy beyond the clique."<sup>61</sup> If MS-13 is indeed moving toward a national command structure for the gang, it is likely to be emulating its model in El Salvador. The El Salvador clique is highly organized and disciplined, with a vertical command structure. As a result, its criminal operations are more efficient and profitable.<sup>62</sup> MS-13 stands on the verge of merging into one of the most formidable organizations local law enforcement and federal authorities are likely to ever combat as the gang grows in the coming years.

## CONCLUSION

Armed street gangs are no longer a growing social problem faced by only local law enforcement agencies and community leaders. Such armed groups will continue to pose a security threat for our nation as they grow, evolve, and engage in more unthinkable criminal practices. By infiltrating the armed forces of the United States and engaging in organized transnational criminal activities, the future of violence within American communities will be shaped by armed street gangs.

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