

LONG ISLAND / CRIME**Advocates: Authorities unfairly target immigrants in MS-13 efforts**

Police and federal officials counter that they remain focused on curtailing a gang that preys on immigrants and said the steps they take are based on evidence.



A U.S. federal officer prepares for a night operation in Hempstead during an anti-gang enforcement effort on March 28, 2018. Photo Credit: Getty Images / John Moore

By Víctor Manuel Ramos

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Immigrant advocates on Long Island and in New York City say their clients often become unfair targets of gang-related allegations or suspicion, which they blame on an aggressive local and federal law-enforcement crackdown on MS-13, according to a report issued Wednesday.

Police and federal officials, though, countered that they remain focused on curtailing a gang that preys on immigrants and said the steps they take are based on evidence.

The report by the New York Immigration Coalition and the Immigrant and Non-Citizen Rights Clinic at the CUNY School of Law warns about the danger of law-enforcement agencies slipping into profiling and discriminatory policing.

The groups' survey of 43 legal service providers, organizations and advocates found that 78 percent had clients who faced questions about gang ties.

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The authors state that undisclosed criteria used by police to establish suspicion of gang membership have become “a pretext to detain and deport non-citizens,” particularly Central American immigrants. Officials have cast a wide net that lands many in trouble, sometimes just over their appearance, one advocate said.

“They are using things like what they are wearing, including the colors blue and white, the El Salvador country code of 503, lines shaved into the eyebrows, Chicago Bulls logos” found on clothes, personal property or social-media posts to flag alleged gang members, said Emily Torstveit Ngara, director of the Deportation Defense Clinic at Hofstra Law School.

The evidence is used by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to seek detention and deportation, “even in the absence of any prior interaction with law enforcement,” Ngara said.

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The Suffolk County Police Department defended its approach, saying “the violent street gang MS-13 has

posed a significant safety threat to our residents and we have responded by implementing increased enforcement and investigations” against it.

“Gang Confirmation criteria within the Suffolk County Police Department is consistent with that used by other law enforcement agencies and has been in use for more than 20 years. This intelligence is vital to our efforts to combat gang violence,” the statement concluded.

The New York City Police Department said its pursuit of the gang benefits the community.

“MS-13 is one of the most dangerous and violent gangs in the world and are involved in multiple crimes,

action is done with the sole purpose of targeting violent criminals, and making those in the community that they terrorize safer.”

Det. Lt. Richard LeBrun, a Nassau police spokesman, said, “When dealing with individuals arrested for crimes, as policy, the Nassau County Police Department will use identifiers and specific criteria for identifying members of gangs,” but that those arrested and detained or deported as a result “had a criminal history, detainers or gang membership in addition to being undocumented.”


An ICE official said its anti-gang efforts are “intelligence-driven.”

K. Babe Howell, a CUNY School of Law professor and gang database expert, said gang labeling over factors like apparel and places people frequent leaves entire communities under watch.

“For young people in communities of color, the impact is even more devastating in terms of how they can exist in this world,” Howell said. “They don’t have the freedom to engage in normal adolescent activities,” such as hanging out “with peer groups” without giving rise to suspicion. “They can’t do the things that nonsurveilled communities do.”



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