

Why the United States Should Change its Immigration Policy

How Immigration Policy Change led to MS 13

By Kira Wates-Williams



An arrested member of MS13 with tattoos symbolizing his loyalty to the gang. Meredith Kohut for [The New York Times](#).

Who would have thought that youth living in an impoverished Los Angeles neighborhood would end up being the foundation of one of the world's deadliest gangs? Los Angeles in the 1980s was introduced to a flood of El Salvadoran refugees, many of whom were [under the age of eighteen](#). Jobs were scarce, pay was low, and resentment was high. The Salvadoran families had fled to the United States from a brutal civil war [between the militarized government and a guerilla force](#) in search of refuge from the endless violence and fear threatening them in their home country.

Despite the hope that the United States would offer safety and solace, many families were faced with the harsh [reality of separation](#) from not only other communities but also within their own homes. Everyday greeted them with racism and the impending sense of fear of being deported back to a country ravaged by death and loss. The children were not excluded from the difficulties of adjusting to a new life. The refugee kids were forced to endure not only racist taunts from the bigoted Americans who resented the newcomers' presence, but also the [threats of violence from the gangs](#) that plagued L.A.'s poor neighborhoods and schools.

The Salvadoran youth, [already accustomed to](#) brutality because of their time spent in the violence ridden El Salvador, had no difficulty constructing a gang of their own. This gang would offer protection from other gangs and create a sense of community and family for the Salvadoran youth whose parents were [constantly working below minimum wage jobs](#) to sustain their families in America. This gang would come to be known as Mara Salvatrucha, or by its more common name, MS 13.

Politics Surrounding Policy

There is a perceptible racist undercurrent present in the United States' immigration policies. Latinos are regularly the victims of racist comments and actions that often end with the threat of deportation, and the 1980s was no exception to the pattern of racism and exclusion. The series of events that led to the substantial expansion of MS 13 began with California's [economic downturn of the 1980s](#). Some Californians felt the need to [blame their economic misfortune](#) on someone, and the coincidental recent arrival of Salvadorans provided the perfect target to blame.

Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at University of California, Berkeley suggests in her book *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* that California politicians from the 1980s, such as Pete Wilson, took advantage of California's xenophobic mindset and included in their campaigns [the promise of reducing government funding, such as health care, that supported undocumented immigrants](#). Pete Wilson claims that his advocacy of the proposition which would rescind government assistance to undocumented immigrants "[wasn't scapegoating. What it was doing was laying out the facts of what it was costing state taxpayers for federal failure](#)"; however, Wilson used the popularity of the proposition to win the racist and resentful voters' approval as a tactic to win the race for governor. The change in who received government funded services was just the beginning of what was to come in terms of policy change.

Targeting a group of people who escaped a violent war and removing their access to health services proved to be a highly misguided policy. Salvadorans no doubt felt even more isolated than before and therefore the need for community was even greater. The constant discrimination that they faced in school and work added to the need for some sort of community [which MS 13 provided](#). The implementation of the politician's promise to repeal welfare services planted a seed that would grow to become an even bigger policy change. Such a policy change would thus be the first step in cultivating one of the deadliest gangs in the United States.

Bedolla shows statistics from the 1980s showing that [63% of Californians believed immigration laws were too lenient](#). It is possible that the pressure from California to implement harsher immigration laws influenced America's Immigration and Naturalization Service, otherwise known as the INS, to change Salvadoran refugee status. The [El Salvadoran Peace Accords of 1992](#) ended the civil war, but its impact was far from peaceful. The end of the civil war meant that those who had fled to America as refugees [were no longer regarded as such](#). INS's decision to change the status of Salvadorans from refugee to undocumented immigrant allowed it to deport [any Salvadoran without citizenship back to El Salvador](#). This policy change and its execution were the main catalyst for expanding MS 13 because the primary group of people that were deported were Salvadoran prisoners who were associated with MS 13. This meant that many MS 13 members were sent back to El Salvador where they could recruit Salvadorans into the gang. MS 13 was no longer contained in the U.S.

Stephen Dinan from *The Washington Times* argues that Ramon Arevalo Lopez, [an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador who was accused of murdering a teenager in 2018](#), is an example of why the U.S. needs more restrictive immigration laws. Dinan accuses Arevalo Lopez of being [a member of MS 13 and that the lenient immigration laws in the U.S. enabled him to carry out gang orders](#); however, Dinan's analysis of the eighteen year old contains racist undertones and conceals certain details vital to understanding the full story. Dinan consistently refers to Arevalo Lopez as an "[illegal immigrant](#)" and [insinuates that the man had heinous intentions from the moment he entered the U.S. as a seventeen year old](#), yet it is important to point out that Arevalo Lopez had [no prior criminal charges before he was detained by U.S. immigration officers](#). [Before the alleged murder took place, Arevalo Lopez was sent to prison for eight months on the charge that he was affiliated with a gang](#). It can be argued that the United States immigration policy profiles young Salvadoran men as gang members, arrests them on inaccurate charges, and sends them to prisons which are [prime locations for gang recruitment](#) due to the concentration of violent criminals. Alice Speri from *The Intercept* explains that "[gang affiliation](#)" is a "[blanket allegation that has become the administration's default justification for its draconian immigration crackdown](#)" and subsequent U.S. law enforcement policies. Overall it can be concluded that the current U.S. immigration policy is faulty and effectively adds to the growing phenomenon of gang expansion.

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Adding Fuel to Fire

The Washington Examiner and Stephen Dinan from *The Washington Times*

advocate for the deportation of immigrants from Central America, including El Salvador. Both articles argue that [deportation](#) is the most effective method of [reducing gang violence and presence in the U.S.](#), but by examining the roots of MS 13’s plight and its effects, it is evident that deportation is a cause for concern. If the United States had not instigated such a change in immigration policy, it is possible that MS 13 would have been contained to Los Angeles and would therefore be easier to exterminate.

As it is, the deportation of Salvadorans back to El Salvador added fuel to the fire. The deported Salvadorans might have felt out of place in Los Angeles, but after more than ten years in L.A., returning to El Salvador was just as jarring as arriving in a new country. Gabrielle Banks interviewed a member of MS 13 who “[left El Salvador at five and returned via deportation at age twenty-five](#)”. The man, Weasel, recalls the events of his deportation: “[It was like out of the blue. They took my papers away. Shot me down here to El Salvador](#)” where he subsequently served twenty six months in prison for

[“weapons possession.”](#) [“I thought I was a permanent resident, but not so permanent, you know?”](#) Weasel is just one example of many Salvadorans who grew up in the United States only to be sent to a country they have no ties to. [Deportees like Weasel had no connection to the Salvadorans](#) who had remained in the country for the duration of the war, and thus once again felt out of place and in need of a community, so it is not surprising that the community they joined after deportation was the one they had formed in Los Angeles: MS 13.

“I thought I was a permanent resident, but not so permanent, you know?”

MS 13 gave its members opportunities in both L.A. and El Salvador that allowed them to lead more prosperous lives. Bedolla’s research shows that until the 1980s many immigrants relied on manufacturing jobs in L.A. which provided them with stable incomes to support their families, but in the 1980s when those jobs [decreased by 23.8%](#), it became increasingly difficult for immigrants such as Salvadorans to find consistent work. The lack of stable jobs meant that refugee parents struggled to find jobs that did not require long hours away from home. This meant that families spent less time together, expanding the schism between children and parents. Children no longer felt connected to

their families, but [MS 13 supplied them with other Salvadoran youth who faced the same issues.](#)

When these children grew up over the twelve years the civil war persisted, they needed work, and after witnessing their parents struggle to barely support their families, they [entered the world of drug trade.](#) The dearth of jobs available for immigrants in the United States added to the appeal of drug trade which could offer a substantial amount of money compared to working undervalued jobs that pay less than minimum wage, such as [“gardeners, restaurant workers, and nannies”](#). It is not surprising that MS 13 members entered the drug industry after years of witnessing their parents struggle economically. When they were sent back to El Salvador, [the economy was in shambles,](#) and once again the drug trade was a lucrative source of income.

Domino Effect

Not only did MS 13 members continue their relationship in El Salvador, but they also recruited more members to the group. Recruitment was an easy task considering the perceived advantages of joining the gang. The country was left with minimal jobs, an immense loss of life, and a numbness to violence. Kelley Padgett Lineberger, a graduate of Vanderbilt law school, includes research in her article “The United States-El Salvador Extradition Treaty: A Dated Obstacle in the Transnational War Against Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)” that the war left over [30,000 soldiers unemployed,](#) thus making them prime targets of recruitment. If the U.S. had refrained from deporting Salvadorans back to the

devastated country, MS 13's forces would not have been so extended in Central America. Because of the deportation of hundreds of Salvadorans, the gang was able to spread its roots throughout not only El Salvador but also other Central American countries.

As well as obtaining more members, MS 13 also acquired a plethora of weapons that had been distributed across El Salvador during the civil war. The increase of lethal weapons led to an increase in violence which was the last step to establishing the gang as a mortal threat. If the U.S. withheld from deporting Salvadorans, MS 13 would not have had access to the abundance of weapons. MS 13 consists of over [50,000 members worldwide and its members have been indicted for murder, extortion](#), and other violent crimes. In [1998](#) the gang was thought to be responsible for over [4,400 homicides a year in El Salvador, a country with a population of about six million](#). Although there are other gangs in El Salvador, MS 13 is now one of the largest and deadliest, and the U.S. must take part of the blame.

Call to Action

With the decision to deport Salvadorans back to a country not fit to support more people came an avalanche of effects. Lawmakers are responsible for listening to what the people want, but it is necessary to ensure that the demands of one group of people, for example the xenophobic Californians in the 1980s, will not negatively affect the lives of another group of people. Not only is this a moral and humanitarian issue, it is also an issue of societal responsibility. By exploiting the emotions of racist Californians, the politicians in the 1980s were responsible for creating a gang that would come to rule drug

trade not only in the U.S., but also in El Salvador and beyond. It is critical that a mistake like this is not made again. Politicians, lawmakers, and people in power must mold their priorities to the best interest of not only the majority vote, but also for that of the world beyond borders. The events that catalyzed the formation of MS 13 are a cautionary note that acting on the whims of a section of society, such as the racist notion that immigrants were to blame for California's economic crisis, can have a much greater negative impact than simply making a group of people temporarily pleased. The first devastating mistake is tracked back to the lack of citizenship documents the U.S. allocates. If immigrants were granted documents, they would be able to obtain sustainable jobs that allow them to have more choice, feel secure, and spend more time with their families, thus extinguishing the need to join a gang because of adverse circumstances. When politicians capitalized on the xenophobic tendencies of society in the 1980s, they were not only further marginalizing the thousands of immigrants from Central America, they were also unwittingly igniting the expansion of MS 13. In order for the U.S. to not repeat history, today's lawmakers must recognize prior mistakes and ensure they establish laws and policies that will not alienate immigrants from other countries.