



### E71 A Closer Look Into Latino Youth Gang Violence: From MS13 to the Latin Kings

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**Learning Overview:** The goal of this presentation is to educate attendees about Latino youth gangs and the violence that is seen on a daily basis throughout the United States, in order to keep themselves safe out on the streets.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by making attendees more aware of the “signs and symptoms” of Latino youth gang violence, so that they may keep themselves safe while investigating the deaths of these individuals.

One cannot open the newspaper or watch the local news without hearing of another casualty of gang violence. Throughout the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities, gang violence has reached epidemic proportions, according to the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Furthermore, gangs have been identified in every state, meaning that gangs are no longer just a California problem. Nationwide there are 24,500 gangs with a gang membership of more than 750,000, with the ethnic composition of these gangs including 47% Latino, 31% African American, 13% Caucasian, 7% Asian, and 2% Mixed. In particular, youth gang violence in the Latino community has had a dramatic increase in the past two years. In Los Angeles County, CA, alone, there are currently 750 documented Latino gangs with a gang membership of more than 93,000. Demographics report a gang member average age of 15 years old with a range of 8–22 years of age. Other counties in California and nationwide have seen increases in Latino gangs, especially in rural communities such as York, PA. The Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13), an El Salvadorian gang originating in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles, CA, since 1983, has seen the largest increase in membership nationwide, with more than 67% in some states. More than 600 gang members were interviewed for this study out in the streets, jails, and juvenile halls in California and Pennsylvania. This study identified eight distinct manifestations of gang violence and nine ethnic differences and similarities among Latino gangs (i.e., definite cultural differences between Latino gangs and various other ethnic gangs, drugs, weaponry, killing over turf/territory, extortion, defacing property/graffiti, and women in gangs).

This study found that Latino gangs are motivated by a state of mind driven by “La Raza,” which translated means “for the race.” It is important to note that La Raza is more of a cultural ideology than a gang-related motto. Latino gangs are extremely territorial and unlike African American gangs where the individual is important, for Latino gangs, it is the gang as a whole that is important and not the individual. To illustrate this point, when Latino gang members go to prison, one of two prison gangs run and controlled the environment depending on the geographic location of the prison: La Eme or Nuestra Familia. La Eme, otherwise known as the Mexican Mafia, is a prison gang originating in California and is considered the leadership arm of all Latino gangs in Southern California. The letter “M” in Spanish is pronounced “eme” and is the 13<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet. Consequently, throughout Southern California, Latino gangs will often call themselves by the city or area that they represent, followed by the number “13” to indicate “La Eme” or “Southern” by giving respect to the Mexican Mafia. In Northern California, the Nuestra Familia, which translated means “our family,” is the prison gang that controls every Latino gang north of Fresno, CA, and is often indicated by the number “14,” representing the letter “N” for Nuestra and Northern. It is important to remember that Latino gangs are not just a California problem, although California is where these gangs originated. Rural, suburban, and urban communities across the nation are now seeing an increase in Latino gangs that mimic the California-based Latino gangs, such as the MS 13.

In direct response to the increase in gangs, the state of California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Idaho have passed gang enhancement laws, which increase the penalty if an individual is found to have committed a felony for the benefit, association, or direction of a criminal street gang. Other states, including California, have also filed a civil injunction or “gang injunction” against specific gangs, whereby removing the leadership of the gang and disbanding its members.

The purpose of this presentation is to present timely data on Latino gangs and offer strategies on how to recognize and interpret various tattoos and graffiti associated with these gangs, which could assist the medical examiner/coroner and death investigator in the positive identification of the decedent out in the field and/or in the autopsy room. This presentation will also discuss some of the recent gang-enhancement laws that California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Idaho have in place to help tackle this deadly problem.

#### **Latino Gangs, Gang Enhancement Laws, Youth Violence**