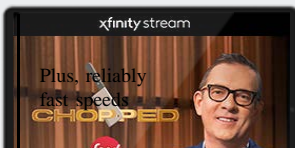





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**MS-13: Who are they?**









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JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

**US Attorney Andrew Lelling spoke to reporters Wednesday.**

**By Cynthia Fernandez and Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 14, 2018

Massachusetts US Attorney [Andrew Lelling said Wednesday](#) that MS-13, the murderous international street gang, had been “all but eradicated” in the Boston area.

Here is a primer on the organization, which has been targeted by an FBI-led special task force launched in 2004.

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MS-13 began in the East Los Angeles barrios during the 1980s, when recent civil war refugees, mostly from El Salvador, organized to compete with reigning local Mexican gangs.

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Mara Salvatrucha, the expansion of the term MS, is a blended phrase that combines colloquial forms of the words “gang,” “El Salvador,” and “street smarts.”

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Toward the end of Bill Clinton’s presidency, the US government began deporting convicted immigrants through the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. An estimated 20,000

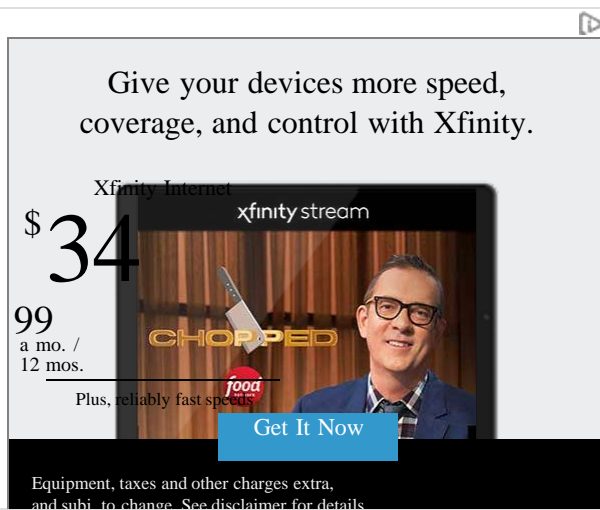
criminals were ordered home to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

“It was like sending them to gang finishing school,” said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, which favors less immigration. “The conditions in El Salvador were not much better than when they left.”

Many returned to the United States, where they continued to recruit teenagers into the gang and committed many crimes.

The gang has been tied to “drug distribution, murder, rape, prostitution, robbery, home invasions, immigration offenses, kidnapping, carjackings/auto thefts, and vandalism,” the FBI has said. “While most of the violence is directed toward other MS-13 members or rival street gangs, innocent citizens often get caught in the crossfire.”

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The Trump administration has held up MS-13 to justify its hard-line stance on illegal immigration. The gang’s motto is “mata, viola, controla,” or “kill, rape, control,” officials say.

Gang members often target middle and high school students for recruitment. Members operate throughout Massachusetts, including in East Boston, Everett, Chelsea, Somerville, Lynn, and Revere. In the past, court documents show, students as young as 14 and 15 have been recruited from Chelsea High School, Everett High School, and East Boston High School.

Vaughan said that soon after its formation, the gang found illicit ways to make money.

“They found that they could make money selling weapons. These were already hardened individuals,” she said.

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Mneesha Gellman, a professor of Latin American studies and political science at Emerson College who has studied El Salvador, said it is unlikely members of MS-13 join the gang through choice.

“Most folks who have the option of getting physical security and economic opportunities through formal sectors don’t join gangs,” Gellman said.

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