



FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
INTELLIGENCE BULLETIN

**Criminal Investigative Division
National Gang Intelligence Center
23 July 2019
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(U//LES) Mara Salvatrucha Very Likely Implementing Security Measures To Conceal Communication, Hindering Law Enforcement Detection Efforts

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(U//LES) The FBI and the National Gang Intelligence Center assess Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) members very likely^a are implementing security measures in an effort to conceal their communications, hindering law enforcement's ability to intercept and identify MS-13 activity. This assessment is made with high confidence,^b based on reporting from human sources with various degrees of access and corroboration.

(U//LES) The FBI and the National Gang Intelligence Center assume MS-13 members desire to limit law enforcement's interception of their communications. A key assumption is the MS-13 techniques described in this intelligence bulletin are for the benefit of the gang's security rather than other non-gang related reasons. The FBI judges MS-13's use of security measures likely will evolve in the long term, therefore making the interception of the gang's communications and subsequent identification of its criminal activity challenging for law enforcement. If human sources indicate MS-13 members use the techniques described in this intelligence bulletin for reasons other than operational security, the FBI will reevaluate its overall assessment.

^a (U) See Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood.

^b (U) See Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information.

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(U) Source Summary Statement

(U//FOUO) Reporting in this intelligence bulletin was derived from four FBI human sources, two with direct access and two with indirect access. Some of the reporting was corroborated through FBI investigations. The reporting from each of the human sources was key in identifying a different communication method used by MS-13. The judgements in this intelligence bulletin could be strengthened if additional human sources reported on the measures MS-13 members take to conceal their communications. The collection occurred between June 2017 and April 2019 and was current as of 30 May 2019.

(U//LES) MS-13 Very Likely Implementing Security Measures To Conceal Communication, Hindering Law Enforcement Efforts To Intercept and Identify Gang Activity

(U//LES) The FBI and the National Gang Intelligence Center assess MS-13 members very likely are implementing communications-related security measures, hindering law enforcement's ability to intercept the gang's communications and identify gang activity. This assessment is based on MS-13's attempts to obfuscate their activity from law enforcement.

- (U//FOUO) According to a human source with direct access, as of April 2019, MS-13 leadership had provided a code list^c for numbers to be used when MS-13 members communicated. Each number on the list represented an MS-13 member and was followed by the name or alias of the corresponding individual and the location of where the member was located.¹
- (U) As of May 2018, MS-13 members used anagrams^d of rearranged letters within certain words to conceal the actual word, according to a human source with indirect access. For example, "tarma" was an anagram of "matar," which is the Spanish word for "kill."²
- (U//LES) As of December 2018, MS-13 leaders of cliques belonging to the US East Coast Program communicated primarily through the application Telegram^e and occasionally through Blackberry Messenger (BBM),^f according to a human source with direct access. The Program leader communicated with the clique leaders three times a day.³
- (U//LES) As of June 2017, MS-13 members used Subscriber Identity Module cards with the Salvadoran country code 503 in phones in the United States and then used the 503 numbers to create secure messaging app accounts, according to a human source with indirect access.⁴

^c (U) A code list is a pre-determined list of words that both the sender and receiver maintains. This allows a non-related word to be used in place of the intended word. For example, a sender and receiver pre-determine the word "dog" to mean "gun" and "groomer" to mean "house" allowing them to write "did you pick the dog up from the groomer?" but have the receiver understand that to mean "did you pick the gun up from the house?"

^d (U) An anagram is the transposition of letters or syllables in a word or name. For example, "Loco" could be changed to "Colo," for a syllabic anagram or "Cool" for a transposition of letters.

^e (U) Telegram is a cloud-based instant messaging and voice over Internet protocol service. Users can send messages and exchange photos, videos, stickers, audio files and documents.

^f (U) BBM was one of the first messaging apps to use read receipts and typing indicators. The consumer version of BBM shutdown on 31 May 2019 but BBM Enterprise is still available.

(U) Perspective

(U//LES) MS-13 members often use smartphone applications to communicate in lieu of making phone calls or sending text messages. Several messaging applications offer end-to-end encrypted communication, where only the sender and recipient can view the message content. Additionally, multiple online articles advertise applications with the most up-to-date security and encryption features, allowing individuals, including gang members, to research and identify the latest, most secure applications. FBI investigative reporting indicates in some cases MS-13 members inform other MS-13 members which application to use. For example, MS-13 members use the term “blue line” to refer to Telegram and “green line” to refer to a secure messaging app.⁵ Use of code lists and anagrams is an additional challenge for law enforcement to interpret MS-13’s communications even after they are intercepted. This intelligence bulletin is a baseline product focusing on MS-13’s use of communication security.

(U) Analysis of Alternatives

(U) The FBI and the National Gang Intelligence Center considered the alternative hypothesis that MS-13 members likely implement certain practices such as communicating via identified applications simply for convenience and not as an attempt to implement security measures. The FBI deemed this alternative hypothesis to be less likely due to reporting that indicates concealing communication is a priority and MS-13’s history of trying to evade law enforcement. If future reporting indicates MS-13 members freely talk about their plans without encrypted applications or covert communication techniques because they are not concerned with evading law enforcement, the FBI would reassess this alternative hypothesis.

(U) Outlook

(U//LES) In the short-term, the FBI and the National Gang Intelligence Center assess MS-13 likely will use additional applications if the gang believes the applications offer operational security and are difficult for law enforcement to intercept. Additionally, MS-13 members likely will update their code lists and share the lists with relevant MS-13 members making future intercepts of the gang’s communications and subsequent identification of its criminal activity challenging for law enforcement. In the long-term MS-13 members likely will expand the use of anagrams in their communications as long as they believe anagrams cannot be interpreted by law enforcement. Reports of MS-13 using new applications or modifying their covert communication techniques to include the implementation of methods not typically associated with the gang will indicate MS-13 is attempting to conceal its communications.

(U) Intelligence Requirements

(U) FBI National Standing Collection Requirements

- (U) USA-CRIM-CID-SR-0803-19.II.B

(U) This intelligence bulletin was prepared by the Criminal Investigative Division National Gang Intelligence Center of the FBI. Comments and queries may be addressed to the Unit Chief at 1-703-414-8600.

(U) Appendix A: Expressions of Likelihood

(U) Phrases such as “the FBI judges” and “the FBI assesses,” and terms such as “likely” and “probably” convey analytical judgments and assessments. The chart below approximates how expressions of likelihood and probability correlate with percentages of chance. Only terms of likelihood should appear in FBI products; the chart includes terms of probability strictly for comparison, as they sometimes appear in reporting of other government agencies. Furthermore, the FBI does not arrive at judgments through statistical analysis; and will not use terms of probability to convey uncertainty in external FBI intelligence products.

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<i>Terms of Likelihood</i>	Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
<i>Terms of Probability</i>	Remote	Highly Improbable	Improbable (Improbably)	Roughly Even Odds	Probable (Probably)	Highly Probable	Nearly Certain
	1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

(U) Appendix B: Confidence in Assessments and Judgments Based on a Body of Information

(U) Confidence levels reflect the quality and quantity of the source information supporting a judgment. Consequently, the FBI ascribes high, medium, or low levels of confidence to assessments, as follows:

(U) **High confidence** generally indicates the FBI's judgments are based on high quality information from multiple sources. High confidence in a judgment does not imply the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong. While additional reporting and information sources may change analytical judgments, such changes are most likely to be refinements and not substantial in nature.

(U) **Medium confidence** generally means the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence. Additional reporting or information sources have the potential to increase the FBI's confidence levels or substantively change analytical judgments.

(U) **Low confidence** generally means the information's credibility or plausibility is uncertain, the information is too fragmented or poorly corroborated to make solid analytic inferences, or the reliability of the sources is questionable. Absent additional reporting or information sources, analytical judgments should be considered preliminary in nature.

(U) Endnotes

¹ (U//FOUO) FBI; IIR; 4 214 1203 19; 17 May 2019; early April 2019; “(U//FOUO) Code Numbers Corresponding to MS-13 Members, as of Early April 2019”; UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USES ONLY; UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY; A collaborative source with excellent access, some of whose reporting has been corroborated for less than one year.

² (U) FBI; Case Information; 23 May 2018; 10 May 2018; “(U) Coded language and inverse words used by MS-13 in El Salvador”; UNCLASSIFIED//UNCLASSIFIED; collaborative source with mixed access, much of whose reporting was corroborated.

³ (U) FBI; Case Information; 25 February 2019; December 2018; (U) Official Translation 12/19/2018 TAG Interview of ARMANDO ELIU MELGAR DIAZ aka BLU de GANGSTERS”; UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY; UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY; Source was a detained MS-13 member. Some of the source’s information has been corroborated

⁴ (U//LES) FBI; Case Information; 27 July 2017; June 2017; “(U//LES) El Salvadoran SIM Cards Used to Activate [Name withheld] Accounts by United States based Members of Mara Salvatrucha”; UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE; UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE; A collaborative source, some of whose reporting has been corroborated.

⁵ (U//LES) FBI; IIR; 4 214 1127 19; “(U//LES) MS-13 Code Words for Communication Methods, as of Mid-April 2019”; 30 May 2019; April 2019; UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE; SECRET//NOFORN//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE; A collaborative source with excellent access, some of whose reporting has been corroborated over the past four years.



Federal Bureau of Investigation

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