

“Maras” ride immigration wave into Spain

EU, other countries collaborate to fight gang threat

The unprecedented wave of Latin American immigrants entering Spain since 2000 has swept in hundreds of thousands of newcomers willing to do work Spaniards spurn. Riding the wave of these Spanish-speaking immigrants are Latin American gangs eager to strengthen their toehold in Europe.



Spanish police seized this cocaine from a ship at the port of Las Palmas, in Spain's Canary Islands, in March 2009. Spanish authorities fear that gangs may increase drug trafficking.



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Colombian and Mexican drug cartels have stalked Europe's underworld for decades. But new blood has arrived in the form of Central American "maras," or Spanish slang for gangs. One notable addition is La Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, El Salvador's notoriously violent criminal gang that Spanish and Salvadoran officials say has reached into southwestern Europe. Known for their garish tattoos and deftness with knives, the Salvadorans have made their debut in cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, recruiting not just disaffected Latin American youth but young Spaniards and Moroccans.

Though this particular gang problem in Europe is embryonic, it has already drawn the scrutiny of the Spanish Civil Guard, Europol, the United Nations, El Salvador's Transnational Anti-Gang Center and other agencies. Since 2009, Spanish authorities have attributed at least one murder and several assaults to MS-13 members. In the case of a Bolivian teen stabbed in Barcelona in November 2009, police said they detained a suspect who declared his MS-13 affiliations.

"The time when the maras were just a Central American problem is over. Now they also threaten Europe," José Manuel Martínez said in a January 2010 story on the news website *elsalvador.com*. Martínez runs the Panama operation of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC. The office opened in September 2009 and will partner with other Central American, Caribbean and European Union law enforcement agencies to combat the spread of the gangs.

Partners in crime

Spanish authorities have grappled with immigrant gangs for years. In and around Madrid, Spanish police estimate gang strength at more than 1,000 members, though only a fraction of those are considered violent. An example of a violent gang

is Spain's Latin Kings. Formed around 2000 mostly from immigrants, it drew attention when its leader, an Ecuadorean named Eric Javier Velastegui, was jailed for rape in 2006. Kidnappings, killings and robberies fill the roster of crimes committed by the gangs.

The newcomers are finding lucrative avenues among established criminal networks. Well-entrenched criminal syndicates such as southern Italy's Camorra and 'Ndrangheta mafias have established affiliations with some of the Latin American gangs, Spanish, Europol and U.N. officials said. The 'Ndrangheta, based in relatively poor and isolated Calabria, acts as middleman for a reported 80 percent of the cocaine smuggled into Europe. The Naples-based Camorra mafia also runs Spanish subsidiaries dedicated to selling the narcotic.

News reports have highlighted the arrests in Spain of several high-profile Camorra chiefs with established links to Latin American gangs. In 2009, the Italian Carabinieri and Spanish Civil Guard arrested Salvatore Zazo, a fugitive said to be acting as liaison between Latin American drug gangs and the Camorra.

"The Camorra has a large network of Latin American and Spanish collaborators in Spain," Madrid's daily newspaper, *El País*, quoted Italian police as saying.

Spain's allure

Immigration lies at the heart of the recent gang infiltration. During Spain's most recent economic boom, which had ended by 2008, the country accounted for roughly half of the new jobs created in the EU, more than its own work force could fill. To gain more workers, Spain loosened its immigration policy.

In less than a decade, immigration has rewritten the demography of Spain. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero's 2005 amnesty for an estimated 800,000 illegal immigrants encour-

aged even more arrivals. In 2007, an additional 749,000 foreigners poured into the country, according to Spanish government figures. From 2000 to 2008, the population jumped from 40 million to 46 million. Today, more than one in 10 residents of Spain is foreign born, including more than 1 million Latin Americans, according to Spain's National Statistics Institute. More than half a million of those came from Ecuador, the top source for Latin American immigrants.

But that immigration-fueled prosperity looks shakier today. Spanish economic growth, based largely on an easy-credit construction binge, has stalled. EU reports show the country has an unemployment rate of more than 20 percent, the highest in the eurozone. Unemployment among youths is approaching 50 percent. Gangs that offer pride, protection and the enticement of easy money threaten to lure new members from the ranks of the unemployed in working-class and immigrant neighborhoods.

Policing the problem

Members from an assortment of New World gangs such as the Latin Kings, the Ñetas, the Forty Twos and the Chicagos have emerged as small-time criminals and street brawlers in places such as Barcelona and its suburbs. Spanish authorities in Madrid and Barcelona have different approaches to the gang issue. Madrid treats the gang presence as a criminal matter. Barcelona, capital of the autonomous region of Catalonia, has adopted a softer approach. It legalized gangs such as the Latin Kings in 2006, more or less labeling them immigrant social clubs, according to Spanish news reports. Barcelona police assume that Ecuadorean teens, even if they call themselves Latin Kings or members of MS-13, are mostly wayward youth looking for acceptance. As the Spanish economy has soured, Catalonia has been the source of much anti-immigrant sentiment. Skeptics such as the Civil Guard, Spain's national police force, accuse Barcelona of mislabeling the problem.

"This is no 'West Side Story,'" Francisco Pérez Abellán, a Madrid author who has researched Spain's gangs, said in a *Chicago Tribune* report. "The Latin Kings mean juvenile violence, machismo and violence against women. This group cannot simply remake itself. ... It would be like a neo-Nazi group wanting to form some kind of recognized association."

Criminal enterprise

Police in Spain and the EU fear the recently arrived gangsters will enter into the continent's already problematic drug trade. Spain's long coast has made it a popular drug smuggling point for South American cocaine and North African hashish. Europol, the EU law enforcement agency, warned as early as 2007 that "increasingly heterogeneous criminal groups," including Latin gangs, have gathered around these Iberian gateways.

Interdiction successes by Spanish and other European police and military agencies have interrupted that direct



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Graffiti in the southern Madrid suburb of Alcorcon expresses anti-immigrant sentiment. Alcorcon has seen violent confrontations between gangs of Spanish and South American youth.



A police officer helps unload cocaine seized from a ship in Spain's Canary Islands in March 2009 as another makes an arrest. Immigrants and the unemployed in Spain are at risk of being lured into Europe's drug trade.

REUTERS

drug route, forcing traffickers to ship through West Africa. The drug trade in Europe is lucrative as demand for cocaine continues to grow. A kilogram of cocaine that sells for about \$22,000 in the U.S. sells for close to \$45,000 in Europe, analyst Ashley-Louise Bybee wrote in a 2009 report, "The Narco-Curse in West Africa."

Illegal drugs are not the sole source of income for Latin American gangs. According to the U.N., extortion, counterfeit medicine, pirated designer clothing, prostitution, and human and organ trafficking are also mainstays. Criminals even play a role in deciding who can settle in Europe and who cannot, said Göran Görzten, head of the Crimes Against Persons unit at Europol. "Ninety percent of the immigrants coming to the EU today have been helped, and that help is to a big extent coming from organized criminal groups," he said.

Mareros adapt

EU nations have tried to counter such threats. However, if the centuries-long history of Italy's Neapolitan and Calabrian gangs is any indication, eradicating such secretive and profitable organizations could take years. Even the formerly communist nations of Central Europe are not immune. In a January 2010 crime assessment by the nonprofit World Security Network Foundation, Czech authorities reported a "definite presence" of "various groups from Latin America."

The UNODC has been sounding the alarm about the new "marero," or gang member, arriving in Europe from Latin America looking for moneymaking opportu-

nities. Spain, which shares a common tongue, is the logical stepping-stone to the continent. For a group such as MS-13, flamboyantly violent in its old United States and Central American hunting grounds, blending in is vital.

"The leaders will arrive without tattoos and wearing ties," said Amado Philip de Andrés, an official with the U.N.'s anti-drug operation, said in an *elsalvador.com* report. "Their interest in Europe is not to take over the state by force, like they do in Central America. Instead, they will find new niches for criminal activity already exhausted on the American continent."

Maintaining vigilance

Police have had some success fighting organized crime in Spain. In February 2010, Madrid police arrested 54 suspected Latin Kings members, including some alleged to be leaders, *El País* reported. Spanish police have cooperated with European police agencies to break up Spanish, Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian and Italian gangs since 2005.

Police are watching and waiting for MS-13 to reveal itself. Latin American immigrants claiming allegiance to MS-13 have brawled with other gangs on the streets of Madrid. Spanish police are bracing themselves for violence should MS-13 try to muscle in on the territory of established gangs.

"The mareros would have to overthrow the people already distributing the drugs," an unnamed Spanish police inspector told *elsalvador.com* in January 2010. "This would provoke stages of violence. And then we would know they were here." □