A Betrayal

The teenager told police all about his gang, MS-13. In return, he was slated for deportation and marked for death.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
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If Henry is killed, his death can be traced to a quiet moment in the fall of 2016, when he sat slouched in his usual seat by the door in 11th-grade English class. A skinny kid with a shaggy haircut, he had been thinking a lot about his life and about how it might end. His notebook was open, its pages blank. So he pulled his hoodie over his earphones, cranked up a Spanish ballad and started to write.

He began with how he was feeling: anxious, pressured, not good enough. It would have read like a journal entry by any 17-year-old, except this one detailed murders, committed with machetes, in the suburbs of Long Island. The gang Henry belonged to, MS-13, had already killed five students from Brentwood High School. The killers were his friends. And now they were demanding that he join in the rampage.

Classmates craned their necks to see what he was working on so furiously. But with an arm shielding his notebook, Henry was lost in what was turning out to be an autobiography. He was transported back to a sprawling coconut grove near his grandfather’s home in El Salvador. In front of him was a blindfolded man, strung up between two trees, arms and legs splayed in the shape of an X. All around him were members of MS-13, urging him on. Then the gang’s leader, El Destroyer, stepped forward. He was in his 60s, with the letters MS tattooed on his face, chest and back. A double-edged machete glinted in his hand. He wanted Henry to kill the blindfolded man.

For years, the gang had paid for Henry’s school uniforms, protected him from rival gangs and given his grandmother...
meat for the family. In exchange, Henry had delivered messages and served as a lookout. Then the gang started asking him to come to shootouts, to help show strength in numbers. They also beat him for 13 seconds — an initiation ritual — and asked him to choose a gang name. He eventually settled on Triste, the Spanish word for “sad.” What you become when your parents abandon you as a toddler and go to America and leave you behind in a slum.

Henry hunched over his notebook, oblivious to the kids around him. Now he was 12, standing in the coconut grove, and it was time to complete the final initiation rite. He took the machete. It was sharper, with more teeth, than the one he used for chores at home. El Destroyer traced his index finger on the trembling man to show Henry where to cut: first the throat, then across the stomach.

“Your first killing will be hard,” El Destroyer told him. “It will hurt. But I’ve killed 34 people. I’m too tired to do this one.” He said the devil was there in the grove and needed fresh blood. And if Henry didn’t kill the man, the gang would kill them both.

So, to live a little longer, I had to do it.

But now, Henry wrote, he wanted to escape the life that had followed him from El Salvador. If he stayed in the gang, he knew he would die. He needed help.

He tore out the pages and hid them inside another assignment, like a message in a bottle. Then he walked up to his teacher’s desk and turned them in.

A week later, Henry was called to the principal’s office to speak with the police officer assigned to the school. In El Salvador, Henry had learned to distrust the police, who often worked for rival gangs or paramilitary death squads. But the officer assured Henry that the Suffolk County police were not like the cops he had known before he sought asylum in the United States. They could connect him to the FBI, which could protect him and move him far from Long Island.

So after a childhood spent in fear, Henry made the first choice he considered truly his own. He decided to help the FBI arrest his fellow gang members.

Henry's cooperation was a coup for law enforcement. MS-13 was in the midst of a convulsion of violence that claimed 25 lives in Long Island over the past two years.

President Trump had seized on MS-13 as a symbol of the dangers of immigration, referring to parts of Long Island as “bloodstained killing fields.” Police were desperately looking for informants who could help them crack how the gang worked and make arrests. Henry gave them a way in.

Under normal circumstances, Henry’s choice would have been his salvation. By working with the police, he could have escaped the gang and started fresh. But not in the dawning of the Trump era, when every immigrant has become a target and local police in towns like Brentwood have become willing agents in a nationwide campaign of detention and deportation. Without knowing it, Henry had picked the wrong moment to help the authorities.
Henry had tried to escape MS-13 before.

From the day he joined the gang, he was part of an operation that trafficked in a single product: violence. Other criminal enterprises attract members who want to get rich and who sell drugs or women or stolen goods to achieve that aim. Violence is a tool for carving out territory and regulating the marketplace. MS-13, by contrast, was established by Salvadoran refugees in Los Angeles who were seeking community after fleeing civil war. The gang offers a sense of security and belonging to its members, who kill to strengthen the group and move up the ranks. Members sometimes sell marijuana and cocaine, but major cartels have been uninterested in partnering with the gang, because purposeless violence is bad for business. MS-13 kills in large groups to minimize betrayal, and it uses machetes, a weapon even the poorest can afford.

In his first few years running with the gang in El Salvador, Henry witnessed more than a dozen murders. He learned how soft skin feels when you slice into it and how bodies, when they are sprayed with bullets, look like they are dancing. Then, in 2013, a shaky truce between MS-13 and the rival gang Barrio 18 broke down. The country’s slums became as dangerous as any war zone. One afternoon, when he was 15, Henry was playing cards in an abandoned lot when he got a call from a stranger. The voice on the phone told him that if he did not leave the country within 24 hours, he would be disappeared — along with his grandparents. To protect his family, Henry set out that night to join his mother and father on Long Island. Before he left, his grandfather made him promise he would use the new start to break with the gang.

Henry made the journey north through Mexico stowed away in the back of a livestock truck. Some 200,000 unaccompanied children from Central America have shown up at the U.S. border since 2013, and nearly 8,000 continued on to Long Island, most to join parents who had settled there years earlier. The suburbs have proved an ideal landing spot — close to low-wage work around New York City and filled with illegal basement apartments. By the time Henry arrived, so many Salvadorans were living in Suffolk County that El Salvador had opened a consulate in the town of Brentwood, the only foreign government with an office on Long Island.

Henry entered the U.S. legally, turning himself over at the border and pleading for asylum. He was granted release pending a final hearing that could be years away, and sent to join his mother. He didn't recognize her when she ran up to him at JFK Airport, clutching welcome balloons; in all the time she'd been gone, she had never sent him a photo. As they headed to her apartment, he learned that she had long ago separated from his father. He soon became acquainted with her abusive boyfriend, who one day threw hot cooking oil at her head, landing her in the hospital with third-degree burns. His father helped Henry lie about his immigration status and age to get a job in a factory, where he worked 12-hour shifts punching perforations in toilet paper for $9 an hour. On payday, he handed over almost all his earnings to his mother, who expected him to pay for rent and groceries.

That summer was the loneliest time Henry had ever known. Unable to speak English or navigate the bus system, he barely left the house except to work. His father sometimes sat next to him on meal breaks at the factory, but Henry didn't know what to say, and his father didn't seem interested in talking. He found the wide, empty streets of Brentwood eerie after the crowded slums of El Salvador, and he was unsettled by the misty weather. His mother worked late, so he was often on his own. At
night, as he sat in the dark watching horror movies, he couldn’t help but miss aspects of the gang — never being bored, always having backup.

All that changed when he enrolled at Brentwood High in the fall of 2014. The school — one of the largest in America, with 4,000 students — felt like a fortress, ordered and welcoming and safe. The overhead lights were brighter and the walls whiter than his schoolhouse in El Salvador, which had been ringed with fencing to stop pigs and chickens from wandering through. Posters on the wall advertised spirit rallies. At orientation, Henry learned that the school had a swimming pool and a music program. He had never touched an instrument before.

His classes were filled with so many recent arrivals from Central America that they were taught in both English and Spanish. The kids talked about soccer and teachers and tried out their shy English on each other at lunch. One friend was struck by the long hours Henry had to work after school and how reluctant he seemed to talk about his childhood in El Salvador. Another liked his funny, street way of talking; he nicknamed her Curly, and that became what everyone in school called her. “He would always want to know how things were going with me, like he was a brother,” she says. “He would get really serious, and we would think up crazy things to do to make him laugh.”

Henry loved every minute of his freshman year: buying sandwiches at the deli with his friends, playing soccer in the park. One friend gave him an old bike so he could get around more easily; others came to visit him at his second job at a car wash. An uncle started to show an interest in him, taking him fishing off the piers at dawn. Noticing that his nephew was friendly and curious, he warned Henry to steer clear of MS-13, which had already established itself on Long Island. “I told him don’t let them become your friends, but don’t let them be your enemies either,” the uncle recalls. “Because that would be seeking death.”

Henry knew how to pick out the gang kids at school — red shirts and bandannas for the Bloods, yellow for Latin Kings, royal blue for the Crips, light blue and white for MS-13. At first, Henry had worried that El Destroyer’s crew would find him: He knew membership in MS-13 is for life, no matter where you move. But as his freshman year passed and no one from his old life recognized him, he began to relax. Maybe it really was possible to start over.

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His new life began to fall apart at the start of his sophomore year, when Henry saw El Fantasma. The boy, a shot-caller in the gang back home, had enrolled at Brentwood High that fall. One day, he confronted Henry in the cafeteria. He ordered him to attend a meeting in the woods that afternoon, to receive his punishment for failing to report in. In the midst of growth spurts, with pierced ears, gelled hair and skinny jeans. They punched and kicked Henry until he curled up into a ball on the ground, then continued for a drawn-out count of 13. “The blows came from all sides like rain,” Henry would later recall. “I had wanted to change, and I’d been succeeding for months at that point. But that’s when it ended.”

Henry felt guilty about breaking the promise he’d made his grandfather. But it was also a relief to fall
back into his old ways. The gang on Long Island had the same rituals and spoke the same slangi Spanish he’d grown up with. Like any good franchise, MS-13 was comfortingly familiar.

In the U.S., MS-13 is organized into small subgroups called cliques. Its emphasis on social rather than criminal bonds has helped the gang persist without a powerful central leader or a steady source of income. On the East Coast, the highest regional level is the “New York program” — middle management put in place by bosses in El Salvador and Los Angeles to oversee unruly cliques, including a dozen on Long Island. At Brentwood High, the main clique is known as the Sailors. Henry began wearing the white plastic rosary they favored, and picked up Chicago Bulls gear, which the gang wears because bullhorns evoke the devil, a central figure in MS-13’s symbology. He identified himself to new recruits as Triste, Sailors, New York, like a soldier stating his rank and chain of command. He was low on the totem pole: His main duty was to ensure that the clique’s 30 or so members were respected in the school. He learned how to turn a mechanical pencil into a weapon by replacing the eraser with a razor blade, and how to threaten boys who tried to get close to the Sailors’ girlfriends. “If you want to stay aboveground, it’s better you stay away from her,” he warned them. It worked every time.

That Christmas, his mother, who had been increasingly distant, left to live in a domestic violence shelter without saying goodbye. Henry moved in with his uncle. He texted the Sailors to tell them how he felt abandoned, once again, by his parents. “We’re your family,” one responded, “and we’ll never abandon you.” Henry was comforted, but he knew that his relationship with his gang friends could crumble the moment he did anything to make them question his loyalty, no matter how simple the transgression — even being slow to answer a text message.

One afternoon in English class, Henry caught the eye of a girl who had been feuding with the Sailors. He texted the Sailors to tell them how he felt abandoned, once again, by his parents. “We’re your family,” one responded, “and we’ll never abandon you.” Henry was comforted, but he knew that his relationship with his gang friends could crumble the moment he did anything to make them question his loyalty, no matter how simple the transgression — even being slow to answer a text message.

Back in El Salvador, the gang was led by veterans hardened by decades of violence. On Long Island, the Sailors were led by a pair of teenage brothers who lived with their mom and kept the gang’s cache of machetes, swords and hatchets buried in their backyard. They navigated the neighborhood on dirt bikes and met up at McDonald’s and worked long hours at normal jobs. They created a hangout in a mulchy clearing in the woods, where they spray-painted tree trunks with stick-figure devils and laughing clown faces. One day, they hoisted an old mattress on a stump to make a lean-to and drew the outline of a naked woman on the fabric. Dues were $10 a week. In Facebook group chats, they talked about girls and Clash of Clans, their favorite multiplayer game. They also shared news of friends and enemies getting arrested in Long Island or murdered back in El Salvador. One wrote: “Did you see El Black, El Funny, El Flash and the others have fallen?” Another said: “I miss El Bad Boy.”

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One afternoon in English class, Henry caught the eye of a girl who had been feuding with the Sailors. She scowled at him, and he responded by flashing the signs M and S with his hands. She folded her hand into a B for Bloods. After class, Henry told the gang leaders what she had done. They seemed conflicted. The girl was just 15, with long hair and a wide-eyed expression. Then again, they told Henry, hasta el peor demonio se viste de ángel: Even the worst demons hide in angels’ clothing. They decided to keep an eye on the girl. If she kept testing them, she would have to fall.

By the summer of 2016, the Sailors and other cliques were starting to return to their violent roots. They began selling marijuana and getting into street fights. Teenagers who wore yellow or red shirts were listed for death; those who acted like they were MS-13 without actually belonging were listed as well. In the first half of that year, the gang killed three boys from Brentwood High and buried their bodies in the woods.

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Henry joined in the fights and sold marijuana, but he didn’t want to participate in another murder. In El Salvador, the violence had seemed necessary, a form of survival. In Brentwood, the Sailors wanted Henry to help lure his classmates to their death — kids he knew from homeroom and parties and field trips — simply because they were acting like kids. MS-13 was like any other bunch of bored and anxious and hormonal teenagers at school, only with machetes.

Local detectives who later questioned Henry, as well as his own texts and Facebook messages, confirm that he stayed on the outskirts of the gang, avoiding the most extreme violence. He tried pretending that he had suddenly been put under curfew. “Look man,” he texted the leaders one night, “the problem is my uncle is here watching me like a hawk.” They backed down that time, but it was clear they were losing trust. “Yesterday, El Delincuente said he thought I was acting like I don’t want to be in anymore,” he wrote a friend on Facebook. “He said I knew from the moment I joined that the only way out is a coffin. So now you know that if one day I’m not on here, it’s because I’m already dead.”

As Henry started his junior year, the girl who had flashed a Bloods sign at him was finally placed on the gang’s kill list. She had continued feuding with the Sailors, and even according to the softer rules on Long Island, the only punishment for rival gang members is death. One afternoon, a car full of Sailors spotted the girl as she was walking home with a friend. They jumped out and attacked her with bats and machetes. They killed her friend as well, to avoid leaving a witness. She was beaten so badly that police initially thought she had been hit by a car.

The exploding violence on Long Island was almost entirely aimed at kids who were flirting with gang life; in texts, the Sailors were careful to distinguish whether an intended target was a “civilian” — only suspected snitches and rival gang members were marked for violence. The Sailors rarely hurt civilians except by accident: In one incident, they shot a young man at a deli they believed was a rival gang member, and the bullet passed through the man’s skull and hit the deli worker behind the cash register.

That fall, not long after the two girls were killed, police discovered the bodies of the three boys MS-13 had buried in the woods. Henry obsessed over the footage of their grief-stricken families on the TV news. He imagined his grandfather crying at his own funeral. He started looking for ways to escape the gang for good, but there seemed to be no way out. He approached U.S. military recruiters in school, eager to join the Army, but they told him that he was too young to enlist without a form from his parents. When he called his grandparents and told them he was struggling to get his life back on track, they told him to go to church and confess.

In school, Henry grew increasingly anxious and moody. That day in English class, staring at a blank page in his notebook, he felt he was ready to explode. He hadn’t planned to write a confession, but it just poured out — the murders, the beatings, his growing remorse about what he had done in El Salvador. He needed help, and he wanted his teacher to know that he hadn’t killed those two girls. She had always seemed to want him to succeed, and he thought of her as a second mother.

Lingering at the door after the bell rang, he saw his teacher discover the pages, noting with confusion that he had signed them “Triste.” He saw her cheeks flush and tears come to her eyes. In that moment, the import of what he had
done started to sink in. The Sailors were already losing trust in him. If they found out what he had told his teacher, they would surely add him to the kill list.

He stayed away from school for a full week. When he returned, the teacher pulled him aside. She asked him why he had written the pages instead of talking to her. He said he didn't think he could have gotten it out face-to-face. He had worried she would be mad, but instead she gave him a tender look and said she wanted to help him.

The message calling him to the principal’s office came over the intercom while Henry was sitting in class, texting a friend. His classmates teased him as he left, assuming he was in trouble again. But when he got to the office, he was introduced to a stranger in a suit. The Suffolk County police officer who was stationed in the school, George Politis, told Henry that the man was from the FBI. If Henry wanted to help, Politis said, he should tell the man everything he knew, because the FBI could give him a new identity and relocate him far from Long Island.

The stranger asked Henry to come up with an alias for him. Henry chose the name Tony and the last initial F, for federale. In reality, Tony was Angel Rivera, a Suffolk County homicide detective detailed to the FBI’s Long Island Gang Task Force. With his menacing face and air of authority, he reminded Henry of El Destroyer, the gang leader back home. And unlike Politis, Rivera spoke Spanish. Henry decided to trust him. He knew about the witness protection program from TV shows, and he thought this could be his ticket out of MS-13. But Rivera never offered him a formal agreement.

Rivera had spent the previous month questioning gang members rounded up after the murder of the two girls. They either blew him off or grudgingly negotiated to save themselves from years in prison. But Henry faced no charges; he was volunteering to come forward as an informant. He seemed eager to unburden himself. After the initial meeting they spoke only over the phone or via text. Henry tried to answer whenever Rivera reached out, and apologized when he was unavailable. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer you quickly,” he wrote one afternoon when he missed a few messages. “It’s just that I was sleeping because I work nights.”

Rivera texted him looking for leads about the gang’s plans and for help connecting gang aliases with real names. The exchanges read like debriefings a teenager in a talkative mood might give a probing parent. One night, Henry complained about two fellow gang members. “One told me, ‘You’ve been in this since you were 12 because you liked it, and now you want to leave?’”

Rivera asked for that boy’s given name and gang name. He wanted to know if Henry had any ideas about how to catch
him breaking the law. “Do you know if he had a gun?” he asked. “Or if he sells drugs? Are they here illegally?”

Henry kept on going with his story, focused on his own troubles. “Another one of them told me, ‘You’re useless. I don’t know why we keep you around. You don’t do anything.’ And I said, ‘If I’m useless, why don’t you let me out?’ And he told me, ‘Quiet, man. We’re never letting you out. We’re always going to have you, whether you like it or not.’”

Rivera tried to steer the conversation in a more evidentiary direction. “I’m thinking I’d like to catch them with a gun,” he wrote. “Or if you know of anything.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” Henry promised.

“Okay,” Rivera responded, “but be cool.”

After a few days, Rivera got in touch again: “You don’t have to worry about that boy any more.” Thanks to the name Henry had provided, the boy had been swept up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Since Trump’s election, the Suffolk County Police Department has stepped up its cooperation with ICE, targeting suspected MS-13 members for deportation. Shipping suspects back to Central America is easier and quicker than proving they have broken the law; even if suspects have committed no crime, ICE can petition to have their immigration bail revoked. In effect, it is a repeat of the same failed strategy that led to the creation of MS-13. The gang first spread to El Salvador from Los Angeles amid a wave of deportations in the 1990s that sent members like El Destroyer back to Henry’s slum. Now, by deporting children who have come to America seeking escape from MS-13, the Trump administration is only intensifying the cycle that drove them here in the first place.

Last year, under Trump, ICE arrested nearly four times more immigrants simply for being suspected of belonging to MS-13 than it did in 2016. Long Island has been the epicenter of the new initiative, called Operation Matador. Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions both delivered major speeches in front of the Suffolk police last year and congratulated them on embracing the administration’s strategy. Trump also invited the mother of Kayla Cuevas, the murdered girl who had flashed the Bloods sign at Henry, to his State of the Union address in January. In private, some Long Island detectives and prosecutors grumbled about the ICE partnership, saying it hampers efforts to investigate the gang. But as the wave of arrests attracted federal grants, additional staff and positive national media attention, Suffolk County effectively began to serve as a local arm of ICE, rounding up immigrant kids for deportation.

Children’s advocates on Long Island started to warn teenagers to avoid the cops. “We can’t work with Suffolk County police, because any information they have is going to go straight to ICE,” says Feride Castillo, who runs a program for at-risk youth on Long Island. “I tell my immigrant kids all the time not to open their mouths — I don’t care what they’re promising you.”

Henry did his part to aid the federal crackdown on MS-13. In addition to the gang members he reported to Rivera, he shared what he knew about the killings and supplied the names of 11 kids who had been marked for death by the Sailors. That spring, the FBI task force arrested the brothers who led the clique on multiple murder charges.

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When Henry learned that his grandfather had died in his sleep in El Salvador, he locked himself in his room and spent the night crying, vowing to do better. He scratched his grandfather’s initials into the back of his cellphone as a reminder. He started seeing a therapist. At school, he sat in the front of his classes and spoke up more often. He especially liked history class, where he learned about pre-Columbian tribes that extracted still beating hearts from their sacrificial victims.

Now that he had helped the police, Henry assumed his witness protection papers would be coming through any day. When he turned 18, he started telling friends and teachers he trusted that he would soon disappear to California. Then one morning in August, as Henry was making lunch for his shift at the toilet paper factory, the federales finally came for him. But they weren’t from the FBI or the witness protection program. They were from ICE. The same unit that Henry had helped to arrest members of MS-13 was now pursuing a deportation case against him, using the information he had provided as evidence.

Confused, Henry told the agents he was already working with the police. He asked them to call Tony. Instead, after interrogating him, the ICE agents put him on a bus. He watched the Long Island streets he knew disappear, replaced by the high-rises of downtown Manhattan, then darkness as the bus was swallowed by a tunnel to New Jersey. He was headed to an ICE detention center full of young men suspected of being MS-13 members — the very same ones he had snitched on.

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At first, Henry was confident that he would be released from ICE custody in time for the start of his senior year. But as the weeks passed, he fell into a routine of sketching anime characters, watching TV and looking forward to the days when chicken was served in the jail’s cafeteria.

One night, as Henry sat in the TV room watching a reality show about aspiring Miami rappers, a half-dozen MS-13 members walked up to him, led by a Brentwood High student who had established himself as the gang’s leader on the ward. The boy called him Triste and demanded to see his detention memo.

https://features.propublica.org/ms-13/a-betrayal-ms13-gang-police-fbi-ice-deportation/
Every inmate rounded up in ICE’s anti-gang raids is given a memo explaining why the government has pegged him as a member of MS-13. Most are short and vague. They list things like school suspensions, Facebook posts and statements by anonymous informants. Henry’s memo is so specific that it amounts to a signed confession. It lists the details that Henry confided to George Politis, the school’s police officer. It quotes his account of the murder he committed back in El Salvador. And most damning, it reveals that he informed on the Sailors to the Suffolk County police. “The subject told SCPD that he has recently had contact with the following confirmed MS-13 members,” the memo says, listing the names of El Fantasma and another Sailor. Instead of protecting his identity as an informant, the police and ICE had effectively signed his death warrant.

“He’s screwed,” says John Oliva, a retired member of the FBI’s Long Island Gang Task Force who saw Henry’s memo. “At the end of the day, that kid is going to become a statistic. If he wanted out, he should have just moved to another town, lived in a basement apartment with ten other people, and started working his way out.”

The MS-13 members who were locked up with Henry suspected that he had been an informant. The only way to clear his name and save his life, the boy from Brentwood warned him, was to produce his detention memo. For weeks, Henry tried to put them off. He told them he was waiting for his lawyer to send it, but that wasn’t credible for long. When the boys started coming around to his bed at night to ask about the memo, he signed up to work an overnight shift in the kitchen, drinking weak coffee to stay awake until morning, then lying on his bed during the day trying to fall asleep. Every day he waited for the attack to come. Gang members in the jail routinely got into violent fights, splattering the floor with blood until they were broken up by guards known as tortugas, because their oversize helmets and heavy armor made them look like turtles.

Finally, sitting cross-legged on his bunk with a piece of paper barely thicker than a tissue, Henry once again decided to scribble a plea for help. This time he addressed it to his lawyer, Bryan Johnson, asking him to put together a fake memo he could show the gang.

“I just need a document saying I was questioned by the FBI but didn’t tell them anything,” Henry wrote. “The members here have said that if I don’t show them my memo, they’ll know I’m a rat, and that will be the end of me. They’ll greenlight the hunt.”

He ended with an apology. “Forgive how bad my handwriting is. It’s just that I feel very scared right now.”

Johnson was rattled by the letter. He couldn’t create a fake memo for Henry, but there was a chance he could get him out of ICE custody by appealing to a federal court. The government has a program that gives green cards to people with criminal records who cooperate with investigators. It is especially intended for immigrants who might be killed back home. Henry could qualify, but he would need someone from law enforcement to confirm that his information had been valuable.

Johnson texted Rivera, asking him to share what he knew at Henry’s asylum hearing, which is slated for April 5. Rivera texted back the names of two boys that Henry had helped get arrested. But he refused to testify, citing concern for his own safety. “My job doesn’t allow me to do that,” he wrote, “especially in my situation being an enemy of MS-13 and several certain individuals incarcerated for murder.” The federal prosecutor overseeing the murder cases involving the Sailors also declined to assist in Henry’s defense, as did Politis.

Near a park where the mutilated bodies of four young men were found in April 2017, murdered by MS-13, a sign states, “This area is under Suffolk County Police Dept. 24 hour video surveillance.” (Natalie Keyssar, special to ProPublica)
The choice to turn an informant like Henry over to ICE has consequences far beyond his individual case. If gang members can't receive protection in exchange for coming forward with information, police will have almost no means to penetrate the insular world of MS-13. School officials who turned Henry over to the authorities were outraged when they learned he had been trapped in a no man’s land between the gang and the law. “They certainly were taking advantage of what he had to offer,” says Robert Feliciano, the head of the Suffolk County school board. “You can’t just do that and then drop him.”

Those who work to get kids out of gangs echo that concern. “Anyone in MS-13 who sees what’s going on with this guy, they’re not going to want to talk to the cops,” says Bob DeSena, founder of the Council for Unity, one of the largest gang intervention programs in New York. “The one thing you never do — the last thing the police want to do — is send a message that if you cooperate with the police, you’re not going to get protection and no one is going to come speak up for you. Rivera, if he wasn’t full of shit, should pick up the phone and say, ‘Look, this guy helped us.’”

In fact, it appears that Henry’s case was mishandled at almost every step along the way. Everyone involved places the blame on someone else. The school says it was required by law to tell the police that Henry was in danger. The police, who told ICE about Henry, blame the feds for trying to deport him. The FBI says that Rivera wasn’t officially a member of the task force, even though he was working out of the bureau’s office. And ICE says that it didn’t know that Henry was an informant. It acknowledges, however, that creating detention memos for kids like Henry puts their lives at risk, and it has decided to end the practice. “That memo was not intended for public consumption,” says Rachael Yong Yow, an ICE spokesperson. “You do these memos, and then something like this happens.”

One of the gang members that Henry turned over to Rivera, meanwhile, has been released by ICE. Unlike Henry, he did not admit to being a member of MS-13, and ICE was unable to prove it. All told, a quarter of the 200 immigrants rounded up in ICE’s anti-gang operation on Long Island last year have been released because of insufficient evidence. So Henry is marked for death and slated for deportation, while the gang members he helped his handler target go free.

“Just for having talked, all this is happening,” Henry says. “They were asking for help, and I gave them all these names. So how am I here?”

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Sitting across from me in ICE custody, Henry still looks like a boy. His orange jumpsuit pools at his feet, and he has stenciled “Henry” on his shirtsleeve in graffiti-style writing. He’s still getting veiled threats from the boys who want to see his ICE memo. The other day, a fellow gang member told him the bosses were sending killers from Los Angeles to take care of a suspected snitch in New York. Another said he had recently used a machete to carve a suspected informant’s lips into a gruesome smile, then buried the body near the Brentwood train tracks.

Henry describes the most horrifying moments of his life in a flat, hyperdetailed way, as if he were watching a movie and narrating the plot. Like many children who have witnessed traumatic events, his mind has recorded the minutest details, but there are huge gaps in the emotional content. One day, he tells me about seeing the gang execute a dirty cop in El Salvador who had tattooed the logo of a rival gang on his inner lip. “They were shouting, ‘This is what happens when you work with punks from the other gang.’ You could see the bullets going into his chest, his stomach, his arms.” When I ask how the killing made him feel, he responds by calculating the number of bullets he thought had blasted apart the victim’s body: 235.

Talking about his memories actually seems to ease Henry’s fears as he imagines what will happen next. If he is deported, anyone who takes him in would be putting themselves at risk. Back in El Salvador, he watched gang members stake out the homes of suspected traitors, then kill their brothers and cousins when they stepped outside. Even if he is granted asylum and returns to Brentwood, the gang will likely kill him unless he gets help relocating.

As he waits in the crowded jail, surrounded by gang members who want to kill him, Henry sometimes lies on his bed with his face hidden and cries. He imagines himself strung up in the same sprawling coconut grove where he killed the trembling man. He has resolved that he will not beg or try to bargain as he has seen others do. “Sometimes I feel like a piece of string being pulled from both ends,” he says. “Sometimes, I think it would be better to be dead than to have
done the things I’ve done. I know it would be better never to have talked to anyone.”

Sometimes, though, Henry tries to imagine a better future for himself. “If someone out there decided to get involved and give me a chance to start a new life,” he says, “I would not waste it.” He pictures himself graduating from high school and living by the ocean and fishing off a pier with children of his own. His grandmother would live nearby, so she could hang out with his kids. He would work in construction. Or maybe he would join the Army and get to travel the world. Whatever gets him away from the gang, and the federales, and allows him to live a little longer.

ProPublica reporters Kavitha Surana and Ryan Gabrielson contributed to this story.

Henry thought that talking to the police would help him get out of MS-13. Instead, his cooperation put him on a path to deportation and his likely death. (Demetrius Freeman for ProPublica)

Editor’s note

This story provides an intimate, revealing look into law enforcement’s war on MS-13, the Central American gang held out by President Donald Trump as a national public safety priority and embodiment of the consequences of illegal immigration. The subject of the story, an informant sold out by authorities, was in significant danger before publication — marked for death by a gang already suspicious that he helped the police. He decided to take on additional risk in telling the story, in hopes that someone would read it and help him. “This is basically my final option,” he told reporter Hannah Dreier. “I know not everyone wants to help a person trying to get away from the gang. When you don’t get help, the only way out of the gang is death.”

We wrestled with how to balance his desire to tell his story with the threat to his life, and made some decisions after discussions with him and his attorney Bryan Johnson. To lend authority to his story, we are using his real first name, Henry, and real gang name, Triste. We withheld his last name and took his photo in a way that did not identify his face. We made clear to him and his attorney that the story would run on ProPublica and in New York magazine, and would be told in a video that would be circulated on social media. Henry wants his story out there. He agreed to meet with Dreier twice in ICE custody, and called her from his jail ward dozens of times in the weeks that followed, whispering into the receiver as other MS-13 members tried to eavesdrop. He let her copy his cellphone to comb through years of text and Facebook messenger conversations as well as the exchanges he had with his handler. And he helped her make a glossary of Spanish gang slang so that she could understand the coded text and voice messages he exchanged with other MS-13 members. “To put it simply, I feel betrayed,” he said. “This could help people understand what it’s like to try to get away from the gang. People think they know, but they can’t imagine what’s it’s really like to live this.”
Teenage MS-13 Gang Informant Heads Into Final Asylum Hearing

Among those who will testify on Henry’s behalf: his former principal, an expert witness working for free and his FBI Gang Task Force handler, who had originally refused.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
April 5, 5 a.m. EDT

This story was co-published with New York magazine.

Henry had finished his overnight shift in the jail cafeteria on Tuesday and was lying on his bunk listening to Spanish rap when he was called up to the administrative office. Immigration officials wanted to offer him a chance to be moved into protective custody. Henry had been waiting on this offer for the eight months he had been in jail, an informant locked up with the same gang members he informed on. But now, he was unsure whether to accept the extra protection.

The call came in response to a story published Monday by ProPublica and New York Magazine. It detailed Henry’s recruitment into the gang MS-13 as a child in El Salvador, his journey to the U.S. to plead for asylum at 15, and his decision to become an informant at 17. For nearly a year, he helped police and the FBI arrest members of his gang clique on Long Island until immigration enforcement arrested him last August for gang ties, using the same information he
gave police. Labeled a snitch, he faces deportation to a country overrun by the gang that has marked him for death. Today is his final immigration hearing.

Henry decided to take on additional risk and make his story public, in hopes that someone would come forward to save him. This week, many have. Henry’s FBI Gang Task Force handler agreed to testify at his hearing. His former school principal, now superintendent of Brentwood School District, spoke to Henry in jail and volunteered to speak in court. An expert witness who charges steep hourly rates for testimony about gang culture agreed to work on Henry’s case for free.

Hundreds of people have written in asking how to help Henry. It’s a hard question to answer, because his fate is really in the hands of the immigration judge who will decide his case this afternoon. Henry may have already disqualified himself from asylum by telling police he was forced to kill a man with a machete when he was 12, as part of an initiation ritual in El Salvador to join the gang. The police turned over his confession to this murder, along with other incriminating information, to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which used it to build a case for his deportation, laid out in an unsealed memo.

His lawyer Bryan Johnson plans to argue that Henry committed the murder under duress, like a child soldier. He says information told to police by a teenager who believed he was going to be placed in witness protection should not be admitted as evidence. In a filing Wednesday, ICE bypassed most of Johnson’s arguments and came back to the murder: “He plainly admits to homicide,” a government lawyer wrote.

If Henry’s asylum claim is rejected, his lawyer will argue that deporting him amounts to a violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, because the U.S. cannot send him back to certain death.

Henry’s other option is to quickly convince a member of law enforcement to help him get a special visa for cooperating witnesses. These visas are intended for people who might otherwise be disqualified for legal status because of their pasts.

The story has galvanized activists, but Henry’s lawyer has been warning people to stay away from his Thursday hearing, for fear of alienating the judge. Advocacy groups including The New York Civil Liberties Union and National Lawyers Guild said Henry’s story shows the problems inherent in failing to protect immigrant informants.

“The way Henry has been treated by law enforcement and ICE is a terrible example of the irrationality and inhumanity of ICE’s mass deportation agenda. Despite risking his life to protect others from violence, Henry and others like him are forever labeled ‘gang members.’ These actions undermine attempts to build safe and thriving communities,” said Alisa Wellek, executive director of the Immigrant Defense Project.

On Long Island, local politicians were struck by Henry’s case. Rob Trotta, a legislator in the Suffolk County government who was a member of the FBI Gang Task Force before entering politics, said the story showed failings in Suffolk police policies.

“It’s embarrassing that Trump had to send ICE in to start deporting all these people. This should have never happened,” said Trotta, who is a Republican.

Henry thought when he was called to speak with immigration officials that he might at last be getting moved into witness protection. But instead, they offered to move him to a separate pod, away from any known gang members. He declined, thinking that kind of change would only underline to the gang that he is, in fact, an informant.

He was amazed by the offers of help from readers who wrote to ProPublica. Families in Connecticut, Illinois, Wisconsin, Washington and California have offered to take him in if he wins asylum. One reader offered to set him up with a job in the Midwest. Another said she is working on getting him a visa to move to Canada.

Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang re-entry program in the country, volunteered to take Henry into the program, which offers services including job training and mental health counseling. “I’d be honored to have
him here,” Boyle said.

Calling from the phone bank of the noisy jail, Henry sounded like a different person — laughing and chattering after months of ruminations on his slim chances of living to see 20.

If he is given asylum, Henry says he would like to join the U.S. Army. He was especially heartened to hear from members of the military. Erik Ruiz, a first-generation Mexican American, wrote to say he empathized with Henry, as he too had overcome challenges to become an Army infantry officer. “Henry is the kind of kid I want to lead in my platoon. An underdog who is trying to survive and do the right thing,” Ruiz wrote.

Henry whispered “wow” and said that if he was released, he intended to find the phone numbers of everyone who had reached out and call them to say thank you.

Still, Henry’s lawyer fears for the teenager’s safety. It is only a matter of time before the gang leaders find out that Henry, whose gang nickname is “Triste,” has talked not only to the FBI but also to a reporter. The story has been translated into Spanish by other outlets, and is being shared widely among immigrants in Brentwood. Johnson set up a GoFundMe page to help with Henry’s relocation that has raised $3,000 in two days, mostly in donations of $10 or $15. He called the campaign “Save Triste’s Life.”

**Update, April 5, 2018:** This story has been updated to reflect additional support Henry received in the hours leading up to his hearing.
Teen Who Faced Deportation After He Informed on MS-13 Gets Temporary Reprieve

A judge postponed an asylum decision until May, asking for more evidence of Henry’s cooperation with police and the FBI.

This story was co-published with New York magazine.

What was on track to be a routine deportation hearing in a New York City immigration courtroom Thursday turned into an hours-long administrative battle and a detailed airing of a teenager’s reasons for informing on his gang, MS-13.

Amid a flood of attention brought to the case by a ProPublica and New York magazine report published Monday, Judge Thomas Mulligan declined to issue a ruling. Instead, he gave the teen’s lawyer a list of evidence and testimony he wants to see before deciding the case in May. The judge seemed to be sketching a path to a successful asylum claim, and mentioned an alternative defense if asylum cannot be supported.

Henry, who asked that his last name be withheld, helped police and the FBI arrest his fellow gang members on Long Island. He worked with law enforcement for about a year, until immigration authorities arrested him last August, using his own disclosures about gang membership to justify his deportation. As a known informant, deportation likely means death for Henry, whose cooperation with police is spelled out in an unsealed Immigration and Customs Enforcement memo. After eight months in detention with MS-13 members threatening his life, his case was looking so hopeless that he decided to go public ahead of his final hearing.

The reaction has been intense. On Thursday, Henry’s lawyer, Bryan Johnson, used a rare chance to sit him in front of a computer to show him the wave of help that has come in from readers over the past few days, including $8,000 in donations. Usually reticent to consider his future, Henry started talking about moving to Spain or Los Angeles.

As the hearing began, an issue of New York magazine lay on the table between the ICE attorney and Henry. Several people agreed to testify after the story ran, including a gang expert, Henry’s FBI Gang Task Force handler, and the superintendent of Henry’s high school district. The government opposed each one. ICE contended that the expert did not seem qualified. A Suffolk County lawyer argued that because the handler is an FBI employee, he has to be subpoenaed in a special way. And the ICE attorney said the superintendent’s testimony seemed irrelevant. But the judge wanted to hear from them all.

The ICE lawyer also argued that Henry’s lawyer should recuse himself, because he had become a witness by exchanging text messages with the FBI handler. In those messages, the handler confirmed that Henry helped get fellow MS-13 members arrested. ICE objections took up the first half of the four-hour afternoon hearing, and in the end, only Henry had time to testify.

Henry spoke softly and described under oath how a tattooed MS-13 leader named El Destroyer had recruited him when he was 10 in El Salvador. He told Mulligan about being taken to kill a rival as an initiation rite, and described how the man had screamed and bled out. He talked about leaving for Long Island at 15, trying to make a break from the gang, and being forced to rejoin an MS-13 clique after being recognized in school.

“Once you join the gang, you can’t leave. They watch you day and night,” he said.
Henry, who is now 19, explained how he felt when the gang began killing classmates. As he described the murders and his anguish about whether to go to police, workers in the courtroom stopped what they were doing to listen. An administrator turned away from her computer and rested her chin in her hands as Henry described how he had prevented the murder of a friend.

“They wanted me to lure him to the woods, and they were going to be there waiting,” Henry said. “But I told the boy that the cliques were going to ask him to come talk in the woods, and they didn’t just want to talk, they wanted to kill him.”

Mulligan interrupted Henry again and again with questions about his meetings with law enforcement. He was especially interested in any instance in which a written record might have been created. He stopped Henry short as the courthouse was about to close and made a list of people who he wanted to testify at the next hearing, including school administrators, police officers and Henry’s FBI handler.

“Common sense tells us there’s a lot of people out there with knowledge,” Mulligan said.

He said Henry could finish his testimony at the next hearing, which he scheduled for the morning of May 22.

In a filing this week, ICE indicated its case for deportation will hinge on Henry’s admissions to having joined the gang as a child (in ICE’s words, being a member “for nearly half of his lifetime”), and to having committed a murder. The ICE attorney twice raised objections to the presence of a ProPublica reporter in court, and to the reporter taking notes that might be published. Mulligan dismissed this objection, citing Henry’s right to waive his own privacy protections.

Johnson plans to argue that Henry committed murder under duress, because the gang leader threatened to kill Henry if he refused to wield the machete. Mulligan said there might be ways to overcome the murder admission, but Henry needed to meet a large burden of proof to justify having committed such a serious offense. He wanted to hear the full story of how and why Henry cooperated with law enforcement. If Henry loses his asylum case, his lawyer plans to argue that deporting the teen would violate a United Nations treaty that forbids the U.S. from returning immigrants to places where they will be killed. “Is duress enough to get him out? If not, there’s really only the Convention Against Torture. This is going to take a little more developing,” Mulligan said.

When Mulligan announced his decision to continue the hearing, Henry shook his head in disbelief and seemed to be fighting back tears; he had thought he would be given a deportation order that afternoon. Before he could speak to his lawyer or a reporter, guards hustled him out of the courtroom and back to the same New Jersey jail where he is receiving threats. ICE offered to move Henry to a part of the jail with no known gang members this week, but he declined, reasoning that temporary protection would make MS-13 members even more suspicious.

Johnson plans to petition in the coming days to have Henry released on bail. He could be temporarily relocated ahead of the May hearing using money readers have donated. Johnson has been working pro bono and is hoping some of the legal organizations that have issued statements supporting Henry will pitch in to help prepare the additional evidence the judge requested. He still sees a lot of work ahead but is amazed that a case that seemed unwinnable suddenly looks like it might have a chance.
What It Was Like Reporting on a Teenager Marked for Death by the Gang MS-13

Henry, the teenager, gave me more access than any source has ever allowed me. And given his youth and vulnerable position, I often wondered if it was too much. But he wanted his story told.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
April 10, 5 a.m. EDT

This story first appeared in ProPublica’s weekly newsletter. Sign up for that here.

How do you write about a teenager who wants his story told, when there is no safe way to tell it?

That was the dilemma we faced with Henry, a Long Island high school student who tried to get away from his gang, MS-13. Henry agreed to help police and the FBI arrest his fellow gang members and worked with law enforcement for about a year until immigration authorities arrested him last August, using his own disclosures about gang membership to justify his deportation.
My name is Hannah Dreier and I cover immigration at ProPublica. I’m focusing this year on MS-13 and law enforcement. I came across Henry’s case last October while reporting on Long Island about how police departments are teaming up with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. At first, all I knew was his gang name, Triste, the Spanish word for “sad.” Henry’s lawyer told me there was no way to do a story and protect his client’s identity, so I just kept tabs on the case as Henry moved toward deportation to El Salvador, where he believes he has been marked for death as an informant. But as the outlook grew increasingly grim, Henry and his lawyer decided that a news story might be a last remaining option to save his life.

Henry agreed to speak with me in February, when he was 18. He was eager to talk, and from what he told me, his case seemed like a strong illustration of what can happen when criminal investigation gets mixed up with immigration enforcement. He arranged for me to be given his cellphone, and I combed through years of text and WhatsApp conversations, as well as exchanges he had with his FBI handler. I asked him to help me make a glossary of Spanish gang slang so that I could understand some coded messages.

At first, I thought I would use only Henry’s gang name, Triste. But he told me he was willing to use his first name as well, because he wanted readers to see him as a real person. He also agreed to let ProPublica use a video and photos of him, shot in a way that did not reveal his face, but gave enough of a glimpse to show his humanity. He gave me permission to call his friends and family, and to contact people whose names recurred in his Facebook chat history, which ran for 2,000 pages. It was more access than any source has ever allowed me. And given Henry’s youth and vulnerable position, I often wondered if it was too much.

I consulted with gang and law enforcement experts and with Henry’s lawyer to ensure we were doing the right thing. I became convinced that what Henry said was true: He was a dead man walking. A story promised a sliver of hope that someone might intervene.

We imposed some limits that Henry did not ask for, including using less revealing photos, leaving out details about what he might do to hide from the gang if released, and refraining from contacting sensitive sources. In the end, we decided that we could not truly protect Henry by obscuring his face more or redacting his name; anyone in the gang who read the piece would know who he was. The decision came down to the question of whether or not to publish. And Henry had been clear: He wanted to tell his story.

I was the only reporter allowed into Henry’s asylum hearing Thursday, and an ICE lawyer tried repeatedly to get me tossed out of the courtroom. The case had seemed unwinnable going in, but amid intense public attention, the judge granted all parties an extension. He questioned Henry closely about how and why he had worked with law enforcement, and said he wanted to hear from police, FBI and high school officials at a new hearing on May 22. Henry’s lawyer was surprised and heartened.

As the hearing was ending, the ICE attorney asked the judge once more if Henry really understood what he was signing up for by allowing a reporter into the room. Did he understand a story about the hearing would be published? Had he seen me taking notes, and did he understand what those the notes were for? But the immigration judge dismissed the objections.

“Is it a smart move? Not a smart move? That’s subject to debate. But he has certain rights, and one of those rights is to waive his right to privacy,” the judge said.
Were Henry’s Civil Rights Violated?

A Department of Homeland Security watchdog is looking into the case of a Long Island high school student who informed on the gang MS-13 and was marked for deportation.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
April 27, 6 a.m. EDT

This story was co-published with New York Magazine.

The Department of Homeland Security is investigating whether the civil rights of a Long Island teenager were violated when immigration officials used admissions he made to police as an informant to mark him for deportation to a likely death.

Henry’s case came to the attention of investigators earlier this month after ProPublica published his story in partnership with New York Magazine. Henry was 17 when he decided to inform on his gang, MS-13. He thought authorities could help him start a new life. Instead, police turned Henry’s file over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which arrested him last August as part of an anti-gang sweep. He was sent to a New Jersey jail with the very MS-13 members he had been informing on.

After the story ran, the Department of Homeland Security’s office of civil rights and civil liberties, which looks into complaints of abuse by ICE, reached out to Henry’s immigration lawyer to ask for his last name, which was withheld in
the story to protect the teen’s identity. The office confirmed this week it had opened an investigation into how Henry was treated.

ICE officials put information Henry gave police into an unsealed memo explaining why the agency detained him. Henry says the MS-13 members he remains locked up with have been demanding to see the incriminating memo. ICE said this month it has stopped creating detention memos like Henry’s, in part because they can become public and put detainees’ lives in danger.

Non-citizens have many of the same basic rights as citizens, including the right to due process and equal protection under the law. Henry’s lawyer, Bryan Johnson, said the investigation suggests the Department of Homeland Security is concerned that ICE has become overly aggressive as it pushes to boost arrests.

“They reached out to me on their own — I’ve never seen that before,” Johnson said. “ICE just threw this kid under the bus. What’s the purpose of detaining him when he was assisting in this investigation? And if this is their policy, how many other kids are out there like this?”

An ICE spokesperson declined to comment. If the civil rights office finds wrongdoing, it can recommend policy changes. If ICE does not implement those changes, the office can take the matter up with Department of Homeland Security leaders. In recent years, the office has acted as a watchdog and pressured ICE to improve medical care and meals in detention centers, ensure that detainees have access to their lawyers, and stop the wrongful arrests of people whose deportation orders had been overturned.

The inquiry comes as Henry is fighting to stay in the country. He entered the U.S. legally and was awaiting a final decision on his asylum case when he was arrested. His final hearing was to take place earlier this month, but a judge who seemed receptive to his claim postponed the decision until a second hearing on May 22.

Henry first asked his high school English teacher to help him escape the gang in 2016. She went to school
administrators passed Henry on to the police, and police connected him to the FBI Gang Task Force. His English teacher and school superintendent have now agreed to testify on his behalf. Henry’s FBI Task Force handler and his school resource officer submitted an affidavit, but ICE is objecting to the statement.

In the wake of the story, Henry has also been granted a new bail hearing, set for the day of the asylum decision. The same judge had previously denied his bail request, but is giving Henry another chance in light of new testimony. If the judge approves Henry’s asylum claim and the government appeals, he can still be released on bond.

Henry started the month expecting to be deported to El Salvador, where gang members had told him he would be killed for informing. He credits pressure from readers with saving his life. If he is ordered to leave the U.S., he plans to use $20,000 readers have donated to find refuge in another country. He said that if he is released, he would like to be able to look up at the sky. He has not been allowed yard privileges in New Jersey. He also wants to call his family in El Salvador.

“I’d call my grandmother and tell her I’m okay. Maybe I could study a little, and start making up the year I missed in high school. I’d like to take all this help and start a new life,” he said.

Henry’s case highlights a shift advocates have been warning about since President Donald Trump took office and cast gang violence as a symbol of the dangers of illegal immigration. Trump has frequently talked about gang killings on Long Island, and applauded ICE and the Suffolk County police for stepping up efforts to target young immigrants suspected of MS-13 ties for deportation.

Unlike the FBI’s Long Island Gang Task Force, which does not share information for use in these anti-gang roundups, the police department’s policy is to turn over whatever information immigration enforcement officials request. The New York Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit earlier this month to force the department to disclose its written guidelines for sharing information about immigrants.

“I think everyone deserves to know,” said Irma Solis, director for the group’s Suffolk County chapter. “We’ve seen this with a lot of students.”

The Suffolk police told ProPublica that law enforcement agencies are obligated to share information, but the department has implemented a new policy in which it provides ICE with information on police letterhead, as opposed to turning over entire files.

On Wednesday, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo issued a cease and desist letter to ICE, warning immigration agents to stay away from state property. He called the agency’s recent raids unconstitutional.

The governor commented separately on Henry’s case. “I don’t know why you would punish a person who was being an informant and was being helpful,” he said.
I’ve Been Reporting on MS-13 for a Year. Here Are the 5 Things Trump Gets Most Wrong.

The gang is not invading the country. They’re not posing as fake families. They’re not growing. To stop them, the government needs to understand them.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
June 25, 5 a.m. EDT

1. MS-13 Is Not Organizing to Foil Immigration Law

Trump often talks about how MS-13 has carried out a string of murders in the suburbs outside New York City. One of the first things I did when I started reporting was talk to the ex-girlfriend of the gang leader charged with ordering six of those killings in 2016 and 2017. The girl sat at a Panera Bread in a Long Island strip mall and told how he had kidnapped and raped her shortly after her 15th birthday, threatened her family, and forced her to get a tattoo of his name on her arm. As I talked to her, I imagined a man like the ones I had seen in news reports on MS-13 — chins jutted out, arms strong from lifting weights, and gothic tattoos of the letters M and S on their faces and chests. I was shocked when I eventually saw this gang leader in court; he was a baby-faced 19-year-old who blushed when girls waved to him from the gallery. The indictment against him laid out killings that were ordered in response to adolescent trash talking.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions has called MS-13 the most brutal of the gangs driving the drug trade, and promised to go after the group like the government went after mob boss Al Capone. Really, experts have found the gang has barely any role in the international drug trade. The Congressional Research Service said that it could be misleading to call MS-13 a transnational criminal organization at all, because it has no central leader or global ambitions. The gang is made up of sometimes competing cliques, often led by teenagers most interested in wielding power over other young people in their immediate circles.

On Long Island, a detective told me police officers call MS-13 members “mighty munchkins,” because they have often not yet hit their growth spurts and tend to commit their crimes in large groups. They meet at night because, while other criminal organizations have massive international revenue streams, these guys — even the leaders — have to work menial jobs and sometimes go to school during the day. Each clique has its own shot caller, and its own hyperlocal

focus. On Long Island, the gang's focus has often been on controlling the halls of a single high school.

2. MS-13 Is Not Posing as Fake Families at the Border

In justifying the policy of child separation last week, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen said, “The kids are being used as pawns by the smugglers and the traffickers. Those are traffickers, those are smugglers and that is MS-13.” The theory is that Central American gang leaders are showing up at the border falsely claiming to be the parents of children, and are also instructing unaccompanied minors to go to the U.S. and claim territory.

Actually, there have been fewer than 200 cases of false family claims this year — a fraction of 1 percent of the total number of families apprehended at the border — and there is no indication that any of those cases involved MS-13. Of the hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied minors that have come to the U.S. since 2012, Border Patrol says only 56 were suspected of MS-13 ties.

The gang is trying to find new members, but there’s no need to step on the toes of the Mexican gangs that control human smuggling to do it. Long Island teenagers tell me that when they show up to school, gang members sit down next to them at lunch and ask them to join. Many— worn down by loneliness, boredom and the threat of violence if they try to refuse — accept the invitation.

People who study MS-13 agree that when young gang members travel from El Salvador to the U.S., they are driven by the same economic factors driving other Central American immigrants. Even the 19-year-old gang leader charged with six murders on Long Island told his ex-girlfriend he was not a member of the gang when he came to the U.S. from El Salvador. He said it was only later, in the New York suburbs, that he was recruited.

And some MS-13 members are born right here. The Suffolk County Police Department examined a sample of active MS-13 members and found that just a quarter had come to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors. The natural conclusion: This is not a border issue. It’s a recruitment issue.

3. MS-13 Is Sticking Around, but It’s Not Growing

Trump talks about the gang as if it is suddenly taking over. “The weak illegal immigration policies of the Obama Admin. allowed bad MS 13 gangs to form in cities across U.S.,” he wrote in a tweet.

MS-13 has been stubbornly persistent, but it remains a boutique criminal organization, accounting for a tiny portion of 1.4 million gang members nationwide. Trump's Justice Department says there are about 10,000 MS-13 members in the U.S., the same number as 10 years ago. There's also nothing new about MS-13 alarmism. Back in 2005, Newsweek ran a cover story about the group, citing its 10,000 members, under the headline, “The most dangerous gang in America.”

On Long Island, the murder people cite most often when talking about MS-13’s brutality is the killing of a two-year-old and his mother back in 2010. But the gang’s history goes back much further than that; the FBI set up a Long Island task force to crack down on the gang in 2003. And MS-13 never invaded the U.S at all. It was founded in Los Angeles in the 1980s, and then mixed with California prison gang culture and was exported to El Salvador.

The group remains significantly smaller than the Crips, the Bloods and the Latin Kings; it’s also smaller than several gangs you’ve probably never heard of, like the Gangster Disciples in Chicago. Even the Center for Immigration Studies, which has been labeled an extremist group for its anti-immigrant ideology, can’t come up with more than an average of 35 murders per year attributed to MS-13 — far fewer than that Chicago gang you didn’t know existed.

MS-13 is not the largest, the most violent, or the fastest-growing gang, but it is the U.S. gang most strongly tied to Central America, which is where the majority of asylum-seeking teenagers come from. In that way, it’s the perfect focal point for Trump’s message of closed borders.
4. MS-13 Is Preying on a Specific Community, Not the Country at Large

When confronted last week with audio obtained by ProPublica of wailing children separated from their parents, White House Communications Adviser Mercedes Schlapp said, “What’s very heartbreaking is to watch Americans who have lost their children because of the MS-13 gang members.” But the vast majority of MS-13 victims are young immigrants, many of them undocumented.

I often think about this when I’m out reporting. This year, I have reached out to current gang members and added them as friends on Facebook. I’ve visited the homes of people on the local clique’s kill list, and heard their police-issued panic buttons hum under tables and behind doors. I’ve explored the wooded areas Long Island police call “the killing fields,” where bodies have been found. I feel safe doing this because MS-13 rarely goes after true outsiders — people who are not friends with any gang members or targets for recruitment. The closest I’ve found in Long Island to a totally random victim was a worker at a Central American deli who was hurt when a bullet passed through the head of a targeted victim.

The White House put out a statement last month that described recent murders carried out by “MS-13 animals.” Lost in the controversy over whether it was OK to call gang members animals was the fact that of the six identified victims, five were immigrants and the other was a child of immigrants.

5. Immigration Raids and Deportation Can Only Go So Far

Secretary Nielsen said last week that the presence of MS-13 in the U.S. is “the exclusive product of loopholes in our federal immigration laws.” The loopholes she is talking about are actually specific protections contained in United Nations conventions on refugees and torture, which the U.S. ratified. The U.S. is obligated to allow Central American immigrants to stay in the country while their asylum claims are processed, which can take years. If the person pleading asylum is a minor, they are supposed to be released to relatives.

But if U.S. officials determine that a teenager is a gang member, they stay in custody. And immigration officials can also re-detain teenagers who are recruited into MS-13 once they get here. Dozens of Long Island teenagers were re-detained last year on suspicion of gang ties. The problem is that it can be hard to tell who is in the gang and who is just adopting gang style. MS-13 has its own music and aesthetic, bound up in Central American pride. On Long Island, some immigrant teens use MS-13 markers as a fashion statement, the way American kids might once have worn the blue bandanas associated with the Crips because they liked Snoop Dogg.

I sat in on one hearing for a Long Island 17-year-old who had been detained for half a year after he wrote the El Salvador telephone code, “503,” in a notebook at school. He had spent some of that time in a detention center now under investigation for child abuse. At the hearing, an immigration judge ordered the teen released and openly mocked the gang charges. “I note that ‘503’ is an area code,” the judge said. “He may have had his grandmother’s phone number written in his notebook. We don’t know. But I think this is slim, slim evidence on which to base the continuing detention of an unaccompanied child.”

That’s not to say that all of the immigrant teenagers accused of gang affiliation are innocent. But Immigration and Customs Enforcement has arrested some 8,000 suspected MS-13 members in the past decade. If deportation was all it took, the gang would be gone by now.

So What?

This all matters because the gang really is terrorizing a portion of the population: young Latino immigrants in a few specific communities.

Last month, I accompanied the mother of a high school freshman killed by MS-13 to a Trump event on Long Island.
Inside a government building, the president railed against the gang. “They killed a cop for the sake of making a statement. They wanted to make a statement, so they killed a cop,” he said. (They did not kill a cop.)

Outside, the mother drifted between a pro-Trump rally and a counter protest. She took tranquilizer pills so she could face local reporters, and then told them she was unsure if Trump really cared about victims like her. She said she hoped the president’s fixation on MS-13 might spur changes that will keep other kids from being attacked and recruited by the gang.

But for any policy to work, it needs to be rooted in reality.
The Disappeared

Police on Long Island wrote off missing immigrant teens as runaways. One mother knew better — and searched MS-13’s killing fields for answers.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
September 20, 2018

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Leer en Español.

The string of text messages that would come to haunt Carlota Moran seemed like just an annoyance at first — an interruption to what was supposed to be a special outing for her and her son. It was the school break after Presidents Day in 2016, and Carlota had taken 15-year-old Miguel to the mall for a long-promised lunch at the Chinese buffet. Miguel walked with his arm slung around his mother’s shoulders as they returned a pair of pants at American Eagle.

Every few minutes, Miguel’s phone pinged with messages, distracting him. Carlota asked who kept texting him and he answered, with teenage vagueness, “Just a boy from school.”

Carlota was just over 5 feet, with thick black hair that fell midway down her back. At 5-foot-10, Miguel towered over her. As he tried on clothes in the dressing room, he teased her, “Why did you make me so handsome?”

The messages kept coming. They were from Alexander, a classmate of Miguel’s at Brentwood High on Long Island, and promised a taste of cool on a dull and frigid February afternoon. “Hey, let’s smoke up today,” Alexander wrote on Facebook Messenger.

“No way. You’re so bad — what did you do?” Miguel responded.
Miguel eventually agreed to join him, but not until later, and he wanted to bring a friend. “No, only us,” came the response. “We’ll get the blunts. That man Jairo is going to treat you. But just you, dog. I can pick you up and bring you here with us. But just us.”

After lunch, Carlota dropped Miguel at a neighbor’s to play video games, calling out to be careful as he jumped out of the car and ran across the quiet street. A man had recently been found dead in the woods, and she was worried.

Miguel and Alexander switched to Facebook voice messages. “Should I wait for you in the woods?” said Alexander, whose Facebook handle was Alexander Lokote, Spanish slang for “Homeboy.”

“No, better at my house — I don’t like to go out there in the trees,” Miguel said, pressing the phone close to his mouth to be heard over the video game music.

As night fell, Miguel and Alexander argued about whether to meet at Miguel’s house or in the woods that stretch like connective tissue through the small towns of Long Island. Around 7 p.m., Miguel agreed to go to the patch of trees nearest his home, by the high school. He said he couldn’t stay long.

“Where are you? I’m here with Jairo. Should we pick you up?” Alexander said.

“Wait by the school,” Miguel replied.

“OK, come over. We’re just getting here now, by the fluorescent lights.”

Miguel walked off toward the woods wearing a pair of black sweatpants and vanished into the darkness. The only clue his family would have to where he had gone and what awaited him there were the 84 Facebook messages he had exchanged that day with Alexander. They were discovered, weeks later, by his teenage sister — not the police.

Miguel was the first of 11 high schoolers to go missing in a single Long Island county in 2016 and 2017, as the street gang MS-13 preyed with increasing brutality on the Latino community. As student after student disappeared, often lured out with the promise of smoking blunts in the woods, their immigrant families were stymied by the inaction and inadequate procedures of the Suffolk County police, according to more than 100 interviews and thousands of pages of police reports, court records and documents obtained through freedom-of-information requests.

Many of the families came from countries where officials have historically looked the other way as gangs and death squads disappear young people. Now they felt the same pattern was playing out again, in the woods of Long Island. The officers they asked for help dismissed their children as runaways instead of crime victims, and they repeatedly failed to provide interpreters for witnesses and parents who only spoke Spanish. Their experience points to a larger breakdown between the Police Department and Latino immigrants. Too often, Suffolk detectives acknowledge, police have stereotyped young immigrants as gang members and minimized violence against them as “misdemeanor murder.”

Today, Suffolk police and the FBI are cracking down on MS-13. They’ve charged dozens of MS-13 members with felonies, and the disappearances have mostly stopped. President Donald Trump visited Long Island and praised Suffolk County police for doing a “spectacular job” against the gang, which he has made a national security priority. The Police Department says it took the disappearances seriously and has improved relations with the Latino community. But Suffolk police gang squad head Lt. Tom Zagajeski acknowledged that, before the surge of national attention, the department’s efforts to fight MS-13 and understand its connection to the wave of disappearances fell short. “I think we’re a little more aware of things we didn’t pay that much attention to,” he said in an interview.

For Miguel’s family and many others terrorized by MS-13, the police response came too late, and remains too little.

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Carlota had been trying to protect Miguel since before he was born. When doctors in Ecuador said there was a problem with her placenta, she lay in bed for months. When her tiny baby arrived at 29 weeks, she slept next to his incubator.

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Once he learned to walk, Miguel’s favorite game was to stand outside the front door and wait for Carlota to come looking for him. Then he’d tear down the street, giggling, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she was following. For a while, Carlota indulged him. She didn’t want him to be scared of going outside. But when he turned 4, she put up a chicken wire fence.

She felt the pressure of being his sole defender; his father had left after he was born. As he grew older, her family chided her for sheltering him. Kids teased Miguel for being chubby, for his slight stutter and for holding his mother’s hand long into elementary school. Carlota married an Ecuadorian who lived part of the year on Long Island and then got green cards for Miguel and his big sister, Lady, in 2014. The marriage didn’t last, but she made ends meet with her assembly line job at an envelope factory. She and her kids lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the majority-Latino town of Brentwood, midway between Manhattan and the Hamptons. It felt to Carlota like both were almost within reach.

By 2016, Miguel and Lady were both enrolled at Brentwood High, and once again, Miguel was being teased. Carlota could see how desperate he was to fit in. He bleached his hair blond; she made him dye it brown again. He tried to pierce his ears; Carlota put a stop to it. She scolded him when he got her name tattooed on his arm, but also felt flattered.

Lady, a year ahead of Miguel, brushed up against the gangs first. Boys wearing the blue plastic rosaries favored by MS-13 had pestered Lady to sit with them at lunch and smoke marijuana after class. When she turned down MS-13’s invitation, members bullied her and knocked her down in the halls. But Lady, who has long, thick hair like Carlota and a habit of narrowing her eyes when she talks, was a natural loner and determined to become a nurse. After a few months, the gang gave up. She worried that her soft little brother, a mama’s boy who still collected Beanie Babies and watched Disney cartoons, would be an easier target. In a special education evaluation, a Brentwood administrator described Miguel as “eager to please” and in need of more “positive peer interactions.” Lady warned him that there could be consequences for acknowledging the wrong people, or spending too much time in the “papi hallway,” where immigrant students hung out. “I told him, ‘This is how you survive high school: Do not make friends with anyone,’” Lady said.
Carlota had heard about the gang problems at Brentwood High. She made a habit of smelling Miguel’s clothes for marijuana. But when he mentioned that some classmates were hassling him, she gave standard parent advice to ignore the bullies. She was happy when Miguel started going to meet friends by the high school. She loved how confident he was becoming. He was lifting weights and was supposed to start speech therapy for his stutter. He had a girlfriend and got along well with Carlota’s boyfriend, Abraham Chaparro, who he called his stepfather. On the Friday he went missing, he had put in an application to work with Brentwood’s volunteer fire department.

Carlota knew it was good for Miguel to become more independent, but still she was pleased that he wanted to spend part of his winter break with her. After she dropped him off to play video games, she picked up chicken and rice for the family’s dinner. When she got home, she texted Miguel to ask where he was. An hour passed and she texted again. She sent a third, a fourth, a fifth message, each time telling herself that he hadn’t heard the first few dings. “Miguel, where are you?” “Miguel, please come home. Nothing will happen.”

By midnight, her stomach was clenched with dread. Miguel never went more than a few hours without calling her. He never missed his 10 o’clock curfew. By 2 a.m., she couldn’t wait any longer. She got in the car and started driving, to the high school, the public soccer fields, to bars that Miguel was too young to get into. Her mind ran wild with visions of him dangling out of a crumpled car or lying unconscious at a party. “I was looking and looking, and the hours were passing so slowly. I was all alone in the dark out there, and it felt like my world was ending. I was so scared I would never see my boy again,” she told me.

When she ran out of places to look, Carlota came home and paced in front of the house, peering into the darkness. Then, she sat fully clothed on her bed, waiting for the sun to come up so she could go to the police station and report Miguel missing.

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The door to the station was locked, so Carlota rang to be buzzed in. Sleigh bells taped to the door jingled as she opened it. Officers sat on an elevated platform next to a glass case of vintage toy police cars. An officer drinking coffee greeted Carlota and asked what he could do for her.

Responsible for half of Long Island, Suffolk County’s Police Department is the 11th largest in the country but has struggled to adjust to an influx of Latino immigrants. The station faced a Latino storefront church, a Central American grocery and a pupusa restaurant, but few detectives there spoke Spanish, and none were certified as bilingual.

Carlota didn’t know much English, so she brought along her boyfriend, Abraham. She gave the basic details for the police report — Miguel had brown eyes, weighed 235 pounds, was 15 years old — and tried to explain that her son would never run off like this; he was so attached to her, he couldn’t even handle sleepovers. The officer told Abraham there was no reason to panic. Most likely, Miguel was still with his new high school friends. “They’re probably hanging out in New York City,” Abraham remembers the officer saying. They should go home and wait for Miguel to come back.

There’s a truism in law enforcement that the first 24 hours are the only 24 hours. The New York
City Police Department has a checklist of dozens of things officers must do right away if a minor goes missing, including speaking with the kid’s friends, checking their social media accounts and putting out a press release. Nassau County, which borders Suffolk, has an even more extensive protocol that includes alerting state officials within two hours of taking a report. The Suffolk County police handbook requires just one step if a child is reported missing: Search the area.

When they got home, Carlota was beside herself. Lady and Abraham spent the day inventing scenarios to reassure her, and themselves. They went to talk with Miguel’s friends, but no one knew anything. If police thought Miguel had been abducted and was in danger, they could have asked for a statewide alert that would have notified people through text messages and social media to look out for him. That evening, Carlota and Lady waited for their phones to ding with an alert. But state records show the Police Department never made the request.

The next day was Sunday. Lady and a friend searched the woods, with a pet dog for protection. Venturing deep among the bare trees, they found dirty clothes and mattresses surrounded by condom wrappers, but no sign of Miguel. Carlota went through his things, looking for some clue and instead finding his notepad filled with drawings he had made of their family. She talked in circles about where Miguel might have gone, always coming back to the conclusion that someone must have kidnapped him. As worried about Carlota as about Miguel, Abraham did not leave her side.

A Spanish-speaking detective was assigned to the case. A bodybuilder with a full sleeve of tattoos, Detective Luis Perez had served in the Air Force before joining the Police Department in the 1990s. He led other officers in searching the area around the house under the low winter sky. Officers also looked through Miguel’s room and talked to a neighbor who said that he had seen Miguel walk off toward the high school, but they didn’t know anything more. Perez told Carlota not to worry, Miguel would be back soon.

When classes started again on Monday, Lady worried about leaving her mother alone, but Carlota insisted she go to school. Carlota stayed home and made a list of places in Brentwood and neighboring towns where Miguel might be. When Abraham got off work, they drove around together, scanning the streets.

Three days had passed since Miguel went missing, and police now sent out a press release. It said, “Detectives do not believe there is foul play involved.” The department listed Miguel as a runaway in the state missing person database, even though a spokesman said department policy is to assume missing children are in danger unless they have been thrown out by their parents or have a history of leaving home. Police generally spend less time and resources looking for teenagers who leave home voluntarily. “As soon as you use the word ‘runaway,’ it’s a non-incident. It’s a non-crime,” said Vernon Geberth, a former New York City homicide detective who wrote a widely used police investigative textbook.

On Tuesday, someone started responding to the text messages Lady had been sending to Miguel’s phone.

“Who are you?” the message said.

“I’m Miguel’s sister. Why do you have his phone?” Lady wrote back, shaken but also relieved that someone might finally know where Miguel was.

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“Send me a photo of you to see if I know you,” came the response. Lady wondered if her brother’s captor was playing with her. But she still sent a photo of herself with Miguel. She says she went to the station and told Perez about the strange request, but he didn’t ask for her phone, and then the messages stopped.

Perez and the Police Department declined to comment on Miguel’s case. The department also declined to provide the missing person report to me or Miguel’s family, citing an open investigation. The department said that it conducts every missing-person investigation thoroughly and follows up on all leads.

“Our response to a reported missing person does not differ based on nationality,” it said, later adding, “Suffolk County Police officers are among the finest in the country and treat everyone with professionalism and compassion.”

Carlota started watching the news obsessively, and MS-13 kept coming up. Founded in Los Angeles by Central American refugees in the 1980s, MS-13 is relatively small nationwide but has been active for years on Long Island. The gang had killed two people around Brentwood during the first two months of 2016 and staged a shootout at the town library.

After five days of no apparent progress from the police, Carlota decided she needed a new strategy. She got a local Spanish-language TV reporter to film a segment about the case. Her face shiny with tears, she confessed the possibility she had begun playing and replaying in her mind: “There’s so much you can never be sure of in this country. What I fear most is, it could be the gangs.” Reporter Alex Roland nodded sympathetically but later told me he thought Miguel had probably run away. After all, he explained, that’s what the police said.

The department hadn’t made a missing poster for Miguel, so Carlota photocopied his freshman ID and wrote next to it in Spanish, “If anyone sees this boy, please call his mother.” She posted the flyer at delis, churches and Miguel’s favorite clothing stores. Tips started to flow in: Miguel was eating empanadas, walking on the beach, begging outside the 7-11, getting a haircut at the barbershop. Each tip spurred an agonizing cycle of emotions: hurt and confusion that Miguel hadn’t let her know he was safe, then desperate hope, and finally, crashing despair as the leads turned out to be false.

Lady kept going to class and tried to keep it together for Carlota’s sake. But she really missed her brother. At night, she would replay his old messages to her, just to hear his low, hesitating voice. Then, in early April 2016, almost two months
after he went missing, Lady discovered Miguel had left his Facebook account logged in on Abraham’s phone.

She started going systematically through messages from the past year. In one conversation, Miguel talked about saving up for Nike Cortez sneakers, but he abandoned the idea after a friend warned him that they were a sign of MS-13 membership. Most of his messages were failed attempts to talk to high school girls. Then, on the day he went missing, just one conversation — the 84 text and voice messages with Alexander. Lady said she recognized Alexander as a gang member from the language he used and the pictures on his Facebook page of grim reapers and laughing clowns — favorite memes of MS-13. There were strings of messages from anxious family and friends in the weeks that followed, but Alexander never sent another message after that night.

Carlota and Abraham say they went to Perez with the phone immediately. He kept it for a few days, and then he called and invited them to the high school to speak with Alexander. Experts on police procedure say a step like this is unusual and risky, because this kind of contact between a witness and a victim’s family could invalidate evidence in court. If Perez suspected foul play, they said, he should have gotten a warrant to search Alexander’s phone.

Assistant principal Lisa Rodriguez called Lady out of class over the intercom and had her wait outside the principal’s office as the adults talked to the student who had coaxed Miguel out. Alexander was dressed like an MS-13 member, with a blue plastic rosary and a long white T-shirt, but he looked like a child to Abraham, scared and “too weak to break a plate.”

Carlota and Abraham recall Alexander saying he and his friends had planned to go with Miguel to some train tracks, but Miguel never showed up. Carlota started crying. She demanded to be told where her son was. Alexander said he didn’t know. After half an hour, Perez dismissed him. “I knew right away this was something key, and I was begging Perez to press for more,” Carlota said. “I was telling them, ‘He has to know where my baby is.’” After they dismissed Alexander, Perez and the assistant principal told Carlota they thought he knew more than he let on, but there was not much officials could do about it.

A spokesman for the Brentwood schools declined to discuss the meeting but said the district fully cooperates with police. Rodriguez said she couldn’t remember who Alexander was. “I work with a lot of kids, it’s a large building, so I can’t even tell you,” she said.

After this meeting, Lady stopped seeing Alexander in school. The gang problem was getting worse. There were frequent fights in the hallways, and teachers shut themselves inside their classrooms. “These groups of students would all crowd around. It was scary,” bilingual education teacher Will Cuba said. Lady tried to ask around about Miguel without drawing attention. Students told her that MS-13 might have targeted him because one of his friends dressed in black, a sign of belonging to its chief rival, the 18th Street gang. But the friend told Lady he wasn’t affiliated with gang.

At the end of April, police asked the state for a missing person poster. It said, “Miguel is a runaway.”

Carlota stopped working at the envelope factory and fell into a routine of watching the news, paging through mystery thrillers at the library, asking Perez for updates and making the rounds of places where she had already searched for

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Miguel more times than she could count. Unable to sleep at night or sit still during the day, she began taking strong pain pills. She thought about counseling but dreaded the likely advice: that she needed to accept that Miguel might be gone.

It was the height of spring — three months since Miguel had gone missing — when Carlota saw something on TV that brought her up short: Another mother, crying over a missing son. Oscar Acosta was weeks away from graduating high school when he left home to play soccer on a Friday afternoon and never came back. He had told his mother a gang was bothering him because he had refused to join. “Something is terribly wrong. He didn't take any clothes or money or anything,” the woman said. Carlota needed to talk to her.

A nephew of Abraham’s recognized the mother’s house on TV; it was just around the corner from the Applebee’s. Carlota knocked on the door that night, heart hammering.

The mother, Maria Arias, didn’t speak English. She told Carlota a familiar story: Detectives had reassured her that her son was hanging out with friends and would return after the weekend. Since then, Carlota recalled, Maria said she had been going to the police station for updates and leaving without information because of the language barrier. Maria later told me that she had to enlist a woman from church to help her report Oscar missing.

It was a frustration immigrants in Suffolk County have grappled with for years. Most Brentwood residents speak Spanish as their first language. But in 2016, only three people in the entire 3,800-person Suffolk County Police Department had passed a language test to interpret for Spanish speakers. One lawyer, Ala Amoachi, told me that she represented a Spanish-speaking Suffolk County woman who called police to report that her husband had been hitting her. When police came to the home, they used the abusive husband to interpret for his wife. The department declined to comment on this case, but it said it now has 10 certified interpreters. The New York City Police Department — 14 times as big as Suffolk’s — has 250 times as many certified interpreters. The Suffolk Police Department is one of the best paid in the country. Most detectives, including Perez, make more than $200,000 a year. But unlike a majority of big U.S. police departments, Suffolk does not give officers any extra pay for knowing a second language.

The U.S. Department of Justice has been supervising the Police Department since 2011, after white teenagers went
“beaner-hopping” — their term for beating up immigrants — and killed a man from Ecuador. Police had failed to follow up on earlier reports that this group of teenagers was attacking immigrants, which the Justice Department said was part of a pattern of discrimination. It said Suffolk officers were both over- and under-policing Latino residents — stopping them more frequently than white people for minor violations, while also failing to fully look into the crimes they reported. This past March, the Justice Department found that Suffolk County officers, after seven years, are still not consistently using professional interpreters.

The Justice Department has also faulted Suffolk police for not doing enough to protect Latino teenagers from gangs. The Police Department pulled back from a joint Long Island FBI gang task force in 2012 amid a political squabble. Current and former Suffolk detectives told me they didn’t see MS-13 as a public safety threat, because its victims are usually at least on the fringe of gang life. They have a phrase for these killings: “misdemeanor murder.”

“When we see a missing Hispanic kid, we tend to assume it’s a gang-involved thing,” said Ken Bombace, who investigated MS-13 murders as a Suffolk County detective before leaving the department three years ago. “The sense is that these kids are killing each other.”

In June 2016, a third immigrant teenager went missing. His mother, Sara Hernandez, said she had pulled him out of Brentwood High because MS-13 was bullying him there. One afternoon, a group of boys came to the house looking for him, and he hid in his room. Then another afternoon, he did go, and didn’t return. Because nobody spoke Spanish at the police station, Sara had to pay her cab driver to interpret. He kept the clock running and charged her $70. She said police told her that her son could be hanging out with friends and would soon return, the same assurance they had given Oscar’s mother and Carlota.
Through the summer, Carlota struggled to maintain her belief that Miguel was alive but just couldn't call home. The rare moments when she let herself imagine that he might be dead felt like a betrayal, as if she was killing him. Hoping to find a piece of his clothing or some other hint, she took to walking at dusk through an area of shaggy oak and pine trees that police called “the killing fields” because it was an MS-13 hangout and dumping ground for bodies. She saw old couches and television sets and a discarded speedboat. At the heart of these woods loomed a boarded up brick building. An abandoned psychiatric hospital. Carlota was spooked by the empty spray paint cans and candy wrappers in the brush and wondered who had left them there. But she found the loud crickets, the earthy smell and the murmur of traffic soothing, even hypnotic. “It was as if I was pulled in by some desperation. There was one night that Abraham called out to me because I was getting lost in there. But I wanted to just keep going deeper and deeper. It was like the forest was calling to me,” she said.

She was always sure to leave by nightfall. “For the first time in my life, I was afraid of the dark.”

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Carlota continued to check in with Perez weekly. One day, he invited the whole family to the station. As she walked through the lobby, Carlota did not see any safety advisories or missing person posters. At the front desk, police had laid out packets in English and Spanish to help people prepare flyers for lost pets.

The three of them sat down in a windowless detective room. Carlota hoped Perez was going to give them some news, but she also feared what it might be. Instead, the family said, he adopted a new attitude that caught them off guard. He accused them of knowing more than they were letting on. He spoke to Abraham in English, saying it was the language of the U.S., and had him interpret.

A different immigrant family that met with police in 2016 about gang threats toward their daughter secretly recorded their interaction with Perez after he was brought in to interpret between them and another detective. Perez is not a certified interpreter, and in the video, instead of speaking in Spanish, Perez asks the daughter if she is bilingual and, even as her father protests that he can't understand, begins interrogating her in English. “You think we’re as dumb as the kids you hang out with? You think this is all a joke?” Perez says.

In their conversation with Perez, Carlota and Lady insisted that they didn't know anything more. Carlota couldn't
understand why he would think she would keep anything back from the police that might help them find Miguel. What the detective said next stands out in the memories of all three family members. Perez turned to Carlota and told her, “If you're so worried, go pay a fortune teller to find Miguel.”

After that, the department replaced Perez with a succession of three officers who seemed more compassionate but no more effective. Perez didn't respond to the two dozen questions I emailed him. When I called him, he hung up. When I knocked on the door of his home in a gated community a few towns away from Brentwood, he told me to get off his property.

In August 2016, an 18-year-old immigrant was found dead in a park with machete marks all over his body. Carlota had always encouraged her children to spend time outside. Now, when Lady made plans to see friends or go to church, Carlota pleaded with her to stay home. Struggling to function on her own, she moved into Abraham's basement apartment and brought Lady with her. “She was in so much pain because she didn't know anything and the police never called her,” Abraham said. “I thought Miguelito must be lying dead somewhere, but of course I would never have suggested that to her.”

By September, Carlota rarely left home. Some days she was relieved there was nothing on the news about Miguel’s case, and other days she felt desperate for any resolution, no matter what. Lady sent Facebook messages to Miguel every few weeks. “We love you.” “Please come back, mami is really suffering.” “Baby brother, I miss you.” MS-13 members were again targeting Lady at school, threatening that if she didn't join them, she could be next to disappear. She urged her mother to do something to pull police attention back to the case. So Carlota tracked down a new Univision reporter.

He agreed to tape a segment outside the high school. He asked Carlota where she thought her son might be, but as she was answering, the producer cut in. Two girls from Brentwood High, Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens, had been attacked as they walked near their homes. Nisa had been killed in the street. Kayla ran into a patch of woods and was missing overnight. Police told state officials she was a runaway. Now her body had been found.

Carlota followed the reporter to the crime scene. Police cars with flashing lights blocked the street. Carlota saw a woman crying in the middle of the road. “I was like, ‘First Miguel, and now these two girls? What is happening in this town?’ I felt this panic rising up and I tried to make myself stop thinking,” Carlota said.

This case was different than the ones before. The victims were native-born U.S. citizens, girls, and the gang hadn't even tried to hide their bodies. Their parents had nice homes and professional jobs, and spoke English. “Two high school girls killed by MS-13?” said Suffolk County lawmaker and former gang detective Rob Trotta. “That’s not misdemeanor murder.”

The murders made national news. Trump hailed the girls’ parents and invited them to his State of the Union speech. The Suffolk County Police Department came under intense pressure to solve the case. It posted signs offering a $15,000 reward for help catching the killers. Officers went door-to-door asking for tips. Over the summer, Suffolk officials had rejected an offer to start an anti-gang program for immigrant teenagers in Brentwood, according to two people familiar with the program.
with the episode. Now, they called the organizer back and asked how soon she could get it running. Police arrested dozens of suspected MS-13 members and mapped out the local cliques. Within days, they were searching the woods with German Shepherds and shovels.

Zagajeski, the Suffolk gang squad head, said the girls’ murders spurred police to pay more attention to reports of missing Latino teenagers. “Where in the past we may have been like, ‘Oh, a missing girl, we hear this all the time,’ now it’s like, ‘Oh, a missing girl in Brentwood? There’s a lot of gang members over there, let’s take a ride over and see what it is,’” he told me.

In the days after the double murder, Carlota and Abraham returned to the crime scene and spoke to the woman they had seen crying in the street, Kayla Cuevas’ mother. They told her about Miguel, and she gave Carlota a rosary as a gesture of solidarity. A detective working with the FBI gang task force came to see Carlota at home. He vowed to quit his job if he couldn’t find Miguel, now missing for seven months. He took a swab of her DNA and showed Lady a photo of a teenager whom she identified as Alexander, the boy from the Facebook messages.

On Sept. 21, 2016, one week after the girls were murdered, Lady was watching coverage of the hunt for their killers when an alert flashed. Police were identifying a body found days earlier in the woods as missing high school student Oscar Acosta. Carlota raced in from her bedroom and saw footage of police walking along the edge of the same killing fields she had searched with Abraham. Then the announcer said a second body had been discovered. Carlota noticed two men in suits walking down the stairs to her door. Her legs began to wobble. They were from the FBI and had brought an interpreter to tell Carlota what she had already figured out from the TV: The second body was Miguel’s.

She fell to the floor, raking the tiles with her hands. Then she saw Abraham coming back from a job installing insulation and ran out of the apartment toward him. But she fell again and tumbled down the stairs. Abraham hesitated to cradle her, because his work clothes were covered in fiberglass. Two days later, Carlota woke up in a hospital bed. The trauma staff had written on her chart, “Altered mental state. Unable to answer questions. Patient repeatedly stating ‘Just kill me. My son, my son.’”

She spent the days in the hospital cursing herself for bringing Miguel to a place where he could be targeted by gangs. She remembered telling him to ignore the kids bothering him at school. Had she been too dismissive? A mantra looped in her head, “I want to die.”

Perez called Abraham to say he was sorry for the family’s loss. Soon after Carlota was released from the hospital, the body of the third missing Brentwood High student was found. He, too, had been buried in the killing fields.

In all the months of uncertainty, Miguel’s clothes and stuffed animals had comforted Carlota. They smelled like him and seemed like a vital connection to someone still alive. Now she packed them into five trash bags and put them on the street next to piles of fall leaves.

The coroner listed the cause of Miguel’s death as a blow to the head and his place of death as an unidentified road. He

https://features.propublica.org/ms13-miguel/the-disappeared/
had likely been killed the night he went missing, although it was hard to tell because his body had been decomposing so long only his bones remained. Carlota had wanted to bury him in a casket and give him a Catholic funeral. But police returned Miguel’s cremated remains in a small cardboard box. Abraham chose not to translate the forensic report that said the bones were crisscrossed with long machete marks.

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The police were paying more attention now, but the slaughter continued. The discovery of Miguel’s bones brought the MS-13 body count in Suffolk County to 10. In October, another 15-year-old, Javier Castillo, vanished and was listed with the state as a runaway, only to be found buried in the woods a year later. A man beaten until his face was pulverized was left in the street. A bystander was shot at a deli. And still no one was charged with any of the murders. At the peak of the violence, MS-13 murders accounted for 40 percent of all Suffolk County homicides. Latino residents began avoiding the streets after dark.

In April 2017, the gang left four boys in a gruesome tableau in the woods, bringing the murder count to 18. The bodies were found by one of the victims’ families, who said they had flagged down a passing police officer and asked for help with the search, only to be told to file a report at the station.

Of the Suffolk County families who lost children to the gang during the rampage, nine have told me they felt ignored and disrespected at times by police. Most say they had to look for their kids themselves and struggled to communicate with police. At least four saw their children listed as runaways before their bodies were found.

“The police treated me like I just had some rebellious kid on my hands, and meanwhile I was living the worst year of my life,” said Santos Castillo, Javier’s father.

A telephone pole in Brentwood near where Carlota lived when Miguel disappeared.

Timothy Sini, now district attorney, said police suspected Miguel had been murdered even though they listed him as a runaway. (Natalie Keyssar, special to ProPublica)
As the head of the Suffolk County Police Department from January 2016 until early this year, Timothy Sini was ultimately responsible for handling the crisis. But when I asked him about Miguel and the other teenagers who went missing in 2016, he got confused. He initially said that the boys had disappeared in 2015 — before he became commissioner. He also said that even though police had listed Miguel as a runaway, detectives had immediately suspected a homicide. Law enforcement experts told me that if police believed immigrant high school students were being targeted, they should have warned the community.

Sini acknowledged that police increased their efforts after the two girls were killed, seven months after Miguel disappeared. “If you want to criticize the Suffolk County Police Department for not doing enough against MS-13” before then, Sini said, “I suppose you can do that.”

He called the phrase “misdemeanor murder” offensive. “We need to do as much as possible to eradicate MS-13 and will continue to do that. Any victim that has been murdered or injured, that is a tragedy,” he said.

An ascendant Democrat in Trump country, Sini has now moved on to become Suffolk district attorney. He ran for the position on the slogan, “The man who took MS-13 down.” Sini said it has taken time to change the Police Department’s culture. The man who ran the department before Sini is in prison for beating up a suspect who stole a bag of dildos and porn from his unmarked police car.

One of Sini’s most important accomplishments as commissioner was reconciling with the FBI and sending detectives to its Long Island gang task force. With the task force in the lead, investigators began making progress against MS-13, and federal prosecutors have now indicted suspects in more than half of the murders. A majority of the people charged with masterminding the violence belonged to the MS-13 Sailors clique, the most powerful gang at Brentwood High. Some were 15- and 16-year-olds.

The wave of MS-13 violence has largely subsided. But Miguel’s case has stumped police. Even though Sini said police immediately suspected a homicide, his murder remains unsolved two and a half years later. Asked why, Sini said: “Are you seriously asking me that question? Law enforcement has done a tremendous job. They’ve put MS-13 on the run in Suffolk County. I mean, this is a ridiculous question.”

Carlota and Abraham no longer haunt the killing fields, but they’re still looking for clues. I tagged along this past winter when they dropped in on a hearing at the Long Island federal courthouse where all the Suffolk County MS-13 murders have been consolidated into one case.

In the wood-paneled courtroom, parents of victims greeted each other like old friends at church. Kayla’s parents waved Carlota over. When the accused killers were led in, Carlota was surprised by how childish they looked, with their sparse goatees and lanky limbs stretched by still-unfinished growth spurts. A woman in the audience lifted up a toddler in a pink coat, catching the eye of a defendant who grinned and waved back with handcuffed hands.

Kayla’s mother pointed out the leaders of the Sailors. One was 19-year-old Jairo Saenz. Prosecutors have charged him with six homicides, including the murders of the two girls and Oscar.
Acosta, whose body was found next to Miguel’s. Jairo has pleaded not guilty. The indictment says he marked his victims for death because he suspected them of associating with rival gangs. The method he is accused of using to kill Oscar mirrors what likely happened to Miguel. Accomplices invited Oscar to the woods by a school to smoke blunts. Then, according to the indictment, the Sailors attacked him, loaded him into a trunk, drove to the killing fields, slashed him to death and buried him in a shallow grave.

Carlota remembered Alexander’s messages to Miguel. He had kept talking about “Jairo.” Jairo was the one who was going to hook them up with blunts. Who wanted Miguel to come alone. The only one who got the teenage honorific “that man Jairo.” Squeezing Abraham’s hand in the gallery, Carlota sat up straight to see. Jairo looked more muscular than the other defendants, with long eyelashes. A row of girls mouthed messages of support as the prosecutor detailed his crimes. Jairo showed no reaction when the prosecutor said the government would be seeking the death penalty, but the girls gasped and murmured. A baby squeezed too hard by one of them started crying.

After the hearing, the parents talked among themselves in an empty hall. Picture windows looked out from the 10th floor onto the spreading Long Island woods where most of the violence had taken place. Another mother confided that police had refused to let her see her son’s body because it was too disfigured. Carlota urged Abraham to approach the prosecutors.

“I am the stepfather of Miguel, who was missing,” he said to one of them.

The prosecutor asked who Miguel was, and how long he had been gone. Then he left and returned with his chief, who led Carlota and Abraham into a small room. When they came out, they said the chief told them that Miguel’s case had been difficult to crack and was still under investigation. Prosecutors were waiting for someone to talk. As we left, a member of the FBI task force chimed in, telling Abraham to call his local police.

That isn’t always as easy as it sounds. One afternoon this summer, Abraham shuffled through his collection of worn business cards, trying the numbers of different detectives. The apartment remained a shrine to Miguel. Carlota kept the urn of his ashes on Lady’s nightstand, nestled among some of his beanie babies, several Bibles open to passages about fiery justice and a now-deflated Mylar balloon he bought for her for Valentine’s Day the week he disappeared. In the corner sat a fat folder of papers for her citizenship application; she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to become a citizen or return to Ecuador for good.

After half an hour, Abraham got through to the Suffolk County homicide detective who now has Miguel’s case and asked for an update. He put the call on speaker phone so I could hear.

“We’re still working on it, us and the FBI. We are still trying to find out what happened,” the detective said.

Abraham asked about Alexander. What was his full name? Had he gotten away?

“That was one of the kids who was spoken to. I’d have to look in the folder and see what his name is,” the detective answered. “Everybody that we had a name of, we spoke to, and they didn’t really provide any usable information. Unfortunately, sometimes these things take a long time.”

https://features.propublica.org/ms13-miguel/the-disappeared/
I decided to look for usable information myself. For months, I didn't make much headway. Nobody I talked to could tell me Alexander's full name, and he never came back to Brentwood High. I eventually spoke with two teenagers who said they had not been questioned about Miguel but knew who had killed him. They said it was “that man Jairo.”

Jairo, they and others told me, had come from El Salvador as a teenager. He worked construction jobs and lived in a large house with his mother, brother, three sisters and a pit bull. He hung out in the halls of Brentwood High but rarely went to class. Friendly and charming, he earned his gang nickname, “Funny.” Girls liked his dimples and strong cologne. He filled his social media accounts with selfies and photos of his infant daughter. In early 2016, he changed, telling gang underlings that he had to show he was hard or others would disrespect him. Jairo's lawyers declined to make him available for an interview.

Henry, a Brentwood High MS-13 member who has given information to the police, told me the gang saw Miguel as overly friendly and effeminate. He also confused the Sailors. He didn't seem to have gang friends, but he sometimes came to school wearing the red bandanna of the Bloods, the rosary of MS-13 or the head-to-toe black of the 18th Street Gang. Henry thought Miguel was just a nerd trying to look cool, but MS-13 members started circulating photos of him on a group text.

Henry said that at Jairo's order, he grilled Miguel about how he dressed. Jairo listened in on speaker phone as Miguel said he didn't owe anyone an explanation. And that was it. Miguel was marked for death because the Sailors felt he was disrespecting MS-13 by wearing the clothes of rival gangs. Henry said that after the Sailors killed Miguel, some members went back, unearthed the body, cut apart his limbs and swung a machete into his face. Around the time the gang was re-butchered Miguel's body, Carlota was pleading on TV that her son was not a runaway.

Jairo's ex-girlfriend, nicknamed Chinita, also linked him to the murder. A 14-year-old freshman when she started dating Jairo in 2015, Chinita at first thought he was sweet and liked that he could drive her to the movies and mall. Then he started becoming more possessive and sending her strange messages, and she took out a restraining order against him. Chinita said that, soon after Miguel disappeared, Jairo texted her that he was in the woods playing with human teeth. He sent her a photo of a dirty pair of black sweatpants like the ones Miguel wore the night he vanished.

In September 2016, right after Miguel’s body was found, police arrested Jairo for driving without a license. Officers let

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him go with a notice to appear in court, which he blew off. Less than two weeks later, Chinita’s parents filed a missing person report saying Jairo had taken her and stashed her at his house. Nevertheless, police listed her as a runaway. Her parents say they asked officers to search Jairo’s house, but they never did. Chinita escaped after two months and called her mother. Chinita says police refused to send a squad car and told her to take a taxi home. The FBI would later find the clique’s cache of guns, bats and machetes buried in the backyard.

By the fall of 2016, Jairo was the subject of a restraining order, had skipped a court appearance for the driving violation and had allegedly kidnapped a minor. And then, having already killed three people, not counting Miguel, he went on to kill at least three more, according to federal prosecutors.

The last time I went to see Carlota, she and Abraham were in the middle of looking for a new apartment. She had decided to stay on Long Island until someone was charged with Miguel’s murder, but she was hoping to move to Nassau County, which she calls the “American side” of Long Island. Carlota is feeling especially scared these days. Another immigrant teenager was murdered in Suffolk County over the summer. Kayla Cuevas’ mother was struck and killed earlier this month by an SUV at a memorial service for her daughter after getting into an argument with the driver.

When I told Carlota what I’d learned about Jairo, she shook her head and spoke angrily. How could a group of teenagers have committed so many murders, essentially becoming serial killers in the space of a year, when the clues were right there in those messages sent to her son during winter break?

“You get the sense that the police here have this attitude that we Latinos are just killing each other, and this is their country,” she said. “If Miguel was an American, they might have found him right away. If they’d investigated then and there, maybe all these other children wouldn’t have had to die.”

Even though they haven’t found a place yet, Carlota has packed up most of the apartment into boxes. She finally got rid of the bed Miguel slept on. The detectives’ cards she kept safe in a drawer, to avoid losing them in the mess of the move. When she’s ready to leave, she’ll pack them up last, just in case.
Ira Glass: MS-13-- President Trump talks about them a lot. He's mentioned them 198 times since he became president according to one database of everything that he said publicly. Here he is in Nashville in May.

President Trump: This vicious gang has transformed the once peaceful, beautiful communities that I know so well. I know them all. Into blood stained killing fields. Savagely murdering, raping, and mutilating, their victims.

Ira Glass: The communities he knows well are on Long Island, near where he grew up in Queens. MS-13 is a particularly brutal gang. Originally formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by immigrants and refugees from Central America. Their weapons of choice tend to be machetes and baseball bats. MS-13 has been especially violent lately on Long Island. Last year the president spoke there at Suffolk County Community College. The audience was filled with law enforcement of various kinds-- immigration and customs officials, FBI agents, members of the local police, in their dress uniforms and white gloves.

And the president praised law enforcement for doing a great job eradicating MS-13-- arresting gang members, throwing them in jail, deporting them.

President Trump: And I want to just tell you all together, right now. And the reason I came, this is the most important sentence to me. On behalf of the American people, I want to say, thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Ira Glass: At this speech, he shook hands with officers from the Suffolk County Police Department. Our story today is about that police department, and it documents the opposite. It documents them failing repeatedly in fighting MS-13. Particularly when the victims were Latino immigrant kids.

In the end, there were 18 murders in 16 months. Literally, teenagers were disappearing. And for a long time, the Suffolk County Police did very little to investigate. Made the same mistakes over and over. Missed clues, missed leads. Brushed aside distraught parents who were looking for their kids. Parents who had information that might have been helpful.

Investigative reporter Hannah Dreier from ProPublica, who spent the last year in Suffolk County reporting on MS-13 and the police there. And she's found pervasive problems in how the Suffolk County Police Department treats Latinos in general. Problems which dramatically slowed their response to this MS-13 murder spree. And let's just get right to it. From WBEZ Chicago, it's This American Life. Here's Hannah Dreier.

Hannah Dreier: The first teenager who was murdered was Miguel Garcia Moran. His family always teased his mom, Carlota, over how over protective she was. When Miguel was a toddler, back in Ecuador, she put chicken wire around their house to keep him from running down the street. When the family got green cards and moved to Suffolk County,
she imposed a strict 10 PM curfew.

And when he wanted to play video games at a neighbor’s house on a cold Friday afternoon, in February of 2016, Carlota drove him there, a few blocks away, even though he had just turned 15 and could have walked over. Carlota got home later that evening around 7:30 with some dinner for Miguel. She called out his name. When he didn’t answer, she felt a jolt of alarm. She texted him to ask where he was. No response.

She texted him a third, a fourth, a fifth time. By midnight, Carlota’s stomach was clenched with dread. Miguel never failed to let her know where he was. He never missed his curfew. He was even too afraid to go to sleepovers. By 2:00 AM, she couldn’t wait any longer. She and her boyfriend, Abraham Chaparro, got in the car and started driving.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** And I was like, where’s Miguel. What happened to Miguel?

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** He normally, he calls me, every 5, every 10 minutes.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** But during all those hours, they seemed just so long, and I didn’t know whether I should scream, or cry. I just felt like I was losing the whole world at that moment.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** At that point, I was just saying, you know, it’s like someone stole my son.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** After hours of searching the streets, Carlota finally went home. She sat down on her bed, fully clothed, and waited for the sun to come up, so she and Abraham could go to the police station. When they got there, two Suffolk County Police officers were sitting on an elevated platform, behind the counter, drinking coffee.

Carlota only speaks Spanish. But her boyfriend, Abraham, has lived in the US for years, and speaks some English. Abraham helped her give the officers the basics. The missing kid was Miguel Garcia Moran, 15 years old, tall, and big, 235 pounds, lived in the town of Brentwood, last seen at a friend’s house the night before. A detective named Luis Perez was assigned to the case. He’s a veteran detective in Brentwood, and one of the few officers on the force who speaks Spanish. The police told Carlota and Abraham that some officers were going to drive around their neighborhood to look for Miguel. But really, they shouldn’t be too concerned.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** And they said, look, it’s Saturday. Your son’s going to be back on Monday. He’s probably just hanging out with friends. But I said, no, my son would never do that. He always comes home early. This isn’t like him.

**Hannah Dreier:** At this point, Miguel had been missing for 24 hours, which in a missing persons case are the most crucial. There’s a truism in law enforcement– the first 24 hours are the only 24 hours. The New York City Police Department has a checklist of dozens of things officers have to do immediately if a minor goes missing. Things like, talking to the kids’ friends, checking their social media accounts, and putting out a press release.
Nassau County, which borders Suffolk County on Long Island, has an even more extensive protocol, which includes alerting state officials within two hours of taking a report. The Suffolk County Police handbook, on the other hand, has no checklist for what to do if a minor goes missing. Nothing about talking to the kid’s friends. Nothing about social media. Nothing about a press release. In the whole handbook, there are basically two paragraphs about what to do if a minor is reported missing. And they boil down to take a report, search the area where they live. That’s it.

So on Sunday, two days after Miguel went missing, that’s what the Suffolk County Police did. They searched the woods closest to Carlota’s home. And they also talked to the neighbors. On Monday, three days after Miguel went missing, the police put out a press release and a photo of Miguel in a green shirt with a red bandanna around his head. It said, quote, “Detectives do not believe there is foul play involved in Moran’s disappearance.” And they listed Miguel as a runaway, which Carlota found extra upsetting.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** I felt a lot of indignation because they would say that, oh, he just ran away from home. And I’d think, why would you say that?

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** Why would you say that he ran away from home when I have proof? I have pictures of us, like, going to the store. Us going to different places, even from that day, where we went to the firefighters.

**Hannah Dreier:** The day Miguel disappeared, he and Carlota had gone to the firehouse to fill out an application. He wanted to join the volunteer firefighters. They spent the morning and afternoon together as they often did on weekends. Miguel liked to walk with his arms slung around his mother’s shoulders. At 5’ 10”, he towered over her.

Miguel was a total mama’s boy. For his 15th birthday, a few months earlier, his older sister helped him get Carlota’s name tattooed on his arm. So to Carlota, the thought that Miguel had run away from home was insane. She tried to explain this to the police, but they still listed him as a runaway. And when they did that, the police were acting against guidelines from multiple agencies.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the Department of Justice, law enforcement should quote, “Assume the child is at risk, until investigative facts contradict that assumption.” When a kid is listed as a runaway instead of as a missing or endangered person, it basically stops an investigation before it starts. Listing Miguel as a runaway is the first big mistake the police make. They’ll be many more.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** My hope, truthfully, was that if I go to the police they would help us. You know, this was just a disaster. A disaster.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** Going to the police was a disaster.

**Hannah Dreier:** After days with no apparent progress from police, Carlota, realized she needed a new strategy. She started going around posting missing person flyers, which she wrote herself because the police had not made any. She searched for Miguel every day on residential streets, strip malls, at American Eagle, his favorite clothing store, and in the woods. Including one patch of forest that the police call the killing fields. It’s a gang hang out and dumping ground for bodies.

The trees are so dense there that it’s hard to see very far into them. Condoms and cigar wrappers and empty spray paint cans blanket the ground. At the heart of these woods is an abandoned psychiatric hospital. The dozens of possibilities

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/657/transcript
she’d been replaying in her head, we’re converging on a single fear, MS-13. She knew they were active in Brentwood, but she didn’t know much more.

MS-13 leaders in the US are often really young, like high school aged. On Long Island, some of the most brutal MS-13 violence has been masterminded by 15 and 16-year-olds. Brentwood high school was shared by a few MS-13 cliques. That’s what they call their subgroups-- the Hollywood Locos, the Brentwood Locos, and the Sailors. They wear blue plastic rosaries and Nike Cortez sneakers. The other gangs at the school were as color coded as teams at camp.

At the time Miguel went missing, Suffolk County Police mostly left the gangs alone. Members had the run of the woods around town and the halls of the high school. Miguel’s older sister, Lady, was a sophomore at Brentwood high school when Miguel went missing. Lady has a habit of narrowing her eyes when she talks. She’s streetwise, but also churchgoing. She had been a natural loner all her life, unlike Miguel, who has always been teased for his stutter, and was desperate to seem cool.

At Brentwood high school, Lady, had become even more standoffish to keep the gang kids away, which wasn’t always easy because gang members aggressively approach new students at school and pressure them to join.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: If they didn’t see you with a stern look in your face, or if they didn’t see you mad, then they would treat you badly.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: It was different for me because I had a strong temper. But Miguel was not like that. He was weak. He was the spoiled child.

Hannah Dreier: When Miguel started in the high school, did you tell him the things that you had learned?

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: I would tell him, you know, when you’re changing period from one class to the other, don’t talk to certain people. And he’d say, OK.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: And at first, he did. He did listen to me. But then, you know, he had friends that I did not know. And I told him, do not make friends.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: A week after Miguel went missing, Carlota did an interview with a Spanish language news channel to talk about his disappearance.

Radio Announcer: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: The footage shows Carlota leaning heavily on Abraham, as the two walk through a strip mall in jackets and winter hats, taping up their missing person flyers. She says, there are so many things you hear about in this country. That the gangs go and take kids. That’s what I fear the most. That they’ve taken him. Carlota brought up the possibility that gangs might be involved in Miguel’s disappearance. But the Suffolk County Police still said no foul play was suspected and continued to list him as a runaway.
Another big problem with the police’s treatment of these immigrant families, was they were dismissive, and sometimes even treated them like suspects. Carlota came to feel intimidated by Detective Perez. She says he seemed angry at her. He was big, like a bodybuilder, with tattoos circling his arms. One day he sat her down and accused her of knowing more than she was saying about Miguel.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** Then he started telling me, you know where he is. And I said, what? Like, why do I know where he is? I come here all the time asking where he is.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** If I knew where he was then I wouldn’t be here. And I just wanted to hit him when he told me that. And he said, well, if you don’t know where he is--

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** --then you should go to a witch doctor, because then, they can help you find Miguel.

**Hannah Dreier:** Detective Perez told Carlota to find a brujo, which is Spanish for witch doctor, or fortune teller.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** I don't know why he said that. It's like, I can't do anything more for you. You need to go and see the witch doctor because he just didn't want to help anymore.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** One of the starkest ways that the police demonstrated their indifference to the families, was that they wouldn't even speak to them in their own language. This underlies so much of what went wrong. Even Detective Perez, who could speak Spanish. Lady told me something else that happened in that brujo conversation.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** He just said, I’m not speaking Spanish anymore because this is America. Nobody speaks Spanish, only English, so why don’t you just go back.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** Even knowing that my mom doesn't speak a word of English.

**Hannah Dreier:** How did you feel when he said that?

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** I felt bad. You know, because she was Latino, and to come and say this to us knowing that we needed him. That we needed for him to find someone for us.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** And he just simply didn’t feel like speaking our language to us.
Hannah Dreier: Carlota and Lady are not unusual in Suffolk County. Though the county includes really ritzy places like the Hamptons, it also has towns like Brentwood, where families get by on minimum wage jobs, and most people speak Spanish as their first language. 20% of the county is Hispanic. But in 2016, in the entire Suffolk County Police Department, 3,500 employees, only three people were certified to interpret for Spanish speakers.

Unlike a majority of big police departments, Suffolk County doesn't give officers extra pay for knowing a second language. They do pay police well, though. They’re actually one of the best paid departments in the country. Detective Perez made just under $200,000 a year, and lived in a gated community several towns away from where he works. Detective Perez wouldn't talk to me for this story, by the way. When I knocked on his door, he said he had no comment, and told me to get off his property.

Almost two months after Miguel went missing, there was a breakthrough in the case. But the person who made it was not a Suffolk County Detective. It was Miguel’s sister, Lady. One morning, she borrowed Abraham's cell phone and discovered that Miguel had left his Facebook account open there. She suddenly had access to his Facebook Messenger chats. She could look through all the conversations he had with his friends, up to the day he went missing.

Lady: Here, look.

Hannah Dreier: Lady showed me the messages.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: Yes. That was Miguel's entire messenger conversation.

Hannah Dreier: Most of them were failed attempts to flirt with girls at school. In others, he’s talking about smoking weed. In one conversation, he tells a friend he wants a pair of Nike Cortez sneakers. But the friend tells him he can’t wear those because they’re a sign of MS-13. That’s an important piece of advice. MS-13 doesn't have businesses like a normal criminal organization. And instead, commits violence for the sake of violence, killing victims with bats and machetes for minor shows of disrespect, like wearing Nike Cortez shoes without their permission.

And then, there’s just one conversation from the day Miguel disappeared. Text and audio messages between Miguel and someone named Alexander Lokote. Lokote isn’t a last name. It means something like homeboy or gangster. So you can see the day that Miguel went missing. There’s like 20 messages back and forth between him and Alexander.

The conversation begins at 8:54 in the morning. And ends at 7:06 that night. Right around when Carlota was getting home and discovering that Miguel wasn’t there. Alexander tells Miguel he’s gotten his hands on some weed, and invites him to smoke later on with two other boys. One of the other boys is a kid named Jairo. Miguel had just started smoking weed. His mother and sister didn’t even know he had tried it. Miguel seems pleased and surprised, and responds with a voice message.

Miguel: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: That's Miguel. He’s saying, oh, you’re so bad. What have you done? At this point in the morning, Miguel was still with Carlota at the mall. It sounds like her in the background of some of these messages, talking and laughing.

Miguel: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: Miguel says he wants to bring along a friend, but Alexander says, no, don't do that. Jairo won't like it. Jairo's going to hook them up with weed. Later, Miguel and Alexander argue about whether to meet in the woods or at Miguel’s house. Miguel tells Alexander that he’d prefer to meet at his house because he doesn't like to go out into the trees. But finally, Miguel gives in and agrees to meet in the woods near the high school, a few blocks away from his house. The last message is from Alexander.

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/657/transcript
Alexander: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: He tells Miguel he's by the fluorescent lights already, at the school. He seems annoyed that Miguel isn't there yet. And then, nothing. In the days and months after that night, Miguel’s Facebook account is flooded with messages from family and friends wondering where he is, or vowing to find him. But none of those messages was from Alexander Lokote.

Abraham showed all these Facebook messages to Detective Perez. Carlota said soon afterward, the detective called with a strange suggestion. He asked Abraham and Carlota if they wanted to meet him at the high school. He said he was going to interview Alexander Lokote in the principal’s office, to see what he might know. And for some reason, he wanted to give them a chance to be there for it. When they got to the high school, Alexander Lokote was there. Lady had been called out of class, and was waiting outside the office.

Hannah Dreier: What did Alexander look like?

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: He was scared.

Hannah Dreier: Scared how?

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: He looked kind of pale, and as though he wanted to get out of there right away.

Hannah Dreier: Did Alexander dress like a gang member?

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: Yeah, he was dressed like a gang member. He was wearing his white long t-shirt.

Lady: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: And I saw the rosary.

Hannah Dreier: What color rosary?

Lady: Blue.

Hannah Dreier: I ran this episode past a few police experts. And they all said it was really odd that Detective Perez invited the victim’s family to an interrogation of a witness or a potential suspect like that. For one thing, it could make it harder to use anything Alexander said that day to build the case in court. They said that if Detective Perez suspected foul play at that point, he should have gotten a warrant to search Alexander’s phone.

Abraham thought that Alexander looked young, and so weak that he couldn't break a plate. He said that Alexander told him that he, Jairo, and another kid, had planned to go with Miguel to some train tracks. But Miguel never showed up. Carlota told Abraham that so far, her teenage daughter seemed to have made more progress than the detectives.

Carlota: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: This was such a key thing that he knows. What else do they want? They weren’t doing anything.
Carlota: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** It’s not clear what happened to Alexander Lokote. Lady tells me that after this meeting, she stopped seeing him in school. I’ve been trying to find Alexander for months, but nobody I’ve talked to knows his real last name.

Carlota stopped going to her job at an envelope factory. She spent most of her time in her basement apartment looking through Miguel’s clothes, breathing in their smell, and trying to distract herself by reading romance novels.

She hated when Lady went out, even to attend church. Nearly three months after Miguel disappeared, at the end of April, the state finally gave Carlota a missing person poster. The poster read, quote, “Miguel is a runaway.” Then one afternoon in May, Carlota was watching the news at home when she saw another mother on TV, crying.

**News Anchor:** Oscar Acosta disappeared two weeks ago. Police believe it’s suspicious.

**Hannah Dreier:** Oscar Acosta was a 19-year-old, weeks away from graduating high school. He had emigrated from El Salvador to Brentwood three years before. He left home to play soccer one night and hadn’t been seen since. When Oscar’s mother went to the police station, this may sound familiar to you, she had a hard time finding an officer who spoke Spanish. So she enlisted her cousin, and a woman from church, to help her talk to the officers. She felt that the police were ignoring the case, so she started posting handmade missing person flyers, just as Carlota had.

In June, a third Brentwood high school student went missing, Jose Pena. He was 18 years old. Emigrated from El Salvador two years before, like Oscar. Jose’s mother didn’t speak English either. When she went to the police station, she also says there was no one who spoke Spanish. So she had to ask her cab driver to interpret for her. He charged her $70. The police told her not to worry. Her son was probably hanging out with friends. He’d be back soon.

Oscar and Jose were not minors, so they couldn’t be listed as runaways. Police put out a press release on Oscar’s disappearance two weeks after he went missing. They never said anything about Jose. These mothers have told me that it seems to them like police were either uninterested in helping them, or unable to do their jobs. They said it seemed like they were being brushed off because they were immigrants.

The Suffolk County Police Department wouldn’t comment on any of the specifics of what happened with these families. They wouldn’t comment about why they incorrectly classified all these disappearances as runaways. But they did send this statement, quote, “Our response to a reported missing person does not differ based on nationality or ethnicity.” They also said, quote, “Suffolk County Police officers are among the finest in the country and treat everyone with professionalism and compassion.”

But the mothers in these cases aren’t just being oversensitive. The Department of Justice investigated the Suffolk County Police Department for two years, and in 2011, issued its observations. It documents a pattern of discrimination against Latinos. A former DOJ official said the department was both over and under policing Latino residents. Stopping them more frequently than white people for minor violations, while also failing to fully look into the crimes they reported. The DOJ called out the department for the exact problems Carlota and the other parents had told me about-- not enough Spanish speakers, not doing enough to protect Latino teenagers from gangs, and not taking Latino victims seriously, even treating them like suspects.

The police department agreed to federal oversight until the bias issues were fixed. But seven years after the DOJ investigation ended, they’re still finding the same problems. Because of the nature of the agreement, it’s not overseen by a court. There isn’t much the DOJ can do beyond issuing progress reports every year.

In the midst of the disappearances of these three boys, another Brentwood high school student went missing. A 15-year-old girl from El Salvador, whose family asked that I not use her name. But unlike Miguel, Oscar, and Jose, after 2 and 1/2 days, her father found her just walking on the street by a White Castle. She said she’d been with some older boys. Her father couldn’t figure out if she’d gone with them willingly, or if she’d been kidnapped. But something seemed wrong.
to him. His daughter wasn't acting normally. He thought maybe she had been drugged, possibly raped. And she'd just
gotten some threatening text messages.

So as soon as they found her, he and his wife took her to the Suffolk County Police Department to ask them to
investigate. The girl’s father had been a cop in El Salvador, and ever since she’d gone missing, he’d been having trouble
getting the police to take her disappearance seriously. So he and his wife secretly videotaped the meeting.

Michael Cammarata: OK. And what did you do?

Girl: I left.

Michael Cammarata: With?

Hannah Dreier: Watching the video, you can see firsthand how two Suffolk County Police officers treat an immigrant
family that’s come in to report a crime. In the video, the girl is sitting at a desk across from a detective named Michael
Cammarata, who’s leaning back in his chair. The father’s crouching on the floor. And immediately, Detective Cammarata
begins interrogating the girl in English. As if she was the one who’d done something wrong. Instead of asking the
15-year-old girl about how she may have been hurt, Detective Cammarata threatens to throw her in juvenile detention,
which is in Nassau County. He thinks she was lying about something. And she is being vague and evasive in her
answers.

Michael Cammarata: Who were you with?

Girl: [INAUDIBLE].

Michael Cammarata: They said you were with two boys. That’s what Fanny said.

Girl: Really?

Michael Cammarata: Yeah. So you need to -- look, I don’t-- do you not understand what I’ve been going
through for the last two days trying to find you? OK. And how much trouble you could be in? It’s up to me,
whether or not I take you to Nassau County and you stay there. OK? Which just means, it’s just you and I. Not
your family. I take you. I put handcuffs on you. And I take you. OK? So you need to tell me who you were with.
Who were the boys?

Hannah Dreier: The girl’s dad doesn’t speak English, but he can make out the details of what they’re talking about.
He hears a name he recognizes, and he can tell his daughter isn’t giving the full story. He wants to jump in and help the
cops. Give some information about an older guy she’s been hanging out with. And he wants to understand and monitor
the conversation between the detective and his 15-year-old daughter. So he asked the detective for an interpreter.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Michael Cammarata: OK.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: The detective ignores his request, which is technically a violation of federal civil rights laws. A minute
later, the girl’s dad asks again.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Michael Cammarata: He said that too.
Hannah Dreier: Another 2 and 1/2 minutes pass with no interpreter. So the girl's dad asks her to translate his request to the detective.

Girl's Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Girl: Well, he said he needed an interpreter.

Girl's Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Girl: So he can inform you of everything.

Michael Cammarata: So he can inform me?

Girl: No. So he can tell you everything. Because he doesn't speak that much English.

Hannah Dreier: The girl's dad actually starts leaving the room to try to find an interpreter himself. The detective tells him to stay put.

Michael Cammarata: Tell him he has to stay.

Hannah Dreier: Finally, as the detective continues interrogating the girl, the dad takes out his cell phone and calls a community advocate he knows. He passes the phone over to the detective.

Michael Cammarata: Hello?

Community Advocate: [INAUDIBLE]

Girl's Dad: This is Carlos, I need interpreter, no understand.

Michael Cammarata: OK. What is he want me to interpret?

Hannah Dreier: The guy on the phone repeats what the dad has been saying, that he needs an interpreter. And the detective agrees to get another officer who speaks Spanish.

Community Advocate: [INAUDIBLE]

Michael Cammarata: OK. All right. I'm just going to use an officer. I just wanted to make sure what he was looking for.

Hannah Dreier: He said, I wanted to make sure what he was looking for. Though it seems like the dad has made that pretty clear.

Community Advocate: [INAUDIBLE]

Michael Cammarata: OK. All right.

Hannah Dreier: The detective hands the phone back to him, and he goes right back to interrogating the girl--

Michael Cammarata: All right. So you're with Carlos. Who else is in the house with Carlos?
Hannah Dreier: --in English.

Girl: Just Carlos.

Hannah Dreier: Six minutes go by, the dad asks for an interpreter for the seventh time. And finally, the detective goes out to get one.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: Here he returns with another detective, who speaks Spanish.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Detective Perez: Si, senor.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH] OK.

Hannah Dreier: It’s Detective Perez. The same guy Carlota has been dealing with. The dad starts explaining the whole saga in Spanish, but Perez cuts him off. He turns to the girl and asks if she speaks English. She says she does.

Detective Perez: Now, you speak English. You speak English?

Hannah Dreier: The dad jumps in and asks Perez to speak in Spanish.

Michael Cammarata: He doesn’t speak Spanish, so if you speak English, you speak English.

Girl’s Dad: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: Perez Ignores her dad and begins interrogating the daughter in English.

Luis Perez: You think that we’re as dumb as the kids you hang out with?

Hannah Dreier: He tells the girl she’s lying. And like the other detective, he threatens to lock her up in juvie.

Luis Perez: How about instead of going back with your parents, we bring you to the Nassau County juvenile facility, to jail? Because you’re a juvenile delinquent by law. You know what that means? That you don’t follow the rules, we can bring you to a juvenile jail. And you just stay there, until your parents are ready to get you.

Hannah Dreier: The interrogation gets more intense. Detective Cammarata threatens to take the girl to a hospital and do tests on her to see what she’s been up to with these older guys. The 15-year-old hangs her head and explains to her mom in tears what the detectives have been saying. She says the officers are accusing her of lying. She says she doesn’t want them to arrest her and deport her.

Girl: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Hannah Dreier: The girl did give them one of the names of the guys she was with. The detectives, as far as I can tell, don’t use it as a lead. Instead, Detective Perez goes into this whole scared straight speech with her. He tells her to stop hanging out with these guys. And if she doesn’t, he’ll go after them, and then they’ll be mad at her.

Luis Perez: We have ways of going into old messages. We’ll find this guy you were with. We’ll lock him up. We’ll then lock everybody up that they end up hating you for you putting them in this position. You’re a young girl. Stay away from these older guys, because you’ll only get them in trouble. OK?
Hannah Dreier: Instead of taking the girl’s parents’ concerns seriously, or even hearing them out in their own language, Detective Perez threatens their daughter. And her parents had good reason to be concerned. Their daughter told me that she had spent the days with an MS-13 gang member, who a year later would be charged with four murders.

Nine months later, the girl went missing again. She came home again, and this time she seemed genuinely scared. Her father called the police to ask once more if the officers would investigate the guy she’d been with. He says they came over, talked to the girl, said they’d be in touch, and never were.

It’s unclear if they investigated beyond that. If they did investigate, they might have learned that she’d been with the leader of one of the MS-13 cliques, a guy who’s now charged with six counts of murder.

Ira Glass: Hannah Dreier. Coming up, all those cops you’ve been hearing about all this hour? Hannah asks their boss, what the hell? That’s in a minute, when our program continues.

Act Two

Ira Glass: It’s This American Life. I’m Ira Glass. Today’s show, “The Runaways,” investigative reporter Hannah Dreier from ProPublica is telling the story of a string of murders of immigrant teenagers in Long Island by the gang MS-13 that, for months and months, it seemed like the Suffolk County Police were not treating as murders, and certainly did not solve.

When families reported their children missing, police told them that their kids were fine. They chose to ignore leads and evidence the parents offered, didn’t follow procedures and best practices that other police departments follow in similar cases. And they listed the children as runaways, which had effects on how rigorous the investigations were.

The families believe they were treated this way because they’re all Spanish-speaking immigrants. So Hannah sat down with Timothy Sini. He was the Suffolk County Police commissioner from 2016 to the beginning of 2018. Basically, he was in charge of the cops during these cases-- to see how he explained this police behavior. Here’s Hannah.

Hannah Dreier: Part of what we’re writing about is the kids who went missing during that time. And I noticed that--

Timothy Sini: What time?

Timothy Sini: What kids went missing in 2016, 2017?

Hannah Dreier: Oscar Acosta.

Timothy Sini: No, that’s before then.

Hannah Dreier: No, they all went missing in 2016. Miguel Garcia. That was all 2016.

Timothy Sini: No, it was 2015.

Hannah Dreier: No, no, no. It was definitely 2016.

Timothy Sini: I would have to double check.

Hannah Dreier: This is an important distinction, because if they had happened in 2015, which they didn't, that would have been before Timothy Sini took over the department.

Hannah Dreier: I guess, like--

Timothy Sini: But they went missing in 2015.

Hannah Dreier: OK. I mean--

Timothy Sini: Right? I mean, we can just check.

Woman: I don't know.

Timothy Sini: Yeah, we can just check the records.

Hannah Dreier: Yeah, do you wanna Google that?

Timothy Sini: I mean, I could be-- well, don't Google it. Check, like, real records.

Hannah Dreier: On?

Timothy Sini: Like a missing persons report.

Hannah Dreier: Yeah, I mean, it’s on--

Timothy Sini: Right. Google?

Hannah Dreier: It’s reported. That was all reported.

Timothy Sini: Oh, I don’t go based on reports.

Hannah Dreier: So you don’t remember when they went missing, it sounds like.

Timothy Sini: I don’t have the exact date, but I can get it to you very easily.
Hannah Dreier: OK. So anyway, when they went missing, their parents say that--

Timothy Sini: You know, that’s very important too. Because when I came in as police commissioner, we can get the exact dates and then lay out the whole chronology. But when I came as police commissioner--

Hannah Dreier: Here’s the whole chronology. Timothy Sini took over the department in January 2016. Miguel went missing in February. The 15-year-old girl in the secret recording went missing and was found in March. Oscar went missing in April. Jose Pena went missing in June.

Once we actually started talking about the missing kid cases, former police commissioner Sini immediately said something I hadn’t heard from anyone. He said the police knew as soon as the boys disappeared that they were murder victims, not runaways, not just missing people.

Timothy Sini: But when I came as police commissioner, we had some missing boys, right? And right away, Chief Giganti, Gerard Giganti, who I promoted to chief detective, came to me and said, “I don’t think these boys are missing. I believe they’re homicide victims. I believe they’re victims of MS-13 gang violence.”

Hannah Dreier: When did he say that?

Timothy Sini: Basically, as soon as I was told that we had missing boys, that was his analysis.

Hannah Dreier: So you were told these three boys were missing. We suspect they’re homicides.

Timothy Sini: There’s no question about that. They were likely homicide victims. No doubt about it, right out of the gate.

Hannah Dreier: So when you first came in.

Timothy Sini: When I first-- I have to look at when they were reported missing for the fifth time, OK?

Hannah Dreier: OK, I mean, I’m telling you--

Timothy Sini: But I’m telling you that right out of the gate, we suspected they were homicides.

Hannah Dreier: This was nuts to me, because the police appeared to be treating so many of the kids as runaways, were telling their parents not to worry, that they’d come home soon.

Hannah Dreier: So the first one, Miguel Moran, he was missing, and he was listed as a runaway for-- he was listed, like, three times as a runaway. He went missing in February.

Timothy Sini: There may have been several times he went missing.

Hannah Dreier: No, he went missing once, in February. And then he was listed as a runaway.

Timothy Sini: So I am not going to sit here and debate with you facts about when someone went missing. We will pull the missing persons report.

Hannah Dreier: I mean, I can show you here.

Timothy Sini: I don’t care what article you’re showing me.

Hannah Dreier: It’s just, like-- it’s the date, February 2016. I have the-- I think I might even have the missing
persons.

**Timothy Sini:** OK, so February 2016. That may be right on that particular one. So he goes missing in February 2016, which is a few months after I get in. Gerry Giganti, out of the gate, says that this is not a missing persons. It is a homicide. Which is why we transferred the missing persons case from the general squad. Typically, it’s a general squad investigation. We transfer it immediately to the major case squad.

**Hannah Dreier:** So in Miguel’s case, he went missing in February, and then this is the poster that the family was given. This is now two months later, in April. And again, it says Miguel is a runaway. So he seems, at least from the outside, like he was listed as a runaway.

**Timothy Sini:** Mm-hmm.

**Hannah Dreier:** And the police told at least the state that he was a runaway. And that happened again with all the boys.

**Timothy Sini:** Yeah, it’s information that they probably received from the person filing the missing persons report.

**Hannah Dreier:** In other words, Miguel’s family.

**Timothy Sini:** Just because--

**Hannah Dreier:** No, the person was convinced that he was not a runaway.

**Timothy Sini:** I don't know the source of the runaway component. I don't know where the runaway part came from. I don't know if it came from someone in the family. I don't know if it came from another witness. I don't know if it came from a friend of the boy. But there is no question that, internally, there’s no doubt that the Suffolk County Police Department, essentially out of the gate, believed that there was foul play.

**Hannah Dreier:** This is, of course, at odds with the press release the Suffolk County Police put out after Miguel disappeared, which said, quote, “Detectives do not believe there is foul play involved in Moran's disappearance.”

Timothy Sini said he wasn't aware of any policy about listing a kid as a runaway instead of as a missing person. I wanted to know why the Suffolk County Police Department’s rules and procedures had so little to say about what to do if a kid goes missing. Just two paragraphs compared to much more detailed guidelines and checklists in Nassau County and New York City.

Former Commissioner Sini said he didn’t know what I was talking about, so I showed him a copy of that section, which I had with me.

**Hannah Dreier:** Basically, there are two paragraphs. One says--

**Timothy Sini:** I understand what you said. And I said I think there is actually more to it. And I think maybe, depending-- I don't know if we can get that to you, because that would essentially reveal investigative steps, but--

**Hannah Dreier:** There’s more to it? Like, more in the rules and procedures?

**Timothy Sini:** Yes, I believe there--

**Hannah Dreier:** I mean, these are the rules and procedures.
**Timothy Sini:** I can assure you that these are not the rules and procedures of the Suffolk County Police Department. The rules the procedures of the Suffolk County Police Department are about 5,000 pages long.

**Hannah Dreier:** They’re 1,602 pages long. I have a copy. The Police Department’s press office pointed out to me that if a child goes missing, the rules and procedures include another way they can find him or her. There are a few paragraphs about the statewide missing person alert system and how to request an alert. But the police never did that for Miguel, or the 15-year-old girl, or Oscar, or Jose.

The press office also said that police officers learn how to deal with missing children in more detail during their training. The rules and procedures also say that police officers have to provide free Spanish language interpretation for anyone whose primary language is not English. And the agreement with the Department of Justice says that police have to use interpretation services instead of forcing Spanish speakers to rely on their children or hire their taxi drivers. I asked Timothy Sini about the mom who told me she did just that.

**Timothy Sini:** So we have a contract with Language Line, which is part of our language access plan.

**Hannah Dreier:** Great, so I wonder why it wasn’t used.

**Timothy Sini:** Can you not interrupt me? So listen. So we have a contract with language access. If there is a--

**Hannah Dreier:** Language Line is a service where police can call an interpreter on the phone if there’s no one available in the office. Police tell me it can be a hassle to use. Also, the connections can be bad, with dropped calls and annoyingly bad sound quality. I asked Former Commissioner Sini about the 15-year-old girl’s experience, the one that was caught on the recording, and how many times the detectives refused to speak with her father in Spanish. But he said he wouldn’t respond to, quote, “bald allegations.”

The Suffolk County Police tell me they’ve improved. They say they now have 10 certified interpreters, up from three. But according to the most recent DOJ report, from March, they’re still not regularly using professional interpreters. The report says that when non-English speakers call the department, they are only given interpretation services 20% of the time. And the department is still letting officers use bilingual children as crime scene interpreters, even though the DOJ keeps saying that that should be banned.

I recently talked to a 12-year-old girl whose brother was attacked by MS-13 in the woods by their house. The gang cut off his hand with a machete. When the police came to interview him, they asked her to interpret for him. She told me that after she heard her brother tell all the details of the attack, she didn’t want to leave the house anymore.

Everyone, former Commissioner Sini included, agrees on one thing-- what led to the boys being found, and their cases being investigated more rigorously-- were the next MS-13 attacks, the double murder of two teenage girls, Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens.

In September, seven months after Miguel disappeared, best friends Kayla and Nisa were walking on a quiet street near Kayla’s home, when a group of boys they’d been feuding with at school jumped out of a car and attacked them. They used baseball bats and machetes. The attackers left 15-year-old Nisa’s mangled body right there on the street. 16-year-old Kayla was missing overnight. The next day, a neighbor found her body in a patch of woods on the same block. Almost immediately, the full force of the Suffolk County Police Department kicked into gear.

**Reporter:** And Maurice, police are calling the murders of these two teenage girls an act of savagery on this community, and they’re asking for the public’s help. They’re also stepping up anti-gang enforcement they have at every level, they say, patrolling this neighborhood and Brentwood High School to find the killer or killers.

**Hannah Dreier:** One obvious difference between the girl’s deaths and the boys was that the police had the girls’ bodies. The gang hadn’t tried to hide them. But the boys’ parents point out that the murders were different in another...
The boys were immigrants, from Spanish-speaking families. Kayla and Nisa, on the other hand, were girls born on Long Island, whose parents were English-speaking American citizens with nice homes and professional jobs.

Dozens of officers went door to door, asking for tips. The department increased patrols and posted flyers offering a cash reward of $15,000 for help catching the girls’ killers. Police arrested 25 suspected MS-13 members and mapped out their cliques. Within days, officers were searching the woods with German Shepherds and shovels. A Suffolk County Detective visited Carlota at home and swabbed her teeth for DNA. Timothy Sini held press conferences.

**Timothy Sini:** We’ve made a strategic subject list of known gang members in the area. And we’re going to be enhancing our presence here to target those individuals.

**Hannah Dreier:** Lady was watching all of this play out.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** When Miguel and Oscar went missing, barely anyone would talk about it.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** But then, when the girls were murdered, then everyone was talking about it.

**Lady:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** But it was as though nobody could remember that there were some missing persons as well.

**Hannah Dreier:** A few days after the girls were killed, Carlota was home watching Univision.

**Reporter:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** It was on TV that I learned when they found Oscar. And I just started to panic. Panic, panic, panic.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** And my daughter said, no, Mom. But that’s not Miguel. That’s Oscar that they found. But I was panicking because I said, well, if they had found Oscar, then they practically found Miguel. And my daughter said, no, calm down. It’s Oscar. It’s not Miguel.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** Police had found Oscar’s body in the woods, the ones they call the killing fields, near some train tracks. The reporter also said that another body had been found in the same place.

**Reporter:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** And just then, through the window of the basement apartment, Carlota saw two men in suits coming down the stairs.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]
Interpreter: I saw people coming in through the door. And when I saw that it was the same guy who came to take my DNA, I knew that they were here to give me some news.

Carlota: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: And I just-- I don't know. I just started to scream, and cry, and kneel, and just like I was dragging myself on the floor, because I knew why they were there.

Carlota: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: And then they left. And that's where I stopped remembering. It's like my mind was clouded.

Carlota: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

Interpreter: And then, the next thing I knew, I woke up at the hospital.

Hannah Dreier: Carlota had run out of the apartment, tripped on some stairs outside, and smashed her face on the cement. The hospital staff wrote a summary on her chart. It said, quote, “altered mental state, patient repeatedly stating ‘just kill me. My son, my son.’”

When she was released from the hospital, she packed Miguel’s things, his clothes, video games, and school papers, into five trash bags and put them on the street. She felt guilty for having brought Miguel to Brentwood in the first place, for having told him to ignore the kids who were bothering him in school. When he was missing, Miguel’s things had felt like a vital connection to someone who was alive, but now they seemed like recriminations.

The coroner listed the cause of death as a blow to the head. Within weeks of discovering Oscar and Miguel’s bodies, police also found the body of Jose Pena, the third missing boy from Brentwood High School. He’d been buried in the same woods.

The double murder of Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens and the police department’s race to catch the killers got so much attention, it reached all the way to President Trump, who invited the girls’ parents to his first State of the Union address.

Donald Trump: Their two teenaged daughters, Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens, were close friends on Long Island. But in September 2016, on the eve of Nisa’s 16th birthday-- such a happy time it should have been-- neither of them came home.

Hannah Dreier: Trump drew a straight line from the girl’s murders to the need for stronger immigration laws.

Donald Trump: Many of these gang members took advantage of glaring loopholes in our laws to enter the country as illegal, unaccompanied, alien minors, and wound up in Kayla and Nisa's high school.

Hannah Dreier: Of course, Miguel and Oscar and Jose were also in that high school. And their disappearances got so much less attention, not just by the president, but by the police. I asked former Commissioner Sini why the police seemed to do so little until the two girls died, especially if they thought the missing boys were homicides.

Timothy Sini: You know, when you have the double homicide of two high school girls in Brentwood, that’s going to provide a catalyst to increase more resources in eradicating MS-13. And that’s exactly what we did. If you want to criticize the Suffolk County Police Department for not doing enough against MS-13 prior to September 13, 2016, I suppose you can do that.

Hannah Dreier: Why would you say that?
**Timothy Sini:** Well, that’s what you’re suggesting. So what I’m suggesting to you is that it’s clearly a fact that we did increase our efforts against MS-13 on September 13, 2016.

**Hannah Dreier:** It may be true that the police stepped up their efforts after September 13th, but they weren’t necessarily effective. The murders continued. In October, a few weeks after the girls were killed, MS-13 killed another 15-year-old immigrant high schooler. When his father reported him missing, police listed him as a runaway. A few days later, a man’s body was found in the street.

After that, it was a suspected rival killed in a deli, then four young men cut up and left together in a gruesome tableau in the woods. All told, the gang killed eight more people by the spring of 2017. By then, MS-13 murders accounted for 40% of homicides in Suffolk County.

I’ve spoken with most of the victim’s families. All of them are Latino immigrants. And even though their loved ones were killed after September 13th, they all told me they felt ignored and disrespected by the Suffolk County Police.

There are lots of ways to frame why the cops treated them like this. The parents say it’s because they’re immigrants. The DOJ says the department has unlawful bias and discrimination. This one retired Suffolk County detective I talked to had another word for it. His name is Rob Trotta. He’s now a county politician. He left the police department a year and a half before Timothy Sini came in.

**Rob Trotta:** There is a term among law enforcement. It’s called a misdemeanor murder. You know, they’re killing each other. I guess it’s a bad thing to say they were killing each other, but were killing low income, minority people. Which, you know, is horrible.

**Hannah Dreier:** That means like a murder that’s not going to get as much attention as the other ones, or you’re not going to get as much glory for solving?

**Rob Trotta:** No, it’s like you know, you’re anyone, and there’s a murder where someone really got murdered, you’re going to put attention to that, because this guy, you know, was-- I don’t want to say asking for it. No one should be asking for murder, but clearly he put himself in a position to be killed. Now, that’s very different from two girls being murdered, high school girls, by MS-13. That’s not misdemeanor murder.

**Hannah Dreier:** I asked the Suffolk County Police if their cops use this term. They sent back a statement saying, quote, “Every investigation is rigorously conducted, regardless of victim or circumstances. And department resources are allocated accordingly.”

But there’s another reason why the investigations into the boy’s disappearances were so anemic. Several detectives and FBI agents talked to me about it. They said the team who handled cases like this in Suffolk County used to be excellent. This was over a decade ago, starting back in 2003, when the FBI first created a joint gang task force on Long Island.

It’s basically like a team made up of FBI agents and local detectives. They share intel, fight crime together. Suffolk County Police sent three of its detectives to join them. Rob Trotta was one of those detectives. And for nearly a decade, they had MS-13 on the run.

**Rob Trotta:** I call it the 1978 Yankees, when everything just clicks and you know, we had informants everywhere. They really had a pulse for what was going on. We would cover gang and clique meetings, where we had two people wired up, just so we could see what was going on. If they broke off, we would have conversations and everything.

**Hannah Dreier:** They shared resources with the feds, who had way more money and training. They solved murders, and even got wind of planned murders before they happened and stopped them. It was going great, until, in 2012, the Suffolk County Police Chief at the time, a guy named James Burke, got into a squabble with the FBI and pulled his detectives from the task force.

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/657/transcript
Then a few months later, Burke got into big trouble himself for beating up a guy who had been arrested for theft. The thief had stolen a duffel bag from Burke's car, which was weirdly filled with dildos and porn. The FBI started investigating him as a result. Burke was eventually put in prison for violating civil rights and obstructing justice.

But one major casualty of the whole fiasco was the department's anti-gang capabilities. They were decimated. When Timothy Sini took over the police department in early 2016, he restored the partnership with the FBI. But by then, Suffolk County had lost out more than three years of MS-13 intel. And it was really hard to catch up.

Finally, in March of 2017, a year after Miguel first went missing, the FBI gang task force, which now had Suffolk County cops back on it, made a big arrest. They charged two guys, 19-year-old Jairo Saenz and his 22-year-old brother Alexi, with organizing the murders of Kayla and Nisa six months before.

The brothers were the leaders of the main MS-13 clique at Brentwood High School, the Sailors. They've pled not guilty. Federal prosecutors have now charged at least 28 people with participating in the MS-13 mayhem on Long Island. It's a massive, ongoing case that includes at least 15 murders, eight attempted murders, arsons, assault, racketeering, and conspiracies to sell marijuana and cocaine.

Many of the accused ringleaders are teenagers. The case is still in progress, with new defendants added every few months. At least 10 people have been indicted for the murders of Oscar Acosta, Jose Pena, and the girls, Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens. One person has already pled guilty to killing Jose Pena. But so far, no one's been charged for Miguel's death.

Carlota won't give Miguel a proper burial until his killer is brought to justice. So in the meantime, his ashes sit on a night stand.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Interpreter:** It's been three years, and the police have never come here to tell me anything. They just gave me back my son in a cardboard box. And that's what makes me mad. There are lots of parents, and we're all suffering. So if they could just have a little bit of wisdom, some feeling, some heart, to help us Latinos. I say Latinos, because if they were Americans-- and I'm sorry to say this, but if they were Americans, they would have found someone quickly. But because we're Latinos, we're always left behind.

**Carlota:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Hannah Dreier:** I think I know what happened to Miguel. In those Facebook messages from the day he went missing, he and Alexander Lokote talk about meeting up with a guy named Jairo. Alex wants to meet Miguel at Jairo's house. Jairo says don't bring a friend. Jairo is going to supply the weed. I'm waiting for you at the school with Jairo.

One of the leaders of the MS-13 clique, the Sailors, the guy who's been charged with six murders now, including Oscar's and Kayla's and Nisa's murders, is Jairo Saenz. This summer, I talked to a former member of Jairo's clique, a guy named Henry, who's in immigration detention right now.

Henry told me, after he joined the Sailors, the first person the clique killed was a chubby Ecuadorean kid. I showed him a picture of Miguel, and he said, yeah, that was him. Henry says Miguel confused the Sailors, because he wore a clashing mix of gang gear. Sometimes, he'd come to school wearing the plastic rosary of MS-13. Other times, he'd be in the head-to-toe black of the 18th Street Gang, or sporting a red bandanna, a sign of the bloods.

Henry knew Miguel at school. Sometimes, they'd smoke weed together in the woods. And so one time, Henry says Jairo made him grill Miguel about why he was wearing clothes from these gangs, if he wasn't in a gang. Miguel said he didn't have to explain how he dressed to anyone. Henry thought Miguel was probably trying out gang clothes in an attempt to look cool. But the clique felt disrespected, and that's all it took to get Miguel killed-- a red bandanna.
Ira Glass: Hannah Dreier. She’s a reporter for ProPublica. This story was a collaboration with them. There’s a print version on their web site. ProPublica.org.

Something upsetting recently happened on Long Island, that we thought we should point out before we leave this subject. One of the parents who we mentioned in this story, Evelyn Rodriguez, the mother of one of the girls who was killed, was also killed. Not by MS-13. It happened during an argument over the location of a memorial for her daughter. She was one of the parents who Donald Trump invited to the State of the Union address.

Credits

Ira Glass: Our program was produced today by Dana Chivvis and Sean Cole. The people who put our show together today includes Elna Baker, Zoe Chace, Whitney Dangerfield, Damian Graef, Chana Joffe-Walt, Seth Lind, Lawrence Lowe, Anna Martin, Nadia Reiman, Lilly Sullivan, Christopher Swetala, Matt Tierney, and Dianne Wu. Our senior producer is Brian Reed. Our managing editor is Susan Burton.

Special thanks today to Peter Brill, Rob Bub, David Klinger, Vernon Geberth, Natalie Keyssar, Alexandra Zayas, Dan Golden, and our colleagues at ProPublica.

Quick program note. Our program Serial just launched its third season. Sarah Koenig and Emmanuel Dzotsi host. I’ve been hearing drafts of this for months. I cannot recommend this highly enough. It’s about the court system. It gives this very vivid picture of ordinary cases that turn out to be all kinds of incredible in all kinds of ways. You can hear it at serialpodcast.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

This American Life is delivered in to public radio stations by PRX, the Public Radio Exchange. Thanks as always our program’s co-founder, Tory Malatia. He is still using Yahoo. He says to me all the time, when I try to look up something online--

Timothy Sini: Well, don’t Google it.

Ira Glass: I’m Ira Glass. Back next week with more stories of This American Life.
Challenged by Long Island Lawmakers, Police Will Look Into Treatment of Immigrant Families Who Reported Missing Children

Spurred by reporting from ProPublica, Newsday and This American Life, Suffolk County police will revisit cases in which parents allege misconduct.

by Hannah Dreier, ProPublica
Sept. 28, 10:32 a.m. EDT

At the behest of county lawmakers, the Suffolk County Police Department said Thursday it will look into what went wrong when Latino families came to the department in 2016 and 2017, desperate for help finding teenage children who had disappeared, only to have their concerns ignored and their children labeled runaways.

It turned out that many of the missing had been murdered by members of the gang MS-13, some of them buried in Suffolk County woods known as the gang’s “killing fields.”

https://bit.ly/2zCSCUq
The county executive and the head of the Police Department also have agreed to meet with advocates for immigrant and Latino Long Islanders in the coming days.

The developments came in response to radio, text and video reporting from ProPublica, Newsday and This American Life that outlined how police bias against Latinos hindered the department’s ability to stop a wave of MS-13 murders.

“This whole entire body has seen the video and read the article, and it’s very disturbing,” Legislator Monica Martinez, who chairs the Legislature’s Public Safety Committee, said during the hourlong discussion at a public meeting. “There is commitment from both the commissioner and the executive to meet with advocates and legislators to discuss this further. This is an investigation going on and therefore certain things cannot be said.”

Martinez said she called police Commissioner Geraldine Hart over the weekend to discuss the reporting. She said that, among other things, the police will look into the case of high school freshman Miguel Moran, who disappeared in early 2016, and the case of a 15-year-old girl who went missing with boys affiliated with the gang around the same time. Moran’s remains were found that September. Parents of both teenagers say the police appeared to dismiss their requests for help because they were immigrants. The father of the 15-year-old girl secretly recorded detectives as they threatened his daughter and ignored his requests for interpretation.

Legislators on Thursday asked Suffolk police Lt. Mike Homan why police had used children as translators, why written policies on the treatment of victims had been ignored, what should happen when teenagers go missing and why bilingual officers have refused to use Spanish with Spanish-speakers trying to report crimes. They also asked if he was familiar with the term “misdemeanor murder,” a phrase some Suffolk County detectives have used to minimize killings of young immigrant men.

**Suffolk County Detectives Repeatedly Ignored a Father’s Request for an Interpreter**

After a 15-year-old girl disappeared, her father worried she had been kidnapped and raped by older guys. He went to the Suffolk County police. They repeatedly ignored his request for an interpreter.
Legislator Kara Hahn said she wanted the Police Department to know that lawmakers are watching and expect reforms.

“There are no words to express what we all feel,” she said. “These families that were being tortured with missing children, and then seemingly tortured by the department and their response. We strive for this to never happen, ever.”

Homan said the department will be giving police officers tablet computers to help them understand and communicate with residents who cannot speak English. He said that when children disappear, detectives should treat them as missing people, not runaways, unless there is a clear reason to think otherwise.

“I will certainly bring your concerns back to headquarters regarding these cases,” Homan said.

Several lawmakers said they were in favor of amending the county budget to better fund police interpretation services. There are 10 certified interpreters, of any language, in the 3,800-person Police Department.

Residents spoke at the meeting about their own frustrations with the police department. Language access advocate Cheryl Keshner told the committee that her organization filed an internal affairs complaint with the police this year after conducting test calls to local precincts. She said the test callers were often treated rudely, or disconnected. One caller reported that an officer called her a “stupid bitch” and told her to go back to her own county.

Police did not respond to requests for comment about the test calls or the parameters of what they will be looking into.

The international nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch said this week that it would also be looking into the police bias issues on Long Island. Grace Meng, a senior researcher with the organization, said accounts of police dismissing reports of missing children were troubling and sure to hinder efforts to crack down on gangs like MS-13.

Asked about the accounts of discriminatory policing, the county executive’s office said that it was looking into the matter.

The U.S. Justice Department has been monitoring bias issues in Suffolk County for nearly a decade and reached a settlement agreement with the Police Department several years ago. Justice Department spokeswoman Kelly Laco said in response to ProPublica’s findings that the agency can take the Police Department to court if it finds misconduct.

Advocates say they have been telling Justice Department investigators for years that the Suffolk police are not taking reports of missing Latino children seriously enough. They say they fear that the Justice Department is unlikely to go court over these issues, as it is currently scaling back civil rights investigations involving police.

Some advocates said the legislature should appoint an independent investigator or form a committee to look into complaints about bias. Suffolk County police union representative Lou Tutone said the department can be trusted to investigate itself. “I’m sure internal affairs was involved immediately,” he said. “I know that when discipline needs to be doled out, it is.”