

White House press release on MS-13 backs Trump’s labeling immigrants as “violent animals”

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On Monday May 21st, the White House issued a press release ominously entitled “What you need to know about the violent animals of MS-13.” The release, issued in advance of Donald Trump’s visit to Long Island, uses the word “animals” ten times to describe members of the MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, gang, which has been presented by the Trump administration as the logical culmination of uncontrolled, undocumented migration across the border.

The press release describes several violent acts committed by members of the gang, depicting MS-13 as a “transnational gang” that “commits shocking acts of violence to instill fear, including machete attacks, executions, gang rape, human trafficking, and more.”

It further makes the unsubstantiated claim that “MS-13 gang leaders based in El Salvador have been sending representatives into the United States illegally to connect the leaders with local gang members.” These illegal border crossings, the White House concludes, have been the source of increasingly violent turf battles.

Going through the press release, one could be forgiven for thinking that the United States has been overrun by MS-13, portrayed as a virtual army of undocumented immigrants raping and murdering citizens across the country with impunity. The reality, however, is quite different.

As the *New York Times* noted in March, MS-13 members are located predominantly in just three metropolitan areas near Los Angeles, California, Long Island, New York and Washington, DC. Formed in central Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadoran refugees fleeing a civil war that claimed the lives of at least 75,000 people—the vast majority victims of the US-

backed military and its death squads—the gang functions as loose local cliques. These cliques are comprised primarily of young men, many of whom grew up marginalized and poor within the United States, while others came to the US as children. The gang is not the product of hordes of criminal undocumented migrants pouring across the border, as conjured up by the administration.

MS-13 became a major gang in El Salvador as the result of mass deportations of gang members and other Salvadoran immigrants convicted of crimes from the US in the 1990s.

In the US, it is far from the sophisticated global drug or human trafficking cartel the Trump administration is making it out to be. Many of the gang’s members are youth between the ages of 15 and 17, and the majority of their victims are immigrant youth like themselves, whom the Trump administration also wants to deport.

Gang members are so destitute that even their small time deals tend to fall through. Police intelligence officers interviewed for the *New York Times* story described one case in which the suspected leader of one of the largest MS-13 cliques in Maryland was forced to cancel a drug deal early in the year because he did not have enough money to pay for the gas to drive to the drop-off point.

In Nassau and Suffolk counties in New York—areas cited by the Trump administration as reeling from a reign of MS-13 mayhem—violent crimes have in fact decreased by 3.4 percent and 8 percent respectively in the last year, according to local police departments’ own figures. Timothy D. Sini, the Suffolk county district attorney and former police commissioner, stated a few months ago that, while MS-13 constitutes a

“significant” threat, “the No.1 public health and safety issue facing Suffolk County, as in other communities, is the drug epidemic.” In the last year alone, while six deaths in the county could be linked to MS-13, opioid overdoses killed over 300.

The lurid narrative being peddled by the White House bears very little resemblance to reality. The sensationalizing of crimes committed by MS-13 has only one purpose, which is to fuel the unrelenting and dehumanizing assault on immigrants being carried out by the Trump administration.

Attempts to present the administration’s racist rhetoric about “animals” as being solely focused on MS-13, and by extension gang violence, are disingenuous and reflect the ruling class’s contempt for the intelligence of the American people.

This ploy was employed last week with the demand by the White House and its backers for an apology from media outlets that highlighted Trump’s use of the term “animals” during an immigration roundtable to describe “people coming into the country, or trying to come in.” Press Secretary Sarah Sanders defended her boss, claiming that his comment was in response to a panelist’s question about MS-13, and that “the term the President used was [frankly] not strong enough.” Trump doubled down on his language by insisting, “So when the MS-13 comes in, when the other gang members come into our country, I refer to them as ‘animals.’ And guess what? I always will.”

The claimed focus on a specific and particularly brutal gang might be more plausible, but for the continuity in the rhetoric targeting undocumented immigrants as well as the series of anti-immigrant measures that have been put in place, and proposed by the current administration.

Trump’s parading of the parents of two young female victims of MS-13 at his State of the Union Address this year was certainly not an innocent act aimed at drawing attention to gang violence. The speech very clearly made a connection between the brutal murders of the teenage girls and supposedly lax immigration laws, demanding a crackdown on “illegal immigration.”

That these demands are being met is clearly evident in measures including the on-going militarization of the border, the inhumane treatment of those seeking refugee status, the empowering of ICE, the separation of migrant parents from their children and the plans to

build concentration camps on military bases to house children torn from their parents at the US border.

Each of these steps has been justified by the demonization of immigrant communities—whether by referring to Mexican immigrants as “rapists” and murderers, or conflating parents trying to enter the United States with “human smugglers” or burglars breaking into a house. And with every step, US immigration policy has taken on more and more fascist overtones in both its practice and the ideology employed to justify it.



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