

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

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Mexico: The Vatos Locos gang, including its organizational structure, areas of influence and activity; information on detention of gang members in 2007

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Origin and Organizational Structure

The information presented in this section is coming from a correspondence sent the Research Directorate on the 18 June 2012 by an associate researcher at the Chihuahua College (Colegio de Chihuahua), also member of the UNESCO Chair on drugs in Mexico. Based on his database consisting of around 3,500 archives on gangs in the Americas, the associate researcher indicated that the gang Vatos Locos was created during the 1940s in Los Angeles by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. During the 1970s and 1980s the gang was partly consolidated in prison, extending its alliances and mode of recruitment. Recent recruits include ex-military personnel returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. Some gangs outside the US probably took the Vatos Locos name from the 1993 film *Blood In, Blood Out*. Members of Vatos Locos refer to themselves as a "nation" that shares common aspects but still allows each individual gang a certain degree of autonomy. There have been reports of third or fourth generation gang members belonging to the same gang.

The associate researcher also indicated the following with regard to the internal organization and recruitment of Vatos Locos:

[translation]

If the hypothesis of a "nation" of "Vatos Locos" is accepted, it is not hard to understand that its internal organization is quite heterogeneous. Available information suggests that in the US there are leaderships constituted in the form of assemblies where "collective" decisions are taken in a relatively democratic way. Members of these assemblies are considered as "Captains" that rule over "Soldiers," who are the ones that do the work in the streets...

Outside the US, structures of internal organization reflect the multiplicity of settlements and the weight it has on local practices. While in Central America Vatos Locos have a strong logic of violent and armed defense of their neighborhoods, in Chile or Argentina, these characteristics are diluted, even though they are present as well. It can be noted that in Ecuador gang membership is a form of cultural identification which eventually turns into violence...

A general behavioural pattern in the ramifications noted above is the existence of hierarchies with their own identity symbols and recruitment methods. In order to join the gang, candidates have to demonstrate their "abilities", and it is reported that leaders ask about their motives for wanting to belong to the gang. If motives are considered reasonable, then they proceed with the test of "placazo" which means that the candidate is to take part in a fight to demonstrate his/her *arrojo* [bravery]. Finally, once the tests have been passed, the candidate makes the oath "sangre con sangre para entrar" [blood with blood in order to enter] or "muero por mi clika, me vale madre, es mi father, mi sangre: por ello siempre juro ser vato loco" [I would die for my clique, I don't care, it is my father, my blood: for this I will always swear to be Vato Loco].

Corroborating information on the leaders of the gangs and the person named in the information request could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response

2. Areas of Influence and Activity

It appears that the organizational structure of the Vatos Locos that is present in the US does not reflect that in other countries (Associate Researcher 18 June 2012.). The associate researcher also noted that there is not enough information available to establish an organic relationship between the Vatos Locos in California and its replicas in other parts of the world (ibid.). He added that Vatos Locos gangs have been detected in metropolitan areas of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Spain and Italy (ibid.). As for their presence in Mexico, the associate researcher stated that:

[translation]

[t]he presence of "Vatos Locos" gang members has been documented in Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California. This is explained by its proximity to the state of California. In lower but constant numbers, members of this gang have been located in the metropolitan areas of Hermosillo, Sonora; Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Monterrey, Nuevo León; and León and Irapuato, Guanajuato. But in other places farther away within Mexico, the presence of Vatos Locos has also been reported. There have been reports of their presence in Jalapa and Veracruz, Veracruz; Guadalajara, Jalisco; and San Luis Potosí and Morelia, Michoacán. Press reports indicate their presence in Nezahualcóyotl and Ecatepec, State of Mexico; and in the district of Gustavo A. Madero in the Federal District. Moreover, the southern states of Quintana Roo and Chiapas are also mentioned in the media. (ibid.)

An article published by *La Verdad*, a news source from Quintana Roo, reports the presence of Vatos Locos in Cancún, Quintana Roo (19 Dec. 2011).

With regard to the activities of Vatos Locos, the associate researcher indicated that activities include the intimidation of students, drug consumption and trafficking, armed robbery and rape (Associate Researcher 18 June 2012). Sources report that the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) indicates that 33 gangs, including Vatos Locos, have established contacts with Mexican drug cartels and organized crime bands (*Milenio* 25 Dec. 2011; CNN 4 Nov. 2011). The reports indicate that gangs are used by these groups to [translation] "protect their interests" in the US-Mexico border, as well as for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, trafficking in persons, protecting contraband routes, "debt collecting", and executing drug trafficking rivals (ibid.; *Milenio* 25 Dec. 2011).

3. Operation Community Shield

The associate researcher indicated that information about mass arrests of Vatos Locos members pertains to Operation Community Shield, which was carried out in the US between 2005 and March 2012 (Associate Researcher 18 June 2012). According to the associate researcher, this operation led to the detention, prosecution and deportation of [translation] "a great deal" of gang members (ibid.). In a 2007 *Washington Times* article, the US Homeland Security Assistant Secretary was quoted saying that Operation Community Shield was "aimed at disrupting and dismantling transnational violent street gangs with the federal government using its immigration and customs authorities" (*The Washington Times* 10 Oct. 2007). According to the article, Vatos Locos was one of the gangs targeted by the operation (ibid.). The same source indicates that in the summer of 2007, 1,313 gang members and associates were arrested, and that between 2005 and October 2007, 7,655 gang members and associates were arrested (ibid.). The Research Directorate could not obtain information on mass arrests of Vatos Locos members in Mexico among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Associate Researcher, Colegio de Chihuahua and Cátedra UNESCO. 18 June 2012. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

Cable News Network (CNN). 4 November 2011. "El FBI reporta una alianza entre cárteles, traficantes y pandillas de EU." <<http://www.cnn.mx/mundo/2011/10/21/fbi-reporta-creciente-alianza-entre-carteles-polleros-y-pandillas-de-eu>> [Accessed 12 June 2012]

Milenio. 25 December 2011. Rubén Mosso. "Reclutan narcos mexicanos a 33 pandillas de EU." <<http://www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/impreso/9084711>> [Accessed 14 June 2012]

La Verdad [Quintana Roo]. 19 December 2011. "Narcopandillas gobiernan en 20 zonas de Cancún." <<http://diariolaverdad.com.mx/narcopandillas-gobiernan-en-20-zonas-de-cancun/5831>> [Accessed 14 June 2012]

The Washington Times. 10 October 2007. Jerry Seper. "Raids Net 1,313 Gang Members, Illegals; 3-month Effort Involved 23 Cities, 19 States." (Factiva)

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Researchers from the following organizations were unable to provide information: Colegio de la Frontera Norte – Departamento de Estudios Culturales, Freie Universität Berlin – Institute for Latin American Studies, InSight Crime, Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia, International Development Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science – Department of Geography, Small Arms Survey, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, Universidad Nacional de Colombia – Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, University of Manchester – Brooks World Poverty Institute.

Attempts to contact researchers from the following organizations were unsuccessful: Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente – Departamento de Estudios Socioculturales, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social; *Diario de Guerrero*; El Faro; *Excelsior*; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México; International Crisis Group; International Institute for Counter-Terrorism; *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*; *La Jornada*; *La Jornada de Veracruz*; Mexico – Procuraduría General de la República, Secretaría de Seguridad Pública; Narco Red; *El Nuevo Diario* [Nicaragua]; Organization of American States; *Oye Veracruz*; *Periódico A.M.*; La Silla Vacía; United Nations – Office on Drugs and Crime, ReliefWeb; United States – Congressional Research Service, Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, Federal Bureau of Investigation; *El Universal*; Univisión; *La Voz de Quintana Roo*; Washington Office on Latin America.

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