



Brentwood, N.Y., Consumed by MS-13 Crime Wave

By Joseph J. Kolb

This is the second of three reports on the issues surrounding the placement of thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America in communities across the United States. The final installment will deal with what Brentwood is doing to combat MS-13.

Key Points

- Long Island, N.Y., and the community of Brentwood in particular, has become a flashpoint for MS-13 violence associated with the placement of thousands of unaccompanied alien children (UACs) from Central America.
- Community, school, and law enforcement officials express concern over the Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) failure to notify them of the large number of placements, so appropriate preventive measures could have been implemented. Suffolk County received the third highest number of placements in the country, with more than half (about 1,800) settling in Brentwood.
- The number of UAC placements in Suffolk County grew more than 100 percent from 2015 to 2016.
- The law enforcement response to gang violence has been more reactive than proactive. For example, Suffolk County detectives were removed from the local multi-agency gang task force.
- Brentwood, N.Y., is gripped by fear of MS-13 gang violence, including nine murders, one attempted murder, and the rape of a 16-year-old.

Introduction

For more than six years, Long Island has experienced a new and disturbing criminal gang trend that many are attributing to throngs of unaccompanied children from Central America being placed in communities such as Brentwood. In September and October there were three murders and the recovery of the remains of two teens missing since last spring — all attributed to MS-13. These cases join the 30 Long Island murders already connected to the violent Central American gang since 2010.

In 2014, President Barack Obama declared the flood of unaccompanied children, which has exceeded 200,000, entering the United States from Central America to be a humanitarian crisis. What has escaped the national dialogue is the public safety crisis created by the immigration policy that places these children in communities around the United States.

Brentwood is a case in point of how a disjointed federal program with little oversight can impact a community. While obtaining empirical data is difficult to impossible due to federal laws protecting the privacy of students and minors, the testimony of reliable observers and the families of victims provides a picture of how communities need to brace themselves to maintain public safety for both the citizen and immigrant populations.

Joseph J. Kolb, M.A., is a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies.

Unprepared for Demographic Disruption

With a population of some 60,000 people, Brentwood has for decades been a predominately Puerto Rican working class community located in central Long Island. Unlike many New York communities that saw a decrease in population growth, Brentwood had seen a sudden rise specifically attributed to the increase in Central American immigrants. At the core was the influx of Central American immigrants. By 2010, nearly 40 percent of the community was born in or had citizenship from a Central American country. This figure was nearly six times the national average. The majority 68 percent Hispanic population shifted now to 51 percent Central American and 18 percent Puerto Rican.¹

One disturbing statistic is the number of people per square mile. Brentwood boasts 5,412 people per square mile, compared to 354 for the rest of New York State and 82 nationally, creating a recipe for blight, crime, and malfeasance. This has also contributed to on the ongoing cycle of settlement and placement.

According to Pedro Sanchez, consul for the government of El Salvador in New York City, when immigrants from his country arrive, usually through illegal pathways, they are attracted to heavily El Salvadoran communities, such as Brentwood. The cycle has been going on for more than a decade of more and more arrivals with little subsequent mobility.

“They come to Brentwood for protection in the group as well as being anonymous,” Sanchez told the author.

UAC Placements in Long Island Surged since 2014

According to data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), since 2014, 3,709 UACs have been placed in Suffolk County, where Brentwood is located. This figure makes the Long Island county the third highest placement site of UACs by ORR. Sanchez estimates that more than half of this 3,709 has settled in Brentwood.

One Brentwood School District employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity told the author that beginning in 2014 there was a major influx of UACs in the community. “We didn’t know what was going on,” said the employee, as the numbers of children registering for enrollment kept swelling. The employee gave a conservative estimate that there are no less than 700 UACs registered in the school district, and they keep coming. The ORR reports a more than 100 percent increase of UACs being placed in Suffolk County from FY 2015 (637) to FY 2016 (1,472).²

Lack of Federal Oversight Concerns Community

The employee expressed significant concern with observations of sponsor fraud as well as dubious registrants: “We have had children register wearing electronic ankle bracelets,” said the employee.

Sanchez sees the process as quite problematic.

“It helps with their — the children’s — mental health, but from a legal standpoint it creates a legitimate problem,” said Sanchez. “It’s quite difficult to follow these children once they are in the country.”

And as if a harbinger for things to come with continued lackadaisical placement and supervision, Sanchez is pessimistic.

“Communities are not prepared here in the United States for gang violence,” said Sanchez. “If they don’t pay enough attention to their youth it will get worse.”

Critics such as Assemblyman Phil Ramos (D-Suffolk) caution that placing the blame for the rise in Brentwood’s violence directly on UACs lacks quantified data and is based on anecdotal observations. Federal rules on privacy rights and student records confound data collection from schools, law enforcement, and ORR.

Systemic Failure of ORR Placement Program

The Office of Refugee Resettlement vigorously defends its program of UAC assessment and placement with a sponsor. Mark Weber, spokesman for ORR, told the author that each child receives a comprehensive evaluation that includes criminal history, prior acts of violence, and gang involvement. ORR says it does not release children considered to be a threat to the community. ORR also says it uses enhanced safety protocols when determining whether to release a child to a qualified sponsor. There is a robust pre-screening process for potential sponsors that requires extensive background checks and, in some cases, mandatory home studies, before a child is released to the sponsor, but only when there is obvious indication that the sponsor may be a threat to the child's safety. Typically there is no assessment of financial stability, and even a criminal background does not necessarily disqualify a sponsor.

By policy, ORR does not give communities the opportunity to be proactive in preventing gang violence, keeping them in the dark as to the numbers of UACs in their community and where they are staying. This information would be of great benefit to community policing strategies; training for school personnel as to the warning signs of gang activity; and PTSD awareness for both students and school staff, since many of the children escaping Central American violence experience PTSD and are likely to be ticking bombs waiting for the fuse to be lit.

“Given ORR does not release children considered to be a threat to the community, local police are not notified,” said Weber. “Given ORR does not release children considered to be a threat to the community, providing a list of placements to local police would not only be an intrusion on the privacy of the child and sponsor, it would be an inefficient use of limited resources. ORR consistently cooperates with local police and child welfare officials if there is an investigation into the wellbeing of a child.”

This approach has proven as naïve as it is faulty. There is no doubt that gang members have penetrated the system and have even been placed with gang member sponsors, according to a source with a local Catholic charity that works with immigrants. Since ORR says its job is essentially complete once the child is placed, there is no oversight as to the risk factors involved in the children being prey to MS-13 recruitment efforts. There are now an estimated 1,000 MS-13 members in Suffolk County alone.³

Carlos Sanchez, director for school safety for the Brentwood School District, told the author he has seen numerous cases where UACs have been recruited by MS-13 to either join voluntarily to gain their protection and support, or through fear and intimidation, telling the child their networks in El Salvador will kill family members if they refuse to join. This in and of itself is a crime that apparently escapes ORR scrutiny, and appears not to be factored into their placement policies.

“We had a case where a recently registered [El Salvadoran] student was given an ice pick by an MS-13 member across the street from the school and was going to do something in the school,” said Sanchez. The plot was foiled. “They have brought their violent way of life here and the community was not prepared.”

Cause and Effect Crime Wave

By all accounts, Brentwood was not prepared for the influx of children with such unique needs or the ensuing violence that has enveloped the community. The newly arrived kids are steeped in the ingredients of social disorganization theory: a lifetime exposure to poverty, rampant violence, a society ruled by gangs and not the rule of law, imperviousness to social norms, and various forms of unrecognized post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴

As for crime, Brentwood was never immune to gang violence. Rivalries between the Crips and Latin Kings result in sporadic spasms of violent crime. Carlos Sanchez said that MS-13 had existed in the community for more than 15 years, but in 2010 the dynamic changed with the murder of the local Latin King leader. This, said Sanchez, left a leadership vacuum that MS-13 rapidly exploited to assume control of the community. In the ensuing six years, bolstered by the infusion of new recruits courtesy of the ORR resettlement program, MS-13 is now the dominant gang in Brentwood and they are making their control abundantly clear.

In the wake of the recent murders, Suffolk County and federal law enforcement stakeholders embarked on a massive offensive to curb the gang violence, arresting 30 MS-13 gang members. This is just a recent skirmish in a decade-long war against MS-13 in Brentwood.

The following is a listing of recent violent MS-13 crimes in Brentwood:

- November 2009: Murder of Christopher Hamilton, 19, as part of gang initiation.
- February/March 2010: Murder of David Sandler, 21, and the attempted murder of Aaron Galan, 20. MS-13 gang members lured Sandler, whom the gang believed was a member of the rival Latin Kings gang, to Timberline Drive in Brentwood under the pretext of buying marijuana from him. Once Sandler arrived, a gang member shot him in the face at close range, killing him. Galan was also shot in the face and survived.
- February 2014: Brentwood gang members murdered a fellow gang member they believed was cooperating with police. They dumped his body on an east end beach.
- July 2014: Murder of Jose Lainez-Murcia, who was shot and killed while sitting in a car outside his Brentwood home because the alleged killer believed the victim was an assassin who had killed MS-13 members in El Salvador.
- June 2015: Three teenaged MS-13 members charged with the rape of a 16-year-old girl.
- September 2016: Murder of Nisa Mickens, 15, and Kayla Cuevas, 16, and the discovery of the remains of two teenage boys.
- October 2016: Murder of Dewann Stacks, 34.

The regional pervasiveness of the problem was highlighted by the number of arrests and convictions by the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York. These figures include all of Long Island MS-13 crimes. Between 2003-2015 there were 250 gang members convicted in federal court on a wide array of charges. Between 2010-2015, 35 gang members were convicted in connection with 20 homicides.⁵

Community Seeks Fundamental Federal and Local Policy Changes

“The community lives in fear now,” Carlos Sanchez told the author, and he is not alone. “The level of violence we have, we have never seen before.”

Lenny Tucker, president of the Brentwood Association of Concerned Citizens, knows first-hand of the MS-13 violence in his community. In 2009 a 15 year-old boy was shot dead in front of his house in what was an MS-13 initiation. In October 2016, a 34-year-old African-American man was jumped and allegedly murdered by MS-13 members wielding a machete.

“MS-13 has this whole community in fear,” Tucker told the author. “The whites are selling their homes, the Hispanics are in silence out of fear, and the blacks are frustrated.”

On a recent visit to research the issue in Brentwood, I went to Tucker’s house to meet the mothers of two MS-13 victims: Erica Boynton, whose son Christopher Hamilton was shot in front of Tucker’s house in 2009, and Elizabeth Alvarado, whose 15-year-old daughter Nisa Mickens was slain September 13 that year, the day before her 16th birthday.

“We need to change the laws in how we handle criminal immigrants,” said Alvarado.

Boynton said the national obsession with a potential infiltration of ISIS is premature and diverting from the violence that already exists because of a lax immigration policy.

“The police let this get out of control,” she said, referring to an effort that came too late when many of the warning signs were present. The Suffolk County Police department has stepped up quality of life enforcement efforts to weed out gang members.

Deb Kirnon, captain for the Brentwood Chapter of the Guardian Angels, who recently stepped up patrols at fast food restaurants, identified the removal of Suffolk County detectives from a federal gang task force as a contributing factor to escalated gang violence. This sentiment was echoed by Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone in an interview with *Newsday*, who said it was a “major, major failure.”⁶

Parents such as Sheila Mowdy have withdrawn their children from the Brentwood School District for fear of the violence.

“I have a 13-year-old daughter who I signed out of middle school here with everything that is going on,” Mowdry told the author. She is also concerned about her 19-year-old son who knew the two girls murdered in September. “I don’t feel safe here.”

Kirnon says she was brought to tears at the recent memorial for the slain students when groups of students chanted “Help us!”

End Notes

¹ USA.com, [“Brentwood, NY Population and Races”](#), USA.com, undated.

² [“Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by County”](#), Office of Refugee Resettlement, last reviewed October 20, 2016.

³ Kevin Deutsch, [“Silent no longer: Brentwood residents detail MS-13’s ‘Control through fear’](#), *Long Island Press*, September 24, 2016.

⁴ Samuel Walker, Cassia Spohn, and Miriam Delone, *The Color of Justice; Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in America, Fifth Edition*, Belmont, Calif.: Cengage Learning, 2012.

⁵ [“MS-13 gang members arrested, charged with murder of 19-year-old Long Island man”](#), Immigration and Customs Enforcement press release, March 6, 2015.

⁶ Nicole Fuller, [“Sini: ‘Working aggressively’ to get license-plate readers in Brentwood”](#), *Newsday*, October 24, 2016.