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## WHITE HOUSE PUSHES LINK BETWEEN IMMIGRANTS AND CRIME

*Donald Trump, Jeff Sessions and John Kelly say gangs such as M-13 are fueling a crime wave, a position disputed by some in law enforcement*

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The Trump administration on Tuesday pressed its case that illegal immigrants are helping fuel a crime wave, singling out a Central America-based international gang it said had flourished under the Obama administration.

In rapid succession, President Donald Trump, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly all promoted a crackdown on illegal immigration they said would improve public safety.

Their approach divides the law enforcement community, with some officers welcoming stricter immigration enforcement and others concerned a crackdown could deter undocumented residents from cooperating with police.

Early Tuesday, Mr. Trump said on Twitter: "The weak illegal immigration policies of the Obama Admin. allowed bad MS 13 gangs to form in cities across U.S. We are removing them fast!" MS-13 is an international gang, made up largely of immigrants from El Salvador or their descendants, that the Justice Department says has been operating since at least the 1980s.

Mr. Obama's backers sharply dispute the notion that his policies were weak, illegal or contributed to crime, and some criminal justice advocates say the Trump administration is exaggerating the threats to public safety. Crime rates remain near historic lows, despite surges in violence in a handful of large cities, and some studies show immigrants commit less crime than native-born Americans.

The debate over immigration and crime is heavily shaping the new administration as it approaches the closely watched 100-day marker. While Mr. Trump has backed away from some campaign promises, he has followed through on putting law and order at the forefront of his agenda.

Mr. Sessions on Tuesday echoed the president's tweet in remarks to federal law enforcement officials, blaming "an open border and years of lax immigration enforcement" for recent growth of the Central American gang. Police suspect [MS-13 gang members murdered four young men](#) last week in a park in Long Island, N.Y., in addition to killing two teenage girls last month in Los Angeles with machetes and baseball bats, Mr. Sessions said.

Mr. Kelly used his first major speech to drive a similar message, saying there is "no better argument for secure borders than the transnational criminal organizations we face."

Wes McBride, executive director of the California Gang Investigators Association, a law enforcement group, agreed that tighter border security would curb gang activity, though he was hesitant to blame the Obama administration for growth of MS-13.

Under Mr. Obama, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on MS-13 in 2012, and the Justice Department prosecuted dozens of members. Last year, [56 members in the Boston area were indicted](#) on racketeering, murder and other charges, while eight were convicted in New Jersey and four were sentenced in Atlanta. An FBI task force to target the group dates back to 2004.

Still, Mr. Kelly drew a sharp distinction between the Obama administration and Mr. Trump's first months in office, attributing a sharp decline in unlawful border crossings to a crackdown by the new administration. U.S. Customs and Border Protection data show a 64 percent drop in people apprehended at the southern border in March, compared to the same month in 2016.

Some law enforcement leaders have welcomed the renewed emphasis on law and order. But others in the criminal justice community dispute the administration's portrayal of a nation plagued by a rising tide of lawlessness, saying the administration's approach could put civil liberties at risk.

The latest FBI statistics show a complicated picture of crime in the U.S. Murder rates fell by nearly one-half in 2016 from their peak in 1991, though the nationwide rate rose an estimated 8 percent in the last year, according to an analysis released Tuesday by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. That increase was fueled largely by a rise in murders in big cities, including Baltimore, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, which opposes long mandatory sentences, argued that "Attorney General Sessions is creating hysteria about crime at a moment when violent crime is down substantially from its peak."

William Lansdowne, the former police chief in San Diego, disputed the administration's efforts to link illegal border crossings and crime. "It has nothing to do with lax [border] enforcement," he said. "Once gangs are here, they recruit new members locally. They don't immigrate."