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# EL SALVADOR'S VIOLENCE: NO EASY WAY OUT

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**El Salvador closed out 2015 with 6,657 murders, replacing Honduras as the murder capital of the world. That averages out to over 18 murders a day, a 70 percent increase compared to the previous year, making it the highest murder rate for any country in the world in almost 20 years.**

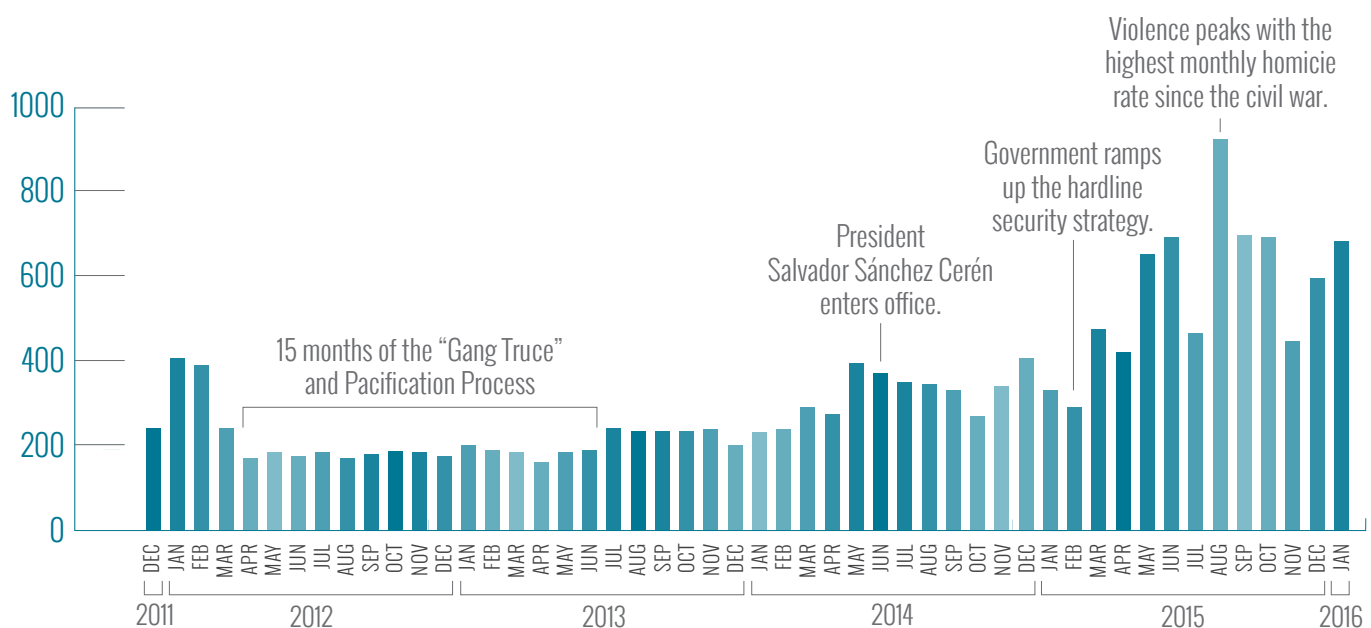
Right now, there is little hope that 2016 will be much better. In January, the country registered 738 homicides, and the government has said murder levels are likely to remain high through the year. Below is a monthly breakdown of murders, using data from the National Police.

These numbers are alarming, but they incorporate only what the police have documented and do not include unreported murders or the hundreds (or more) of disappearance cases. This violence, paired with a lack of opportunity, has caused Salvadorans, including growing numbers of women and children, to flee the country in droves. Whether they are refugees fleeing violence or economic migrants without specific grounds to receive asylum is a vital question now part of the U.S. national political debate. In an attempt to understand the different sources and dynamics of violence, the Center for International Policy and the Latin America Working Group Education Fund traveled to El Salvador late last year. We interviewed journalists,

## EL SALVADOR HOMICIDES BY MONTH December 2011 to January 2016

Source: Homicide Data from the National Civil Police (PNC) of El Salvador

Graph based on this version by Paolo Luers: <http://bit.ly/1LfKZiV>





An officer of the National Civil Police (PNC) stands in front of a poster depicting actors within El Salvador's security strategy.

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

analysts, government officials, judges, police officers, citizens, activists, humanitarian workers, diplomats, and academics.

What we found was evidence of a grim, multi-sided conflict with no clear end in sight: Gangs are now present in each of the country's 14 regional departments, controlling entire neighborhoods and imposing untold violence and fear on the population. Evidence is emerging that some members of the military and police, now engaged in a war against the gangs, are involved in [extrajudicial killings](#). Many Salvadoran citizens are in favor of the government's militarized measures and are calling for the gangs' blood, adopting a 'kill them all' mantra in hopes that some sort of peace

will emerge once the gangs are gone. But the gangs are a moving target, whose operations involve a substantial part of the population and who continue to re-fill their ranks with young, marginalized boys who have grown up in areas where criminal groups hold more clout than the state.

The Salvadoran government developed a relatively well-regarded plan that promises a more balanced approach to the gangs, but there is little funding for the program and international donors have been slow to buy in. The hard security strategy is what is most evident on the streets.

In the backdrop of all of this, or perhaps driving it, are problems rooted in the legacy of the country's bloody civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992. The problems of social inequality and elite dominance of state institutions that contributed to the conflict are still in place, and it is evident that the inheritance of the use of force as a first resort still casts a shadow over El Salvador. Politics remain extremely polarized, corruption is rampant,

impunity is high, transparency is low and justice is rare. But despite all obstacles, a comprehensive, rights-respecting way out must be sought.

The gangs are a moving target, whose operations involve a substantial part of the population.

Street graffiti by the Mara Salvatrucha 13 gang in Los Angeles.

Photo credit: Walking the Tracks





Members of the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) gang in El Salvador.

Photo credit: History Channel en español.

## EL SALVADOR'S GANG VIOLENCE: TURF WARS, INTERNAL BATTLES AND LIFE DEFINED BY INVISIBLE BORDERS

Following the official breakdown of the controversial truce between El Salvador's two main gangs in March 2014, El Salvador's murder rate increased substantially, reaching a peak in the late summer of 2015, hitting a high of over 900 murders, or 30 per day, in August.

When the agreement was first made in March of 2012, brokered by third-party mediators tied to the previous government of President Mauricio Funes, murders halved, dropping from around 12 per day to an average of five. During this time gang witnesses [claim](#) the government gave imprisoned leaders concessions for their participation in

the truce, such as cell phones, transfers to lower security prisons, and conjugal visits. The role that the Funes administration played is extremely unclear and is currently [under investigation](#), although President Funes denies any involvement. Critics have argued that while homicides declined during the truce, disappearances increased and the gangs strengthened. Others have noted that it was the overall lack of transparency surrounding the truce, including the extent of the government's involvement and any possible concessions, paired with a lack of accountability on either side or dialogue with gang members on the street, that soured public opinion on the agreement and paved the way for the chaos that was to follow, not dialogue itself. In June of 2015, leaders from the country's two main gangs [sent a letter](#) to minister

of security and justice at the time, Benito Lara, saying they were open to dialogue.

Current President Salvador Sánchez Cerén was voted into power promising a tougher security strategy to the previously unpopular truce, and has publicly rejected negotiating with the gangs. When he took office in June 2014, he put gang leaders back in maximum security prisons. In response, the gangs escalated attacks on police. So, the government deployed more security forces. Then, the gangs attacked the soldiers. By the spring of 2015, the government had basically declared war.

As the war continues to rage, the fight against the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs has often taken center stage. However, the security landscape in El Salvador is more complex than a battle between gangs and security forces. There are struggles between the gangs, within the gangs, conflicts between all armed actors and citizens, and some violence due to transnational drug trafficking. In this complicated, very bloody fight, violence has become a daily occurrence, forcing entire neighborhoods to leave their homes and making it nearly impossible for many children to go to school or for adults to make a living.

### **GANG VS. GANG: TERRITORIAL CONTROL, EXTORTION AND MICRO-TRAFFICKING**

Originating on the streets of Los Angeles and strengthened by Salvadorans who had fled to the city during El Salvador's civil war (1980–1992) and their children, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs now regularly fight over territorial control of cities, towns and local drug markets in El Salvador to increase influence and profits. As a seasoned, San Salvador-based investigative journalist explained, “They want to control territory for extortion, that’s

how they make their money—that’s a big generator of violence. They are fighting for control of territory and of community members to control extortion. At a certain point as well, killing with brutal methods becomes a way of communicating and reaffirming leadership.”

**Gangs have been able to better arm themselves, raising the stakes of war. There are also signs that their modus operandi could be changing.**

Large-scale deportations of gang members from the United States in the mid-1990s brought U.S.-style gang structure and customs to El Salvador, helping to boost mostly small local youth gangs into more violent and more organized groups. The deportees brought back the names and styles of U.S. gangs, along with personal and family connections to the gang structures in the United States. They were also met by a politically and economically fragile country trying to rebuild itself following the signing of a 1992 peace accord.

“Gang members came from Los Angeles with a much more professional and unified force, and the conditions were ripe for them to recruit, consolidate and expand,” the journalist noted.

Now, with an [estimated 60,000 gang members](#), El Salvador has more gang members [per capita](#) than any other country in Central America. As a result, the gangs have become an integral part of Salvadoran society, with as many as 600,000 in a country of about 6 million believed to be in the groups’ extended networks, including family members of free and imprisoned gang members who live off the money extorted by the gangs.



As of 2005, there are two factions of the Barrio 18: the Revolucionarios and the Sureños. According to several interviews, as the smallest and weakest of the groups, the Revolucionarios are the most volatile and have ramped up violence to stake their place in the underworld. The group is responsible for the [transportation “strike”](#) earlier this year that resulted in the death of nine drivers, and for [car bombs](#) that have been placed strategically near government buildings, a new pressure tactic by the gangs that has just emerged this year. Gang units known as “clicas” or “cliques” from the three groups (MS-13, Revolucionarios, and Sureños) have now carved out territories throughout the country. As InSight Crime [notes](#), the cliques are relatively autonomous groups that have their own name and hierarchy but are subject to the leadership’s overall, strategic decisions. However, since the breakdown of a truce between the gangs in 2014, gang leadership has lost a degree of control throughout their ranks and violent scuffles between and within gangs have increased.

## CHANGING NATURE OF THE GANGS

The gangs of today look different than those of 2012 that entered into the truce. Whereas top jailed leaders once wielded immense power over foot soldiers on the ground, it appears the lower, younger ranks have also taken more control of operations and in some instances are at odds with the older leaders who negotiated the truce. When imprisoned gang leaders were transferred back to maximum security prisons, their communication with members on the street was [disrupted](#) and disillusioned mid-level members took more control.

A security analyst told us, “There is tension between the old and young; the ‘ranfla libre,’ or the younger members on the street, are discontent

with paying extortion to the ‘ranfla en la cárcel,’ or imprisoned leaders. For a long time they [younger members] weren’t seeing any new programs while the top leaders got benefits like being moved to lower-security prisons. Now they are calling a lot of the shots.” Run by younger gang members, sometimes as young as 13, gang cells are not waiting for instructions from gang leadership before attacking rival gangs or police.

A seasoned investigative journalist explained the rift further: “Gangs have a lot of people on their payroll. They were hoping the reinsertion programs [included in the truce] would get people off their payroll. And some leaders are getting older, beyond when they thought they would live. They don’t want war anymore. Their reality from the young guys on the street is different.”

Everyone ... must pay what the gangs ask or they put themselves and their family at risk of being tortured or murdered.

Further contributing to the gang violence is the fact that some cliques are increasingly making money from micro-drug trafficking. The MS-13 and Barrio 18 cliques operating in El Salvador are distinctive in operations and use of violence, with some more violent than others or more focused on extortion. According to [reports](#), some cliques of the MS-13 aspire to acquire cocaine routes traditionally held by local organizations with connections to Colombian producers and Mexican distributors, who transport drugs across national territory. Like the MS-13 cliques in Honduras, the gang’s cliques in El Salvador are more focused on local drug sales

than those of the Barrio 18. As the investigative journalist explained: “The MS-13 has some main cliques, Normandy (the biggest), Los Stoners, Los Teclas, and Los Sancochos (the most powerful) which distribute the most drugs locally and are now also distributing to Guatemala.”

While the gangs do not make anywhere near the exorbitant profits of Mexico’s drug cartels or Colombia’s criminal bands, they have been able to better arm themselves, raising the stakes of war. There are also signs that their modus operandi could be changing.

“People living in gang territory live under different authoritarian structures and become part of the organic structure of organized crime.”

According to a researcher at the Central American University (UCA), “Not only is the firepower of the gangs increasing, but, we have not seen the car bombs before. This is a hint that the nature of the gangs is changing. They are also starting to say they will provide the population with services.” This fits in with the narrative of the gangs, who claim that they provide structure in neighborhoods with little to no state infrastructure or presence. While the gangs may provide an alternative structure to the government, they are also terrorizing the population.

Official numbers for how many alleged gang members are killed versus how many non-gang members are killed are highly politicized and vary depending on the source. There is very rarely hard evidence to substantiate them. Relatively recently for instance the Salvadoran government [claimed](#) that gang members

now make up the vast majority of murder victims, while the former subdirector of the country’s national police [said](#) that just 30 percent, or 2,014, of the 6,657 killed in 2015 were alleged gang members. At the same time, many of our interviewees told us that no investigation is pursued if the homicide victim is suspected to have any gang affiliation or relation, so it is difficult to get a hard statistic.

### GANGS VS. POPULATION: EXTORTION, MURDER, AND CONTROL

The gangs control entire communities, leveraging so much power that even police are afraid to enter some areas. All over the country, residents’ lives are defined by invisible borders set by the gangs, often marked by an innocuous park, bridge, or school. Salvadorans, particularly those living in gang-controlled territories, are frequently killed for anything from [crossing into the territory of another gang](#), witnessing a crime, refusing to join or trying to leave a gang, or for being unwilling or unable to pay extortion fees.

As one aid worker who has worked in gang-controlled communities for 15 years explained, “A person who is a carpenter who lives in an MS-13 zone can’t take a job in a Barrio 18 zone, or visit a family member, even if it’s just a few blocks away.” These invisible lines make it extremely hard for people to get to school or work, as they may have to travel through several neighborhoods, all controlled by different gangs’ cliques. The extent of gang presence and control in San Salvador was recently [mapped out](#) by Salvadoran daily newspaper El Diario de Hoy.

Territorial control is important, as gangs earn most of their income from extortion. According to an estimate by Honduras’ National Anti-Extortion Force, Salvadorans [pay](#) nearly \$400 million in extortion, or “rent,” each year. No one is exempt from paying what gang members call “rent.” In the past, the issue of

extortion was not typically discussed openly, but that may be starting to change, especially following the publication of El Faro's [extensive special series](#) on this topic, which includes an anonymous questionnaire for victims to report their own experiences with extortion. Everyone from old women peddling pupusas to shopkeepers and bus drivers must pay what the gangs ask or they put themselves and their family at risk of being tortured or murdered. Even teachers have to pay the tax—out of their own pockets—just to carry out class. “The gangs don’t let the people live their lives—they will often kill people who don’t pay extortion,” an aid worker explained.

Turf wars among the gangs also impact political elections. “Candidates have to work with the gangs to get permission to campaign in those neighborhoods, and gangs control local politics through intimidation and corruption,” the aid worker told us. The power and political sway of the gangs helps them avoid formal prosecution for crimes committed against the communities they control.

In addition to intimidating citizens, committing acts of torture, sexual violence, and murder, the gangs are responsible for carrying out disappearances. A civil society organization investigating human rights violations told us that they are receiving more cases of disappearances, mainly of young people, and that it’s not just the police disappearing people, but the gangs as well. This reality has caused a large portion of the population to back the government’s hardline approach.

At the same time, gangs have become an integral aspect of poor, vulnerable areas. “People living in gang territory live under different authoritarian structures and become part of the organic structure of organized crime,” explained a U.S. human rights activist who has worked for the past decade in these communities in El Salvador. “They don’t believe the state can resolve their problems.” The activist mentioned that “people in some communities are

now saying they are more afraid of police than the gangs. In some areas they think they can get better security from gangs if they follow the gangs’ rules. They are more predictable than state security forces. So the gangs begin to think of themselves as an alternate state.”

The gangs’ presence and power is evident in their high recruitment numbers. Joining the gangs is often one of the only options for children in communities where gang members hold clout, state presence is lacking, opportunities are few, and violence is the norm. Young people who refuse to join will be threatened, if not killed, and non-consenting young girls will often be raped by gang members. For the most part, residents in these areas have no options for refuge. As Dr. Mauricio Gaborit, the head of psychology at the Central American University (UCA) and an immigration specialist, said, “If a gang threatens someone, that person doesn’t have a place to turn and will likely have to leave.”

According to Dr. Gaborit, this violence propels migration to the United States. “Adolescents in El Salvador are besieged by gangs to belong, to carry out certain activities that they do out of fear. When the families in the United States see this is happening, they try to get them out,” he said. “And then the threat directed at the child then is directed at the family in El Salvador when the gangs find the child has left. Then the whole family has to leave.”

While gang violence previously had been more focused in urban areas, in response to the government flooding the streets with masked security forces armed with heavy artillery, the gangs have expanded their operations outside of the country’s main cities like the capital of Soyapango, Santa Ana, and the capital San Salvador. This has caused an increase of violence in rural areas. Of 8,150 murders that occurred in the country between January 2014 and September 2015, about 54 percent took place outside of cities.

## NARCO-TRAFFICKING GROUPS

Narcotics and other contraband move through El Salvador with relative ease along its borders and coastline, although the country is a “relatively small player” in the drug trade compared to other Central American countries like Guatemala and Honduras, [according to InSight Crime](#) and confirmed by interviews. Local drug trafficking groups servicing larger criminal enterprises, primarily from Mexico, will sometimes contract out murder, torture and other activities to gang members, mostly in areas outside of cities where the gangs are now operating. According to Salvadoran and U.S. security officials though, violence related to the international drug trade is a small slice of the overall pie.

Known as transportistas, these groups moving drugs across El Salvador’s borders have their roots in contraband smuggling operations during the civil war. The main groups are [the Taxis cartel](#) and [the Perrones](#). Although the gangs have some links with transportista groups, gang members are not the main actors moving drugs, guns, or humans transnationally. As noted, some cliques of the MS-13 might be trying to take control of some of these routes, but overall it remains to be seen if the gangs will become more involved with the international narcotics trade or human trafficking.

Although not the main drug trafficking hub in Central America, El Salvador has become a base for laundering drug money, particularly since it adopted the dollar as its official currency in 2001. As the U.S. State Department [notes](#), “the country’s dollarized economy and geographic location make it an ideal haven for transnational organized crime groups, including human smuggling and drug trafficking organizations.” Numerous [reports](#) have linked high-level officials to the larger transportista groups, indicating their political influence and level of penetration into the government.

Because these groups are not a primary driver of violence in the country, we did not look into their operations much. However, several journalists, analysts, and activists interviewed for this report flagged the gangs’ potentially growing involvement in trafficking and government corruption linked to these transportista groups as issues that require further investigation.

InSight Crime has an [excellent series of articles](#) written by investigative journalist Hector Silva highlighting such corruption, while [this Wilson Center paper](#) by Steve Dudley, a founder of InSight Crime, on drug trafficking, transportistas and maras in Central America is also a useful resource.

While it is unclear how internal gang dynamics will develop, how they will change their tactics or how they will increase their profits, what is clear is that if the government continues with the same strategy that invites an all-out war with the gangs and little else, violence will continue to escalate and many Salvadorans will continue to face a choice between death or migration. A more comprehensive strategy providing greater (non-militarized) state presence in marginalized communities, more economic opportunity for people in those communities, including for gang members, community-level violence prevention and protection for victims would gradually help. Dialogue with the gangs should not be taken off the table as an option, although very significant problems associated with the truce, such as a lack of transparency and accountability, as well as the need to engage with non-imprisoned gang leadership, should not be forgotten. But at this point, without any change, there is little hope that the gangs will change course or that murder rates will drop.



President Salvador Sánchez Cerén hands over a bulletproof vest to a PNC officer during a ceremony on December 2, 2015.

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

## EL SALVADOR'S SECURITY POLICY IS INCREASING EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS AND ABUSE

The government's use of force has invited violent pushback from the gangs, and there have been severe consequences for citizens living in the crossfire. All sides are now engaged in an escalating cycle of action and reaction. For security forces, it seems the line between those living in gang-controlled neighborhoods and those in a gang has become blurred, casting such a wide net in their operations that anyone could be targeted, but particularly young boys.

## POLICE AND MILITARY VS. GANGS: WAR, EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS, AND "DEATH SQUADS"

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén was elected on a pledge to take on the gangs. Since taking power, he has overseen an overall policy shift to outgun them. In a scramble to address the violence, the Salvadoran government has **created** anti-gang battalions and increased police raids, spearheaded by a unit called the **Reaction Police Group**, which has been **linked** to deaths and enforced disappearances of alleged gang members. The government has **deployed over 7,000 soldiers** and thousands of police officers to the streets.

Among the forces deployed are elite groups such as: **Los Halcones** (The Hawks), the police's Fast

Response Corps; the [New Reaction Special Forces](#), an elite army unit created last year to battle the gangs; the [Hacha command](#), part of the Salvadoran Armed Forces Special Operations Group that has been trained in the United States to advise police in Iraq and Afghanistan; the [“Zeus” command](#), a military force of 2,821 members divided into nine task forces and deployed to 42 of the country’s most violent municipalities to patrol with police; the [“Águila” command](#), which has deployed 2,000 troops to 1,063 schools; the [“Sumpul and” “San Carlos” commands](#); and the military’s mobile rapid response special force “Trueno,” or “Thunder,” which is “supported by helicopters and ground vehicles, for situations requiring an armed response beyond

that available from local military and police forces,” according to security blog [War on the Rocks](#).

Part of the government’s increasingly hardline approach is in response to a shift in gang strategy. Starting in 2014, the gangs began specifically targeting police, [killing over 30 officers](#) that year. With the surge in police operations, the overall trend towards [more violent confrontations](#) has grown. In 2015, gang members killed just over 60 police officers and nearly 20 soldiers. Because of the heightened dangers on top of [extremely low salaries, more police are quitting](#) – some 350 police officers resigned in 2015, a 49 percent increase on the previous year. An organized crime specialist in

**President Salvador Sánchez Cerén participates in a ceremony turning over vehicles to the armed forces.**

**Photo credit:** Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr



the country told us that the gangs now have formed “comandos de barrios” that are like gang special forces units that carry out “disappear and bury” operations, targeting police and military.

Escalating the violence, Salvadoran lawmakers and officials have encouraged police to take a harder swing at the gangs.

In 2014, [changes](#) to the country’s [penal code](#) (articles 300, 323-A, and 350) made it harder for police and military involved in shootings of gang members to be prosecuted effectively for abuses, according to a former vice minister of security. A police directive that followed these changes in 2015 essentially gave officers the green light to shoot alleged gang members without fear of investigation. Speaking at a press conference in late January 2015, then-Police Director and recently-named Minister of Public Security and Justice Mauricio Ramirez Landaverde [said](#): “All members of the [National Civil Police (PNC)] that have to use weapons against criminals due to their work as officers, should do so with complete confidence. There is an institution that backs us. There is a government that supports us.” As a humanitarian worker who has worked on the ground for 10 years and previously worked with USAID told us, “This has perpetuated the mentality that the life of a police officer is worth more than the life of a gang member in El Salvador, and that is a dangerous message.”

Adding fuel to the fire, in August 2015, the then-attorney general Luis Martínez began prosecuting gang members as terrorists under El Salvador’s existing [Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism](#). Terrorism charges can carry prison terms from 40 to 60 years for those found guilty of “an act against the life, personal integrity, liberty, or security” of a public official or employee, while homicide [carries](#) up to 20 years, and aggravated homicide up to 50 years.

Lawyers, judges, and security analysts we spoke with said the special law was more about sending a message, both to the gangs and the public, about its “zero-tolerance” stance on the gangs than changing prosecution proceedings. They also noted that as much as it further encouraged security forces to view all alleged gang members as enemies in a war, it could also have the effect of radicalizing the gangs. As one judge, an alternate for the Supreme Court, noted: “it could, and will likely push gang members to assume the attitude of ‘well, I’m already considered a terrorist, so I might as well act like one.’”

In a disturbing example of the dangers presented by labeling gangs as terrorists, a top Salvadoran police official [called](#) for newspaper *El Diario de Hoy* to be tried on terrorism charges after publishing several stories on the gangs, including one article about police corruption [claiming](#) that “the police do not escape gang control. In fact, they may be the most controlled.”

At this point, without any change, there is little hope that ... murder rates will drop.

This overall hardline approach to security has led to an increase in extrajudicial killings, most of which seem to be carried out by the police. As the investigative journalist explained, “Now a supposed fire exchange between security forces and gang members will leave all gang members dead and not one officer even wounded. This is suspicious.” The most emblematic case, [documented and investigated masterfully](#) in July 2015 by investigative news site *El Faro*, is that of San Blas, where police allegedly massacred eight people in March 2015.

Five months later, in August, the officers implicated in the shootings were still on active duty and the then-director of the PNC [said](#) the officers had done nothing wrong. In July 2016, the Attorney General announced the arrest of seven members of the PNC, [declaring](#) that “we cannot allow our country to turn into the Wild West.

“I don’t have the certain scientific evidence, but everything indicates to us that [security forces] are committing extrajudicial executions,” Dr. José Miguel Fortín Magaña, the former director of the Institute of Legal Medicine, the medical examiner’s office, [told \*El Faro\*](#). Several sources told us that bodies of alleged gang members supposedly slain in combat had weapons placed on top of them—which, they said, clearly indicates these people were not killed in shoot-outs.

## This overall hardline approach to security has led to an increase in extrajudicial killings.

Neither human rights groups nor government officials could provide estimated numbers of extrajudicial executions. At this point these killings do not appear to be part of a systematic strategy throughout the force.

With the exception of the human rights ombudsman’s office, the government has often been quick to deny allegations of police wrongdoing. As Dr. Fortin [explained in \*El Faro\*](#), “What are the comments when someone is doing an investigation that involves this government? They say that they [the investigators] were bought, that they are part of ARENA [opposition political party], that they are pro-gang... I don’t know how

many other things. We are on the brink of hell.” However, investigations seem to be rare. As Dr. Fortín told the news site, “the problem is not that there are bad investigations, it is that there are not investigations.”

There is hope that this will change with the country’s [newly-elected attorney general](#), Douglas Meléndez. Meléndez’s predecessor, the controversial Luis Martínez, has been accused of [using illegal wiretaps](#), [protecting drug kingpins](#), and purposefully [mishandling](#) a major corruption case against a former president. In December, the mayor of San Salvador [threatened to leave the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front \(FMLN\) party](#) if the party’s deputies voted to re-elect Martínez. So far Meléndez, who has some [significant convictions](#) under his belt, has said some of the right things: [acknowledging](#) allegations of corrupt elements within the attorney general’s office and [pledging](#) to focus on murder, extortion, corruption and transparency. He also recently signed an agreement with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to establish a new initiative to fight corruption in El Salvador. Although it lacks the teeth of Guatemala’s international anti-corruption body, [the CICIG](#), it is a sign things could be moving in the right direction. It is disturbing, however, that Meléndez has focused much of his attention on investigating the government officials involved in arranging the gang truce. This high-profile effort could shut off possibilities of dialogue with the gangs for years to come.

Moreover, the weakening of controls over the police and other security forces, the incentives to take a hardline approach, and the lack of adequate investigations, may be laying the groundwork for escalating extrajudicial executions and other abuses in the future. As the former Salvadoran vice security minister warned: “The police and army need to



follow laws. It will be too late to rein them in if their actions aren't dealt with now. They may become, and some could be becoming, illegal structures that the government cannot control."

## A VIGILANTE RESURGENCE

There is also growing concern over killings by illegal structures—what the Salvadoran media [are calling](#) "death squads." These are groups of armed, masked men, dressed in clothes similar to police uniforms, dedicated to murdering alleged gang members. Those being targeted are gang members and those thought to be "sympathizers," including family members and those pulled into gang operations against their will.

Human rights workers, security experts, a mid-level police commander, a former intelligence agent, journalists and the country's human rights ombudsman all flagged [reports](#) about "death squads" operating in the country. One security analyst told us:

These groups are executing gang members and their families, carrying out several multiple homicides. It is not clear exactly who they are, but accounts from victims point to police and military tactics and many of them are often dressed in similar outfits to the police or army. So it is likely that current security force members are getting hired to carry out executions by the business community or politicians. It is also very possible that there are groups of civilians organizing themselves as social cleansing groups to take out the gangs.

Last January, an anonymous police source told [Salvadoran newspaper La Página](#) that these "death squads" had recently increased attacks against the gangs, although several [had been operating](#) in the

country for over two years. A 2014 video can be seen [here](#), allegedly from a group calling themselves "*Los Lobos Negros*," or the Black Wolves, which claims to be made up of members from *La Sombra Negra* (the Black Shadow), the death squad that haunted the country in the mid-90s. Today, *La Sombra Negra*, or at least its name, seems to have made a resurgence, with a [Facebook page](#) that's gathered nearly 15,000 likes; a recent update this past January 5 read: "Feeling ready to exterminate." The group also [gives online classes](#) and until recently had its own [website](#) featuring pictures of heavily armed masked men and close-ups of gang members shot in the head. The website, [advertised](#) on the group's Facebook page in 2015 and active in early 2016, has since been deactivated. It is worth noting that the new subdirector of El Salvador's national police (PNC), Flores Murillo, was [indicted](#) as a member of the Sombra Negra in 1995. For reasons that remain unclear, the charges against all those alleged to be involved were eventually dropped.

"The problem is not that there are bad investigations, it is that there are not investigations."

To date, there do not appear to be effective investigations into these structures. A November 2015 [report from El Diario de Hoy](#) examined 14 unsolved murders carried out in the "death squad style" and found that authorities had not investigated a single case. The PNC has [pushed back](#) on allegations of death squads, claiming the groups are made up of gang members themselves. In an interview with online news site [Contra Punto](#) on January 11, Human Rights Ombudsman David Morales responded, saying: "Here what

is happening is a dysfunction of the PNC, in my opinion, the internal control mechanism and units have to go out and investigate the **possible participation** of police in these type of acts.”

Morales said his office was planning to investigate the “death squad” trend, although as human rights ombudsman his office cannot bring criminal charges. He cautioned that “it is very difficult to investigate these crimes, especially because most families immediately flee in fear. So those who carried out the crimes are never found and those who planned it never investigated.” Whether the new attorney general vigorously investigates these shadowy structures as well as incidents of alleged extrajudicial executions by police and military will be an important measure of his effectiveness.

### **POLICE AND MILITARY VS. POPULATION: ABUSES AND GUILT BY ASSOCIATION**

One analyst and activist who has worked in gang-controlled communities for over 15 years described police interaction in some marginalized communities:

Police will open fire in the community because they’re at war. These are ripe conditions for police abuse; people expect to be physically assaulted by the police. It is routine for the police to beat people up, to break down doors, to verbally and sexually harass, to threaten people’s lives, to carry out arbitrary arrests. No one bothers to register this, only when it is killing, and even that is only sometimes. Since police can arbitrarily detain young people who look like gang members or trans women or not-quite-legal street sellers, no one wants to complain.

“The worst situation of life here is to be a young, poor boy. There is no guarantee you won’t be killed now. The police are criminalizing poverty. They are

creating a generation of resentful youth,” explained a human rights defender in a gang-controlled neighborhood in San Salvador. A development worker in another neighborhood explained that even trying to help residents in these areas is becoming difficult: “The police now see even working with the community as working with the enemy. This has made our work this year very hard.”

Problems with the government’s use of force also extend to the military as it is increasingly being used for law enforcement. While police are supposed to be in charge in joint military-police actions in neighborhoods, we heard reports of soldiers acting without police supervision from several interviewees that work in crime-heavy neighborhoods. There appears to be insufficient oversight of these military operations and cases of abuse are rarely investigated. In one case, eyewitnesses allegedly caught soldiers raping a 13-year-old girl with Down syndrome, but when they attempted to report the crime, police officers refused to take their testimony because the witnesses were members of an LGBTI rights group.

“The worst situation of life here is to be a young, poor boy. There is no guarantee you won’t be killed now.”

In February 2014, five soldiers and a sergeant allegedly **took three young men** from a neighborhood in the town of Armenia controlled by one gang into the territory of another gang. The three young men never returned. When their families searched for their sons, they received threats and their houses were searched by the authorities. This well-publicized case has advanced in the courts, but many other disappearances

remain unsolved. According to human rights groups, there are many threats against those involved in cases involving state actors. We commonly heard: “it is a risk to say anything.”

According to the founder of an organization investigating extrajudicial executions, “While the gangs are responsible for most of the murders, more and more state actors are involved in homicides and disappearances. They aren’t systematic, but they are there, and we are worried they could become more systematic, but the government has shut the door to human rights groups and does not want to talk about this.” While the military was allegedly responsible in above cases and others, human rights groups reporting on instances of rape, use of excessive force, and enforced disappearances highlighted that police seem to be the perpetrators in the majority of such crimes allegedly committed by security forces.

In early December 2015, El Salvador’s human rights ombudsman [announced](#) that between June 2014 and May 2015 his office received 2,202 complaints of human rights violations, 92 percent of which were ascribed to the PNC and the army.

“Victims are sometimes willing to go to the human rights ombudsmen but not to police and the [now former] attorney general,” said a human rights activist who works with victims. “As well as not

reporting out of fear, people see no reason to do so because nothing happens. And this year has been the hardest because security has been much more repressive and the abuse more aggressive.”

In El Salvador, it seems both police and military are employing excessive use of force and committing abuses with few consequences.

In 2016, there are few signs that the government will change its hardline strategy. A more comprehensive approach to security, where citizens feel protected, not targeted, is needed. A functioning justice system that investigates and prosecutes murder and abuse, as well as corruption in all ranks of government, and a police force that is competent, honest, and respectful of human rights is essential.

With a new attorney general, there is a window of opportunity for the Salvadoran government to investigate and prosecute unlawful killings by security forces. This is a complicated situation, and the solution is not easy. But what is clear at the moment is that heavy-handed law enforcement tactics alone cannot protect the Salvadoran people.



EL LANCERO

Storefront of a shop thought to supply arms and other equipment to private security and vigilante groups, such as gun holsters, military-style boots, and camouflage clothing.

Photo credit: Frederick Meza, Diario La Página

## ARMING THE CONFLICT: EL SALVADOR'S GUN MARKET

In El Salvador, **over 80 percent of murders** were carried out with guns in 2015. Loose enforcement of existing Salvadoran laws, limited U.S. gun controls, military corruption and lax oversight of large caches of civil war-era arms have made it relatively easy for criminals to access such firepower.

There is not one primary source or channel of arms for criminal groups. According to the U.S. Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), **almost 50 percent** of the guns found at crime scenes in El Salvador in 2014 and filed into their e-Trace – ATF's gun-tracking database – are from the United States. As the Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) explained in a **2014 report**, these arms reach criminals in

El Salvador through multiple channels: "some weapons make their way from the civilian market into the black market, some are sourced from the stockpiles held by the militaries, others are recovered from civil war-era guerrilla arms caches, and some are imported from outside the country by or on behalf of criminal syndicates."

According to a government source close to the issue, El Salvador's gangs have significantly grown their weapons arsenals in the past year using these means, demonstrated by the fact that gang members are now much quicker to leave guns behind at crime scenes. Contrary to Salvadoran government reports, the weapons of choice for the gangs are mainly semi-automatic handguns and revolvers, as opposed to more military-grade anti-tank weapons and machine guns like M-16s

or AK-47s. Such high-powered arms are [likely leftovers](#) from the civil war (1980-1992) and are mostly used by more powerful criminal groups in specific instances. All guns in El Salvador come from outside the country – it has no domestic gun manufacturers. While many firearms flow in along the same routes used to traffic drugs up to the United States, many also come down from the United States in shipments of old appliances and car parts. In either case, it is not large-scale traffickers that are the main players in the arms trade. “It is not so much the transnational criminal organizations that are moving guns,” a security observer told us, “just your bread-and-butter small-scale arms traffickers, which in many ways makes it much more difficult to track.” Throughout Central America these arms flow across porous borders and unpatrolled waters with ease. And business is thriving: “Borders are porous for guns, because guns are a business in this country. People in power own guns.”

Of the U.S.-sourced guns on the black market, many are smuggled down through Mexico, primarily from cities with the largest Salvadoran diaspora communities, including Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Boston. In addition to being the number one arms supplier on the black market, the United States is also the top source country for all guns legally entering El Salvador, [according to the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers](#).

Beyond concerns over transnational trafficking are worries about arms from current military and police arsenals falling into criminal hands. As the government source noted, “many times a criminal will be arrested with a gun, which is later traced in another crime [though it had been confiscated and should have been in police custody], so we know they are stolen out of vaults by military or police.”

The fact that some members of the Salvadoran military sell stolen weapons on the black market

is not new—there have been several cases of members of the military stealing and trafficking weapons, [everything from M-60s](#) (the guns often shot from the top of a tank), to [rocket launchers](#), to ammunition, and grenades. It is unclear exactly how this issue has played out in the security relationship with the United States, but it likely contributed to the massive drop in U.S. government arms sale authorizations and deliveries to the country, now at their [lowest point](#) in over 20 years.

Multiple sources told us that the military was directly involved in arms trafficking. In its study AOA also found “numerous sources in government and within the gangs themselves [who] described easy access to the weapons either directly via corrupt military personnel or indirectly through middlemen.”

**All guns in El Salvador come from outside the country – it has no domestic gun manufacturers.**

Aside from the guns being smuggled out of current security force arsenals, there are a significant number of arms also reportedly slipping out of military stockpiles -- these are weapons not used by active-duty security forces and include arms leftover from the civil war as well as some recovered from illegal stockpiles following the war. “These stockpiles represent one of the greatest proliferation risks in El Salvador. They contain thousands of weapons of all descriptions and sizes, from handguns to anti-tank weapons. There is very little transparency regarding such holdings,” [reported AOA](#). According to the report and confirmed by our own interviews, there is very little oversight of these stockpiles. While there is little data available concerning the size and scope of security force caches in general, existing numbers



suggest these stockpiles are sizeable. According to the [Small Arms Survey](#), between 1980–1993, the United States supplied the Salvadoran military with almost 37,500 guns (including 32,500 M-16s) and nearly 270,000 grenades, making the country the number one recipient of U.S. military hardware in the Western Hemisphere during the 1980s.

But traffickers and security forces are not the only source of weapons—there are also reportedly plentiful stashes of other civil war-era arms used by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), mostly soviet-type weapons and ammunition, that the group never turned over

after the peace accords. As AOV found, “finding, repairing and selling those weapons is one of the ways that illicit arms dealers and middlemen do business.” While most parts for these arms are harder to find in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala, who source most of their firearms from Western countries, they can often be found in Nicaragua, which also had a period of civil war fueled by arms from the Soviet Union and the United States, and whose security forces [still use soviet-type arms](#).

On paper, El Salvador has fairly strong [gun control laws](#)—all buyers must pass background checks



Officers of the National Civil Police (PNC) receive new arms and equipment during a December 2, 2015 ceremony with Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén.

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

administered by police, before picking up their gun they must pass a safety and proficiency course, and citizens cannot own automatic rifles, among other measures. But these rules are loosely enforced, meaning that many guns seamlessly drift from the civilian market over to the country's extensive black market. Although straw purchasing is legal, meaning that guns can even be bought with someone else's power of attorney, due to the strict guns laws, it is not the main source of criminal firepower.

A bigger cause for concern is the relationship between the Ministry of Defense and gun retailers. Because the army regulates gun sales and gun

stores are mostly owned, and run, by former members of the military, the Defense Ministry does not necessarily have a vested interest in cracking down on the gun market or providing reliable data. This means there are rarely penalties for irregularities in sales or imports. As AOAV [noted](#), there is inconsistent and inadequate data from the Ministry of Defense on the numbers of registered and unregistered guns.

Some of the biggest purchasers of illegal arms are [allegedly](#) private security companies, hired by businesses and wealthy individuals and growing in popularity as government security forces fail

A guard with a private security company.

Photo credit: Batallon Aguila, Facebook



to drive down crime and violence. The firepower that companies such as [Eagle Battalion](#) and [Blue Star Security](#) pack is evident on the street —most commercial establishments and gated communities have guards with prominent [12-gauge revolvers](#) slung across their chests. The largest estimate of private security was reported to be over 25,000 personnel employed by more than 400 companies in 2008 (the country’s national police force has around 20,000). The Small Arms Survey found that there is about one gun for every private security guard in the country. While there is no recent official public data, even their legally-purchased firearms end up on the black market – a [report](#) from 2011 found that over 1,700 guns registered to private security companies were reported missing over two years.

Now, according to several citizens we interviewed, it is not just criminals and security companies buying guns for protection but, “people without faith in the justice system who are arming themselves,” adding more arms to an ever-escalating conflict.

As the military continues to deploy onto the streets, as the gangs continue to target police, as anonymous vigilante groups continue to rise, and as murder rates continue to climb, El Salvador will see an incalculable loss of life in 2016. But those supplying the firepower stand to win.





Petitioners at an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights hearing on forced internal displacement in El Salvador at the Organization of American States. From left to right: Pedro Martinez of the Human Rights Institute at the University of Central America (IDHUCA), Abraham Abrego of the Foundation for the Study of the Application of Rights (FESPAD), Noah Bullock of Fundación Cristosal.

Photo credit: Daniel Cima

## NO LIFE HERE: INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN EL SALVADOR

The horrific violence gripping El Salvador has contributed to a humanitarian crisis that has forced hundreds of thousands of citizens to flee their homes. But the Salvadoran government has not fully recognized the problem of internal displacement and has failed to provide solutions.

In 2015, 324,000 people were **displaced** by crime and violence in El Salvador, up from 280,000 **displaced** in 2014. This type of “exodus,” as it has been **described** by civil society organizations, is typically led by women in the community and “constitutes a break in the social fabric, an uprooting of the

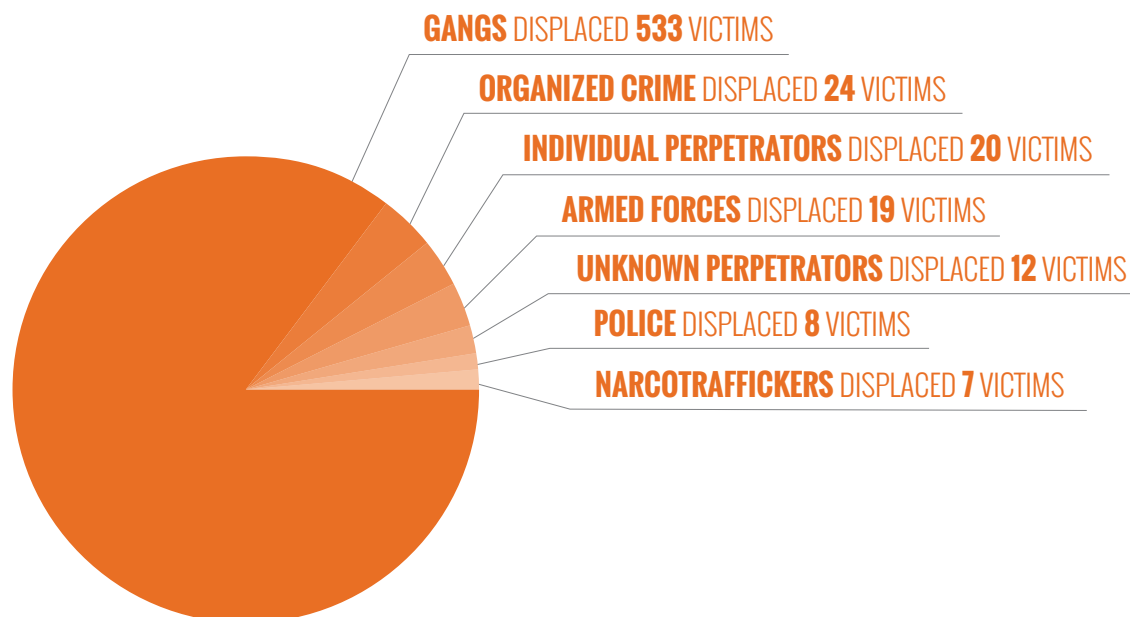
community marked by a disruption in the education of children and youth.”

Making matters worse, the alarming level of displacement shows no signs of slowing in 2016. In fact, the International Rescue Committee **included** El Salvador in its “Crisis Watch List for 2016” which highlights countries where escalating violence and insecurity will likely continue fueling displacement.

Gangs and other criminal organizations are by far the main violent actors causing internal displacement, according to cases **documented** between August 2014 and December 2015 by the Civil Society Roundtable Against Forced Displacement, as seen in the chart on page 26.

## VIOLENT ACTORS CAUSING DISPLACEMENT in cases documented August 2014 to December 2015

Source: Data presented by the Civil Society Roundtable Against Forced Displacement by Violence and Organized Crime in their January 2016 “Report on the Situation of Forced Displacement caused by Generalized Violence and Organized Crime in El Salvador.” [bit.ly/1nEy30t](http://bit.ly/1nEy30t)



Many displaced Salvadorans who have been forced into hiding do not see an opportunity to fully develop as a person in their home country. The only real options for most are participating in dangerous criminal activities or working in insecure, informal jobs – for example, as unlicensed street vendors or domestic workers at risk of exploitation and extortion.

Or, they can migrate.

“No one in this country lives without this incredible fear,” says Noah Bullock, director of the San Salvador-based human rights organization Fundación Cristosal. Even those Salvadorans not experiencing violence first-hand still live with the

stress and trauma associated with constant media and political discussion about violence.

However, Bullock clarifies that “the violence is suffered disproportionately by the poor” and that this inequality may be one of the reasons that such high levels of displacement might be tolerated or made invisible.

Many Salvadorans seek safety within their home country before fleeing abroad. “Displacement is a preamble for external migration because the country is so small,” explains Dr. Mauricio Gaborit, head of the psychology department at the University of Central America (UCA). “One person told me, ‘if I flee, the gangs will find me in 24 hours.’”

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face major restrictions of movement and access to safety in El Salvador, a country smaller than the U.S. state of New Jersey. “This isn’t an IDP crisis of concentration” with large groups of IDPs gathering in public spaces, Bullock says. “It’s invisible because those fleeing violence go into hiding.”

When threatened, a Salvadoran might self-incarcerate within their home. When that is no longer safe, they might stay with family members. And when the displaced person runs out of options, they will often be forced to leave the country.

When displaced Salvadorans flee the country, they often have little to no time to prepare. Many individuals and families leave without selling their

home or business, without making arrangements with smugglers, and with just a few dollars in their pockets.

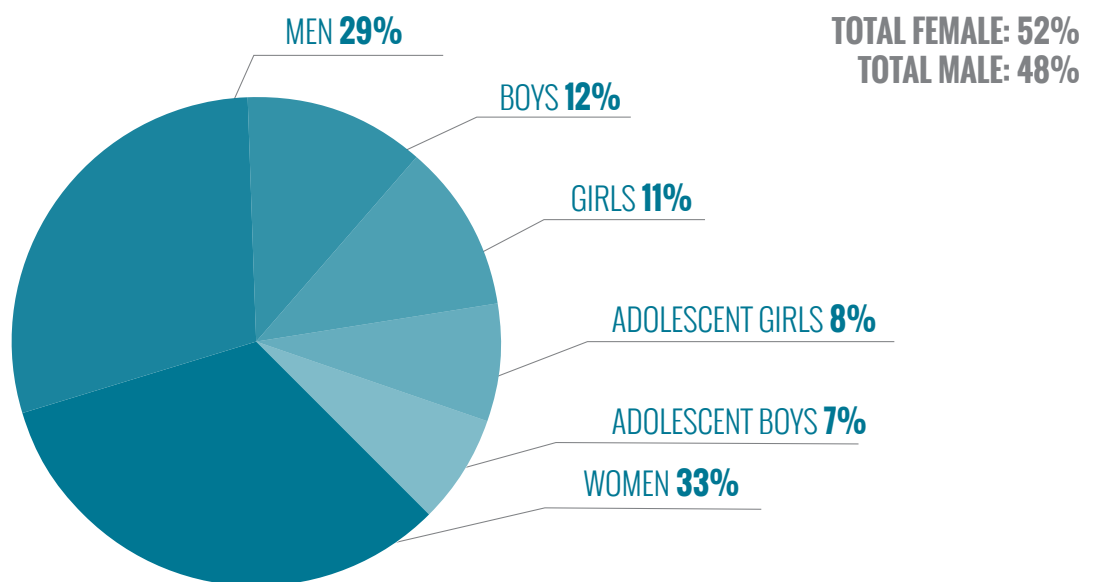
The migrants who leave everything behind and migrate without a plan are “the most vulnerable of the vulnerable,” says Dr. Gaborit.

As violence increases, more family units —most commonly a mother with her children— are traveling together rather than sending their children alone or with a smuggler.

Women and girls make up the majority of Salvadorans whose displacement was **registered** by the Civil Society Roundtable Against Forced Displacement between August 2014 and December 2015. Almost a third of those displaced during this

## VICTIMS OF FORCED INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT by Age and Gender

Source: Data Presented by the Civil Society Roundtable Against Forced Displacement by Violence and Organized Crime in their January 2016 “Report on the Situation of Forced Displacement caused by Generalized Violence and Organized Crime in El Salvador.” [bit.ly/1nEy30t](http://bit.ly/1nEy30t)



time were children or adolescents, As seen in the chart on page 27.

Insecurity, violence, and poverty are increasing as primary reasons for migration, although family reunification remains a key factor for leaving the country, according to Dr. Gaborit. Five hundred to 600 Salvadorans emigrate every day, mainly to the United States without documents, according to [estimates](#) by the Committee on Rights of Migrants.

Researchers at UCA estimate that each year about 145,000 people migrate without documents from El Salvador. Currently, over 2 million Salvadorans live outside of the country, representing nearly 30 percent of the total population. In other words, 1 out of every 3 Salvadorans lives outside of El Salvador.

While security concerns are a common thread among most if not all migrants, the specific reasons for leaving and the experiences migrants have en route vary widely by age and gender.

Most often, migration is not an individual choice, but a family decision. Salvadorans with family members in the United States often migrate in the hope of reunifying with their relatives. Some young Salvadorans grow up knowing that they will emigrate at some point in their lives.

These young people plan ahead for the difficult journey and exercise to prepare themselves. For boys, the ninth grade is often a watershed year when they begin to view themselves as adults. If they are unlikely to continue with school, this is when they are often forced to decide whether to join a gang, struggle to find a job, or migrate. If the boy flees his community due to threats or recruitment pressure by a gang, the gang's threats can shift to remaining family members, often leading to the displacement or migration of the entire family.

In spite of the fact that the education ministry [recorded](#) a sharp increase in [school](#)

[desertion](#) as a result of violence (now the primary reason behind drop outs), if a child is threatened by gangs and forced to flee his community, Salvadoran law requires that the child return to their original school to acquire the proper documentation needed to transfer to a new school, further endangering that child.

The number of girls migrating from El Salvador has increased, due to [various factors](#), including the push of violence and displacement, as well as the pull of family reunification. Women and girls face extreme levels of violence on a daily basis in El Salvador, with 61 percent of Salvadoran girls [listing](#) crime, gang threats, and violence as reasons for leaving their home country. Some girls may also be migrating at a younger age to avoid being raped en route to the United States, according to research conducted by UCA.

Many displaced Salvadorans ... do not see an opportunity to fully develop as a person in their home country.

One informal survey indicates that more than 80 percent of Central American women and girl migrants [say](#) they were raped en route when interviewed by shelters after reaching the United States. Many of these women anticipate that they will be raped and attempt to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy with a birth control injection that lasts for three months. But, as Dr. Gaborit points out, “there is no immunization against violence” and the trauma of rape cannot be prevented.

Many Salvadorans seeking protection and security instead end up in [insecure](#) and [dangerous](#) situations along the migrant route, falling prey to

human trafficking, rape, robbery, and organized crime, in addition to human rights violations committed by immigration and security forces in Mexico and the United States.

Since the “surge” of unaccompanied child migrants in 2014, migration from El Salvador hasn’t significantly slowed or stopped. U.S. immigration authorities continue to **apprehend** large numbers of family units and unaccompanied children from El Salvador along the southern border, even though Mexico has ramped up enforcement efforts. Between 2014 and 2015, Mexico’s apprehensions of Central American migrants **increased** by more than 80 percent, from 49,893 to 92,889. Nevertheless, U.S. apprehensions of child and family migrants **remain** at an historic high.

The migration process is complex, prolonged, and often cyclical. Even when apprehended, detained, and deported back to their home country multiple times, most migrants will not be dissuaded from immediately trying again. Returned migrants are **stigmatized** in Salvadoran society and viewed as “delinquents” or “weak” for having been deported back. In addition, smugglers **often** offer migrants package deals – multiple attempts for a fixed price. And if one family member doesn’t make it, that investment can sometimes be transferred to another.

For most returned migrants, there is no choice but to leave again since the original threats still exist. In fact, forthcoming research by social scientist Elizabeth Kennedy **documents** 45 cases of Salvadorans who have been murdered on their return to El Salvador after being deported from the United States.

In spite of these highly concerning issues surrounding returned migrants, in January 2016, the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) **began** “nationwide enforcement operations to take into custody and return at a greater rate adults

who entered this country illegally with children” after May 1, 2014. The **raids targeting** children and families have already **begun** returning vulnerable individuals to the violent conditions they fled.

Almost simultaneously, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry **announced** that the Refugee Admissions Program would be expanded to allow a greater number of Central Americans fleeing violence to be admitted into the United States. In response, activists and human rights defenders have **highlighted** the contradictory messaging in the simultaneous mass deportation of undocumented immigrants in the United States and the screening of potential refugees in their countries of origin.

Shortly after the deportation raids began in the United States, the Salvadoran government **announced** a new Reinsertion Program for Returned Migrants, but it remains to be seen if the services provided will be effective in protecting and reintegrating returned Salvadorans.

**500 to 600 Salvadorans emigrate every day, mainly to the United States without documents.**

The Salvadoran government does not fully recognize forced internal displacement as a major problem facing the country, further exacerbating the problems of displacement and migration. Currently, the state does not document cases of internal displacement and there are few victims’ programs or options for relocation. The government has reacted defensively to ongoing criticism from all sides, and it has denied the problems of internal displacement to avoid the ARENA opposition party’s claims that El Salvador is a failed state.



CONNA  
Consejo Nacional de la Niñez  
y de la Adolescencia

EL SALVADOR  
UNAMOS PARA CRECER



# NO PONGAS EN RIESGO SUS VIDAS



El trayecto a Estados Unidos por tierra y sin visa no es cosa fácil. No expongas a tus hijas e hijos a un viaje lleno de peligros que pueden causarle hasta la muerte.

Para mayor información:  
[ninezmigrante.rree.gob.sv](http://ninezmigrante.rree.gob.sv)

Si has perdido contacto con tu hija, niño o adolescente en ruta a Estados Unidos llama a:

**(503) 2231-2950** El Salvador  
**1-888-30-111-3** Estados Unidos

“Don’t put your life at risk. The journey to the United States by land and without a visa isn’t easy. Don’t expose your daughters and sons to a trip full of dangers that could result in death,” reads a poster commissioned by the Salvadoran government’s National Council for Children and Adolescents (Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y de la Adolescencia, CONNA).

Photo credit: Angelika Albaladejo

The problem of displacement is part of the broader issue of insecurity and it should be incorporated into the Salvadoran government's security strategy. By fully recognizing the problem of internal displacement as a precursor to migration, the Salvadoran government could develop programs and inter-institutional cooperation to address the needs of IDPs and other victims of violence. This will involve strengthening the social fabric in communities by providing education and work opportunities and developing reinsertion programs for returned migrants and former gang members.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized the problem and has [called](#) “on all countries in Central and North America to: Recognize the growing refugee situation in the region; Establish adequate capacity at borders to ensure the identification of persons in need of international protection; and Move swiftly towards a coordinated regional approach to this problem aimed at enhancing access to protection and solutions for refugees and at addressing the root causes of forced displacement.”

To fill the void of inattention and lack of services by the state, Salvadoran civil society organizations [formed](#) the Civil Society Roundtable Against Forced Displacement by Violence and Organized Crime in 2015 with the goal of raising awareness about the severity of the problem of forced displacement, analyzing the current approach to attention to victims, and urging governmental institutions to take action.

In July 2015, the Roundtable [presented](#) the Salvadoran government with a comprehensive [report](#) on displacement issues produced in collaboration with Refugees International. Representatives from the Roundtable also participated in a [hearing](#) before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on October 20, 2015, to [advocate](#) for increased government action to assist citizens

who have been forcibly displaced in El Salvador. In January 2016, the Roundtable released a [detailed report](#) highlighting the issues discussed in the hearing and analyzing extensive data of internal displacement from 2014 to 2015.

Salvadoran civil society organizations argue that the state needs to make a greater effort to understand the factors that place Salvadorans at risk of displacement. Documenting cases of displacement could lead to informed adaptations to existing governmental institutions and programs meant to provide protection services for victims, such as the National Council for Children and Adolescents (CONNA) and the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women (ISDEMU).

“Countries of origin, transit, and destination have a responsibility to respect existing international protocols and refugee protection laws.”

In El Salvador, whole families often flee violence as a group but existing institutions are individually focused on providing services to a specific demographic, for example children or women, but not whole families. To improve protection measures, the government approach must include indirect victims –such as the relatives of a threatened individual– in order to help whole families that are affected.

Overall, “countries of origin, transit, and destination have a responsibility to respect existing international protocols and refugee protection laws and the rights of migrants,” says Dr. Gaborit. “Without that, we get nowhere.”



Activists with the Citizens' Association for the Decriminalization of Abortion outside of the Salvadoran Parliament in San Salvador. The activists protest for the pardon of 17 women the Citizens' Association claims had miscarriages and were wrongly jailed on charges of aggravated homicide.

Photo credit: EFE via La Prensa

## HOW VIOLENCE AFFECTS WOMEN IN EL SALVADOR

The violence gripping El Salvador affects women in a different way than men. Within the current security crisis, gang and security force violence has exacerbated a broader, long-standing acceptance of violence against women. More than half of all Salvadoran women [say](#) they have suffered some form of violence in their lives. Over a quarter of these women were victims of sexual or physical violence.

While men are far more likely to be murdered, women are significantly more likely to experience intrafamilial, sexual, or economic violence. To make matters worse, women receive little to no guarantees of protection from the state. Due to ineffective governmental institutions, corruption,

and social acceptance, impunity [reigns](#) in nearly all cases of violence against women.

At work, many women face discrimination and [abuse](#) ranging from wage and pension theft by business owners to extortion by gangs. More than half of all working Salvadoran women are employed in the [informal sector](#), placing them at higher risk of exploitation and extortion because the state does not regulate these jobs.

Women often face the highest levels of violence in their own homes. In the first nine months of 2015, the Attorney General's [Special Attention Unit for Women](#) attended to [1,283 cases](#) of intrafamilial violence against women. While this represents an average of almost five reports each day, the true number is almost certainly higher as many cases of domestic violence go unreported.



The prevalence of sexual violence against women in El Salvador is also staggering. Between January and August 2015, the National Civilian Police (PNC) registered an average of nearly five cases per day of sexual violence against women, including rape and sexual assault. And victims are often the most vulnerable—more than half of these assaults were carried out against girls, adolescents, and the disabled, as seen in the graph below.

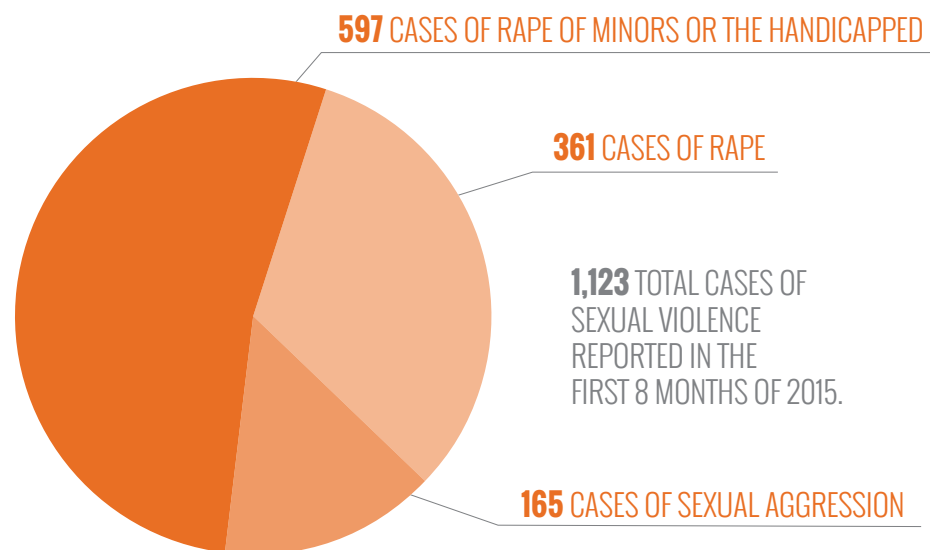
On top of the everyday violence already faced by women, ongoing gang conflict has led to an increase in some of the most heinous acts of violence against women. In the past, sexual violence was primarily committed in the home by a family member. Now however, rape and sexual assault are increasingly committed by gangs and security forces.

Gangs rape and violently murder young girls, or claim them as “*novias de las pandillas*” – “girlfriends” of the gangs. “Women’s bodies were treated like territory during the civil war and continue to be today by the gangs,” says Jeanette Urquilla, the director of the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA). In many gang-controlled neighborhoods, young girls expect they will be raped, abducted, and/or murdered by the gangs. Urquilla says this has led some families to pressure young women to become pregnant with their boyfriends, rather than be claimed by a gang member.

Police officers and soldiers stationed in “*barrios calientes*” –high-violence or gang-controlled neighborhoods—have also been linked to cases of sexual violence. In one case, a 13-year-old girl with

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR cases registered with the National Civil Police (PNC) January through August 2015

Source: Records of cases registered with the National Civil Police (PNC) obtained by the Observatory of Violence Against Women maintained by the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA). <http://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/violenciasexual.php>



Down syndrome was raped by soldiers stationed in her community, according to eyewitness reports from members of a human rights group. In another case, a soldier was **arrested** in February 2016 on charges of abducting, raping, and threatening the life of a young woman.

As “*mano dura*” or heavy-handed policing expands in El Salvador, the targeting of teenage boys suspected of gang affiliation is also having an inadvertent impact on women. Female family members who attempt to protect their male relatives from arrest or harassment are being

**threatened and attacked** themselves. In a recently released **documentary**, a VICE News camera crew captured a raid on the home of a suspected gang member where the women and children were visibly intimidated by the presence of heavily armed security forces entering in the middle of the night.

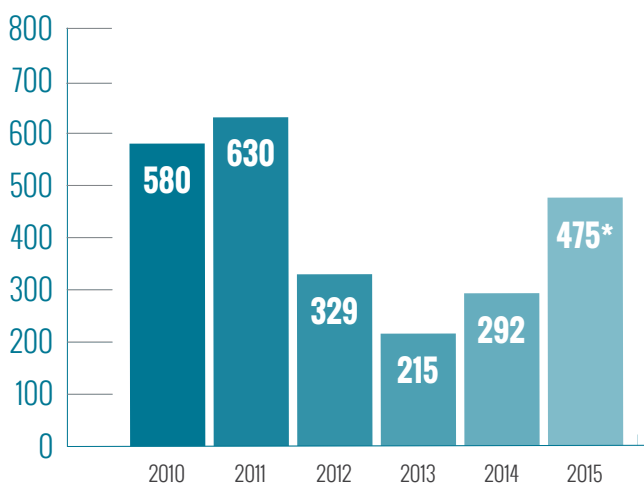
The targeted killing of women based on their gender, known as femicide, is also on the rise. An estimated 2,521 women have been murdered in El Salvador since 2009; this represents an average of 420 femicides each year. And according to the **Observatory of Violence Against Women**, the numbers are escalating. In the first ten months of 2015, 475 women were **murdered** – an average of one femicide every 16 hours, as seen in the graph of femicides per year.

For many reasons, women often don’t report violence. Vanda Pignato, El Salvador’s Secretary of Social Inclusion, **told La Prensa Gráfica** that women stay silent because of “fear, shame, terror, and above all, because they do not trust the judicial system. The judicial system in El Salvador leaves much to be desired on this issue. There is widespread impunity for aggressors and that isn’t a good message for young people and the female victims of violence.”

Even officials within government institutions sometimes commit violence against those they are charged to protect. Patterns of impunity validate this “masculinity” within the institutions, which leads to further violence, **says** a program coordinator for ORMUSA. In 12 percent of the cases of violence against women reported to ORMUSA, the alleged perpetrators were judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police officers. In one **case**, a woman brought charges against her husband, a PNC officer, for firing his weapon and injuring her. The victim later withdrew her testimony, clearing the officer, even though neighbors and other police officers on the scene heard the attack and witnessed her husband dragging her across the floor.

## FEMICIDES PER YEAR IN EL SALVADOR 2010 through October 2015

Source: Data compiled and analyzed by the Observatory of Violence Against Women maintained by the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) and the Institute for Legal Medicine (IML) <http://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/femicidios.php>



\* The Institute for Legal Medicine (IML) has not yet released all data for 2015. This total reflects only the period from January through October 2015.

Note: The IML registers cases of “homicides of women,” rather than using the term “femicides.”

The Salvadoran government has begun to implement some programs and legislation to combat violence against women. But progress has been slow, in part because the violence is perceived as a social problem outside of the government’s realm of responsibility. Nevertheless, some important mechanisms for addressing violence against women have been created in recent years due to the efforts of Salvadoran feminist organizations. In 2010, the Salvadoran legislature passed a set of framework laws —constitutional provisions that lay out general obligations for governmental institutions— known as the “[Comprehensive Special Law for a Life without Violence for Women](#).” Civil society groups drafted this legislation to address violence against women through “prevention, special attention, prosecution and punishment.” However, to date, less than half of all relevant Salvadoran institutions have worked to implement the law.

## Long-standing institutional barriers continue to block access to programs for reporting and escaping violence.

Some of these obligations were codified into law in 2011 with the passage of [legislation](#) that [requires](#) the Attorney General’s office to create “[Special Protection Units](#)” focused on intrafamilial violence, gender-based violence, and discrimination against women. These units are supposed to offer legal representation, accept and investigate reports, provide psychological and social attention during the case, and develop a system for referring cases to government institutions and local gender units. The Attorney General’s office also established “[Self-Help Groups](#)” to give direct assistance to victims within their local community. These groups provide

women with a space to discuss intrafamilial violence and seek help with their cases. Impact studies [indicate](#) that these groups have been successful in empowering women to leave abusive relationships.

To date, the police have rolled out eleven local “[Gender Units](#)” to provide attention to female victims of violence. These special police units are trained with a gender-focused curriculum and collaborate with local women to create “fear maps” pinpointing high-risk areas and the types of violence specific to the community. The Gender Units are meant to use the fear maps to take targeted actions like increasing officer patrols on a dimly lit street where rapes have taken place. While these special police units have had some success, the constant rotation of personnel makes it difficult for officers to build relationships with the local community. Many women don’t even know these units exist due to limited outreach and a lack of public awareness campaigns.

Although these laws and specialized units represent positive steps forward by the Salvadoran government, they haven’t been fully implemented and access to these programs is very limited. These frameworks also fail to address widespread impunity and do not provide adequate protection for those reporting crimes.

Long-standing institutional barriers continue to block access to programs for reporting and escaping violence. For example, there is little to no access to shelters or relocation centers for female victims of violence. The Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women (ISDEMU) provides [temporary assistance](#) for women fleeing domestic abuse, but it is unable to accept entire families, which discourages many victims from seeking help. In addition, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [found](#) that [Supreme Court](#) centers for reporting domestic or intrafamilial violence are ineffective, inaccessible, and discriminatory.

The United States has invested in “multi-institutional assistance centers” for victims of gender-based violence (GBV), which USAID [asserts](#) have “supported efforts to reduce levels of impunity and promote fairness in treatment of GBV survivors.” A sample study of one center showed that of the 99 domestic violence cases received, “all were presented in court and 97 of them resulted in convictions.” While these isolated cases do not reflect an overall change in the [levels](#) of impunity in violent crimes against women, it is possible that such models might merit further investigation.

In addition to insecurity and impunity, the country’s healthcare system has placed women at further risk by stripping them of legal control over their reproductive health. El Salvador has [maintained](#) some of the most [draconian abortion laws](#) in the world for over two decades, criminalizing abortion even in cases of rape or when the pregnancy poses a risk to the mother’s life.

Since abortion and miscarriage were [criminalized](#) in 1998, 129 women have been prosecuted for “homicide,” including women [imprisoned](#) for having a [miscarriage or a stillbirth](#).

The [Citizens’ Association for the Decriminalization of Abortion](#), a prominent organization advocating for changes to El Salvador’s abortion laws, estimates that over 35,000 insecure clandestine abortions have taken place in El Salvador since 1998.

Women’s mental health is also negatively affected by the country’s approach to reproductive healthcare paired with mounting levels of violence. “There’s a correlation between sexual violence and the high rate of suicides among adolescents—that’s the reality,” a Salvadoran health official [told Reuters](#). “Pregnancy is a determining factor behind teenage suicides.”

Suicide is now the [third most common cause of death](#) for pregnant women overall and accounts for

[57 percent](#) of the deaths of pregnant girls between the ages of 10 and 19.

In spite of national and international pressure on the Salvadoran government to revoke these damaging laws and release the unjustly imprisoned women, the Ministry of Health has blocked advances in women’s healthcare. Urquilla says the ministry fears political backlash from religious and conservative groups, as well as the legislature. These conservative views, while strongest in the ARENA party, stretch across party lines and are [shared](#) by some FMLN politicians.

However, El Salvador’s strict anti-abortion laws have been further [called into question](#) with the recent and rapid [spread](#) of the mosquito-borne Zika virus thought to be linked to birth defects. The Salvadoran health minister has [said](#) that from a public health perspective, the total criminalization of abortion is a “true difficulty” that may place women and their babies at risk. However, the Salvadoran legislature has not taken action to change the laws.

The Salvadoran government, in line with several other Latin American countries, has [advised](#) women not to get pregnant until 2018, placing the burden of responsibility on women who [often](#) have little control over their own bodies due to high rates of sexual violence, repressive laws, and a lack of access to reproductive healthcare.

As security conditions in El Salvador worsen, violence against women continues to increase in severity. To address these issues, the Salvadoran government will need to implement existing legislation, expand institutional capacity, increase protection for victims of violence, and perhaps most importantly, work with Salvadoran civil society groups to begin to shift the cultural, social, and economic dynamics currently reinforcing impunity and acceptance of violence against women.



Members of COMCAVIS TRANS participate in a march.

Photo credit: COMCAVIS TRANS, Facebook.

## LGBTI SALVADORANS: WINNING LEGAL ADVANCES BUT FACING UNCHECKED VIOLENCE

After the murder of three transgender activists and the brutal beating of a transgender man, the Salvadoran legislature passed a hate-crime law in September 2015, placing El Salvador among a handful of Latin American nations with such laws to protect LGBTI citizens. The reforms to the legal code increased the sentences of those convicted of killing someone because of their sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, political affiliation or gender. Those convicted of such murders would now face sentences of 30 to 60 years, while those convicted of threatening a person because of the same factors would face 3 to 6 years in jail.

This legal advance, while significant, by itself does not guarantee protections. “For the first time in our history, violence against the LGBTI community has strong penalties. But if the judges don’t apply it, if the police don’t,” the law will be all but meaningless, cautioned Karla Avelar, a transgender human rights defender. And the new law is not retroactive. Some 500 past acts of violence against LGBTI individuals that activist organizations have documented since 1993 would not be covered.

In her hole-in-the-wall office in San Salvador where she directs the dynamic nonprofit [COMCAVIS TRANS](#), Avelar talked to us about the violence facing LGBTI Salvadorans. Violence comes from gang members, from family members, neighbors—and from members of the police.

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Tómenlos, defiéndanlos, promuévanlos.  
entiéndanlos e insistan en ellos.  
nútranlos y enriquezcanlos. . .  
Son lo mejor de nosotros.  
Denles vida.

"Soy Karla Avelar"  
Mujer Trans

Karla Avelar, a transgender human rights defender and director of COMCAVIS TRANS. "Human rights are your rights. Take them, promote them, understand them and insist on them. Nourish and enrich them... They are the best of us."

Photo credit: COMCAVIS TRANS, Facebook.

At least 85 LGBTI persons in El Salvador have been **murdered** between 2008 and 2014, according to the International Human Rights Clinic at the American University Washington College of Law. While all members of the LGBTI community are vulnerable, transgender people are especially at risk. According to Avelar, many transgender people have reported rape, extortion, kidnapping, and torture by the police. "Many of us, when we see police, don't see protection, but rather we feel panic." For LGBTI Salvadorans, reporting a crime is difficult. "Most police see us and label us as thieves, criminals. They don't even see us as valid witnesses."

Security forces were the most often reported source of physical and verbal aggression, at 55 percent, followed by family members at 16 percent in 171

calls received in 2014 by a hotline for the LGBTI community to report incidents of discrimination and violence, according to the State Department's 2014 human rights **report**.

Aldo Alexander Peña, a transgender man working for the Salvadoran capitol police, was **brutally beaten** by members of the National Civilian Police June 27, 2015, after a disagreement with a bus driver. Earlier that same day, he **marched** with his girlfriend in the gay pride parade. He suffered several broken ribs, a skull fracture, and damage to his left eye socket.

"José" **suffered a brutal gang rape** by gang members and a sexual assault by a teacher. But he reported none of his attacks to the police, as he did not trust them to protect him.

Police officers physically and verbally abused a gay adolescent in one 2011 case. As described in an [article](#) published by the [American Bar Association](#), “According to the victim, after abusing the victim, the police made a telephone call and three gang members subsequently appeared and beat the victim unconscious.”

Francela Méndez Rodríguez, a prominent transgender activist, was [murdered](#) by unknown assailants on May 31, 2015 while visiting a friend in the countryside, who was also murdered.

LGBTI organizations such as *Entre Amigos* have received [death threats](#), break-ins of their offices, and attacks on activists that appear to be related to their public advocacy for their rights.

“I have suffered the same,” said Karla Avelar, “I have fourteen bullets in my body. The worst is that our society approves violence against us, including our

own families sometimes. I am forty years old now. I never thought I would live this long. I am truly old.”

These are just a few examples of a deeper problem within El Salvador. To make matters worse, the Attorney General’s office is not vigorously prosecuting these cases and [fails to register](#) attacks against LGBTI persons as hate crimes.

“For the first time in our history, violence against the LGBTI community has strong penalties.”

El Salvador’s official human rights ombudsperson’s office, led by David Morales, does cover abuses against LGBTI persons and urges other government agencies to improve protections. “There is an [absolute](#)

The Solidarity Organization to Boost Human Development (Asociación Solidaria para Impulsar el Desarrollo Humano, ASPIDH) holds a sign reading “We are not dangerous, we are in danger” at a protest in San Salvador.

Photo credit: Sin Etiquetas



**indifference** towards investigating and prosecuting these crimes, which has created a pattern of deliberate impunity that is totally unacceptable,” said Morales. The ombudsperson publicly **urged** the police and Attorney General’s office to “investigate these crimes in an efficient and diligent manner, to see if there is a hate motive towards gender expression or sexual orientation of the victims.”

Some LGBTI Salvadorans have fled the country, seeking asylum in the United States, Costa Rica, and other countries. Neila, a 26-year-old beautician, **fled El Salvador** in December 2015 after a knife attack in which she was stabbed 58 times. “This is all because my gender identity differs from what is traditional,” said Neila to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). She is now in Mexico seeking asylum.

COMCAVIS TRANS has accompanied 60 cases of asylum in the last year, almost all of them for transgender people. According to an analysis published by the American Bar Association, it is challenging for U.S. lawyers to defend asylum for LGBTI asylum seekers fleeing countries like El Salvador where Department of Homeland Security attorneys can argue there have been advances in the legal framework for LGBTI rights, gay pride parades take place, and LGBTI groups openly operate. Asylum lawyers must **argue** that “violence toward the LGBT community persists despite official policies and laws that protect the community,” while “LGBT advocates and those who frequent pride events are at an even higher risk of

harm than those who hide their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

Beyond protection from violence and an end to impunity for these crimes, LGBTI activists in El Salvador are also fighting for an end to discrimination. The Salvadoran government has taken some tentative steps in this direction, but this has yet to result in the sea change needed. In 2010, the Salvadoran government established a **Directorate on Sexual Diversity** in its Secretariat for Social Inclusion to promote an end to discrimination. A positive executive action, decree 56 issued in 2010 by the government of Mauricio Funes, forbids discrimination against LGBTI individuals by public employees. However, this decree fails to include penalties for noncompliance, is not sufficiently included in training of public employees, and does not cover the private sector.

Transgender activists are also fighting for the right to change their names and genders. Lacking this right affects a transgender person’s ability to study, work, and even vote. LGBTI Salvadorans also continue to struggle for adequate health care coverage, and against severe discrimination in the workplace. Marriage equality is still far in the distance.

Although the government has taken some legal steps to protect certain rights for LGBTI citizens, in practice, the laws are often ignored or blatantly violated, leaving the LGBTI community in El Salvador vulnerable to discrimination and brutal violence.





Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén meets with officers during a ceremony turning over weapons and vehicles the National Civil Police (PNC).

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

## EL SALVADOR'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN 2016: CHANGE OR MORE MANO DURA?

El Salvador's mounting security crisis has been met by a heavy-handed government response, which centers on sending the military and police into the streets to outgun the gangs and filling the country's jails with even the lowest-ranking of alleged gang members. Beyond escalating violence and presenting extremely serious human rights concerns, this plan is simply not working. But, as 2016 unfolds, the government has a chance to set a new course and roll out an existing strategy to curb the violence.

Instead of addressing the drivers behind astronomical murder rates, current strategy aims to shoot and arrest the problem away—a well-worn security policy in Latin America known as “*mano*

*dura*,” or “iron fist.” Throughout Latin America it has been well documented that this hardline approach is not only bad for human rights, but does not work in the long run. In neighboring Honduras, the Latin America Working Group and the Center for International Policy's Security Assistance Monitor [documented](#) in 2015 that as the list of abuses committed by militarized police forces continues to grow, “the central problem with this tactic becomes clearer: these soldiers are educated for war, not peace, and putting them on the streets turns each citizen into a potential enemy.” Studies in [Mexico](#) and [Guatemala](#) have also confirmed that relying on soldiers for citizen security for an extended period of time has not sustainably lowered rates of crime and violence. In the case of Guatemala, the United Nations has declared that greater use of the military in public security “has not resulted in visible improvements.”

In El Salvador, [previous bouts](#) of *mano dura* policies, including mass arrests, not only failed to bring down murder rates, but made matters worse. After being incarcerated in the early 2000s, gang members from local criminal groups were able to consolidate due to connections made while imprisoned. They then expanded their operations nationally, giving rise to the country's current security landscape, in which two main gangs [wield exceptional power](#) over territory and murder rates have risen across the country.

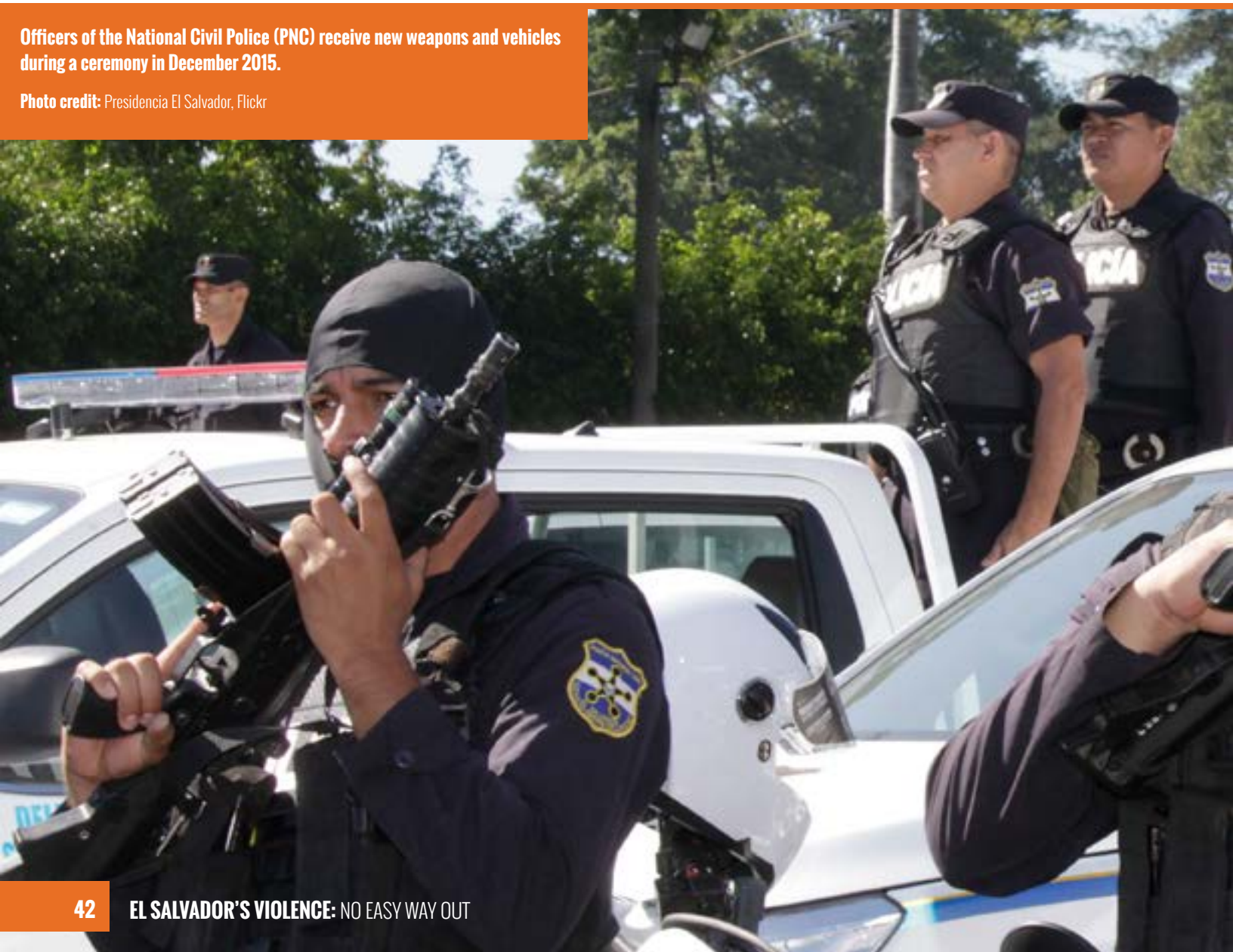
Today's policies might bring about similar adverse effects. As a former colonel in the military warned,

“More repression of the gangs by the state only makes them more sophisticated. Applying the most severe penalties only emboldens the gangs because they are the product of social exclusion and inequality.” A commander in the Salvadoran police force warned of several other problems with the current security strategy:

You can't kill a mosquito with an M-16. The gangs are a moving, growing target. Furthermore, by police being abusive, you've handed part of the community to the gang. You need intelligence to build cases, a strong judicial system and a working prison system. You also need to investigate financial crimes, but only the (now-former) Attorney General's Office can do that, and right now, it won't.

Officers of the National Civil Police (PNC) receive new weapons and vehicles during a ceremony in December 2015.

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr



However, in the early months of 2016, the Salvadoran government appears to be continuing its hardline stance with the claim that the *mano dura* approach will work if given enough time. Vice President Óscar Ortiz recently [said](#), “We’ve never had this level of prosecution and strategy deployed to strike and dismantle crime, like we do now. But it’s going to take some time.”

In conjunction with continued deployments of police and soldiers, lawmakers are proposing hardline legal means to bring down the gangs. There is currently a gang registry law [under debate](#) in Congress, introduced by the right-

wing ARENA party, which would create a list of alleged gang members and their collaborators. Lawmakers say this registry would make it easier for judges to apply harsher sentences to gang members under a law that has newly [defined](#) gang members as terrorists since August 2015. Aside from the potential to escalate violent gang tactics and perpetuate an overall rhetoric of war, police do not often differentiate between gang members, collaborators and those who simply live in gang-controlled neighborhoods, leaving the door open for wrongful imprisonment and creeping mass incarceration rates.



Salvadoran officials are also now [considering using](#) Rio de Janeiro’s controversial [Pacification program](#) as a model to be replicated in Salvadoran neighborhoods. Despite some wins, the program has [failed](#) to provide the lasting security or social services meant to be included in the policy, while thousands of civilians have been killed by police in [extrajudicial killings](#).

Instead of addressing the drivers behind astronomical murder rates, current strategy aims to shoot and arrest the problem away.

The escalation of El Salvador’s *mano dura* security policies, while concerning is unsurprising, given the history behind the country’s use of violent force. An experienced San Salvador-based journalist explained:

This violence isn’t new and has been exacerbated, but not caused, by current policies. In El Salvador, violence has always been seen as valid and the FMLN, once a guerrilla force, has never rejected the use of force. Theoretically, the peace accords in 1992, following the civil war, should have been a rupture with this. And for the first ten years [after the conflict], it seemed that a more inclusive society would be possible. There was dialogue and the police appeared to be moving towards a more professional force, but ultimately, a comprehensive security strategy was never created and the current government is relying on the same types of heavy-handed tactics as governments past, such as the hard, militarized, *mano dura* of President [Francisco] Flores (1999–2004).

Of course, the problem goes much deeper than the use of *mano dura*. El Salvador’s complex security situation is complicated by a number

of other variables, including lack of political will and resources within the justice system to tackle tough cases. Too often, the mentality among public prosecutors appears to be that if someone who is believed to be in a gang or related to one is killed, no investigation is required. Prosecutors also suffer from a lack of training and resources, including DNA testing.

Investigations are also halted by a lack of willingness to report crimes due to fear of retaliation. According to an activist and security analyst who works in gang-controlled neighborhoods in San Salvador, “Stoking people’s fear of reporting crimes is that there is also a fair amount of catch and release, either due to not enough evidence or corruption. People are afraid that if they report and this happens, that people will come after them.”

A lack of witness protection further deepens fears of reporting crimes. As a human rights group investigating extrajudicial executions told us, “witness protection practically does not exist. There is little attention to victims, and no one wants to come forward to speak.” Between the gangs’ looming threat to kill those that speak and the government’s inability to protect them, a culture of silence with regards to corruption and violence has been created. With a new attorney general in place, there is hope that El Salvador’s justice system can make some advances.

Compounding these problems is an overburdened prison system that is [exceeding its capacity](#) by over 320 percent, lacks rehabilitation, and fosters crime. Although prisoners are separated by their gang affiliations, [deadly clashes](#) still occur. A September 2015 [report](#) in the Guardian describes visiting a prison that was “guarded outside by the army, but

inside, the 2,600 inmates [in a prison built for 800] have free run of the squalid facility, because the guards are too scared to enter.”

It is clear El Salvador cannot arrest itself out of its gang problem: in the last year the government has arrested well over 12,000 gang members, but homicide rates remain sky high, as the gangs on the street are a revolving door of marginalized young men. “We can go in and arrest 50 gang members and 50 more will take their places,” Howard Cotto, the [recently-named](#) director of El Salvador’s national police, [told the Associated Press](#).

## ANOTHER WAY FORWARD

While repressive *mano dura* policies continue to drive the country’s security strategy, public statements by Salvadoran government officials indicate an understanding that some change is needed. Speaking at a press conference in late October 2015, Security Minister Benito Lara [recognized](#) that violence in the country is a “deep structural problem” and that any government response will have to combat the drivers of violence, including impunity and lack of opportunity for youth. And, on paper, officials have developed a more balanced approach to security that would address these structural issues more effectively than current policy.

When President Salvador Sánchez Cerén took office, the government went through considerable effort to create a broad security strategy, [Plan El Salvador Seguro](#), with a strong focus on community policing and development. The strategy was developed through extensive consultation with a wide range of mayors, business owners, churches, political parties, journalists, civil society organizations, and other actors. Many of the

organizations we talked with described the plan as comprehensive and well designed.

Plan El Salvador Seguro envisions:

- improving the living conditions in high-crime areas to reduce the occurrence and impact of violence, including increasing job opportunities for youth and improving health services and education;
- making the justice system more effective;
- reducing the influence of criminal groups within the prison system, improving conditions within prisons and expanding rehabilitation programs;
- creating a legal framework and improved services for attention to victims; and
- strengthening government institutions to address crime.

The plan is intended to be applied nationally, but will first be rolled out in ten high-crime municipalities, followed by 50 more. The implementation of the plan will be overseen by a National Council for Citizen Security and Peaceful Coexistence, [established](#) in 2015, which will receive technical support from the United Nations Development Program. However, there is an immediate problem with the plan, as humanitarian workers and journalists told us: the government has rolled out the tough side of the strategy while the holistic approach remains largely on paper.

The plan is [estimated](#) to cost around \$2.1 billion over five years, and as one security analyst told us, “The government is acting like all the money for the good side has to come from beyond the budget. Some funding could come from reorienting existing budget lines. But, there’s a lack of transparency about all of this.”

Even if the Salvadoran government steps up implementation of the comprehensive plan, it will be hard to change the impact of the *mano dura* tactics that have already exacerbated the conflict. “The government is absolutely convinced what they are doing is the right way. They say their strategy is comprehensive, that they will do prevention, reintegration. But even if this is true, after what has happened this year, they can’t overcome this carnage necessarily,” cautioned one investigative journalist. “We will still be living with the terrible consequences of this year.”

Resolving El Salvador’s security crisis is no easy task. But, there can be no hope for change unless policymakers emphasize policies that prioritize: human rights, due process, corruption, investigating and prosecuting all crimes, strengthening communities, building democratic institutions, and making security institutions more accountable, rather than repeating the failed *mano dura* policies of the past. By strengthening the rule of law and creating viable alternative options for youth, the government can begin to recover what it has lost to the gangs.

The existence of Plan El Salvador Seguro shows that a consensus in favor of this shift is slowly emerging, but it has in no way been firmly established.

Given the high violence rates, dialogue with the gangs should not be taken off the table as

a potential option. There were serious issues associated with the truce, such as a lack of transparency and accountability, among several other problems which should be taken into account if crafting discussions. And while it is unclear if the gangs are currently open to dialogue, they [indicated](#) in June 2015 that they would be willing to sit down with the government.

The escalation of El Salvador’s *mano dura* security policies, while concerning, is unsurprising given the history behind the country’s use of force.

In any case, the message of war that the government is sending to the public is dangerous and divisive: either you are for our fight or you are with the gangs. El Salvador is at a critical juncture where there is an opportunity to pave the way for the situation to take a turn for the better. The Salvadoran government should choose the path towards a more balanced and humane approach to confront the severe citizen security situation facing the country.



President Salvador Sánchez Cerén greets officers of an Anti-Gang Unit of the National Civil Police (PNC) in February 2016.

Photo credit: Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

## HOW U.S. POLICY & AID TO EL SALVADOR CAN HELP NOT HURT

The solutions to El Salvador’s security problems are neither easy, nor immediate. It will be a long and difficult road for El Salvador to address the issues at the core of the violence and insecurity ravaging the country. But there are things that can be done to improve conditions in the short term and set the country on a path to see peace and justice. U.S. policies and assistance can be part of the problem or part of the solution.

The Obama administration seems to have recognized that U.S. assistance needs to target the conditions – weak civilian government institutions, lack of opportunity, and corruption – driving insecurity and causing thousands of

children, women, and men to flee in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The recognition of these conditions was a motivating force behind the administration’s \$1 billion aid request to Congress for FY 2016. This request was also intended to support or to complement the [Alliance for Prosperity](#), a development plan put forth by the Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan governments in response to the high levels of migration.

However, civil society organizations in the Northern Triangle and the United States raised [strong concerns](#) about the [proposed plan](#) and the U.S. aid package. While it did call for strengthening institutions and providing opportunity to vulnerable sectors, the most detailed projects appended to the document were

large infrastructure investments. Civil society organizations [worried](#) that without consultation of affected communities and free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous populations as required by international law, these infrastructure projects could lead to unequal development, human rights violations, and displacement. Finally, civil society organizations feared more emphasis on militarized solutions to law enforcement.

In December 2015, Congress more than doubled assistance to Central America for FY2016 through the State Department's [appropriations bill](#), approving up to \$750 million of the president's request. This aid package showed some improvements over recent aid packages to the region, with greater focus on strengthening civilian government institutions, investing in community violence prevention, and providing opportunities to at-risk youth, as opposed to an over-focus on counternarcotics training and equipment.

The Congress also tried to address the concerns regarding infrastructure by specifying that U.S. bilateral assistance for Central America was not to be used for cash transfers or for large infrastructure projects. However, U.S. contributions through multilateral banks could support such projects.

The assistance includes [unusually tough conditions](#), tying 50 percent of the money for central governments to progress on human rights, justice, and corruption issues in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. The conditions also call on the governments to consult broadly with civil society in the development and implementation of the Alliance for Prosperity plans.

Separately, the Congress increased military assistance to Central America via the Defense bill—nearly \$67 million, a full \$30 million more than the Obama administration requested. (See military assistance section below for more detail.)

## WHAT'S IN THE AID PACKAGE?

The U.S. aid approved for Central America this year is likely to be the first installment of an increased aid package for the next five or more years. See page 49 for a breakdown of assistance in the State Department's appropriations bill.

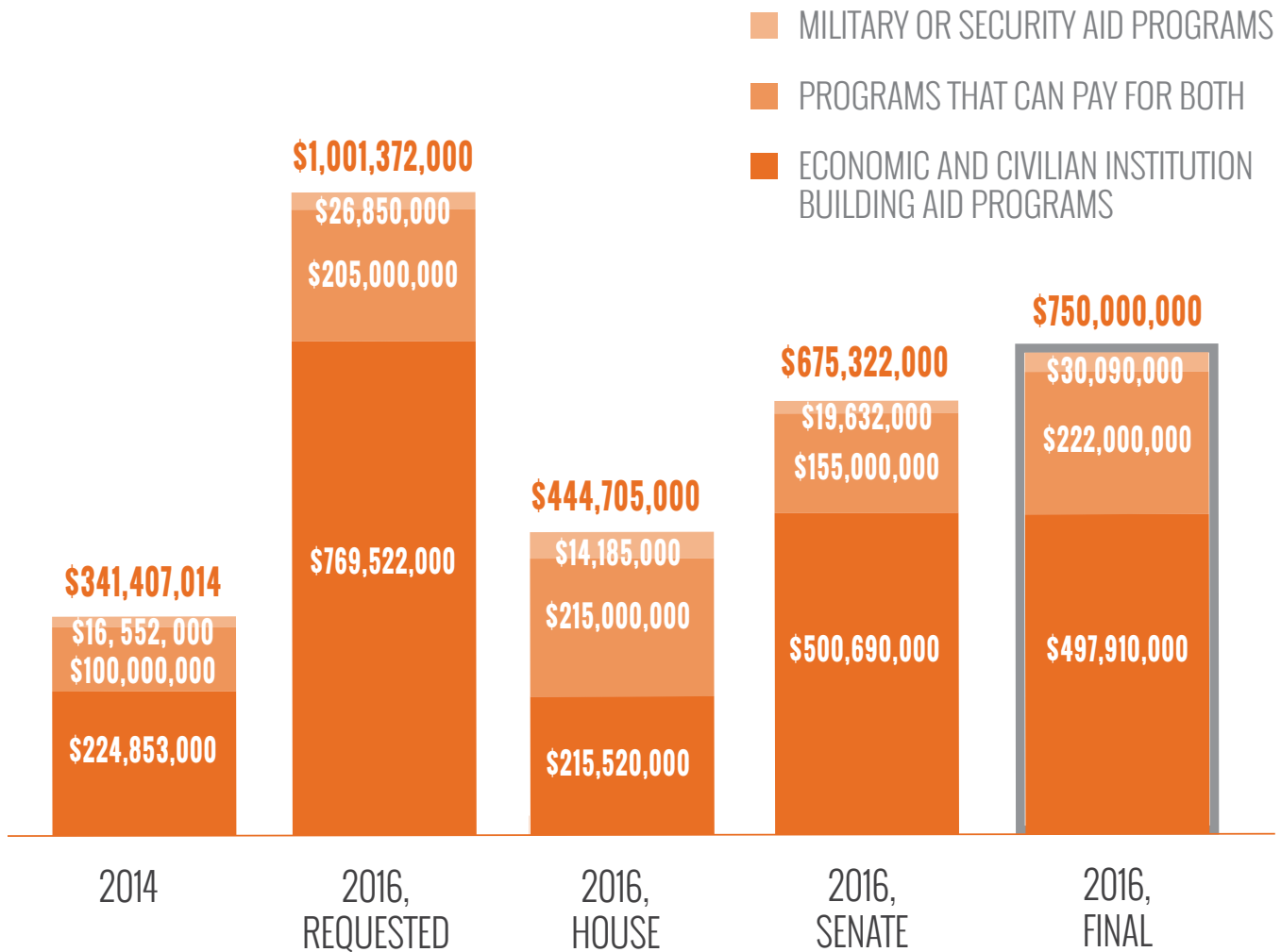
The totals include:

- \$299.4 million through USAID in development assistance programs to help at-risk youth, fund community anti-violence programs, help rural areas affected by drought and coffee blight, and other programs, of which at least \$65 million is directed towards El Salvador. This is represented by the darkest orange in the graph.
- \$183.5 million is provided in the catch-all category of [Economic Support Funds](#) (generally also via USAID) for regional security, "economic opportunity," and "governance and prosperity." This is represented by the darkest orange in the graph.
- \$222 million via [International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement](#) (INCLE). Such funding is usually focused on strengthening law enforcement, border security, counternarcotics efforts, and improving judicial systems. This is represented by the medium orange in the graph.
- \$28.7 million in military training for Central American forces via [Foreign Military Financing](#) (FMF) and [International Military Education and Training](#) (IMET). For El Salvador, this includes \$1.9 million in FMF and \$1 million in IMET. These programs are represented by the lightest orange in the graph.



# CENTRAL AMERICA AID BREAKDOWN, 2014 -2016

Source: Breakdown chart by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) based on compilation and analysis of official U.S. government assistance figures: <https://www.wola.org/analysis/us-increases-central-america-aid-but-its-no-blank-check/>



It is unclear exactly how much El Salvador will receive, as much of the assistance is not broken down by country. So far, we only know that the country is slated to receive \$65 million in [Development Assistance](#) and \$2.9 million in FMF and IMET.

This aid package stands the best chance of making a positive contribution towards El Salvador’s public

security crisis if the human rights, anti-corruption, and civil society consultation conditions are fully enforced; if USAID develops a regular consultation process with a broad range of civil society organizations to provide input into aid implementation and direction; and, if assistance through all U.S. agencies becomes more transparent and is carefully monitored.

## U.S. MILITARY AID TO EL SALVADOR

Military assistance to Central America will also double in FY2016, mainly to step up assistance for counternarcotics operations and border security.

Congress included \$66.8 million—a \$31 million increase over what the Obama administration had requested—on top of the military, counternarcotics, and border enforcement assistance for Central America included in the State Department’s appropriations bill. The defense committees provided this assistance following a [direct appeal](#) by the head of the U.S. Southern Command for additional resources. All told, Central America is set to receive around \$96 million in military support from the United States.

The Defense Department money will support aerial and maritime interdiction capabilities, provide training and equipment, bolster border security and construction at military and police bases, and increase detection and monitoring of illicit trafficking. Violence associated with the international drug trade is relatively limited. Due to this, interviewees indicated that U.S. assistance could likely also support military and police units involved in domestic security.

In FY2013, El Salvador received around \$12 million in DoD assistance, but in FY2014, the last year for which we have country-level data, it received just \$2.6 million. This number surely went up in FY2015, and will be higher for FY2016 and FY2017, given the country’s security crisis and border security plans, which U.S. Southern Command is assisting.

**“Not 1 More Deportation!”** Immigrant rights activists gather in New York City in April 2014 to protest the 2 millionth deportation of an undocumented immigrant by the Obama administration.

Photo credit: Michael Fleshman, Flickr



There are many details that we do not know about U.S. military activities in El Salvador, but the U.S. military has supported several specialized units in the country including Salvadoran Armed Forces Special Operations Groups like the [Hacha Command](#), Joint Task Force Groups meant to combat transnational organized crime like [Joint Task Force Grupo Cuscatlán](#), and internal military units like the [Zeus Command](#) that patrol high violence gang-controlled neighborhoods alongside police.

## OTHER U.S. SECURITY AID

Aside from military units, the United States is supporting a host of other specialized security units in El Salvador, including, but certainly not limited to:

- **Grupo Especial Anti Narcoticos (GEAN)**, a vetted counternarcotics unit within the Anti-Narcotics Division (DAN) of the National Civilian Police (PNC), that works with the Drug Enforcement Administration
- **Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) units**, units supported by INL and led by the FBI targeting criminal gangs.
- **Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIU)**, vetted units managed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), through the Department of Homeland Security, intended to dismantle transnational criminal organizations involved in illicit trafficking, particularly human smuggling.

Other vetted unit programs run through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) throughout Central America, including in El Salvador, aim to counter money laundering and human, drug, firearm, and bulk cash smuggling. The Defense Department sometimes assists in these operations. As has been the case in other countries, vetted

units have had some law enforcement successes, although they rarely have the effect of improving the country's overall security institutions' accountability and divert limited resources away from efforts to improve the entire force. Investigations into these kinds of crimes are important, but the larger security picture must also be kept in mind.

Given the current security landscape, the temptation to throw more firepower at the gangs is understandable. But it has proven counterproductive and deadly for the population at large. Real political and financial investment in community-level solutions and adhering to the steps laid out in the conditions put forth by the U.S. Congress – including reforming police institutions, improving the justice system, and combating corruption – will make a sustainable difference. Ultimately, the security approach must work in tandem with development plans, so that reasonably lucrative and safe alternatives exist, as the cost of engaging in criminal activity theoretically increases due to stepped up law enforcement efforts.

## U.S. RESPONSE TO MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

The response to Central American migrants and refugees arriving to the United States has remained controversial, [contradictory](#), and often heartless. The congressional debate over how to address the rising numbers of Central American migrants has “retreated from possible comprehensive immigration reform in 2013, to more recent piecemeal immigration bills” in the last year, according to a [recent report](#) by the Latin America Working Group.

The Obama administration issued important executive orders that could provide relief from deportation to some four million people, many of them from Central America, but those measures were [blocked](#) by a Supreme Court decision.

Moreover, those measures **do not provide relief** for the children, teenagers, and adults who arrived after January 1, 2014 – and so they do not address many of the unaccompanied children and families fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle. For many Central American families, the fear of deportation has only increased.

The U.S. government has focused on stemming the flow of migrants reaching the United States: through a domestic strategy of “deterrence,” most visible in the detention and fast-track deportation of migrants back to their home countries and by encouraging the Mexican government to apprehend, detain, and deport Central American migrants before they reach the southern border of the United States. In addition, the Congress conditioned 25 percent of aid going to Northern Triangle countries for FY2016 on efforts to increase border security and run campaigns to try and deter migrants from leaving their countries.

The United States established an “**in-country processing program**” in 2014 to allow a small number of families in the United States to apply for asylum for their children in Central America. As of the end of December 2015, a **total of 6,663** asylum applications had been received, 5,797 or 76 percent of these applications were from El Salvador.

The **first six children**, all from El Salvador, were approved to travel legally to the United States under this program in December 2015. In January 2016, the U.S. government also **confirmed** the expansion of the U.S. refugee resettlement program as a mechanism to process and screen Central American refugees in the region, providing refugees with a legal alternative to the dangerous undocumented journey. However, these programs have been slow moving and, even if fully implemented, barely begin to address the protection needs of countless at-risk children, youth, and adults.

The U.S. response to the tens of thousands of children, teenagers, families, and adults arriving to the United States from the Northern Triangle in the last several years does not fully recognize the reality that many are not economic migrants, but refugees fleeing violence.

In light of the escalating violence fueling the humanitarian crisis of refugees fleeing the Northern Triangle countries, human rights organizations and members of the U.S. Congress have **called on** the Obama administration to grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) as part of a much-needed humanitarian relief package.

U.S. deportation policies, as well as U.S. pressure on the Mexican government to increase immigration enforcement, are problematic in terms of respect for international protections for refugees. Deportations from the United States and Mexico of those Central Americans who should have access to asylum also complicates efforts to address public security in the Northern Triangle countries, by putting additional pressure on Central American governments unable to protect their citizens from rampant violence.

## **THE START OF 2016**

Salvadoran security forces’ exclusive heavy-handed approach to internal security has led to an increase in extrajudicial executions, the emergence of vigilante ‘death squads,’ and an overall escalation of violence with the gangs and the population. From our interviews, it did seem that of abuses allegedly committed by official security forces, the police were responsible for the larger percentage of abuses. We also heard reports about the Salvadoran military’s involvement in arms and drug trafficking, disappearances, and excessive use of force on patrols.



**U.S. Vice President Joe Biden during a March 2015 meeting with the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras on the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle of Central America.**

Photo credit: U.S. Embassy Guatemala, Flickr

On March 12, Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Céren made a [statement](#) saying the government will double down on its current security strategy and employ a set of extraordinary measures, which would include deploying more military units onto the streets and increasing controls over prisons to restrict imprisoned gang leaders from effectively operating from behind bars. Government officials also [said](#) they are considering implementing a “state of exception,” which, as InSight Crime [reported](#), would “provide authorities with broad powers to suppress public meetings, restrict freedom of movement, and monitor mail, e-mail, telephone, and social media communications.” It would also allow police to detain people without cause for undefined

periods of time. In April, El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly [approved](#) the decision to declare a “state of exception” in seven Salvadoran prisons. The [measures are meant to](#) “tighten restrictions on prison inmates and halt them from ordering crimes from behind bars.”

The leaders of the country’s three main gang factions – the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Barrio 18 *Revolucionarios* and *Sureños* – allegedly released a [video](#) on March 26 announcing a nationwide halt to homicides committed by their members, an order meant “to demonstrate to the public, the government, and international agencies in our country that there is no need to implement [“state of exception”] measures.” In urging the Salvadoran government to hold off on applying the

proposed measures, the alleged gang spokesperson argued “the government can’t get rid of the gangs, because we are a part of the community in our country.” Salvadoran Police Chief Howard Cotto [stated](#) that there will be “no negotiation of any kind with any criminal structure,” and Presidential Spokesperson Eugenio Chicas [affirmed](#) that the Salvador Sánchez Céren administration “will not grant any truce in the fight against criminals, and will apply the necessary measures to protect the population.” Yet dialogue with all sectors in El Salvador, including gang members, is clearly needed.

The temptation to throw more firepower at the gangs is understandable. But it has proven counterproductive and deadly.

At this difficult moment in El Salvador, increased U.S. assistance has the chance to help or hurt. Through USAID, the United States is planning to invest increased resources to strengthen communities’ social fabric through community violence prevention and other programs. This is positive. At the same time, however, the United States is expanding support to El Salvador’s hardline response to gangs through certain law enforcement and military assistance. This includes support for the “surge” of police with military support into crime-ridden neighborhoods. While this responds to pressure from the Salvadoran public for results in the fight against the gangs, it is concerning as it underwrites an expanded role of the Salvadoran military in law enforcement, a shift that once made will be difficult to turn back.

This more hardline U.S. aid could lead to increased abuses of suspected gang members by Salvadoran security forces, including extrajudicial executions, through the targeting of young men who live in gang-controlled areas—especially when security forces feel pressure to produce results.

U.S. assistance and policy should not go down the path of encouraging a militarized role for law enforcement. Moreover, the U.S. Embassy should encourage investigation and prosecution of suspected extrajudicial executions and other serious abuses, ensure that its diplomacy discourages any “green lights” or incentives for security forces to commit abuses, and expand its contacts and consultation with civil society groups investigating or monitoring abuses. This is how U.S. assistance can help and play a positive role.

When looking at solutions to El Salvador’s violence, there is no easy way out. It is not merely a question of security policy; it is one of improving the quality of education, establishing ties and trust between communities and the state, raising school enrollment, and providing substantive income for a population that currently relies on remittances and the informal sector, among a long list of other needs. This is all very difficult to achieve. But a good place for the government to start would be to listen to its people and be honest and transparent with them about the security situation. The Salvadoran government must hear not only from those calling for war, but from those who see a different way forward, including those who are perpetuating the violence.

Tensions are high and dynamics are complicated, but without dialogue, transparency, and respect for the rights of all citizens, El Salvador will not be able to resolve its security crisis.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY TOWARDS EL SALVADOR

The United States should ensure that its aid and diplomacy towards El Salvador supports a balanced, rights-respecting approach to El Salvador's citizen security crisis.

### U.S. ASSISTANCE SHOULD EMPHASIZE:

- jobs, schools, and programs for at-risk youth, including education that is effectively connected to employment;
- violence prevention, health, and education programs in high-crime communities;
- strengthening the justice system;
- reintegration and rehabilitation programs for ex-gang members;
- strengthening of accountability mechanisms within the military and police; and,
- accompanying aid to these areas with diplomacy to encourage the Salvadoran government to invest in and fully implement the comprehensive strategy developed in Plan El Salvador Seguro.
- USAID should in addition establish a regular consultation process with a broad range of Salvadoran civil society organizations, not limited to its grantees, regarding the direction of U.S. assistance programs.

### U.S. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD ENSURE THE STRATEGY TO SUPPORT CITIZEN SECURITY IN EL SALVADOR:

- does not encourage military forces deployed in law enforcement;

- encourages the strengthening of internal and external controls on the Salvadoran National Police;
- vigorously applies the Leahy Law to exclude those implicated in gross human rights violations from receiving training;
- does not preclude the possibility of careful and transparent dialogue with the gangs; and
- encourages the Salvadoran government to broadly consult civil society organizations regarding measures to address violence, including but not limited to regularly convening the National Council for Citizen Security and Peaceful Coexistence.

### U.S. DIPLOMACY SHOULD SPECIFICALLY SEEK TO STOP ANY INCREASE IN EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE POLICE OR MILITARY BY:

- encouraging the prompt and effective investigation of alleged extrajudicial executions;
- discouraging the development of “green lights” for security forces to commit abuses, whether by statements by high-level public officials or changes to police directives or the penal code to shield officials from investigation;
- urging the government to fully implement any U.S. aid that aims to strengthen internal and external oversight of the security forces; and
- reaching out broadly to civil society organizations that may be documenting such cases, including community organizations in high-crime areas and LGBTI organizations, as well as traditional human rights groups.

## **U.S. POLICY SHOULD ENCOURAGE PROTECTION OF THE LGBTI COMMUNITY, INCLUDING STRONG ATTENTION TO TRANSGENDER WOMEN AND MEN, BY:**

- continuing the positive public statements by the U.S. ambassador and visiting U.S. government officials;
- encouraging investigation and prosecution of key cases of abuse against members of the LGBTI community; and
- funding LGBTI organizations documenting cases and advocating to protect their community.

## **U.S. POLICY SHOULD SUPPORT THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN IN EL SALVADOR BY:**

- encouraging the Salvadoran government to further implement the “Comprehensive Special Law for a Life without Violence for Women” by ensuring proper investigation, prosecution, and punishment in cases of violence against women;
- providing robust support for special attention programs for women victims of violence, including community-based self-help programs and special protection units;
- continuing to fund and consider expanding the USAID multi-institutional assistance centers for victims of gender-based violence aimed at reducing impunity;
- encouraging the Salvadoran government to provide victims’ services within communities, particularly those affected by violence, rather than concentrating services in distant department centers; and

- encouraging the Salvadoran government to develop stronger mechanisms in consultation with civil society for the protection of women human rights defenders and civil society organizations documenting cases of violence against women, providing direct services to victims, and advocating for their communities.

## **THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROTECT INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN EL SALVADOR BY:**

- encouraging the Salvadoran government to recognize the extent of the internal displacement problem;
- providing funding for victims’ protection, including shelters for women and for youth, in addition to victims and witness relocation programs; and
- encouraging the Salvadoran government to consult with the civil society Roundtable on Internal Displacement on policies to aid victims of internal displacement and to prevent displacement.

## **THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD ENSURE THAT ITS IMMIGRATION POLICIES DO NOT EXACERBATE THE VULNERABILITY OF POPULATIONS AT RISK OF VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR BY:**

- implementing the President’s executive actions on immigration;
- fully recognizing the scope of the refugee crisis facing El Salvador, and sufficiently expanding refugee admissions from El Salvador, and ensuring full access to asylum screening;



- funding the UNHCR for its important work on protection in Central America, and protecting migrant rights and access to asylum throughout the migrant route;
- ensuring adequate screening for asylum in the United States and encouraging the Mexican government to do the same;
- encouraging U.S. asylum officers to take into consideration the UNHCR's [eligibility guidelines](#) for assessing the international protection needs of asylum-seekers from El Salvador;
- re-evaluating the eligibility requirements, effectiveness, and operations of the in-country processing program in order to increase reach and improve overall regional child protection;
- supporting well-trained, well-resourced and accountable child protection systems in El Salvador;
- encouraging the Salvadoran government to provide adequate reintegration programs for Salvadoran nationals that have been deported, with consideration of particular needs of children;
- working carefully with Salvadoran officials to make sure they receive adequate advance warning and information regarding criminals deported back to El Salvador;
- consulting with civil society organizations for the design and implementation of the new refugee resettlement program; and
- granting an extension of Temporary Protected Status for Salvadorans in the United States.



**Noé Flores, a representative of Caritas Zacatecoluca, reads a copy of Plan of El Salvador Security during a presentation of the plan to several members of the Municipal Commission on Prevention of Violence.**

**Photo credit:** Presidencia El Salvador, Flickr

# EL SALVADOR'S VIOLENCE: NO EASY WAY OUT

BY SARAH KINOSIAN, ANGELIKA ALBALADEJO, AND LISA HAUGAARD

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