

Escalating Violence in El Salvador

October 22, 2015 (IN10382)

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Gangs in El Salvador

During the first 10 months of 2015, El Salvador, a country with a population of 6.5 million people, recorded nearly 5,500 murders. As with Honduras and Guatemala, El Salvador has been dealing with high homicide levels and generalized crime committed by gangs, drug traffickers, and other criminal groups for decades. El Salvador has the [highest concentration of gang members per capita in Central America](#); as a result, gangs are responsible for a higher percentage of homicides there than in neighboring countries.

The largest and most violent gangs in El Salvador have origins in and ties with the United States. The 18th Street gang was formed in the Rampart section of Los Angeles in the 1960s by Mexican youth who were not accepted into existing Hispanic gangs. The MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha-13*) was created during the 1980s by Salvadorans in Los Angeles who had fled the country's civil conflict. Both gangs later expanded their operations to Central America after many of their leaders were deported to the region in the 1990s.

The homicide rate in El Salvador may exceed [90 per 100,000](#) in 2015, a level of violence—including [massacres and killings of police](#)—not seen since the country's civil conflict (1980-1992). Homicides escalated following the demise of a 2012 truce between the country's two largest gangs that had reduced murder levels. Post-truce, the gangs are more [fragmented and powerful](#). The government has designed a [holistic anti-crime policy](#), but lacks the funds to implement it. In the meantime, it has increased military involvement in anti-gang efforts and deemed gangs terrorists. U.S. security cooperation with El Salvador has increased, but the results have been minimal thus far. Gang-related crimes continue to drive [internal displacement](#) and illegal emigration.

Government Efforts: A Return to *Mano Dura* (Firm Hand) Policies?

From 2003 to 2009, El Salvador pursued aggressive anti-gang policies. Those policies involved incarcerating large numbers of youth for illicit association and increasing sentences for gang membership and related crimes. Delays in the judicial process and massive arrests led to severe prison overcrowding, and the government's lack of internal control allowed prisons to become like ["finishing schools" for gangs](#). Most youth arrested under *mano dura* provisions were later released for lack of evidence. At the same time, gangs and gang tactics became more sophisticated in order to avoid detection and arrests.

The Mauricio Funes Administration (2009-2014), the first leftist government to govern El Salvador, adopted a more holistic approach for dealing with gangs that involved prevention and rehabilitation, but ultimately failed to

substantially reduce crime rates. Under pressure over his failure to quickly decrease violence, President Funes appointed his defense minister as head of public security in 2011. With the minister's approval, top gang leaders were transferred from maximum security prisons to less secure facilities in March 2012 to "facilitate" a truce between the gangs. Between the time the prison transfers took place and May 2013, homicide rates declined dramatically. [While some praised the truce, many, including U.S. officials, expressed skepticism](#). During the truce, disappearances increased and extortions continued, while gangs gained [media attention and political power](#). By 2014, murders had risen and the Funes government disavowed the truce.

After a narrow victory, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén took office in June 2014, inheriting a security crisis with few resources and without a legislative majority. The government formed a broad-based National Council for Citizen Security that designed an integrated security plan that is being launched in 10 of the most violent municipalities this year. Nevertheless, it has been [unable to convince the Legislative Assembly to fund the plan](#) through new taxes or loans. Many observers maintain that Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander who is facing serious health challenges, has failed to demonstrate the leadership necessary to address El Salvador's deteriorating security situation.

At the same time, President Sánchez Cerén has refused to negotiate with the gangs, returned gang leaders involved in the aforementioned truce to maximum security prisons, and mobilized three military battalions to bolster anti-gang operations run by the police. In August, the Supreme Court declared that gangs, which had recently carried out a massive bus strike and used grenades against government installations, [could be charged with terrorism](#). Human rights groups have warned the Salvadoran government that these policies could [exacerbate human rights abuses](#) committed by the country's underpaid and ill-trained security forces. [Extrajudicial killings](#) of suspected gang members have occurred.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Escalating violence in El Salvador and the ongoing political polarization in the country have inhibited the success of U.S. and Salvadoran efforts to improve security and bolster growth and investment under the [Partnership for Growth \(PFG\)](#) that began in 2011. This year, U.S. law enforcement and prevention programs have begun to be co-located through a "[place-based approach](#)" in the same cities that the Salvadoran government has prioritized. Some argue that increased U.S. assistance for El Salvador (and Guatemala and Honduras) through the [Alliance for Prosperity plan](#) (a regional proposal for economic, public safety, human capital, and governance programs) could help improve security conditions by enabling the expansion of U.S. programs. However, others remain skeptical, given the degree of the challenges those governments face and the corruption they have exhibited (see CRS Insight IN10237, [President Obama's \\$1 Billion Foreign Aid Request for Central America](#)).

On the one hand, El Salvador has drafted a solid security plan with help from international donors and created a multi-sectoral Alliance for Prosperity Consultative Group to help oversee its implementation. That group includes U.S. officials, as well as at least six Salvadoran ministries, a mayoral representative, the local chapter of Transparency International, and the private sector. El Salvador is also receiving U.S. economic support through a \$277 million [Millennium Challenge Corporation compact](#). On the other hand, El Salvador is the only country in the so-called "northern triangle" of Central America where violence is trending upward. The U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador has called upon the Sánchez Cerén Administration and the Legislative Assembly to [exhibit leadership and work together](#) to tackle the country's security challenges. Without a united effort, it could be difficult to stop the escalating violence.

See also CRS Report R43616, [El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations](#).