

I chose to include my essay “The Violent Reality in El Salvador” because it represents one of the most impactful learning experiences I had during the ISS program. I was able to carefully analyze the many aspects of gang violence in this essay, including how it impacts not just individuals but also entire communities, economies, and political systems. Through examining the historical roots, social consequences, and economic disruptions, as well as the political challenges and government responses, I developed a more comprehensive understanding of how security issues are interconnected. What makes this essay particularly special to me is its connection to my own background. As someone from Mexico, I found the situation in El Salvador strikingly similar to the violence and insecurity we face in my home country. This piece reflects my passion for advocating for human security and highlights my commitment to addressing the underlying causes of violence and instability in vulnerable regions.

## The Violent Reality in El Salvador

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### **Introduction**

Despite being the smallest country in Central America, and being even smaller than the state of Massachusetts, El Salvador had the highest murder rate in the world in 2009 with 71 homicides per 100,000 people. Then again at a rate that this century had never seen before, in 2015 with 103 homicides per 100,000 people, it beat its record.

The problem of gang violence in El Salvador dates back to the 1990s. Firstly, the US had started to deport Salvadorian gang members from Los Angeles during the civil war to El Salvador.

Then, the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 ended the war. However, the purpose of these agreements was to allow the guerrillas to become part of a democracy, not to make the nation a peaceful place or reconstruct the economy or society (Martinez, 2016). Thousands of criminals entered El Salvador postwar, which was characterized by a weak state and economy, and very complex social circumstances. Since there were no government services of any kind, young people were left to live in abandonment, which facilitated the growth of a predatory mentality that made extortion and killing easy. Gangs began to multiply and behave criminally, primarily through extortion (Garsd, 2015).

The situation at hand demonstrates the intricate and widespread effects of gang violence in El Salvador, which affect not just individuals but also communities, the government, and the economy.

### **Social Impact**

There are 262 communities in El Salvador, and 94% of them have maras operating, including the notorious MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha. Not only do gangs pose a constant threat to public safety in many of these "red zones," but they also hold a de facto authority that greatly influences the day-to-day activities of the local population. Many Salvadorans fear going to public spaces and even crossing the street. Many of San Salvador's streets are empty after the evening due to the majority of the maras' killings occurring throughout the night.

Furthermore, homes in areas deemed "strategic" are frequently taken over by gangs and converted into "crazy houses," or casas locas. All members of a family are threatened if they choose not to leave. The casas locas are hangouts for gang members where they consume alcohol, smoke, and execute ceremonial initiation of new members. Additionally, they might bring local girls and women there to be sexually assaulted (Martinez, 2018).

Gangs in El Salvador exert widespread control, instilling fear and trauma within communities. As a result, families have no choice but to leave their homes and seek safety elsewhere. The fear of being killed for doing nothing more than running errands, going to school, or going to work is a daily terror in the neighborhood.

An especially vulnerable sector of the population is the youth. The majority of homicide victims—who range in age from 15 to 29—are young men from impoverished urban neighborhoods, making up over 50% of the total. High rates of poverty, inequality, underemployment, school dropouts, dysfunctional family structures, easy access to weapons, alcohol, and illegal drugs, and finally local gang structures and organized crime are some of the risk factors that contribute to El Salvador's high rates of youth violence and crime. An estimated 20,000 to 35,000 young Salvadorans are reported to be members of youth gangs, or "maras"; the average age of a member is 20, and the average age of membership is 15.

Furthermore, youths have a high degree of skepticism and resignation toward the government and its institutions as a result of the government's repressive strategies in combating youth violence (OECD, 2024). This supports the theory that people in Latin America are "recovering authoritarians." Control is given precedence by the government over resolving the societal problems that fuel crime. It supports the notion that authoritarian tendencies persist and undermine faith in democratic institutions, leading to mistrust between youth and the government. This makes it more difficult to establish a society that is democratic and inclusive (Brysk, 2003).

### **Economic Impact**

In El Salvador, gang activity hinders people's ability to earn a living in two basic ways.

Resources aren't used as effectively since it first limits the amount of work and business that can be completed. Second, it makes people spend more money on coping with the financial fallout from crime. These consequences hurt the nation's economy (Amaya, 2022).

In addition, extortion targeting local businesses is an especially serious problem. Older gang members, known as mareros, visit each store and vendor's stall in the neighborhood market at least once a week to collect “renta”, or protection money, from business owners who are unable to pay for their own security personnel. Once more, the majority of store owners pay, as it is a dying wish to oppose the gangs (Martinez, 2018).

Moreover, tourism and investment have been greatly affected by gang violence. With its “most dangerous place in the world” reputation, El Salvador’s tourism and private investment department deteriorated (Lugo, 2015). However, it makes sense that these departments suffered since even its citizens feel the need to leave the country for safety and economic opportunities. It is advised for tourists to be extremely cautious because the threat of violence still exists and

increases at night even though the State of Exception has decreased the rate of violent and gang-related crime (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023).

Despite a decline in homicide rates in El Salvador, violence continues to have a significant negative economic impact on the area. The majority of people in El Salvador continue to view violence and insecurity as one of the biggest issues, according to statistics from the country's most recent victimization and security perception polls. Thus, violence costs El Salvador \$3,727.7 million a year (13.86% of the country's GDP) in terms of medical costs, institutional and legal fees, lost productivity, absenteeism from work, investment leakage, and material losses (UNDP, 2022).

### **Political and Governance Impact**

Gang violence influences El Salvador beyond its social and economic ramifications. Gang infiltration of political institutions has resulted in governance being compromised and corruption occurring. This has resulted in a complex climate where violations of human rights are common, especially when combined with the difficulties facing law enforcement.

Significant concerns include claims of gang-related and other unlawful killings, forced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests and detentions by the PNC and military personnel. Despite government efforts to remove and prosecute abusers in the security forces, executive branch, and legal system, impunity remained (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2019).

Moreover, law enforcement officers who carry out their duties and search for criminal suspects often face consequences themselves. Fearing that members of gangs may target them and their families, police officers always wear a balaclava that covers their faces, known as a “gorro navarone” (Martinez, 2018).

In addition, organized criminal elements were major perpetrators of violent crimes, engaging in murder, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, intimidation, and other forms of violence and threats against police and judicial authorities. These groups included both local and transnational gangs, as well as illegal drug traffickers (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2019).

This brings attention to how widespread corruption and poor governance are in Latin American nations, similar to the police behavior and corruption in Guerrero, Mexico. Due to inadequate working conditions and resource scarcity, police personnel in Guerrero frequently enter into agreements with criminal organizations in order to stay out of trouble and to safeguard their families and themselves. This has created a loop of corruption, cooperation between law enforcement and criminals, and abuse of power (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Similar effects of gang violence on political institutions have been seen in El Salvador, where corruption and poor governance have resulted. These institutions have seen power abuses and violations of human rights as a result of gang infiltration. Security forces have to work with criminals or fear their families are targeted.

### **International Factors**

Organized crime and drug trafficking often go together, and organized crime in El Salvador is not the exception. The United States has the world's largest market for illicit drugs, the total market being \$150-\$300 billion per year (Cyr, 2024). Drug trafficking appears to be the best option for putting food on people's tables in a place where the economy is struggling, young people are searching for ways to generate money, and gangs rule the territory.

El Salvador is still a major hub for the transportation of illegal drugs from South American source nations into the United States. Trafficking of people, weapons, and drugs all pass through

El Salvador with the help of the protection offered by its criminal networks. According to the President's 2015 report to Congress on key Illicit Drug Producing and Drug Transit Countries, El Salvador has been designated as a key transit country for five years running (US Department of State, 2017).

### **Responses and Solutions**

The Salvadoran government responded in the 2000s with a strategy known as *mano dura* (iron fist), which included mass incarceration, harsher sentencing guidelines, and repressive police methods. Many experts do point out that there were significant drawbacks, as overcrowded prisons turned into centers for gang recruitment and training. The number of homicides increased further, more than tripling from 1999 to 2009.

Then, President Mauricio Funes adopted an alternative strategy. He mediated a contentious gang truce in 2012 that resulted in a decrease in violence. However, when turf disputes intensified in 2014, the truce broke down, leading to the 2015 record of homicides in the world.

Starting in 2016, the murder rate started to decline, and by the time Bukele took office in 2019, it had reached its lowest point in 20 years. Bukele had allegedly followed Funes' example by negotiating with gang leaders, purportedly providing them prison benefits in return for further reducing violence and boosting party turnout (Roy, 2022).

Afterwards, on March 27, 2022, President Bukele issued a nationwide state of exception declaration. In line with this, Salvadoran legislation changed the criminal code, suspending civil freedoms, permitting arbitrary mass detentions, and leading to multiple reports of violations of human rights. Salvadoran police do not explain to detainees or their relatives why they are being held, and they frequently refuse to provide arrest warrants.

Many Salvadorans strongly contend that by eliminating violent crime, President Bukele's drastic actions provided El Salvador with much-needed relief. After making almost 22,000 arrests, Bukele had an 87% approval rating by May 2022. State of exception proponents believe that to fight gangs, extremely harsh measures must be taken, even if doing so means breaking international human rights laws in order to maintain social order (Reyes, 2024).

This has brought several benefits such as more tourists visiting the country now after many years in the red. Over 3 million foreign visitors visited the nation in 2023, bringing with them a sense of renewed prosperity and energy from the United States, Canada, Guatemala, Honduras, and a few other European, Asian, and Latin American countries. They predict 3.8 million visits in 2024, which translates to roughly \$3.8 billion in foreign exchange and represents a 19% increase. Additionally, El Salvador is positioning and promoting itself for 2024 in an effort to draw investment and improve the spaces it offers its guests (Quartucci, 2024).

On the other hand, critics of both *Mano Dura* and the criminal code revisions have called for a more compassionate approach to the issue of gang violence. The UNHR acknowledges the difficulties caused by El Salvador's gang violence and the obligation of the State to maintain law and order. Yet, it argues that doing it following international human rights legislation is crucial (Throssell, 2022).

Throughout El Salvador's history, leaders have addressed gang violence through repression and negotiation with gang leaders. However, community-based approaches play a very important role in addressing gang violence providing all-encompassing solutions that help with prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration while addressing the underlying reasons of gang involvement. Collaboration between governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be necessary.



Prevention programs that address the root causes of gang involvement are vital to address this issue. These should focus on the lack of education, poverty, and limited possibilities. They frequently consist of community service projects, adolescent mentoring programs, and educational campaigns that support constructive alternatives to joining gangs.

Furthermore, rehab programs provide a way out of gang life for those who are already members of one. These programs assist people in creating new lives free from gang affiliation by offering therapy, education, and job training.

Finally, reintegration programs are intended to assist those who are reentering society after leaving gangs. These initiatives help people find homes, jobs, and educational possibilities. To guarantee successful reintegration and prevent a relapse into gang involvement, continued support and supervision should also be provided.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, gang violence impacts El Salvador in a variety of ways, affecting individuals, society, the economy, and the political system. El Salvador may see some short-term gains from the extreme *mano dura* strategy, but for the country to flourish moving forward, the government needs to deal with the root causes of gang violence. El Salvador faced severe gang violence in the past, and while the *mano dura* approach was seen as a necessary, though extreme, response, the country is now much safer. Given this improvement, the state of exception and harsh, repressive policies should no longer be needed. Suspects and offenders must be treated fairly through due process, rather than subjected to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. It is unjust for innocent people to be detained without cause or explanation, and this practice should be ended.

Since a great number of El Salvador's youth are involved in the country's difficulties, it is even more crucial to address their issues. The youth represent every nation's future, therefore investing in them now will pay off in the long run.

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