

# Escalating Violence in El Salvador

January 7, 2016 (IN10382)

---

—|

## Related Author

---

- [Clare Ribando Seelke](#)

—|

---

Clare Ribando Seelke, Specialist in Latin American Affairs ([cseelke@crs.loc.gov](mailto:cseelke@crs.loc.gov), 7-5229)

---

During 2015, El Salvador, a country with a population of 6.5 million people, recorded some 6,657 murders. As a result, El Salvador probably posted the world's highest homicide rate, an alarming [104 per 100,000 people](#), last year. 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 Guatemala and Honduras. The current level and type of violence that El Salvador has experienced—including [massacres, killings of police](#) and [their families](#), and [extrajudicial killings of suspected gang members](#)—rivals the worst periods of the country's civil conflict (1980-1992).

## Gangs in El Salvador

The largest and most violent gangs in El Salvador have origins in and ties with the United States. The 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang was formed in 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. Gang cliques (*clicas*) in El Salvador have [maintained ties with gangs in the United States](#), particularly in the Los Angeles and Washington, DC, metro areas.

Although El Salvador has struggled with gang-related violence for many years, homicides have escalated since the demise of a 2012-2013 truce between the country's two largest gangs. Post-truce, the gangs are more [fragmented and powerful](#). Gangs have increasingly become involved in extortion; kidnapping; and drug, auto, and weapons smuggling. Gangs have extorted millions of dollars from residents, bus drivers, and businesses. Failure to pay often results in harassment or violence. In July 2015, gang threats prompted a [three-day shutdown of San Salvador's bus system](#). 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 an

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 begun to rise, 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 National Council for Citizen Security that designed an integrated "[El Salvador Seguro](#) (Secure)" security plan that is being launched in 10 of the most violent municipalities and includes proposed legislation to create reinsertion programs for gang members who have not committed violent crimes. The plan forms part of a regional [Alliance for Prosperity plan](#) put forth by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to reduce emigration by promoting development and the rule of law. El Salvador's legislature has [approved a new tax](#) and \$100 million in loans to support the security plan; however, its implementation will likely require additional taxes and loans. Consensus on those funding mechanisms has been difficult to achieve.

In the meantime, President Sánchez Cerén has taken a [tough anti-gang approach that has yet to yield positive results](#). His government 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, El Salvador's 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.

### 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 \(PEG\)](#) that began in 2011. U.S. law enforcement and prevention programs funded through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) have begun to be co-located through a "[place-based approach](#)" in the same cities that the Salvadoran government has prioritized (see CRS Report R41731, [Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress](#)). Those programs could potentially be scaled up using funds provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 ([P.L. 114-113](#)).

The act provides "up to" \$750 million to implement the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#) that supports the Alliance for Prosperity. This includes up to \$68 million for El Salvador and \$349 million for CARSI. The act places a number of conditions on the assistance, however, requiring the Salvadoran government (as well as the governments of Guatemala and Honduras) to take steps to improve border security, combat corruption, increase revenues, and address human rights concerns, among other actions (see CRS Insight IN10237, [President Obama's \\$1 Billion Foreign Aid Request for Central America](#)).

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. El Salvador is also receiving U.S. economic support through a \$277 million [Millennium Challenge Corporation compact](#). Nevertheless, 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 [work together](#) to tackle the country's security challenges.

On January 5, 2016, the Legislative Assembly elected Douglas Arquímides Meléndez to serve a three-year term as El Salvador's attorney general. Meléndez, a consensus candidate who received nearly unanimous support, is a career prosecutor with experience in handling corruption cases who could play a decisive role in El Salvador's efforts to

combat impunity. He will inherit an attorney general's office that has been plagued with problems and thus far [resisted offers to partner with an external entity to combat corruption and reduce impunity](#) as neighboring Guatemala and Honduras have done.

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