



El Salvador 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, El Salvador.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses El Salvador at Level 3, indicating travelers should reconsider travel to the country due to crime.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

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Review OSAC's [El Salvador-specific page](#) for original OSAC reporting, consular messages, and contact information, some of which may be available only to private-sector representatives with an OSAC password.

Crime Threats

There is serious risk from crime in San Salvador. El Salvador is the most densely populated country in Central America, with more than six million people living in an area the size of Massachusetts, high unemployment and generally low wages, and comparatively high housing costs. Some of these factors push families in lower economic status into marginal housing zones. These zones, located throughout urban areas, including in upscale neighborhoods, provide a point of origin and safe haven for criminals.

Crime can run the gamut from credit card skimming to homicide, and is characterized by violence directed against known targeted victims and targets of opportunity. No information suggests that criminals specifically target U.S. citizens. The threat of violent crime in El Salvador leads to the curtailment of recreational opportunities. Crimes of every type occur routinely.

Property crimes (e.g. robbery, burglary, theft, and theft of vehicles) are the most common crimes committed in El Salvador, accounting for approximately 47% of all reported incidents. Of these, simple theft, including burglary, accounted for 28% of all reported property crimes. Armed robberies accounted for 14% of all reported property crimes. Burglaries during daylight hours occur in residential neighborhoods throughout San Salvador. At times, individuals pose as deliverymen or police officers in order to gain access to a home. Cameras, concertina wire, and grilles on all windows/doors appear to dissuade some would-be burglars; residences without these features are targets of crime more frequently. The presence of armed security and the use of security features in homes have proven successful in combating home invasion. Most theft cases reported to the Embassy involve the loss of a U.S. passport during a surreptitious theft of bags, backpacks, or purses.

Crimes against the person (e.g. assault, homicide, rape, and sexual assault) accounted for 38% of all reported crime incidents in 2018. Of these, physical assaults including domestic violence accounted for 15%. Rapes accounted for 9% of all reported crimes against the person. There were 2,203 rape cases reported to the police in 2018, up 8% from 2017. Although the homicide rate has consistently declined since 2015's high of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador continues to have the highest homicide rate in Latin America. Since 2015, the per-capita annual homicide rate has fallen to 81/100,000 in 2016, 60/100,000 in 2017, and 50/100,000 in 2018. Homicides accounted for 14% of all reported crime incidents in El Salvador in 2018. Females accounted for 11% of all homicide victims in 2018.

Homicides are not uniform across the country. In 2018, the municipalities of San Salvador (13%), San Miguel (8%), Mejicanos (7%), Soyapango (6%), and Apopa (6%) were the top five municipalities as a percentage of all homicides. Together, the five municipalities registered 40% of crime, but only 22% of the country's population.

Violent, well-armed street gangs — 18th Street (*Barrio 18*) and MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha*) being the largest — are dispersed throughout El Salvador. They concentrate on street-level drug sales, extortion, arms trafficking, murder for hire, carjacking, and aggravated street crime. Recognizing the threat posed by MS-13, the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [designated](#) MS-13 a Transnational Criminal Organization in its list of Specially Designated Nationals.

Extortion continues to be a common and lucrative criminal enterprise in El Salvador. In 2018, victims filed 1,628 complaints, slightly up from 2017's 1,588 cases. In 2017, the National Police launched an anti-extortion call center for victims and witnesses to anonymously report extortion, which may account for the slight increase in complaints.

El Salvador has concerns regarding ATM/credit card crime, including at well-known restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and retailers. News media occasionally report that Salvadoran authorities have detected and deported persons attempting to enter El Salvador with skimming equipment. For more information, review OSAC's report, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#).

Other Areas of Concern

Avoid isolated stretches of beaches all along the coast of El Salvador at all times. Monitored beach areas at clubs and public access beaches are less vulnerable to crime.

In late 2017, the police reported at least three instances of armed robberies of restaurants in San Salvador's Colonia Escalon. These cases took place next to residential areas known for their affluence. Many restaurants and business owners hire private security for their premises; this has the tendency to deter most petty crime and spontaneous robberies. There were no published incidents of restaurant assault in 2018.

Transportation-Safety Situation

For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Security in Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Road Safety and Road Conditions

A significant percentage of vehicles are in disrepair, underpowered, beyond their service life, or otherwise do not meet U.S. road safety standards. Passing on blind corners and over hills is common. Driving while intoxicated is common and is a major contributing factor to traffic accident fatalities. Due to lax enforcement of traffic laws, drivers must drive defensively.

Road conditions in urban areas are generally fair; rural area conditions are poor. Likewise, road lighting in urban areas is generally fair, but generally non-existent on roads and highways outside urbanized areas. In urban and rural areas alike, stray animals, unwary pedestrians and bicyclists, and numerous large potholes (or missing manhole covers) make driving particularly dangerous and hazardous at night.

Complete travel outside of cities and to Guatemala or Honduras during daylight hours and, if possible, with convoys for safety. Refrain from driving outside the capital after dark, for personal security and traffic safety reasons. In 2017, there were 1,244 deaths due to traffic accidents; 1,312 occurred in 2018.

For more information on self-driving, review OSAC's report, [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Public Transportation Conditions

Avoid public transportation, especially local buses. Public buses are often in poor mechanical condition. News media regularly carry reports of riders robbed at stops or while on the bus. Regional "first class" or "executive" commercial bus travel is generally safe, although robberies have occurred in neighboring countries. Minibus, bus, and taxi drivers commonly disregard traffic rules.

Privately owned cabs are unregulated. Use only taxis you can call via telephone or that you find at major reputable hotels. Uber operates in San Salvador.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has assessed the government's Civil Aviation Authority as compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of El Salvador's air carrier operations.

Other Travel Conditions

The CA-4 agreement between El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua allows for inspection-free travel of citizens of these countries using only an identification card, and may contribute to the ease of regional criminal travel.

Terrorism Threat

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is minimal risk from terrorism in San Salvador. No known international terrorist groups operate in El Salvador. El Salvador does not appear to be a terrorist safe haven. There were no legal cases involving instances of terrorism affecting U.S. citizens or facilities brought before the judicial system in 2018, nor were there any judicial developments that would appear to have a significant impact on U.S. counter-terrorism efforts.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is moderate risk from civil unrest in San Salvador. Public protests and strikes against the government, generally by government employees, are common. Most demonstrations concentrate in/around city centers or public buildings and other public areas. Although usually non-violent, these public displays sometimes create security problems and impede traffic.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

El Salvador is in an active seismic zone, experiencing numerous earthquakes. El Salvador suffers a major earthquake approximately every 10 years. Seismic tremors of a magnitude of approximately 5.0 occur on a regular basis, usually causing little damage. There are close to 2,000 tremors in the country per year. In 2014, a 7.4-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast, causing moderate damage and killing one person.

There are approximately twenty active volcanoes in El Salvador.

While direct hits by hurricanes occur less frequently, they are a concern. Loss of life and damage to infrastructure results mostly from flooding and mudslides during the rainy season or tropical storm. During the rainy season (May-October), heavy and persistent storms can cause landslides, topple trees/power lines, and wash away roads and bridges. In October 2018, heavy rains forced the government to close schools nationwide for several days.

For more information, review OSAC's report, [Central America Natural Disaster Emergency Planning: OSAC Guidance and Resources](#).

Economic Concerns

El Salvador has revised several of its laws to comply with CAFTA-DR's provisions on intellectual property rights (IPR), and has a National Intellectual Property Policy that recognizes IPR protection as a key element for the economy's development and competitiveness. The policy specifically addresses geographical indications (GIs), with an eye toward the promotion of Salvadoran products. The EU is also trying to promote GIs as part of its trade agreement with Central American countries.

The Attorney General's Office and the National Civilian Police enforce trademark and IPR by conducting raids against distributors and manufacturers of pirated goods. Salvadoran law authorizes the seizure, forfeiture, and destruction of counterfeit and pirated goods and the equipment used to produce them. It also allows authorities to initiate raids ex officio. Piracy is punishable by a jail sentence of 2-6 years. As a practical matter, however, the Attorney General's Office lacks a trained team of IPR investigators and prosecutors, and, in a country with limited resources and a high crime rate, IPR cases do not receive a high priority. The judiciary, due to the lack of familiarity with IPR issues and inconsistent enforcement, continues to be the weak link in IPR protection; using the courts to seek redress for IPR violations is often a slow and frustrating process. Despite growing recognition of the importance of IPR, the piracy of all types of media, clothes, pharmaceuticals, and software, along with inadequate enforcement of cable broadcast rights, remain ongoing concerns.

El Salvador is not on the Special 301 Watch List or the notorious market report. Internet trolling and other disreputable practices occur, but there is little evidence of organized economic espionage.

Privacy Concerns

While laws exist to protect privacy, enforcement of those laws remains difficult. The release of personal and medical information over the phone, by email, or in person is a common practice. There are few incidents of identity theft. Consequently, it is common for Salvadorans to include their photo, national ID number, date of birth, address, and other personal information on resumes and other documents.

Personal Identity Concerns

There is negative sentiment toward individuals who identify as LGBTI. Members of the LGBTI community engaged in sexual work or gang activity are at the highest risk of victimization. In 2018, the Government of El Salvador commissioned the National Division for the Protection of Women, Children, Adolescents, and Other Vulnerable Populations; this agency employs prosecutors specially trained to investigate crimes against the LGBTI community. The Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman has proactively condemned attacks against the LGBTI community.

Drug-related Crimes

El Salvador is not considered a major transit point for illegal narcotics, though maritime smuggling routes do exist in the eastern Pacific. El Salvador is party to the 1988 United Nations Drug Convention. The relatively small volume of drugs transiting the country in comparison with some regional neighbors, as well as active efforts by Salvadoran authorities to combat transit routes, has kept El Salvador from becoming a major transit location.

El Salvador's gangs are major narcotics trafficking organizations. Rather, they are primarily involved in retail street-level drug sales.

Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking illegal drugs are strict; convicted offenders can expect lengthy jail sentences and fines.

Police Response

While receiving significant support from U.S. and other partners, the police often experience inadequate funding and limited resources. Because of perceived and actual corruption, they do not enjoy the full confidence and cooperation of much of El Salvador's citizenry. The police's investigative units have shown great promise; however, routine street-level patrol techniques, anti-gang work, and crime suppression efforts remain a constant, difficult challenge. Equipment shortages (particularly radios and vehicles) limit their ability to deter or respond to crimes expeditiously. Other impediments to effective law enforcement are unsupportive laws, general distrust, and the occasional lack of cooperation between the police, prosecutors, and corrections.

Many prisons and detention facilities supply only the bare minimum of basic necessities. In some cases, prisoners may have to purchase their own food, clothing, and bedding. Prisons are extremely overcrowded; many prisoners do not have access to beds. Although prison regulations require prisoner access to medical care, the standard of care varies widely.

Local law allows the police to detain individuals for up to 72 hours for administrative processing. This is a common practice for most automobile accidents resulting in personal injury, apprehensions for DUI, and for criminal acts, including accusations.

Private tour companies frequently employ national police officers from the tourist police division to accompany their groups for personal security.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Police generally treat arrested or otherwise detained foreigners well. U.S. citizen residents/travelers should insist on speaking to U.S. Embassy representatives upon arrest or detention. Except in some very rural locations, police are generally aware of a U.S. citizen detainee's right to contact the Embassy. Embassy assistance is limited to ensuring U.S. citizens are not mistreated, contacting family/friends, protesting breaches of due process, and providing a list of local attorneys.

Judicial procedures are not always clear or easily understood. Significant delays during the investigation and legal process are common.

Crime Victim Assistance

U.S. victims of crime should contact the police and the U.S. Embassy. Reach the American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit at U.S. Embassy San Salvador at (503) 2501-2999. Reach the Office of Overseas Citizens Services in Washington, D.C. at (888) 407-4747.

For public safety emergencies, dial 911. Operators generally only speak Spanish.

Police/Security Agencies

There is only one national police service: The [Policia Nacional Civil](#) (PNC). Each major city, municipality, or town has a PNC delegation. The PNC also has a number of specialized units that investigate specific crimes and traffic enforcement, anti-gang, civil disturbance, VIP protection, and other special operations units.

Medical Emergencies

Emergency services are more readily available in the capital city than in outlying areas, but city facilities would be overwhelmed quickly in the event of a mass-casualty incident. Public hospitals are very crowded. Their resources are typically very limited, and they do not see patients quickly that are not assessed to have an obvious life threatening emergency.

There are few private hospitals. The Embassy uses Hospital Diagnostico and Hospital de la Mujer for most routine medical and surgical needs. Embassy health professionals assess the standards of these hospitals to be less than those of the United States.

Pharmacies are plentiful, but not all medicines found in the U.S. are available. Medicines often have a different brand name and are frequently more expensive than in the U.S. Recent regulatory changes that established price limits for pharmaceuticals may affect quality and availability of certain medicines. Carry an adequate supply of any required medication in its original, clearly labeled container. A copy of the prescription from the prescribing doctor will be helpful if immigration or customs authorities question you about your medications. For more information, refer to OSAC's report, [Traveling with Medications](#).

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

Priority Ambulance: Tel: (503) 2264-7911— the only private ambulance service with a fleet of vehicles in San Salvador that has trained personnel and medical equipment to manage emergencies. The response time is often less than ideal because of heavy traffic in San Salvador. It is often quicker for people to transport themselves by private vehicle.

Available Air Ambulance Services

Air Ambulance: (305) 535-7380 (International SOS, Mount Sinai Hospital, Miami Beach, Florida)

Insurance Guidance

Private hospitals and physicians expect up-front payment (by cash or, for hospitals, credit card) for all bills. No hospitals or medical offices will bill U.S. insurance companies.

Check with insurance providers to ensure you have adequate medical insurance valid for El Salvador, including coverage for medical evacuation (medevac).

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

All routinely recommended immunizations for the U.S. should be up to date. Measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, pertussis, and chickenpox are much more common than in the U.S., especially among children. Additionally, hepatitis A and typhoid immunizations are recommended for all travelers. Those who may have sexual contact, receive tattoos, or require medical treatment in El Salvador should receive the hepatitis B vaccine.

The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [El Salvador](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

There is no Country Council in San Salvador. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's [Latin America Team](#) with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Final Boulevard Santa Elena, La Libertad

Hours of operation: 0800-1700, Monday-Friday. (Closed on U.S. and Salvadoran holidays.)

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy 24-Hour Contact Number: (503) 2501-2999

Website: <https://sv.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

U.S. citizens traveling to El Salvador should register with the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program](#) (STEP) to ensure they receive pertinent security updates and notices.

Additional Resources

[El Salvador](#) Country Information Sheet