



# El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador. OSAC encourages travelers to [use this report](#) to gain baseline knowledge of security conditions in El Salvador. For more in-depth information, review OSAC's [El Salvador country 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.

## Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses El Salvador at Level 2, indicating travelers should exercise increased caution when traveling to El Salvador due to crime. Review OSAC's report, [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#).

## Overall Crime & Safety Situation

### Crime Threats

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **CRITICAL**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, with more than six million people, 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. It 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 often leads to the curtailment of recreational opportunities. Crimes of every type occur routinely.

The Government of El Salvador tracks eleven specific categories of crime, and logged 23,914 reports of crime in 2019 in the categories of theft, robbery, injuries, homicide, extortion, theft of vehicle, carjacking, rape, road deaths, truck jacking, and kidnapping. Non-categorized crime reports totaled 40,522 incidents.

Property crimes (e.g. robbery, burglary, theft, and theft of vehicles) are the most common crimes committed in El Salvador, accounting for 47% of all categorized crimes. Of these, simple theft, including burglary, accounted for 63% of all reported property crimes. Armed robberies accounted for 27% of all reported property crimes. Burglaries during daylight hours occur in residential neighborhoods throughout San Salvador. At times, individuals pose as delivery people or police officers 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. Review OSAC's reports, [Hotels: The Inns and Outs](#) and [Considerations for Hotel Security](#).

Most theft cases reported to the Embassy involve the loss of a U.S. passport during a surreptitious theft of bags, backpacks, or purses. Review OSAC's report, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#).

Crimes against the person (e.g. assault, homicide, rape, and sexual assault) accounted for 35% of all categorized crime incidents in 2019. Of these, physical assaults including domestic violence accounted for 16%. Rapes accounted for 26% of all reported crimes against the person. There were 2,254 rape cases reported to the police in 2019, up 2% from 2018. Although the homicide rate has consistently and notably declined since 2015's high of 104 per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador continues to have one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Since 2015, the per-capita annual homicide rate has fallen from 81/100,000 in 2016, to 60 in 2017, 50 in 2018, and 36 in 2019; this new rate remains more than seven times the murder rate in the United States. Homicides accounted for 10% of all categorized crime incidents in El Salvador in 2019. Females accounted for 9% of all homicide victims in 2019, down from 11% in 2018.

Homicides are not uniform across the country. In 2019, the municipalities of San Salvador (12%), San Miguel (10%), Santa Ana (7%), Apopa (7%), and Mejicanos (5%) were the five municipalities registering the most homicides.

Violent, well-armed street gangs — MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha*) and 18th Street (*Barrio 18*) 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) has [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 2019, victims filed 2,115 complaints, up from the 1,628 complaints in 2018. In 2017, the National Police launched an anti-extortion call center for victims and witnesses to anonymously report extortion, which may account for the increase in complaints.

### 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.

### Cybersecurity Issues

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.

Review OSAC's reports, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#), [Taking Credit, Cybersecurity Basics](#), [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#), [Traveling with Mobile Devices: Trends & Best Practices](#), and [Satellite Phones: Critical or Contraband?](#)

### Transportation-Safety Situation

#### 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 multiple-vehicle 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; and 1,404 were recorded in 2019. The police recorded 20,107 traffic accidents in 2019, down slightly from 20,378 in 2018.

Private tour companies frequently employ national police officers from the tourist police division to accompany their groups for personal security. Review OSAC's reports, [Road Safety Abroad](#), [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#), and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#); and read the State Department's webpage on [driving and road safety abroad](#).

### 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. Review OSAC's report, [Security In Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

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, and Honduras 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

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **LOW**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. 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 2019, 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

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **MEDIUM**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. 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. Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

### Post-specific Concerns

#### Environmental Hazards

El Salvador is located in an active seismic zone, experiencing numerous earthquakes. El Salvador suffers a major earthquake approximately every ten 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. In May 2019, a 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast, causing light damage and reportedly contributing to the death of one person.

There are 21 active volcanoes in El Salvador.

Strong undertows and currents make swimming at El Salvador's Pacific Coast beaches extremely dangerous, even for experienced swimmers. Lifeguards are not present at beaches and lakes. In addition, El Salvador's search and rescue capabilities are limited, and access to medical resources in these areas is inadequate. Carefully assess the potential risks of recreational water activities and consider your physical capabilities and skills.

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 following a 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.

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

#### Economic Concerns

El Salvador revised several of its laws to comply with CAFTA-DR's provisions on intellectual property rights (IPR), but smuggling of counterfeit products, music and video piracy, use of unlicensed software, and cable and satellite signal piracy are still prevalent.

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.

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 common. 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. LGBTI+ travelers should exercise caution, especially when expressing affection in public. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [LGBTI+ travelers](#).

Salvadoran law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services. The government, however, does not allocate sufficient resources to enforce these prohibitions effectively. There are few access ramps or provisions for the mobility of persons with sight and hearing disabilities. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [travelers with disabilities](#).

### 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 not 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 suffer from 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.

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.

U.S. victims of crime should contact the police and the U.S. Embassy. For public safety emergencies, dial **911**. Operators generally only speak Spanish. Download the State Department's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

### 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. Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the U.S. Embassy [website](#).

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.

There is only one private ambulance service with a fleet of vehicles in San Salvador that has trained personnel and medical equipment to manage emergencies. (Priority Ambulance: Tel: +503-2264-7911) 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.

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). The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends purchasing international health insurance before traveling internationally. Review the State Department's webpage on [insurance overseas](#).

### 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, all travelers should have hepatitis A and typhoid immunizations. Those who may have sexual contact, receive tattoos, or require medical treatment in El Salvador should receive the hepatitis B vaccine.

Review OSAC's reports, [The Healthy Way](#), [Traveling with Medication](#), [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#), [Shaken: The Don'ts of Alcohol Abroad](#), [Health 101: How to Prepare for Travel](#), and [Fire Safety Abroad](#). 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 Contact Information

Final Boulevard Santa Elena, La Libertad

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

Embassy 24-Hour Contact Number: +503-2501-2999

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

## Helpful Information

Before you travel, consider the following resources:

- [OSAC Risk Matrix](#)
- [OSAC Travelers Toolkit](#)
- [State Department Traveler's Checklist](#)
- [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#)
- [El Salvador](#) Country Information Sheet