



## El Salvador 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Assault; Bribery; Burglary; Carjacking; Drug Trafficking; Extortion; Fraud; Money Laundering; Murder; Murder-for-hire; Narco-Terrorism; Rape/Sexual Violence; Theft; Financial Security; Hotels; Floods; Earthquakes; Volcanoes; Hurricanes; Other Threat / Incident; Stolen items; Surveillance; Narco-Terrorism; Threats; Transportation Security; Travel Health and Safety

Western Hemisphere > El Salvador > San Salvador

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### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

El Salvador is considered one of the most violent countries in the world. The effect and threat of violent crime within San Salvador, including the neighborhoods in which many Americans live and work, leads to greater isolation and the curtailment of recreational opportunities.

#### Crime Threats

The U.S. Department of State rates El Salvador as CRITICAL for crime. While crime in this country can run the gamut from credit card skimming to homicide, the criminal threat in El Salvador is best characterized as unpredictable, gang-centric, and violent acts that target both known associates as well as targets of opportunity. There is no information to suggest that criminals specifically target U.S. citizens and other Westerners.

Robberies and robbery attempts, home invasions, and extortions occur in the most affluent neighborhoods, and closely guarded officials, independent business persons, and diplomats are not immune from these attacks. As a result, neighborhood watch groups employ armed private security, while security checkpoints and police patrols have increased.

As a reaction to the threat, many citizens no longer frequent areas such as the once-popular Zona Rosa, whose surrounding neighborhoods are havens for violent criminals and gang members, out of fear of violent crime. Beyond the capital, security concerns, including insecure roads in many areas of the country and along the border with Guatemala, also severely limit persons from enjoying the tourist opportunities El Salvador has to offer. To compound matters, many of El Salvador's tourist and recreation areas are accessible only by unsafe and damaged roads. Accidents are frequent and serious, and they discourage many citizens, especially those with children, from traveling far beyond San Salvador.



Beach options are effectively limited to the few private beach clubs, which can be expensive (swimming at the few public beaches, which are protected by shotgun-toting guards, is inadvisable). Options for children are particularly limited; most head home to the U.S. during the summer and rely on playgrounds or school activities for organized play during the rest of the year.

These factors have significantly increased the sense of isolation for many. Crime takes a psychological toll on visiting American citizens and residents. Their lives are restricted to the routine of work, school, limited shopping, and sponsored events, by the fear of violence that creates, at best, a difficult work-life balance.

Salvadoran police statistics show an average of 12 murders and three carjackings reported daily to the police in 2011. The number of murders for 2011 was 4,354; the number of carjackings for 2011 was 1094. This is an uptick in the statistics reported in 2010, which saw 3,985 homicides and 999 carjackings. Salvadoran police crime statistics for 2011 for the number of reported assaults and rapes showed some improvement; however, robberies increased slightly. Crimes of every nature occur throughout the country 24-hours a day; daylight is not a deterrent.

Based on current statistics, violent crime remains significantly higher than U.S. and international rates. El Salvador has the second highest per capita murder rate in the world: 71 per 100,000 in 2011 (by comparison the murder rate in Massachusetts, with a similar geographical area and population, was 2.6 per 100,000). The National Civilian Police (PNC) reported that 69 percent of all homicides in 2011 were committed with firearms.

Due to lax customs enforcement and porous borders, weapons are readily available and easily obtained by criminals, gangs, and just about anyone else who wishes to obtain one. The number of illegal weapons on the streets is estimated at more than 600,000, including AK-47s and M-16 assault rifles, various handguns, and military-grade weaponry, in addition to the 260,000 legally registered firearms. The number of weapons caches, with non-decommissioned weapons that survived the civil war, is unknown. Crimes committed by criminals armed with automatic weapons are considered routine.

In 2011, armed robberies continued at the accelerated 2010 pace and arguably could be the single greatest security threat facing U.S. embassy staff and business persons. As an example, in April 2011, an embassy officer and spouse were robbed at gunpoint at a traffic circle less than a mile from the embassy while stuck in late rush hour traffic. In this instance, two unidentified men approached the driver's side of the car, pointed a gun at both occupants, and demanded their belongings. The couple complied with their demands, and the attackers



fled the scene on foot. In another example, a U.S. tourist was robbed at night by two individuals with machetes directly outside a popular private beach club that is frequented often by embassy staff and other Westerners.

Personal attacks, such as muggings, continue within the public transportation sector as well. Travelers are warned to avoid most public transportation, as it has become too dangerous for city and country commuting. Passengers on public buses are frequently robbed en-route, at roadblocks, and at bus stops. Would-be muggers and gang members have become so brazen in their attacks that they are known to keep to a daily schedule, riding city buses from one stop to the next, mugging and committing criminal acts with impunity.

Although there is evidence that the police are making positive strides against the threat of extortion, it persists as a very common and effective criminal enterprise that preys on the collective fear of the populace. Many extortion attempts are no more than random cold calls that originate from imprisoned gang-members using cellular telephones, and the subsequent threats against the victim are made through social engineering and/or through flimsily obtained information on the victim's family. Nevertheless, these calls are still very effective based on the fear associated with the daily murders committed against extorted small business operators and bus drivers.

Hitting its peak a few years ago, extortion has dropped in the last two years. Whether it can be attributed to the creation of a joint police-attorney general anti-extortion unit in 2009 or to the public trend toward underreporting or dismissing clearly ill-prepared extortion attempts is yet to be determined. Extortions dropped nearly 18 percent in 2011, from 3,992 (2010) to 3,296 (2011). The decrease in reported cases notwithstanding, extortion affects all sectors of the population (including embassy staff), and recent reports show that there is an increase in the level of violence associated with extortion cases, including media reports of extortion victims and witnesses being killed.

El Salvador, a country of roughly six million people, has hundreds of known street gangs totaling more than 20,000 members. Violent, well-armed, U.S.-style street gang growth continues in El Salvador, with Los Angeles' 18th Street and MS-13 ("Mara Salvatrucha") gangs being the largest in the country. Gangs concentrate on narcotics and arms trafficking, murder-for-hire, carjacking, extortion, and violent street crime. Gangs and other criminal elements roam freely, day and night, targeting affluent areas for burglaries, and gang members are quick to engage in violence if resisted. Many of the gangs are now comprised of unemployed youth who are street trained and do not hesitate to use deadly force when perpetrating crimes. The U.S. government has assigned a Gang Advisor to assist the



government of El Salvador (GOES) with combating the gang problem. Additionally, the FBI has established a transnational anti-gang unit with the PNC, based in San Salvador.

Even though El Salvador witnessed a sharp decline in the number of reported rapes in 2011, it remains a serious and ever-present concern. There were 326 rapes reported to the PNC in 2011, down from 681 in 2010. Local police and judicial experts estimate that less than 20 percent of rapes are reported to authorities.

Home invasions and/or the burglaries of residences during broad daylight are becoming more prevalent in affluent residential neighborhoods in San Salvador. Some of these home invasions occur by individuals posing as deliverymen or as police officers to gain access to a home. Some come up on a motorcycle and push the tenant back in their residence to rob them. 'Follow home' home-invasions by gang members on unsuspecting drivers are also occurring in communities where embassy families live. Recently, the next door neighbor of an embassy family was victimized by this methodology when armed assailants followed the home owner and rushed him as he pulled into his garage. Once inside, they closed the garage doors and robbed the man of \$1,500 at gun point and then drove off in his vehicle. Due to the large amount of cash stolen, it is very likely that this individual was surveilled by the assailants who must have observed him departing a bank or ATM machine. Attempted burglaries of heavily fortified embassy housing are also a fact of life in San Salvador. In an attempt in December 2011, the burglars likely had good information that the occupants were away since they methodically cut the razor wire and scaled the rear wall of the residence before attempting to gain entry through a rear door. Once they attempted to force the door open, the alarm sounded, and the thieves took flight. A contributing factor to crime in well-to-do neighborhoods is the unimpeded development of squatter slums in the midst of some of the best areas in the capital. For example, less than 300 meters from a popular area for embassy housing is a squatter slum.

Another crime on the rise and directly affecting the embassy community is credit card skimming. Employees have been victimized at well known restaurants, hotels, and retailers within San Salvador. Embassy employees are briefed on the importance of maintaining direct visual contact with their credit cards at all times and on the importance of closely checking monthly statements.

#### Road Safety

Poorly maintained roads and vehicles are common and pose a significant danger to travelers. There is virtually no street lighting on minor roads in urban areas, which is a serious problem after-hours. U.S. Embassy San Salvador advises all personnel to avoid driving outside of the



city during hours of darkness. During both daylight and nighttime hours, it is not uncommon to encounter pedestrians, feral dogs, livestock, or abandoned vehicles on the roadways. Even within San Salvador, missing manhole covers and large objects in the roadway marking the danger are regularly encountered. During the rainy season (May-October), heavy and persistent storms can cause landslides, topple trees and power lines, and wash away roads and bridges.

A significant percentage of vehicles are in disrepair, under-powered, and/or beyond their lifecycle, and do not meet U.S. road safety standards. Mini-bus, bus, and taxi drivers do not adhere to traffic rules or regulations and cause many accidents. Because of a near complete lack of enforcement of traffic laws, drivers must make an extraordinary effort to drive defensively. If traffic signals are working, they are often ignored, and passing on blind corners is common.

## **Political Violence**

### International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

There are no known international terrorist groups that operate within El Salvador. Since the end of the civil war in 1992, most groups who once violently opposed El Salvador's ruling government and the U.S. government's policies in El Salvador have demobilized and joined the political process as peaceful actors. Some fringe domestic groups have resorted to street violence, including the 2006 assassination of Salvadoran riot police. The GOES cooperates closely with the U.S. on counterterrorism and takes active steps to protect U.S. interests and citizens present in the country. El Salvador does not appear to be utilized as a terrorist safe haven.

The threat from transnational narco-terrorism cannot be ruled out, however. In addition, there is some evidence that the Mexican drug cartel, Los Zetas, may have infiltrated El Salvador, although nowhere near to the extent that it has infiltrated Guatemala and many Mexican states. In addition, the GOES strongly supports the U.S. government's War on Terrorism, and, in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S., has worked hard to tighten both border and airport security. It appears that these actions, if sustained, could reduce organized crime, like drug smuggling, over the long term.

The CA-4 agreement among El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, allows for the inspection-free movement of citizens among these countries, and reduces overall inspection at land crossings. The agreement has raised concerns that its implementation



could possibly facilitate easier international movement of terrorists.

There were no legal cases involving instances of terrorism affecting U.S. citizens or facilities brought before the Salvadoran judicial system in 2011, nor were there any judicial developments that would appear to have a significant impact on U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

### Civil Unrest

Public demonstrations and strikes against the GOES, generally by government employees, are not uncommon. Most demonstrations are concentrated in and around city centers or public buildings and other public areas. Although often non-violent, they have created public security problems at times.

There are numerous protests each month by workers and students alike demanding more resources, benefits, money, etc. from the government, and in addition, many of the government offices and public schools protest by work slowdowns, in some cases letting criminals go free and children go home from school. Most protests have been peaceful; however, on a few occasions there have been violent confrontations between the police and demonstrators. Additionally, there have been demonstrations and road blockades staged along key routes, such as the road leading to the international airport.

### Post-Specific Concerns

#### Environmental Hazards

El Salvador is located in an active seismic subduction zone, where the Caribbean plate overrides the Cocos plate, that produces numerous earthquakes from multiple sources. El Salvador suffers a major earthquake every 10 years. In 1986, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake destroyed the old U.S. Embassy located in San Salvador. Approximately 1,500 people were killed, over 10,000 injured, and 200,000 left homeless after the earthquake and a week of aftershocks.

An earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale devastated parts of El Salvador in January 2001. A second earthquake in February 2001 measured 6.6 on the Richter scale and caused significant additional damage and loss of life. In total, there were three earthquakes that struck El Salvador in 2001 that resulted in over 1,000 deaths, one million people left homeless, and over 400,000 homes destroyed.



In December 2006, an earthquake measuring 5.7 on the Richter scale struck in the northwest corner of the country. More than 100 families were displaced, left homeless, and searching for temporary shelter.

In March 2007, an earthquake of 5.6 struck in the northern section of the country, knocking down a number of homes and damaging buildings. Seismic tremors measuring over 5.0 occur on a regular basis, usually causing little damage to the country. It is estimated that there are close to 2,000 tremors that affect the country per year.

There are approximately seven active volcanoes. The most recent eruption occurred in October 2005, when one of the country's largest volcanoes, Ilamatepec, erupted twice in a two-day period in the Santa Ana Department. There were two deaths reported and over 4,850 people evacuated from their homes.

There have been approximately nine significant tropical storms and hurricanes that have affected El Salvador. Two of the most damaging storms on record were Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and Hurricane Stan in 2005. While hurricanes are a concern, much of the damage to infrastructure is a result of flooding and mudslides. In 2011, Tropical Storm 12E dumped heavy and consistent rains on the three Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) that caused extensive damage to infrastructure (i.e. many washed out bridges and roads) and resulted in the deaths of dozens of people. The rainy season usually runs from May through October.

### Kidnapping

Economically motivated kidnappings-for-ransom was a serious concern; however, press reports indicate that kidnappings have decreased significantly since 2005. The PNC has had notable success in dismantling kidnapping gangs through strong policing and investigations. Salvadoran police statistics reported two kidnappings in 2011.

### Drugs and Narco-terrorism

El Salvador is a transit country for cocaine and heroin along the eastern Pacific maritime smuggling routes. Illicit narcotics originating in South America are smuggled over land and by sea to the United States via Mexico.

El Salvador hosts a Cooperative Security Location (CSL) crucial to regional narcotics trafficking detection and interception efforts. El Salvador is party to the 1988 United Nations



Drug Convention.

Transnational street gangs, including MS-13 and M-18, are major threats to public security in El Salvador, but are not thought to be major narcotics trafficking organizations. These gangs are apparently more involved in street-level drug sales.

Neither precursor chemical production and transit, nor illicit trading in bulk ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, are significant problems in El Salvador, although indicators suggest that some diversion of these substances has been attempted.

### **Police Response**

The National Civilian Police (PNC) was created in 1992 as part of the Peace Accords following the civil war. To bolster broad-based support for the organization, the recruiting effort focused on quickly hiring new officers to meet hiring quotas: 20 percent of the PNC would be former or public security officials, 20 percent would be former leftist combatants, and the remaining 60 percent would be drawn from the civilian population with no former military or police experience.

The PNC is still in the developmental stages of becoming a modern and effective police force that can protect the public. While several of the PNC's investigative units have shown great promise, routine street level patrol techniques, anti-gang, and crime suppression efforts remain somewhat ineffective. Equipment shortages (particularly radios and vehicles) further limit their ability to deter or respond to crimes effectively.

### **How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment**

U.S. citizen residents or travelers detained by the police should insist on speaking to U.S. Embassy representatives. Arrested or otherwise detained foreigners are generally treated well by the police. Except in some very rural locations, police are aware of a U.S. citizen detainee's right to contact their embassy. Travelers should be aware, however, that the assistance the embassy can provide is limited to making sure U.S. citizens are not being mistreated and providing them with a list of local attorneys. The embassy cannot secure the release or act as legal representation for any U.S. citizen. Local law allows the police to detain someone for up to 72 hours for administrative processing. This is a common practice for most automobile accidents where there is personal injury and for criminal acts, including being accused of a criminal act. The court uses the 72-hour detainment to investigate the crime or accident further. Travelers are reminded to seek legal representation before admitting or signing any



legal form that acknowledges culpability.

U.S. citizens are subject to the laws of the country in which they are traveling. Penalties in El Salvador for possession, use, or trafficking illegal drugs are strict, and convicted offenders can expect lengthy jail sentences and fines.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime, and Local Police Telephone Numbers

If you are the victim of a crime overseas, contact the nearest embassy or consulate. The Office of Overseas Citizens Services in Washington, DC can be reached at (888)-407-4747 (business hours), (202) 647-5225 (after hours), or overseas at (202) 501-4444. American Citizen Services of U.S. Embassy San Salvador can be reached at (503) 2501-2628 (business hours) or (503) 2501-2252 (after hours duty officer).

For public safety emergencies in El Salvador, dial "911."

National Civilian Police Contact Information

- Criminal Investigation Division: (503) 2223-7985
- Public Security Division: (503) 2527-0610

Fire Department Contact Information

- Fire Department Headquarters: (503) 2243-2054

### **Medical Emergencies**

Medical care is somewhat limited. Emergency services, even in the capital city, are basic at best. Although many physicians in San Salvador are trained in the U.S., their staff and equipment are generally not up to U.S. standards. For more information, see the Consular Information Sheet.

Medical Emergency Contact Information

- Diagnostic Hospital & Emergencies: (503) 2264-4422
- Women's Hospital: (503) 2265-1212
- Priority Ambulance: (503) 2264-7911



## Air Ambulance Service

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

## **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

The majority of U.S. business persons are able to conduct their daily activities without security-related incidents by following basic security precautions and exercising good judgment.

Always remain alert to your surroundings. Research recent crime trends prior to planning your trip.

Avoid travel into the downtown area of San Salvador unless absolutely necessary.

Leave expensive jewelry and watches at home. If confronted by an armed assailant and he/she demands your property - comply. Leave valuables and important documents in a secure location at your office or in a hotel safe deposit box. Be sure to have copies of these documents in a second location, back at home or in the office.

Avoid public transportation, especially the local buses. There have been numerous reports of robberies involving inter-city and international buses. Use only taxis you can call via telephone or that you find at reputable hotels.

Always drive with your vehicle doors locked and windows up. Bring your cell phone with you, with emergency numbers on the speed-dial list.

Try to park in a secure area whenever possible. At stores, restaurants, and other locations with uniformed guards, try to park near the guard post or the business' entrance.

Be alert to your surroundings when entering or leaving a parking area, including private residences.

Check your vehicle before entry. Ensure no one is hidden inside the vehicle or standing in vicinity of where you have parked.



Do not leave any valuables in your vehicle, anything left visible in your vehicle will appear inviting to petty criminals.

Do not drive outside the capital after dark, for both personal security and traffic safety reasons.

When traveling to rural areas, try to travel with a large group and more than one vehicle whenever possible. Be sure someone is aware of your travel itinerary.

Avoid unpaved roads. These are indicators of areas where police presence may be minimal.

Use caution when traveling or spending the night in an isolated or rural area. Telephone communication may be non-existent or erratic. In an emergency situation in a rural area, you may not be able to summon assistance - including the police.

Schedule trips on the highway between San Salvador and the Comalapa International Airport during daylight hours. The highway is dangerous, especially at night.

The beaches along El Salvador's Pacific coast are beautiful, but the undertows and strong currents can make swimming very dangerous for even experienced swimmers. During a seven day holiday period, nine Salvadoran citizens drowned while swimming at Pacific beaches. In one month alone, three U.S. citizens drowned while swimming at beaches in La Libertad and La Paz Departments.

Visitors should use caution when climbing volcanoes or hiking in remote areas. Armed robberies of climbers and hikers are common.

#### Areas to Avoid

There are no areas within the city of San Salvador (or the country of El Salvador) that are deemed free of potential violent crime.

#### **Further Information**

U.S. Embassy San Salvador

24 hour number: (503) 2501-2999

Regional Security Office: (503) 2501-2244

Consular Section, American Citizens Services Unit: (503) 2501-2628



24 hour Embassy Dispatch: (503) 2501-2252  
MSG Post 1: (503) 2501-2316

U.S. citizens who live in or who are visiting El Salvador are encouraged to register with U.S. Embassy San Salvador. Citizens can register online at <https://travel.state.gov>

### **OSAC Country Council**

The American Chamber of Commerce sponsors an active local OSAC Country Council that meets monthly. The Country Council frequently holds seminars and briefings on local criminal trends. Contact the American Chamber of Commerce for further information on the OSAC Country Council.

Phone: (503) 2263-9494  
Fax: (503) 2263-9393  
[amchamsal@amchamsal.com](mailto:amchamsal@amchamsal.com)  
[www.amchamsal.com](http://www.amchamsal.com)