



## El Salvador 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Financial Security; Murder; Drug Trafficking; Other Threat / Incident; Extortion; Carjacking; Murder-for-hire; Narco-Terrorism; Burglary; Rape/Sexual Violence; Cyber; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Volcanoes; Hurricanes; Landslides and mudslides; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Counterfeiting; Hate Crimes

Western Hemisphere > El Salvador; Western Hemisphere > El Salvador > San Salvador

3/10/2016

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Critical

### Crime Threats

Crime can run the gamut from credit card skimming to homicide and is unpredictable, gang-centric, and characterized by violence directed against both known victims and targets of opportunity. According to a Central American University (UCA) poll from January 6, 2016, almost a quarter of Salvadorans (24.5 percent) were victims of crime in 2015. There is no information to suggest that U.S. citizens are specifically targeted by criminals. The effect and threat of violent crime in San Salvador, including the neighborhoods in which many U.S. citizens live and work, leads to greater isolation and the curtailment of recreational opportunities. Crimes of every type routinely occur.

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The threat from transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) is prevalent throughout Central America. There is some evidence that the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas may have infiltrated El Salvador, although in extremely low numbers. El Salvador has hundreds of gang “cliques.” Violent, well-armed street gangs — 18th Street (“Barrio 18”) and MS-13 (“Mara Salvatrucha”) being the largest — concentrate on narcotics, extortion, arms trafficking, murder for hire, carjacking, and aggravated street crime. In 2015, there was evidence that the gangs gained access to weapons and explosives left over from the country’s civil war and/or from the military. Recognizing the threat posed by MS-13, the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated the MS-13 a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) in their list of Specially Designated Nationals. Gangs and other criminal elements target affluent areas for burglaries and are quick to engage in violence when resisted. Many of the gangs are comprised of unemployed youth who do not hesitate to use deadly force when perpetrating crimes.

In 2015, armed robberies continued to be the greatest threat facing diplomats, tourists, and business persons. Home invasions/burglaries during daylight continue to be prevalent in residential neighborhoods in San Salvador. Some home invasions occur when individuals posing as delivery men or police officers gain access to a home.

Extortion persists as a very common, effective criminal enterprise in San Salvador. Hitting a peak at 4,400+ cases in 2009, the number of reported cases has dropped. In 2015, the number of reported cases was 2,119, a 14.6 percent decrease from the 2,480 reported cases in 2014. Many of the extortion calls originate from prisons.

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There were 2,096 car thefts and 1,503 carjackings reported in 2015. Not tracked, however, are the significant numbers of smash-and-grab-type of auto burglaries pervasive throughout urban areas.

El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world, and the U.S. Department of State updated the Travel Warning for El Salvador in January 2016 (<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=18887>) to notify U.S. citizens about travel safety concerns and the increase in frequency and intensity of security incidents. Crime statistics showed that the 2015 annual homicide rate — 103.1 per 100,000 inhabitants — was significantly higher than 2014's 68.6 per 100,000 rate. In 2015, authorities recorded 6,657 homicides, a 69.8 percent increase from the 3,921 in 2014. The rise is attributed primarily to the cessation of a controversial 2012 truce between local gangs.

Rape remains a serious concern. In 2015, there were 314 reported rape cases, down from 367 reported cases in 2014. Services for victims of rape are very limited, and many victims choose not to participate in the investigation and prosecution of the crime for fear of not being treated respectfully by the authorities. Many murder victims show signs of rape, and survivors of rape may not report the crime for fear of retaliation.

## Cybersecurity Issues

San Salvador has cybersecurity concerns regarding ATM/credit card scams. Credit card skimming is on the rise. U.S. citizens have been victimized at well-known restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and retailers.

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## Other Areas of Concern

A contributing factor to crime is the wide income disparities found within neighborhoods in the capital city. There are few, if any, areas immune from violent crime.

## Transportation-Safety Situation

### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Poorly maintained roads are common and pose a significant danger to travelers. There is limited street lighting on minor roads, creating a serious risk after dark. It is not uncommon to encounter pedestrians, dogs, livestock, or abandoned vehicles on the roadways. Missing manholes or storm drain covers are prevalent and may be flagged with large objects in the roadway (placed to mark the danger but difficult to see).

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

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Mini-bus, bus, and taxi drivers commonly disregard traffic rules and cause many accidents. In 2015, there were 1,132 deaths due to traffic accidents, an increase over the 1,043 deaths reported in 2014.

Travel outside the cities and to Guatemala or Honduras should only be done during daylight hours and, if possible, with multiple vehicle convoys for safety. When traveling to rural areas try to caravan using multiple vehicles. Refrain from driving outside the capital after dark, for both personal security and traffic safety reasons.

Always drive with your vehicle doors locked and windows up. Carry a fully charged cell phone with emergency numbers on speed dial. When possible, try to park in an illuminated, secure area. At stores, restaurants, and other locations with uniformed guards, try to park near the guard post or the business's entrance. Always remain alert to your surroundings when entering or leaving a parking area, including private residences. Do not leave any valuables in your vehicle; anything visible in your vehicle may invite petty criminals. Share your travel itinerary with others. Use caution when traveling or spending the night in an isolated or rural area, as telephone coverage may be sporadic and/or non-existent and medical and police assistance limited.

### Public Transportation Conditions

Avoid public transportation, especially local buses. Public buses are often in poor mechanical condition and plagued by bands of armed robbers.

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Regional commercial bus travel is generally safe, although robberies have occurred in neighboring countries.

Privately-owned cabs are not regulated, and caution should be taken to choose reputable taxis, usually located in front of major hotels. Use only taxis you can call via telephone or that you find at reputable hotels. If headed downtown, use a trusted taxi service and travel during daylight hours only, as the likelihood of a criminal encounter increases at night.

There are no trains or ferries that run between cities.

#### Aviation/Airport Conditions

Comalapa International Airport is serviced by several major US and international carriers. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has assessed the government's Civil Aviation Authority as being in compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of El Salvador's air carrier operations. Further information may be found on the FAA's safety assessment page.

#### Other Travel Conditions

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

## **Terrorism Threat**

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

### Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There are no known international terrorist groups that operate in El Salvador. El Salvador does not appear to be utilized as a terrorist safehaven. There were no legal cases involving instances of terrorism affecting U.S. citizens or facilities brought before the judicial system in 2015, nor were there any judicial developments that would appear to have a significant impact on U.S. counter-terrorism efforts.

### Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

The government cooperates closely with the U.S. on counter-terrorism and takes active steps to protect U.S. interests and citizens. The government has worked hard to strengthen border and airport security and provided military personnel to support U.S. efforts in Iraq and

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Afghanistan.

## **Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

### **Civil Unrest**

Public protests and strikes against the government, generally by government employees, are quite common. Most demonstrations are concentrated 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 subduction zone, where the Caribbean plate overrides the Cocos plate, producing numerous earthquakes. El Salvador suffers a major earthquake approximately every 10 years. Seismic tremors measuring 5.0+ occur on a regular basis,

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usually causing little damage. There are close to 2,000 tremors that affect the country per year.

In October 2014, a 7.4 magnitude earthquake struck off the coast, causing moderate damage and killing one person.

In December 2006, a 5.7 earthquake struck in the northwest, displacing over 100 families.

In 2001, three earthquakes and their aftershocks resulted in over 1,000 deaths, a million homeless, and the destruction of over 400,000 homes.

There are approximately seven active volcanoes.

In December 2013, Chaparratique erupted, causing little damage but forcing hundreds to evacuate San Miguel.

In October 2005, one of the country's largest volcanoes, Santa Ana Department's Llamatepec, erupted twice in two days. There were two deaths reported, and over 4,850 people were evacuated.

Approximately nine significant tropical storms and hurricanes have affected El Salvador in recent years. Two of the most damaging storms were Hurricane Stan (2005) and Hurricane Mitch (1998). While direct hits by hurricanes are a concern, damage to infrastructure results mostly from flooding and mudslides during the rainy season or tropical storm. In 2011, Tropical Storm 12E dumped heavy rains on the three Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador), causing extensive damage and resulting in the deaths of dozens of people.

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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 2015, heavy rains forced the government to close schools nationwide for several days.

A common cause of death of U.S. citizens is drowning as a result of strong rip currents and large surf at many of the beaches. There are a few public beaches, with some protected by armed guards. Swimmers should exercise caution.

#### Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

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 protection of IPR as a key element for the future development and competitiveness of the economy. The Policy specifically addresses geographical indicators with an eye toward the promotion of Salvadoran products.

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. Since 2006, piracy has been punishable by jail sentences of two to six 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, continue to be the weak link in IPR protection, and using the courts to seek redress for IPR violations is often a slow and frustrating process. Despite growing

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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 nor notorious market report. Internet trolling and other disreputable practices have been publicly reported over the past year, but there is little evidence of organized economic espionage activity.

## 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.

## Personnel-Background Concerns

There is significant hostile sentiment toward individuals who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT). There are several reports of violence against LGBT individuals, including a well-reported case involving an attack on a transgender man that occurred in June 2014 following the San Salvador Pride event. Authorities are still investigating the case.

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## Drug-related Crimes

El Salvador is a transit country for cocaine and heroin along the eastern Pacific maritime smuggling routes. Illicit narcotics from South America are smuggled through Salvadoran territory and coast and onward to the U.S. El Salvador is party to the 1988 United Nations Drug Convention.

TCOs, including MS-13 and Barrio 18, are not thought to be major narcotics trafficking organizations. These gangs are involved primarily in street-level drug sales.

## Kidnapping Threat

U.S. citizens and Westerners are not the target of kidnapping plots in El Salvador. However, the kidnapping, torture, and murder of rival gang members occurs with some frequency.

## Police Response

The police are hampered by inadequate funding and limited resources, and as a result of perceived corruption, they do not enjoy the confidence and cooperation of much of El

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Salvador's citizenry. While several of the police's investigative units have shown great promise, routine street level patrol techniques, anti-gang, 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, and many prisoners do not have access to beds and may be forced to sleep on the floor. Although prison regulations require that prisoners have access to medical care, the standard of care varies widely.

U.S. citizens are subject to the laws of the country in which they are traveling. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking illegal drugs are strict, and convicted offenders can expect lengthy jail sentences and fines. 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 resulting in personal injury and for criminal acts, including accusations.

## How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Arrested or otherwise detained foreigners are generally treated well by the police. U.S. citizen residents or travelers should insist on speaking to U.S. Embassy representatives. Except in some very rural locations, police are usually aware of a U.S. citizen detainee's right to contact the Embassy. Travelers should be aware, however, that Embassy assistance is limited to ensuring U.S. citizens are not mistreated, contacting family/friends, protesting breaches of

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due process, and providing a list of local attorneys. The Embassy cannot secure their release or act as legal representation for any U.S. citizen.

Judicial procedures are not always clear or easily understood by foreigners, and significant delays during the investigation and legal process are common. U.S. citizens should be aware that due process and other constitutional guarantees in the U. S. do not necessarily exist.

#### Crime Victim Assistance

If you are the victim of a crime, contact the U.S. Embassy. The Office of Overseas Citizens Services in Washington, D.C. can be reached at (888) 407-4747. The American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit of U.S. Embassy San Salvador can be reached at (503) 2501-2999.

For public safety emergencies, dial "911." However, operators are not bilingual and 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 (extortion, homicide) and traffic enforcement, anti-gang, civil

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disturbance, VIP protection, and other special operations units. For more information, see the PNC website at: <http://www.pnc.gob.sv/>.

Recognizing the need to address the level of extortions, the Fuerza de Tarea Anti Extortiones (Anti-Extortion Task Force, FTAE) was formed in 2006 and has been recognized as effective in combating this persistent and common crime.

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

## **Medical Emergencies**

There are few private and no public hospitals that meet U.S. accepted standards. Although many physicians are trained in the U.S., their staff and equipment are generally not up to U.S. standards. The Embassy recommends that private hospitals be used only for emergency care to stabilize a condition prior to returning to the U.S. for definitive evaluation and treatment.

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

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

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regulatory changes that established price limits for pharmaceuticals may affect quality and availability of certain medicines. RSO recommends that U.S. citizens carry an adequate supply of any medication they require in its original container, which should be clearly labeled. A copy of the prescription from the prescribing doctor will be helpful if immigration or customs authorities question you about your medications.

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.

For more information on medical facilities and health resources, see the Country Specific Information on El Salvador: <http://www.travel.state.gov/content/travel/english.html>.

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 the heavy traffic in San Salvador. Therefore, it is often quicker for people to transport themselves directly to the hospital by private vehicle.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Diagnostic Hospital & Emergencies: (503) 2264-4422

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Women's Hospital: (503) 2265-1212

### Available Air Ambulance Services

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

### Recommended Insurance Posture

Visitors are advised to check with insurance providers to ensure they have adequate medical insurance valid for El Salvador, including coverage for medical evacuation.

### 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. Hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for all those who may have sexual contacts, receive tattoos, or require medical treatment.

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For vaccine and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:  
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/el-salvador.htm>.

## **OSAC Country Council Information**

There is an active OSAC Country Council in San Salvador run in conjunction with the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham). To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email [OSACWHA@state.gov](mailto:OSACWHA@state.gov).

## **U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information**

### Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Embassy of the United States of America

Final Boulevard Santa Elena

La Libertad, El Salvador, C.A.

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Hours of operation: 08:00 - 17:00, Mon-Fri. The Embassy observes all U.S. and Salvadoran holidays.

## Embassy Contact Numbers

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

Website: <http://sansalvador.usembassy.gov/>

## Embassy Guidance

U.S. citizens are encouraged to register with U.S. Embassy San Salvador. Citizens can register online through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at <https://step.state.gov/step/>.

## Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

### Situational Awareness Best Practices

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Follow basic security precautions and exercise good judgment. It is recommended to research recent crime trends prior to planning your trip. Visitors are advised to take precautions when transiting or visiting the downtown area of San Salvador (ie. do not carry large amounts of cash, do not wear jewelry, remain alert to your surroundings, know the exact destination you are headed to).

Travelers should consider bringing small denomination U.S. notes and one dollar coins (which are used much more than U.S. dollar bill notes). Do not wear expensive jewelry. If confronted by an assailant demanding your property, comply.

Secure valuables and important documents in your office or in a hotel safe deposit box. Maintain copies of identification documents in a separate location.

Avoid exercising near unguarded public roads or parks.

Cameras, concertina wire, and grilles on all windows and doors appear to dissuade some would-be burglars, as residences without these features in affluent neighborhoods are frequently robbed. The presence of armed security and the use of security features in homes have proven to be successful in combating home invasions.

Travelers are reminded to seek legal representation before acknowledging any culpability or signing any legal document.

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