



## El Salvador 2010 Crime & Safety Report

NGO; Academia

Western Hemisphere; Western Hemisphere > El Salvador

4/20/2010

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

El Salvador is considered one of the most violent countries in the world. The threat of violent crime within San Salvador, including the neighborhoods in which many U.S. citizens live and work, increases isolation and impinges upon recreational activities. Crimes of every nature occur throughout the country; unfortunately, daylight is not a deterrent for criminals.

A country of roughly 5.8 million people, El Salvador has street gangs totaling more than 25,000 members. Violent, well-armed, street gangs continue to grow in El Salvador. Los Angeles' 18th Street and the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, are the largest gangs in the country. Gangs concentrate on extortion, narcotics, arms trafficking, murder for hire, car jacking, and violent street crime. Gang members and other criminal elements roam freely, day and night, targeting affluent areas for burglaries. Gang members are quick to engage in violence, even when resistance is offered. Many gangs are now comprised of unemployed youth who do not hesitate to use deadly force when perpetrating crimes. The U.S. government is working with the government of El Salvador to combat the country's gang problem.

Due to lax customs enforcement and porous borders, weapons are readily available and easily obtained by criminals, gangs, and anyone else who wishes to obtain them. The number of illegal weapons on the streets is estimated at 400,000; including AK-47s and M-16 assault rifles, various handguns, grenades, and military grade weaponry. 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 routine.

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Generally, U.S. interests and citizens are not specifically targeted by criminals, but they are not exempt from crimes either. Most members of the U.S. private sector are able to conduct their daily activities without security-related incidents by following basic security precautions.

Within the city of San Salvador, no area of the city is deemed free of violent crime. Robberies, attempted robberies, home invasions, and extortions occur in even the most elite of neighborhoods. Closely guarded officials, private sector representatives, and diplomats are not immune from these attacks. As a result, neighborhood watch groups now employ private security in legions and security checkpoints are normal, even in the best of areas. Police patrols have increased, as well.

In response to the threat posed by criminals, many citizens no longer frequent certain areas, such as the once popular "Zona Rosa". The surrounding neighborhoods of Zona Rosa are havens for violent criminals and gang members. Beyond the capital, security concerns, including insecure roads throughout the country, severely limit persons from enjoying the tourist opportunities El Salvador has to offer. Road accidents, which are frequent and often serious, discourage many citizens, especially those with children, from traveling far beyond San Salvador.

Beach options are limited and 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 U.S. citizens and residents.

### *Homicide*

The homicide rate in El Salvador for 2009 was 37 percent higher than 2008. The total number of homicides nationwide in 2009 was 4,365. This represents an average of 12 homicides per day. Other statistics are based on crimes reported by victims and those statistics vary widely among El Salvadorian government agencies. Nevertheless, the overall crime reports received by the police in 2009 were eight percent higher than 2008.

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## *Extortion*

Some categories of crime rose more significantly than others, particularly reports of extortion, which increased by 46 percent to 3,984 reported cases. In January 2010, the American Chamber of Commerce surveyed 400 businesses, revealing that 51 percent of the businesses reported being victims of extortion. Geographically, San Salvador had the lowest rate, with only 28 percent stating they had received extortion demands, while Usulután had the highest rate with 71 percent of respondents reporting they had been victims of extortion. It is generally believed that the extortion statistics are imprecise as many victims do not file reports.

One disturbing trend in 2009 and into 2010 is the rise in the use of hand grenades in extortion cases. While there has been a long history of the use of hand grenades in incidents of crime, their use was infrequent until the latter part of 2009 and they were generally not tied to extortion cases. Specifically, there were between one and three grenade attacks a month through 2009 until December, when there were six. By late January 2010 there were 10 grenade attacks that occurred during the month. These appear to be linked to extortion, causing at least twelve deaths and injuring 60 over three months. The attacks occurred at such places as open air markets, restaurants, police stations, and even a pediatric clinic. The majority of the victims have been innocent bystanders.

## *Armed Robbery*

Throughout 2009, the Regional Security Officer (RSO) in San Salvador received reports of criminals who robbed drivers while they were idle in traffic during daylight. The criminals would show drivers their concealed firearms and demand money. So far, no one has been hurt in these incidents. These robberies occur at intersections used regularly by both official and private U.S. citizens during their daily commutes. RSO San Salvador also received reports of armed robberies against U.S. citizens leaving ATM machines, hiking at tourist destinations, and mountain-biking in the hills around San Salvador.

Personal attacks, such as muggings, continue within the public transportation sector. Travelers are warned to avoid most public transportation, as it has become too

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dangerous for city and country commuting. Passengers on public buses are frequently robbed while 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. They ride city buses from one stop to the next, carrying out muggings and committing criminal acts with impunity.

### *Kidnapping*

In the past, economically motivated kidnappings for ransom were a serious concern; however, press reports indicate that kidnappings have decreased significantly since 2005. The police have succeeded in dismantling kidnapping gangs through strong policing and investigations. Salvadoran police statistics reported 18 kidnappings during 2009. An additional number of unlawful detentions or "Privación de Libertad," were reported.

### *Rape*

Rape remains a serious concern in El Salvador. There were 649 rapes reported to the police in 2009, a ten percent increase over 2008. However, local police and judicial experts estimate that less than 20 percent of all rapes are reported to authorities.

### *Residential Thefts*

Home invasions and residential burglaries are on the rise in affluent San Salvador residential neighborhoods. Many incidents occur during daylight hours and are carried out by individuals posing as delivery men in order to gain access. There are also reports of gang members following home unsuspecting drivers and then force their way in as their victims enter in order to commit home invasions. A contributing factor to crime in affluent neighborhoods is the unchecked development of squatter dwellings in the midst of some of the wealthier areas of the capital city.

### *Credit Card Skimming*

Credit card skimming is another crime that is on the rise and directly affects the diplomatic community. Official U.S. citizens have been victimized at well known restaurants, hotels, and

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retailers within the city of San Salvador. RSO San Salvador advises U.S. Embassy employees to make cash transactions only.

### *Road Safety*

Poorly maintained vehicles are common throughout El Salvador and pose a significant danger to travelers. There is virtually no street lighting on secondary roads in urban areas, which is a serious problem at night. U.S. Embassy San Salvador advises all personnel to avoid driving outside of the city during hours of darkness. Even within the city of San Salvador, it is common to see missing manhole covers and large objects in the roadway marking the danger.

A majority of vehicles in El Salvador are not up to U.S. standards. Mini-bus, bus, and taxi drivers do not adhere to traffic rules or regulations and cause many accidents. Because traffic laws are not enforced, drivers must take extraordinary efforts to drive defensively. If traffic signals are working, they are often ignored and vehicle passing near blind corners is common.

### **Political Violence**

There are no known international terrorist groups that operate within El Salvador. Since the end of the country's civil war in 1992, most groups that once violently opposed El Salvador's ruling government and U.S. policies in El Salvador 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 2009 election cycle was generally peaceful and ushered in the first popularly-elected leftist government after a relatively smooth transition.

The threat from transnational terrorism or transnational narcoterrorism cannot be ruled out. The government of El Salvador strongly supports of the U.S. government's counterterrorism efforts and has worked hard to tighten both border and airport security. However, the Central America Pact (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

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raised concerns that its implementation could possibly facilitate easier international movement of terrorists.

Public demonstrations against the government of El Salvador are somewhat common. Most demonstrations are concentrated in and around city centers or public buildings and other public areas. Although normally peaceful, they have created public security problems at times. Starting in the fall of 2006, and continuing to March 2010, there have been monthly protests by health-care workers. Most of these protests are staged near public buildings, hospitals and downtown areas and 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. In December 2009, a strike by the Stevedores Union closed the port of Acajutla for nearly a week.

There were no legal cases involving instances of terrorism affecting U.S. citizens or facilities brought before the Salvadoran judicial system in 2009, nor were there any judicial developments that would appear to have a significant impact on U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

## **Post-specific Concerns**

### *Earthquakes*

El Salvador is located in an area with significant seismic activity. In 1986, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake destroyed the previous U.S. Embassy. Approximately 1,500 people were reported to have been killed, over 10,000 injured, and 200,000 left homeless after the earthquake, as well as a week of aftershocks.

An earthquake measuring 7.1 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, resulting in over 1,000 deaths, one million left homeless, and over 400,000 homes destroyed.

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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. The most recent seismic tremor, measuring 5.8 occurred in January 2010. Because the epicenter was approximately 50 miles off the coast and just west of the border into Guatemala, there was little damage to the country. It is estimated that there are close to 2000 tremors that affect the country per year.

### *Volcanoes*

There are seven active volcanoes within El Salvador. The most recent eruption occurred in October 2005 when one of the country's largest volcanoes, Iamatepec, 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.

### *Hurricanes and Flooding*

There have been eight 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 during the rainy season. The rainy season usually runs from June through November. Mudslides, caused by rains from Hurricane Ida, in November 2009 killed almost 200 people and left 14,000 homeless.

### *Beach Safety*

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 recent holiday weekend, 15 Salvadorans drowned while swimming at El Salvador's beaches. In one month alone, three U.S. citizens drowned while swimming at beaches in the La Libertad and La Paz Departments.

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## *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 U.S. via Mexico. In 2009, local law enforcement seized five kilograms of heroin, 320 kilograms of marijuana, and 1,769 kilograms of cocaine. While El Salvador is not a major financial center, in 2009 the government seized nearly 2.9 million dollars worth of assets stemming from drug-related crimes.

El Salvador hosts a Cooperative Security Location (CSL) crucial to regional narcotics trafficking detection and interception efforts. Transnational street gangs are not thought to be major narcotics trafficking organizations. These gangs appear more involved in street-level drug sales. Neither precursor chemical production, transit, nor illicit trading in bulk ephedrine and pseudo ephedrine 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, recruitment efforts 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 developmental stages of becoming a modern and effective police organization that can protect the public. While several PNC investigative units have shown great promise, routine street level patrol techniques, as well as anti-gang and crime suppression efforts, lack effectiveness. Equipment shortages (particularly radios and vehicles) further limit PNC officers' ability to deter or respond to crimes effectively.

U.S. citizen residents or travelers detained by the police should insist on speaking to U.S. Embassy San Salvador representatives. Arrested or otherwise detained foreigners are

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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 the 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 very common practice for most automobile accidents where there is personal injury and for criminal acts, to include being accused of a criminal act. The court uses the 72 hours of detainment to further investigate the crime or accident. 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 in illegal drugs are strict and convicted offenders can expect lengthy jail sentences and fines.

U.S. citizens who live in, or who are visiting, El Salvador are encouraged to register with the Embassy. Citizens can register online at <https://travel.state.gov>. If you are the victim of a crime overseas, contact the nearest embassy or consulate where consular officers can provide assistance to U.S. citizens. To contact the Office of Overseas Citizens Services in Washington DC call 1-888-407-4747 (business hours) or (202) 647-5225 (after hours), overseas (202) 501-4444. The consular section, American citizen services of U.S. Embassy San Salvador can be reached at (503) 2501-2628 (during business hours) or (503) 2501-2252 (after-hours duty officer).

Dial 911 for public safety emergencies in El Salvador

National Civilian Police Criminal Investigation Division (503) 223-5214

National Civilian Police Public Security Division (503) 222-8203

Fire Department Headquarters (503) 243-2054

### **Medical Emergencies**

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Medical care is somewhat limited. Emergency services, even in the capital city, are basic. Although many physicians in San Salvador are U.S.-trained, their staff and equipment are generally not up to U.S. standards.

Diagnostic Hospital & Emergencies (503) 2264-4422

Women's Hospital (503) 2265-1212

Priority Ambulance (503) 2264-7911

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

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

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 your 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, including the local buses. There have been occasional reports of robberies involving inter-city and international busses. 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.

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've parked.

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

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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.

### **Further Information**

U.S. Embassy, San Salvador, El Salvador

Regional Security Office: (503) 2501-2244

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

24 hour Emergency: (503) 2501-2999

Marine Post 1: (503) 2501-2316

### **OSAC Country Council**

The San Salvador Country Council meets monthly and works in close partnership with the American Chamber of Commerce. The Country Council frequently holds seminars and briefings on local criminal trends. Contact the American Chamber of Commerce for further information on the San Salvador Country Council at [amchamsal@amchamsal.com](mailto:amchamsal@amchamsal.com), Phone (503) 2263-9494, Fax (503) 2263-9393.

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