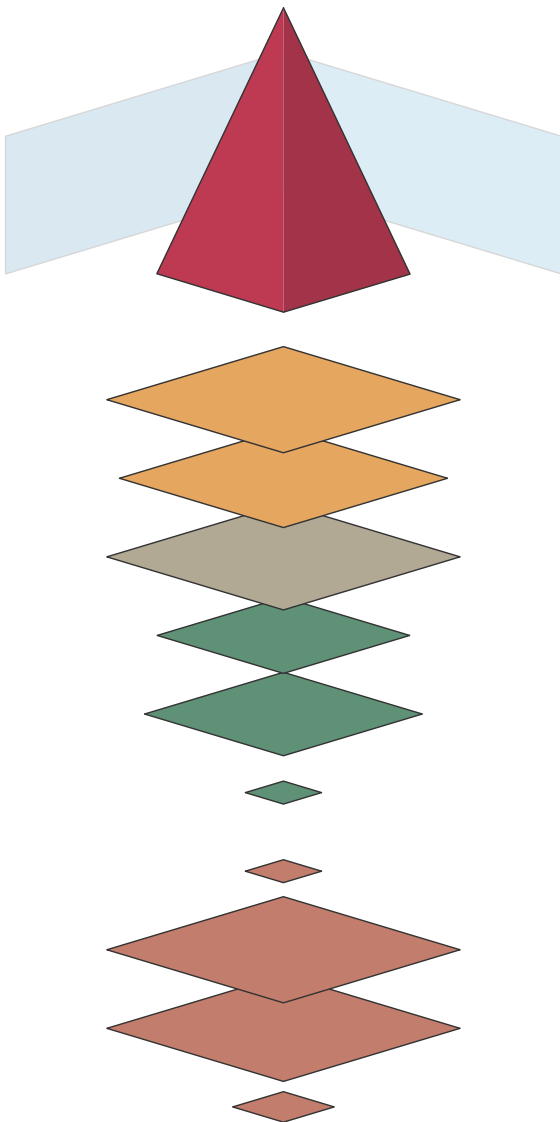




 **EL SALVADOR**



 **5.94**  
**CRIMINALITY SCORE**  
46<sup>th</sup> of 193 countries  
12<sup>th</sup> of 35 American countries  
6<sup>th</sup> of 8 Central American countries

 **CRIMINAL MARKETS** **5.00**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	7.00
FLORA CRIMES	5.00
FAUNA CRIMES	5.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	1.50
HEROIN TRADE	1.50
COCAINE TRADE	7.00
CANNABIS TRADE	7.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	2.00

 **CRIMINAL ACTORS** **6.88**

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	9.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	4.50

 **3.71**  
**RESILIENCE SCORE**  
145<sup>th</sup> of 193 countries  
29<sup>th</sup> of 35 American countries  
6<sup>th</sup> of 8 Central American countries

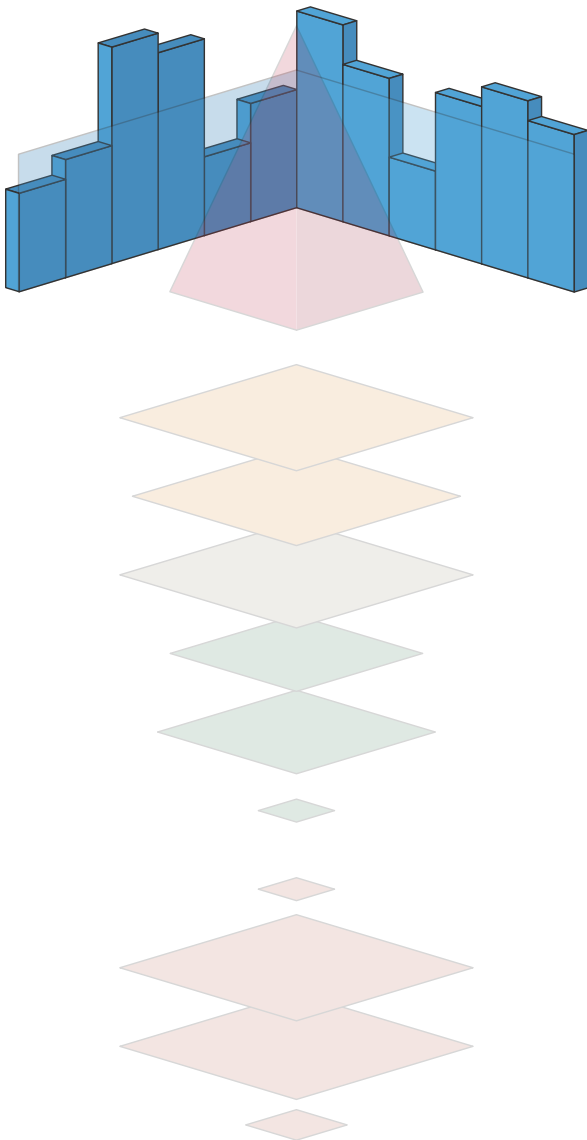


Funding provided by the United States Government.



ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

 **EL SALVADOR**





 **3.71**  
**RESILIENCE SCORE**

145<sup>th</sup> of 193 countries  
29<sup>th</sup> of 35 American countries  
6<sup>th</sup> of 8 Central American countries

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	2.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	3.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	5.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	5.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	2.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	3.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	4.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	2.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	4.00
PREVENTION	4.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	4.00

 **5.94**  
**CRIMINALITY SCORE**

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 <b>CRIMINAL MARKETS</b>	5.00
 <b>CRIMINAL ACTORS</b>	6.88



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# CRIMINALITY

## CRIMINAL MARKETS

### PEOPLE

Human trafficking is especially acute in El Salvador. Although some progress has been made, much needs to be done to address the domestic and international trafficking from El Salvador and neighbouring countries. Victims are often subjected to kidnapping and sexual exploitation, or are coerced into perpetrating violent acts for street gangs. Women and girls forced into prostitution frequently become victims of gender-based violence. Traffickers are usually the same nationality as their victims, and some victims subsequently run trafficking networks. There has been a recent increase in the use of online platforms and offers of domestic employment to lure victims into, for example, forced marriage. Victims trafficked internationally are subjected to forced labour in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and the US, while those trafficked domestically are used as forced labour in the agriculture and textile industries, domestic service, begging and sex trafficking.

Massive levels of displacement caused by criminal groups, violence and poverty in El Salvador have resulted in organized, highly profitable human-smuggling networks. As a result, nearly a quarter of the country's native-born population live outside its borders. Human smuggling in El Salvador typically involves loose national criminal networks that pay quotas to foreign transnational groups for passages, and liaise with corrupt state actors to facilitate the smuggling. Mexican and Colombian networks are also active in the country. Those who are smuggled face a gamut of risks: death, abandonment, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, sexual violence, torture and exposure to environmental elements.

### TRADE

Most homicides in El Salvador are committed with firearms. Many criminal actors possess illegal firearms and, considering the high rate of homicides, it is likely that the impact of illegal firearms is significant. Although some gangs carry out violent activities, such as extortion using firearms legally available on the domestic and international markets, there are a few large criminal groups that also traffic weapons. The latter is a crime of opportunity, fuelled by the availability of weapons in the region, leftover stocks from past conflicts, and the constant movement of people and goods to and from the US (the largest purveyor of legally purchased weapons in the region). The market is driven by demand from all types of criminal organizations and drug wars, as well as the lack of state monopoly on security in many areas, and high levels of violence and impunity. Weapons,

such as grenades, are also stolen from army stock piles and smuggled to Mexico.

### ENVIRONMENT

El Salvador is the only country in the world where mining for metals is completely banned, and the ban appears to have been effective. In contrast, fauna and flora crimes are significant issues in El Salvador, with perpetrators predominantly acting independently as loose criminal networks. Nonetheless, wildlife crime is often mingled with drug trafficking in the region, making it harder to counter these illicit markets separately. El Salvador is a source country, and a transit and destination market for illegal fauna exports from neighbouring Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Hundreds of birds are poached annually, and in recent years, several endangered birds indigenous to Nicaragua, such as parrots and macaws, are trafficked to the central market in San Salvador. The impact of fauna trafficking on biodiversity is substantial, since many of the species captured and sold illegally are endangered or nearly extinct; the most commonly confiscated species being parrots and iguanas. Of the millions of iguanas from captive breeding facilities exported for the pet trade, more than half may be wild, caught in neighbouring countries. With regard to flora crime, logging is a significant problem in El Salvador and it is likely that illegal logging for fuel and building materials constitutes a large part of this. Illegal logging does not appear to generate violence, and authorities do not usually intervene.

### DRUGS

Unlike neighbouring countries, El Salvador is not a major trafficking hub for cocaine. However, the market is large relative to the country's size and to other parts of the world. Currently, there is little domestic cocaine or crack use, but its popularity is growing. Criminal networks are involved in cocaine transportation and have collaborated with Mexican and Colombian cartels. This is a major source of violence, primarily between gangs vying for retail space, and between wholesale distributors. Some illicit actors have even built up political or economic fiefdoms that could challenge state supremacy and systematically undermine the rule of law. Tonnes of cocaine are intercepted annually, partly through operations carried out by the Salvadoran naval force. With regard to cannabis, El Salvador is not part of the major regional trafficking route from Guatemala and Mexico to the US. However, gangs are major distributors of cannabis and disputes over retail space often generate violence. An increase in arrests and prosecutions for low-level dealing is resulting in jails filling up. Compared to the cocaine and cannabis markets, the presence and use of synthetic drugs and heroin are negligible.

## CRIMINAL ACTORS

The two dominant rival mafia-style groups in El Salvador are MS-13 (the common name for Mara Salvatrucha) and Barrio 18, the latter of which has split into two factions, the Sureños and Revolucionarios. The tens of thousands of members of these gangs are typically young males from poor socio-economic backgrounds; they now forego their hallmark tattoos in order to avoid catching the attention of the authorities. These gangs maintain a presence in almost all municipalities, where extortion is their main revenue source. They also collect rent from those partaking in theft and resale, the sale of counterfeit goods (such as cigarettes), human smuggling and trafficking, and domestic drug dealing. In some areas, they maintain de facto control over the daily lives of communities. Gangs are known to pay off corrupt officials and have received money from the government in exchange for political support. They have almost complete control of the prison system, using prisons as administrative centres for organizing illicit activities. Significant access to firearms, resulting from permissive ownership laws, gun imports and leftover weapons from the civil war exacerbates the fierce rivalry between the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs, with violent turf wars contributing to internal displacement, mass migration and one of the highest national homicide rates per capita worldwide. Murder rates have decreased but there is debate as to whether this is the result of a hardline government response, or an apparent truce between the gangs. Recently, both gangs have contributed to enforcing COVID-19 restrictions, developing creative ways to continue collecting extortion payments from businesses.

The two main groups involved in commodity trafficking, the Taxis Cartel and Los Perrones, have seen their membership dismantled and replaced by loose criminal networks, which appear to avoid violence and largely succeed in operating outside the public eye. The Taxis Cartel was made up of Salvadorans well established in politics and business who worked with international drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico to transit cocaine and other narcotics through El Salvador. Los Perrones were predominantly contraband transporters (transportistas) working with Colombian, Mexican and Guatemalan groups to traffic drugs and other products, such as contraband clothing, through Central America to the eastern front of El Salvador. Networks of transportistas (freight companies, hoteliers, human smugglers and contraband sellers) also operate along smuggling routes going north from El Salvador, cooperating with transnational groups smuggling people and contraband.

Although Salvadoran criminal actors involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking and human smuggling cooperate with transnational groups (such as Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel), foreign groups do not have a significant presence within El Salvador. Furthermore, nothing suggests that state-embedded criminal groups exert control over any criminal market. There are, however, state actors who have facilitated criminal acts, protected criminal actors, obstructed criminal investigations, and sold weapons and ammunition to criminals on a regular basis. There is an indication that police systematically execute suspected gang members extrajudicially and share information on how to cover up these actions and obstruct investigations.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

El Salvador is a moderately stable country. Upon entering office in 2019, President Bukele enjoyed high levels of electoral support with an anti-corruption and security platform. Nonetheless, there is a general lack of confidence in political leadership, and government efforts to combat organized crime are largely ineffective, due in part to high-level corruption and collusion with criminal groups. In 2020, allegations were made – which have been denied by the president – that an informal non-aggression pact had been established between the government and El Salvador's major gangs.

On the international stage, El Salvador has ratified all the relevant treaties and conventions pertaining to organized crime, but impunity and high-level corruption hinder the country's ability to comply with international standards.

While El Salvador benefits from international assistance in the fight against organized crime, which has increased some institutional capacities, critical challenges, such as gang violence, insecurity and corruption, remain impediments to the establishment of effective and trustworthy institutions.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

There are no units within the judiciary specifically mandated to counter organized crime, and corruption and inefficiency within judicial institutions and among politicians hinder the implementation of anti-organized-crime legislation. There have been steps to address these issues and to aid investigations into crimes perpetrated by politicians, security forces and gang affiliates, including one which resulted in the incarceration of ex-president, Antonio Saca, on charges of embezzlement and money laundering.

El Salvador has a high number of people in pre-trial and remand imprisonment, demonstrating a deficiency in the processing of court cases. MS-13 and Barrio18 members are sometimes held in the same cells, resulting in the prison system being largely overtaken by gangs. Organized-crime groups maintain widespread territorial control and enjoy high levels of impunity, with limited resources, low public trust in law enforcement, and violence perpetrated by state actors hindering advancements. While raids by special forces have crippled the operational capacity of some gangs, they have also undermined the collection of vital intelligence. El Salvador is home to land and maritime smuggling routes for illicit drugs, humans, weapons and contraband. Its borders are porous, a situation exacerbated by limited resources, infrastructure and corruption.

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## **ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

El Salvador is at considerable risk of money laundering and terrorist financing. The veto of legislative reform, which would have given autonomy to the principal anti-money-laundering investigative body (Unidad de Investigación de Delitos Financieros), resulted in the country's suspension from the Egmont Group – an international organization of finance intelligence units – and severely tarnished the legitimacy and effectiveness of the country's anti-money-laundering capacity. Crime, insecurity and 'burdensome' regulations also hinder economic growth (the country has consistently the lowest growth rate in Central America). The government's inability to protect legitimate businesses from criminal activity, notably extortion, may partly explain the widespread reliance on informal practices.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION**

More can be done in El Salvador to identify victims of modern slavery and to support their exit. Government services for identifying and supporting organized-crime victims are often inadequate, with particularly limited services for women, children and LGBTI victims of human trafficking. There has been continued reliance on civil society organizations, which play the leading role in victim support and fill gaps left by the state, often cooperating with international organizations. Churches, in particular, fill a fundamental gap when it comes to attempts to demobilize gang members. The media is relatively free of political interference and is the main source of independent reporting on organized crime and state corruption, despite frequent harassment of the press by state actors. Legislation provides little protection, with journalists who try to investigate corruption or government finances being threatened or harassed. Members of the media are targets of the rampant violence in the country, and there have been several physical attacks on and murders of journalists in recent years.