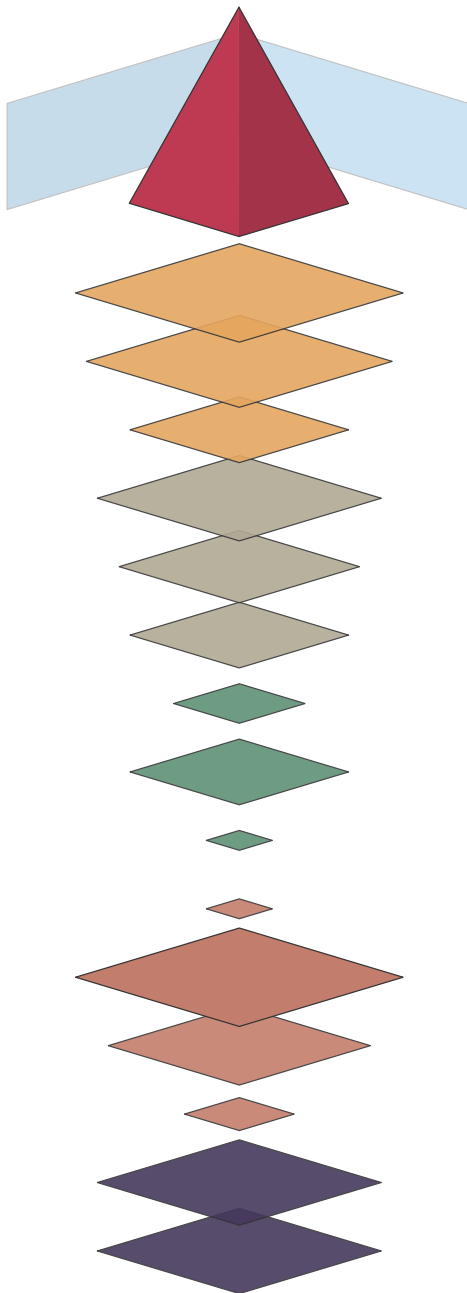


EL SALVADOR



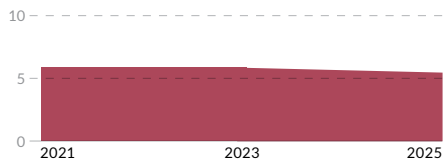
5.45 $\searrow 0.47$

CRIMINALITY SCORE

77th of 193 countries $\searrow 25$

18th of 35 American countries $\searrow 5$

7th of 8 Central American countries $\searrow 2$



CRIMINAL MARKETS

5.10 $\searrow 0.33$

HUMAN TRAFFICKING 7.50 $\nearrow 0.50$

HUMAN SMUGGLING 7.00 0.00

EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING 5.00 $\searrow 2.50$

ARMS TRAFFICKING 6.50 $\searrow 0.50$

TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS 5.50 $\nearrow 0.50$

ILLCIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS 5.00 $\searrow 0.50$

FLORA CRIMES 3.00 $\searrow 2.00$

FAUNA CRIMES 5.00 $\searrow 0.50$

NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES 1.50 0.00

HEROIN TRADE 1.50 0.00

COCAINE TRADE 7.50 0.00

CANNABIS TRADE 6.00 $\searrow 1.00$

SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE 2.50 0.00

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES 6.50 $\nearrow 1.00$

FINANCIAL CRIMES 6.50 0.00



CRIMINAL ACTORS

5.80 $\searrow 0.60$

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS 6.00 $\searrow 2.50$

CRIMINAL NETWORKS 6.00 $\searrow 1.00$

STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS 7.50 0.00

FOREIGN ACTORS 5.00 $\nearrow 0.50$

PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS 4.50 0.00



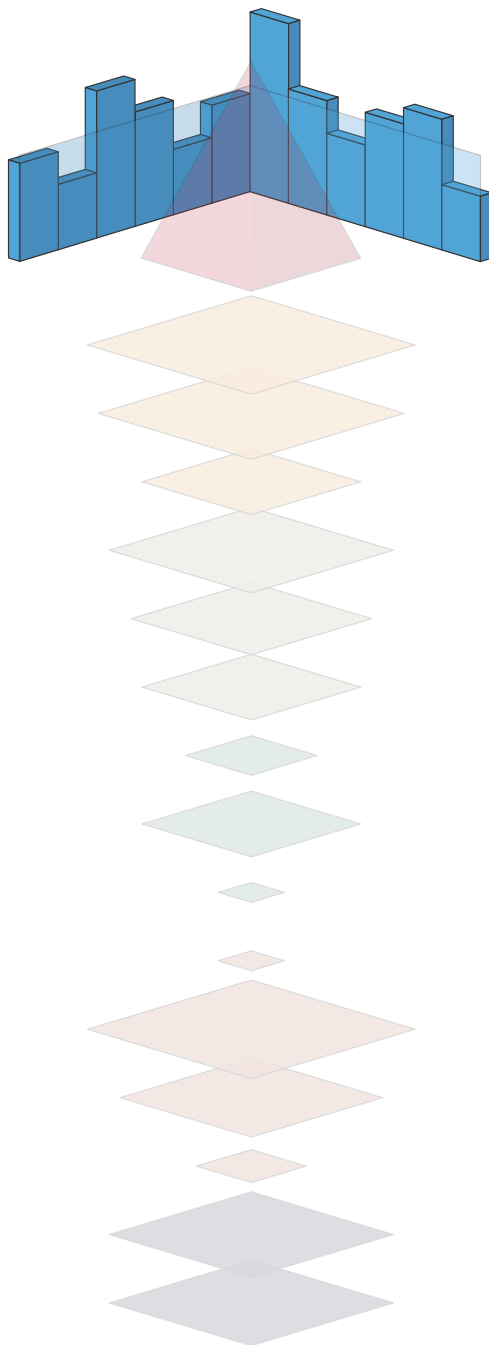
This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.



Funded by the European Union

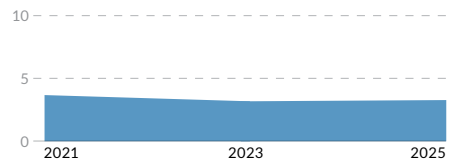
ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

EL SALVADOR



3.25 $\nearrow 0.04$ RESILIENCE SCORE

155th of 193 countries $\nearrow 8$
31st of 35 American countries -
7th of 8 Central American countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	3.00 $\nearrow 1.00$
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	2.00 0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	4.50 0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	3.50 $\searrow 0.50$
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	2.00 0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	3.00 0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.50 0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	3.50 0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	2.50 $\nearrow 0.50$
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	3.50 0.00
PREVENTION	4.00 0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	2.00 $\searrow 0.50$



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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

El Salvador remains a significant source, transit and destination country for human trafficking, exacerbated by weak democratic institutions and high levels of corruption. Alongside Guatemala and Honduras, the country is part of a region notorious for human trafficking, where criminal networks actively exploit vulnerable individuals. Victims of smuggling often fall into human trafficking when they cannot repay debts to smugglers, leading to forced labour in criminal enterprises such as drug and arms trafficking, extortion and prostitution. Gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 recruit children, some as young as eight years old, coercing them into criminal activities. These groups facilitate human trafficking operations, using social media platforms and encrypted messaging services to lure victims with false employment opportunities. The involvement of state-embedded actors in human trafficking has been reported, with legislators and government officials implicated in trafficking operations.

Data on migrant smuggling in El Salvador is scarce, though reports suggest the trade has become more lucrative post-pandemic. The security measures implemented by President Nayib Bukele's administration have led to increased migration, with former gang members also seeking to flee the country. Smuggling operations employ *trochas* (unofficial crossing points) and use both private and public transportation networks. The cost of smuggling varies by route and individual profiles, with some migrants paying via international remittances. The presence of state actors in smuggling networks is suggested by the use of Salvadoran airports for illicit transit. Authorities dismantled a significant migrant smuggling ring in 2024, arresting six individuals, including a gang leader. However, despite crackdowns, the smuggling trade persists, with migrants from Africa and Asia paying substantial fees to transit through the region. Reports suggest the illicit proceeds of smuggling operations may be funnelled into digital assets, taking advantage of El Salvador's minimal regulatory framework on cryptocurrency transactions.

Historically, extortion has been the primary financial mechanism for gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18, generating substantial revenue from businesses, transport operators and even schoolchildren. The state's crackdown on organized crime has significantly reduced gang control over neighbourhoods, leading to a reported decline in extortion cases. Many businesses no longer incorporate extortion payments into operational costs, and the transport sector reports significant savings due to reduced gang extortion demands. Nevertheless, extortion persists in

isolated areas, now carried out by independent criminals and former gang members. Although the overall impact of this criminal market has largely remained the same, the methods and types of extortion practices appear to have changed in recent years. Some perpetrators imitate gang tactics, utilizing threatening phone calls to demand one-time payments. Though official statistics suggest a decline in extortion-related crimes, lack of transparency in state data raises concerns over the true extent of the problem.

TRADE

El Salvador remains a key node in regional arms trafficking networks. Weapons primarily originate from the US, smuggled through Mexico before reaching Salvadoran criminal groups. Illicit arms also come from military surplus and black-market sales. Despite thousands of firearms being confiscated since the state of exception began in 2022, the estimated number of unaccounted-for military-grade weapons remains high. Experts suggest gangs have adjusted their operational tactics, hiding firearms to avoid seizures.

Counterfeit products, particularly toys, clothing and pharmaceuticals, enter El Salvador primarily through the port of Acajutla. Customs officials have seized counterfeit goods originating from China and Mexico, with some counterfeit medicines posing significant public health risks. However, limited investigative efforts have been made to trace counterfeit distribution networks.

The illicit trade of tobacco products has long served as a revenue stream for gangs. Particularly MS-13 is known to use illicit cigarettes to finance their activities, sometimes by forcing individuals to participate in smuggling and selling illicit cigarettes if they were unable to pay extortion fees. The crackdown on organized crime has reportedly diminished gang involvement in cigarette smuggling, shifting operations to Guatemala and Honduras. Nonetheless, illicit trade in excisable goods continues, with criminal groups leveraging regional smuggling routes.

ENVIRONMENT

Although flora crimes are not a consolidated criminal market in El Salvador, there have been reports of illegal logging. However, there does not seem to be a strong connection to organized crime. Available information points to loosely organized criminal networks approaching farmers to fell timber for them, but they do not seem to be part of a more sophisticated wider network. Fauna crimes involve wildlife trafficking, particularly of birds and reptiles, with El Salvador serving as a transit point for smuggled species moving towards the US and Europe. Seizures of illegally traded animals continue, but enforcement remains limited.

El Salvador banned mining in 2017, making non-renewable resource crimes relatively uncommon. However, recent policy shifts suggest potential mining reauthorization, which could attract illicit activities linked to resource extraction.

DRUGS

Heroin trafficking is not a major criminal market in El Salvador, though the country's role as a transit point remains plausible. Reports indicate heroin seizures in coastal regions, but consumption remains low compared to other drugs. El Salvador is a major transit country for cocaine moving from South America to the US, with criminal groups providing logistical support to Mexican, Colombian and Guatemalan cartels. The cocaine trade fuels high levels of violence, with gangs historically involved in trafficking operations. Although law enforcement has seized substantial drug shipments, a lack of transparency regarding judicial processes hinders comprehensive assessments of drug market disruptions. Cannabis smuggling occurs mainly through the Santa Ana region, with MS-13 and Barrio 18 controlling distribution networks. However, their activities have been severely impacted by the security measures that have been adopted by the government which has weakened these gangs' operativity. It remains to be seen if the current measures by the El Salvador government have curbed local demand for cannabis completely. Synthetic drug trafficking remains limited in El Salvador, though recent seizures of methamphetamine and fentanyl suggest increasing market activity. Fentanyl smuggling, particularly along the Honduran border, has raised concerns, with authorities issuing public alerts regarding its risks.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime in El Salvador is rising, with ransomware attacks and cryptocurrency-related fraud among the most prevalent offenses. The state-backed Chivo Wallet has been plagued by hacking incidents, exposing systemic vulnerabilities in digital financial security. El Salvador performs poorly in terms of cybersecurity preparedness, and reports suggest state-linked actors may be involved in digital harassment campaigns against journalists and activists.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crime is a deeply embedded issue in El Salvador, with fraud, tax evasion and embezzlement being widespread. In some instances, MS-13 gang members have been involved in such schemes trying to obtain funding for the gang. Corruption remains a critical issue, with both former and current officials implicated in fraud-related cases. Limited transparency and ineffective regulatory oversight allow illicit financial activities to persist.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

El Salvador's criminal landscape has long been dominated by MS-13 and Barrio 18, the latter split into two rival factions, 18R and 18S. These gangs have built transnational networks, collaborating with Mexican cartels and engaging in extortion, drug distribution, money laundering and arms trafficking. Historically, they controlled territories as de facto authorities, regulating commerce and imposing taxes. MS-13 maintains a layered leadership with councils and subunits, while Barrio 18 is more fragmented, led by regional bosses known as *palabrer*os. However, the government's sustained crackdown under the state of exception has significantly weakened their operations, driving many members into hiding or exile. Although their territorial control and extortion capabilities have diminished, thousands of affiliates remain at large, raising concerns about potential reorganization, particularly abroad. Both have adapted to law enforcement pressure, with younger members avoiding visible tattoos to evade detection. While gang influence within prisons has declined, incidents of bribery and illicit privileges persist, reflecting ongoing criminal infiltration.

Beyond street gangs, sophisticated criminal networks such as the Cartel de Taxis and Los Perrones operate within El Salvador, focusing primarily on drug trafficking. The Cartel de Taxis is deeply embedded within the country's elite, with connections to high-level politicians and businesses, enabling it to evade significant law enforcement scrutiny. While facing repeated allegations of money laundering and corruption, its leadership remains active and influential. Similarly, Los Perrones, once a dominant force in human and contraband smuggling, has seen many of its top members arrested, though the network continues facilitating drug movements northward in collaboration with Colombian, Mexican and Guatemalan trafficking organizations. These criminal networks thrive on corruption and weak regulatory oversight, using a combination of legitimate businesses and illicit operations to launder funds. Notably, recent investigations have uncovered links between senior government officials and these organizations, raising concerns over state complicity in organized crime.

El Salvador's political and security institutions have long facilitated criminal operations through corruption. The judiciary has also faced allegations of selective enforcement, with some prominent criminal figures escaping prosecution due to political connections. Moreover, under the state of exception, expanded powers granted to security forces have raised concerns about the potential for state officials to co-opt illicit activities previously dominated by gangs.

Foreign criminal groups play a limited but growing role in El Salvador's organized crime landscape. The Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel have been identified as key actors in the trans-shipment of drugs through the country. Recent arrests of Mexican nationals transporting large cocaine shipments highlight their presence.

Additionally, Colombian criminal enterprises, such as the Oficina de Envigado and the Gaitanist self-defence forces, have established gota a gota loan-sharking operations, laundering drug proceeds through local financial systems. This scheme involves charging exorbitant interest rates and coercing victims into surrendering their identities for illicit banking activities. The dismantling of local criminal structures has created opportunities for foreign groups to exploit emerging gaps in drug trafficking routes.

The private sector in El Salvador has been implicated in money laundering and corruption. The ease of establishing shell companies, particularly through platforms like the

Chivo Wallet, has raised concerns about financial abuse. Business leaders and financial institutions have allegedly played a role in enabling organized crime by providing laundering mechanisms and opaque corporate structures that facilitate illicit transactions. Investigations have also highlighted cases where public funds have been funnelled into private companies linked to government officials, reinforcing concerns over institutional corruption. The blurred lines between private enterprise and political elites create an environment where illicit financial activities can flourish with limited oversight or accountability.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

El Salvador's political leadership under President Bukele has undergone significant shifts marked by an increase in executive power and a decline in democratic checks and balances. Bukele's government has consolidated control over all branches of government, weakening judicial independence and restricting civil liberties. His re-election in 2024 followed the controversial decision of the supreme court to overturn the constitutional ban on consecutive presidential terms. The administration has pursued a hardline security approach, leading to a drastic reduction in gang violence but also to widespread reports of arbitrary arrests, mass detentions and human rights violations. Despite concerns from international observers, Bukele remains highly popular, with many Salvadorans supporting his tough stance on crime. According to the 2024 Gallup Global Safety Report, public safety perceptions reached record-breaking numbers, with nearly 90% of citizens reportedly feeling safe at night. However, surveys conducted by the country's Central American University in 2024 indicate a growing reluctance among citizens (over 60% of survey respondents) to publicly express political opinions due to fears of government retaliation.

Government transparency and accountability have weakened, with corruption becoming increasingly institutionalized. Key state institutions, including anti-corruption agencies and oversight bodies, have been co-opted by the executive, limiting their effectiveness. Investigations into financial crimes linked to government officials have been suppressed, while reports of nepotism and favouritism within the administration have surfaced. The government has also been accused of weaponizing anti-corruption measures against political opponents while shielding allies from scrutiny. Although El Salvador's right to information law remains in place, access to government records has become more restrictive, and investigative journalists face harassment and legal threats.

On the international stage, El Salvador remains engaged in regional and global efforts against organized crime. Reforms enacted in January 2024 introduced principles governing extradition and international cooperation. The country holds the pro tempore presidency of the Central American integration system and has taken steps to improve cross-border law enforcement cooperation with Guatemala and Honduras. However, its relations with the US have deteriorated due to allegations that the Bukele administration secretly negotiated with MS-13 gang members and obstructed extraditions. Meanwhile, El Salvador has sought closer ties with China, signalling a shift in its diplomatic priorities.

Since March 2022, El Salvador has operated under a state of emergency that has entrenched a punitive approach to security, marked by legislative reforms weakening due process and oversight. Measures include eased wiretapping procedures, removal of judicial and human rights oversight, and provisions allowing mass gang trials of hundreds of defendants. Legislation affecting criminal markets includes firearm registration proposals and medical cannabis regulations, though gaps remain in enforcement and public education. Environmental concerns persist despite compliance with CITES, amid efforts by foreign companies to access mineral-rich lands and the government's reluctance to adopt regional environmental frameworks.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The Salvadoran judicial system has been significantly altered by the state of exception introduced in 2022. According to the 2024 Freedom of the World report, the country's judicial system is not independent. The removal and replacement of supreme court justices and the attorney general by legislative decrees have eroded judicial independence, making the judiciary largely subordinate to the executive.

Habeas corpus petitions have been largely ignored, and due process violations have increased, particularly for those detained under the emergency regime. Legislative changes have facilitated mass trials, further limiting judicial oversight and raising concerns about procedural fairness. Human rights groups have claimed that inmates in the centre for the confinement of terrorism, a maximum-security jail built to imprison 'high-ranking' members of the country's main gangs, as well as in other Salvadoran prisons, are subjected to inhumane conditions, including torture, with many being presumed innocent yet confined alongside convicted criminals. While the country's criminal justice measures have been effective in reducing gang-related homicides and organized crime, critics cite the simultaneous decline in constitutional protections in implementing these efforts.

El Salvador's law enforcement agencies have played a central role in the government's crackdown on gang activity. The national civil police and military have conducted large-scale operations, often relying on broad and opaque criteria for arrests. While these measures have led to a sharp drop in homicide rates, reports of indiscriminate detentions, abuses in custody and excessive use of force have also surged. Corruption within law enforcement remains an issue, with allegations of collusion between officers and criminal organizations persisting. The transfer of control over criminal investigations from the attorney general's office to the national civil police has further concentrated power in the hands of law enforcement, weakening critical checks and balances. The ongoing state of exception – now in place for over two years – has suspended key constitutional protections, enabling authorities to bypass due process and engage in warrantless surveillance. Community policing initiatives have largely been abandoned in favour of militarized operations, which, though effective in disrupting gang activities, have eroded trust and limited intelligence gathering. Law enforcement agencies also remain underfunded, with inadequate case management systems impeding anti-trafficking efforts.

El Salvador's territorial integrity is challenged by its position within Central America's major drug trafficking routes. While government security initiatives, including increased border patrols and enhanced naval operations, have led to record drug seizures, the country remains vulnerable to transnational criminal activities. Limited control over maritime and land borders continues to facilitate illicit flows of narcotics, arms and people.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

El Salvador's financial system has seen increased scrutiny due to weaknesses in anti-money laundering measures. The government has proposed reforms aimed at strengthening its regulatory framework, yet critics argue that these efforts lack technical rigor and exclude key sectors from oversight. The use of cryptocurrencies, particularly Bitcoin, has introduced additional regulatory challenges, with

concerns about the potential for money laundering and financial fraud. The country's reliance on informal financial transactions further complicates efforts to combat illicit financial flows.

The economic regulatory environment remains fragile, with persistent issues of corruption and inadequate protections for businesses against extortion. Although mass arrests have disrupted gang-related extortion networks, economic conditions remain challenging. The government's interventionist approach, including price control measures, has raised concerns about its long-term economic strategy. Public procurement laws have been amended to limit oversight, increasing opportunities for financial mismanagement. The government's adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender has not delivered expected economic benefits. On the contrary, the absence of regulatory oversight and transparency – particularly concerning the state-run Chivo Wallet – has created opportunities for misuse, including potential money laundering and providing refuge for individuals seeking to evade prosecution, raising serious concerns around financial crime and impunity. Nonetheless, El Salvador maintains a relatively open market environment, offering equal treatment to foreign and domestic investors. In an effort to address fiscal and external imbalances, the government has taken recent corrective steps, including approving a restrained 2025 budget, settling domestic arrears, and reducing short-term financing pressures through a series of debt buybacks.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support mechanisms remain underdeveloped. The government provides limited resources for victims of organized crime, relying heavily on civil society organizations to fill the gap. Existing programmes primarily focus on women and children, leaving male victims without adequate support. The state's witness protection programme suffers from bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource shortages, undermining efforts to ensure the safety of those cooperating with law enforcement. The state of exception has exacerbated these issues by depriving victims of legal safeguards.

Crime prevention strategies have been partially implemented, with youth-focused initiatives such as the construction of community centres aiming to provide alternatives to gang involvement. Drug prevention programmes have been launched in schools and workplaces, but their impact is yet to be assessed. In the area of environmental crime, authorities have taken steps to regulate the wildlife trade but have yet to develop a comprehensive framework for preventing natural resource exploitation. Overall, most government efforts remain focused on enforcement rather than long-term prevention.

The role of non-state actors in El Salvador's resilience landscape is increasingly complex. Civil society organizations,

particularly human rights groups and independent media, operate under growing restrictions. Journalists investigating government corruption face intimidation, while NGOs advocating for transparency and accountability have been subjected to harassment. The state of exception has been extended multiple times, limiting civil liberties and enabling the suppression of dissent. Religious institutions, particularly evangelical churches, continue to play a crucial role in gang rehabilitation efforts, often stepping in where the state has failed. However, legal restrictions and targeted prosecutions against activists have limited civil society's ability to function effectively.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.