



## COI QUERY

**Country of Origin** **EL SALVADOR**

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**Main subject** **Crime levels, including homicides, disappearances, kidnapping and extortion; territorial presence and activities of MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs; armed confrontations between gangs and with authorities; state response to gangs; state protection for victims (1 January 2019 – 9 March 2022)**

**Question(s)**

**Date of completion** 10 March 2022

**Query Code** Q12-2022

**Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)** N/A

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The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on 10 March 2022. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

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## COI QUERY RESPONSE - El Salvador

### 1. Main gangs

For information on gangs in El Salvador during 2017-2018, see EASO Query Response Q113-2018: [https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/SLV\\_Q113.pdf](https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/SLV_Q113.pdf)

The main criminal gangs in El Salvador are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) [Maras] and 18<sup>th</sup> Street Barrio/Barrio 18 [with two factions the Revolucionarios and Sureños].<sup>1</sup> MS-13 is approximately double the size of Barrio 18.<sup>2</sup> These gangs are involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, kidnapping, human smuggling, sex trafficking, murder, assassinations, racketeering, blackmail, and extortion.<sup>3</sup> MS-13 and Barrio 18 are described as violent and well-armed, and are reported to be the largest contributors to the homicide numbers in El Salvador.<sup>4</sup>

There are approximately 60 000 gang members active in El Salvador,<sup>5</sup> however other sources report there are tens of thousands, but there is no reliable number.<sup>6</sup> If collaborators and family members of gang members are included as part of the gang's network, the figure rises to 400 000.<sup>7</sup>

The El Salvadoran gangs, like MS-13 and Barrio 18 were designated as a terrorist group by El Salvador's courts in 2017.<sup>8</sup> The gang leadership is incarcerated and operate their activities from within prisons.<sup>9</sup> However, International Crisis Group remarked in July 2020 that the gangs have evolved with a new generation of gang leadership emerging on the street which has less reliance on the incarcerated leadership, with which does not always 'see eye to eye'.<sup>10</sup>

### 2. Homicides and disappearances: trends from 2019-2022

Since the civil war ended in 1992, violence in El Salvador has been described as endemic.<sup>11</sup> El Salvador's high homicide rate has been dropping since 2015,<sup>12</sup> when it was deemed the most violent country in the hemisphere with 6 650 murders and a homicide rate of 103 murders per 100 000 residents.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, there were 2 398 murders, and the National Police of El Salvador reported that there were 1 322 homicides in 2020, marking a 45 percent drop compared to the

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<sup>1</sup> InSight Crime, El Salvador Profile, 15 September 2020, [url](#); EFE, About 200 gang members arrested in El Salvador, government says, 24 September 2021, Factiva

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>3</sup> US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> OSAC, El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Noticias Financieras/La Prensa Grafica, Almost a thousand complaints against police officers in five years, 9 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>8</sup> The Washington Post, El Salvador's government cut deals with MS-13 gang in bid to reduce killings, report says, 5 September 2020, [url](#); AP, More than 400 years in prison for Salvadoran gang members, 8 March 2022, Factiva

<sup>9</sup> Noticias Financieras/La Prensa Grafica, Almost a thousand complaints against police officers in five years, 9 December 2021, Factiva; InSight Crime, El Salvador Profile, 15 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 28

<sup>11</sup> OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>12</sup> El Salvador, National Police, Grafico: Total de homicidios por año (Graph: Total homicides by year) [Twitter], 2 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> InSight Crime, InSight Crime's 2015 Homicide Round up, 14 January 2016, [url](#)



previous year<sup>14</sup>. During the year 2021, El Salvador police recorded 1 140 homicides and a homicide rate of 17.6 per 100 000 people.<sup>15</sup> There was a spike in gang-related homicides in November 2021 [discussed below], in which 22 people died in a single day.<sup>16</sup> In February 2022, police reported at least 16 people were murdered during the month.<sup>17</sup>

There have been 13 000 reported victims of disappearances recorded by police, including 400 children, between January 2014 and November 2020.<sup>18</sup> However the NGO Foundation for the Studies of the Application of the Law (FESPAD), reported that although police received those complaints, their own data from other official sources recorded over 22 000 cases,<sup>19</sup> noting the statistical discrepancies in institutional reporting of disappearances were problematic.<sup>20</sup> FESPAD produced a report on trends in disappearances that provides graphical historic trends in the murder rate and the disappearance rates over multiple decades that indicate a spike in disappearances since 2017.<sup>21</sup> During 2019, there were 3 175 missing persons and during 2020, the Attorney General's office reported that there were 2 251 disappearances; also higher than the 1 322 annual homicide figure.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, there were 1 124 reported disappearance cases; also higher than the recorded murders.<sup>23</sup>

President Bukele has taken credit for reduced gang-related homicide rates in by crediting his Territorial Control Plan [discussed below],<sup>24</sup> claiming the historic reductions in violence as one of the government's primary achievements in 2020.<sup>25</sup> However, experts on Salvadoran crime reported the likelihood that the drop in the murder rate and increased disappearances in 2021 indicated that murders were likely being concealed<sup>26</sup> and there was suspicion that gangs were 'hiding bodies'.<sup>27</sup>

FESPAD's April 2021 report on the situation of disappearances stated that disappearances are a criminal phenomenon that happens in all departments and the vast majority of municipalities in El Salvador, in both rural and urban areas, and in a range of different circumstances. The same report provided a graphic of the 14 municipalities with the highest disappearances in 2014-2019, noting San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel as the top three.<sup>28</sup> During 2020, disappearances were concentrated in the central region, with San Salvador being the highest, followed by La

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<sup>14</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); IACHR, Chapter IV Human Rights Development in the region, Annual Report 2020, [url](#), para 347;

<sup>15</sup> Insight Crime, Insight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round Up, 1 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>16</sup> Insight Crime, El Salvador's gangs send a message in blood, 16 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> AP, More than 400 years in prison for Salvadoran gang members, 8 March 2022, Factiva

<sup>18</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>19</sup> EFE, El Salvador recorded more than 22,000 reports of disappearances between 2014-2019, 8 April 2021, Factiva

<sup>20</sup> FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), p. 42; USDOS also noted that discrepancies in official figures

<sup>21</sup> See: FESPAD, Grafico 1: Tasas de homicidios por cada cien mil habs. 2001-2020 (p. 26) and Grafico 4: Reportes de personas desaparecidas registrados por la PNC 2009-2019 (p. 40), in FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> El Salvador.com, Fiscalía registra 2,251 personas desaparecidas en 2020, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>23</sup> Insight Crime, Insight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round Up, 1 February 2022, [url](#); El Salvador.com, 2021 cerró con el doble de casos de desapariciones sin resolver, con respecto a 2020, [url](#); La Prensa Gráfica, Desaparecidos ya superan cifra de homicidios en El Salvador, 4 Noviembre 2021, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Insight Crime, Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims, 24 August 2021, [url](#); InSight Crime, El Salvador Profile, 15 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> El Faro, Bukele has been negotiating with MS-13 for a reduction in homicides and electoral support, 6 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> La Prensa Gráfica, Desaparecidos ya superan cifra de homicidios en El Salvador, 4 Noviembre 2021, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> Insight Crime, Insight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round Up, 1 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> See: Grafico 6: Municipios con mayor porcentaje de denuncias de desapariciones reportadas en la PNC (2014-2019), in: FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), p. 57



Libertad and Sonsonate.<sup>29</sup> The 2021 increase in disappearances and decrease in murders reportedly occurred in areas that have been prioritised by the government's Territorial Control Plan for security action. In 2021, the government identified the areas with the most significant drop in homicides as San Salvador, San Miguel, and Soyapango; however disappearances in these areas doubled. La Prensa also reported San Salvador as one of the departments with greater magnitude of disappearances, as well as Cuscatlán, La Libertad and Santa Ana.<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group provides a municipality-level map of the changes in the homicide rate from 2019-2020 since Bukekle was elected.<sup>31</sup> La Prensa provides a map of the departments showing the areas with the highest levels of disappearances and murders during the year 2021.<sup>32</sup>

The main profiles of those who are abducted and victims of disappearances are adolescents and young men.<sup>33</sup> Women account for 30 to 40 % of victims.<sup>34</sup> However, 'the homicide rate among women, in particular, has been on the rise,' according to the BTI's 2021 report on El Salvador.<sup>35</sup>

Disappearances 'are committed by a range of actors, including gangs and the police' with few being investigated by authorities.<sup>36</sup> A specialist on criminal violence interviewed by the Salvadoran news source La Prensa stated that the drop in homicides does not necessarily imply that the areas are now no longer dangerous, since gangs are resorting to disappearances to maintain their power.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. Territorial presence and control by MS-13 and Barrio 18

MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs are dispersed throughout El Salvador,<sup>38</sup> and operate in 94 percent of the country's municipalities, as each gang member has a network of at least 6 collaborators or family members.<sup>39</sup> According to FP, 'gangs have exerted control over entire communities for decades through extortion, disappearances, and frequent killings' and 'control every facet of life'.<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch stated in its World Report 2022, published 13 January 2022, gangs exert control over 'parts of the territory' and have territorial control over some neighbourhoods and extort residents throughout the country.<sup>41</sup> International Crisis Group stated that since 2014, gangs operate by dividing up territory and therefore do not fight one another directly for territory to the same extent as in the past; they are more focused on the administration of their territory and preventing members from 'crossing "invisible borders"' into rival areas.<sup>42</sup> Gangs control access to their territories and those living in one area cannot enter the territory of another, even by public transit. Gangs also checked government issued ID upon entry into territory and 'if gang members discovered that a person lived in a rival gang's territory, that person risked being

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<sup>29</sup> Elsalvador.com, Fiscalía registra 2,251 personas desaparecidas en 2020, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> La Prensa Gráfica, Desaparecidos ya superan cifra de homicidios en El Salvador, 4 Noviembre 2021, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>32</sup> La Prensa Gráfica, Desaparecidos ya superan cifra de homicidios en El Salvador, 4 Noviembre 2021, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> EFE, El Salvador recorded more than 22,000 reports of disappearances between 2014-2019, 8 April 2021, Factiva; FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), p. 56

<sup>34</sup> EFE, El Salvador recorded more than 22,000 reports of disappearances between 2014-2019, 8 April 2021, Factiva

<sup>35</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), El Salvador Country Report 2022, 2022, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>36</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> La Prensa Gráfica, Desaparecidos ya superan cifra de homicidios en El Salvador, 4 Noviembre 2021,

<sup>38</sup> OSAC, El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>40</sup> FP, El Salvador's Homicide Rate Hit a Historic Low in 2020, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 26



killed, beaten, or denied entry into the territory.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Activities and treatment of the local population by gangs, including extortion

Organised criminal gangs were ‘significant perpetrators of crime’ and carried out criminal acts which have been directed at the population, including police, judicial authorities, journalists, businesses, women, and vulnerable groups.<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch similarly reported in January 2022 that ‘gangs kill, disappear, rape, or displace those who resist’.<sup>45</sup> Gang activities affecting the local population during the period include<sup>46</sup>:

- Homicides<sup>47</sup> and assassinations<sup>48</sup>
- Disappearances<sup>49</sup> and kidnapping<sup>50</sup>
- Extortion<sup>51</sup> resulting in death for refusal to pay<sup>52</sup>
- Death threats and intimidation<sup>53</sup>
- Drug trafficking<sup>54</sup> and human trafficking<sup>55</sup>
- Child recruitment<sup>56</sup>
- Sexual violence<sup>57</sup>
- Restrictions on free movement of the local population<sup>58</sup>
- Forced displacement,<sup>59</sup> with an estimated 454 000 people displaced in 2019 due to violence, threats, extortion, and assassinations by gangs<sup>60</sup>

Extortion is one of the key sources of income generated by the gangs, particularly by targeting transportation workers and business owners.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, extortion increased by more than 17%.<sup>62</sup> During 2020, extortion figures were lower than in previous years due to the COVID restrictions

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<sup>43</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>44</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>45</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022,

<sup>46</sup> US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva; HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>48</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>49</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 52-55

<sup>50</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>51</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva; AP, El Salvador captures gang members who ordered homicides, 5 January 2022, Factiva; US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>52</sup> AP, El Salvador captures gang members who ordered homicides, 5 January 2022, Factiva; Noticias Financieras, Crime is lucrative for Salvadoran Gangs, 22 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>53</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2; Noticias Financieras, Crime is lucrative for Salvadoran Gangs, 22 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>54</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>55</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>56</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva; HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>57</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>58</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva; USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>59</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>60</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>61</sup> Noticias Financieras, Crime is lucrative for Salvadoran Gangs, 22 December 2021, Factiva; International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>62</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 6



and because MS-13 and Barrio 18 both reportedly suspended or reduced extortion payments.<sup>63</sup> By December 2020 the transportation sector had paid 10 million USD in extortion to gangs through the year, down from 12-14 million in pre-pandemic years. IHS Global Insight remarked that the gang's efforts to recuperate their COVID-related losses and in similar previous periods with low homicide rates, criminal groups have increased extortion due to lower risks of assassinations from rival groups.<sup>64</sup> In 2021, it was reported that public transportation businessmen have again paid an average of 12 million USD to the gangs.<sup>65</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was reported that MS-13 was involved in enforcing COVID curfews within the communities under its defacto control, under threat of punishment, while the Barrio 18 was involved in handing out food bags.<sup>66</sup>

## 5. State response to gangs

In 2019, President Nayib Bukele and his Nueva Ideas party, was elected as an outsider to the traditional two-party system, and dealing with crime by gangs has been Bukele's 'top priority' since taking office. However he has been criticised by human rights groups for his approach to his adversaries.<sup>67</sup>

Sources reported that detailed information was not made public about the content of the Territorial Control Plan, which sets out the country's national security policy.<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group reports that it has been described as an 'iron fist' approach mostly focused on policing 22 priority municipalities, including permanent deployment of patrols, mass detentions, new police equipment, tightened control over jails, and confinement and transfer of thousands of gang members.<sup>69</sup> The Interamerican Commission on Human Rights also reported that the plan was criticised by civil society as 'repressive' and causing a 'militarization' of citizen security with 9,000 soldiers involved in security operations in 2020.<sup>70</sup>

In July 2020, President Bukele ordered increased military deployments to carry out the Territorial Control Plan. In September 2021, there were 20 000 soldiers participating in the Territorial Control Plan carrying out military operations against the gangs in El Salvador to arrest gang members for crimes such as homicide, extortion, assault, rape, and theft. The National Civil Police (PNC) arrested 200 gang members in a single week during September 2021 during such operations.<sup>71</sup> In November 2021, there was a spike in gang-related homicides blamed on gangs, with 30 people (or up to 40<sup>72</sup> or as high as 124<sup>73</sup>) killed over several days, resulting in a government operation (*Despliegue Nacional*<sup>74</sup>) to deploy security forces in San Salvador to

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<sup>63</sup> International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, July 2020, [url](#), p. 28

<sup>64</sup> IHS Global Insight, *Gang-led extortion targeting pharmacies, cargo carriers in El Salvador likely to increase business security costs in 2021*, 21 April 2021, Factiva

<sup>65</sup> Noticias Financieras, *Crime is lucrative for Salvadoran Gangs*, 22 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>66</sup> International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, July 2020, [url](#), p. 28

<sup>67</sup> International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, July 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 4, 6

<sup>68</sup> Amnesty International (AI), *Amnesty International Report 2020/2021, The State of the World's Human Rights*, June 2021, [url](#), p. 151; International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, July 2020, [url](#), p. 10, 14

<sup>69</sup> International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, July 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>70</sup> IACHR, *Chapter IV Human Rights Development in the region, Annual Report 2020*, [url](#), para. 348

<sup>71</sup> EFE, *About 200 gang members arrested in El Salvador, government says*, 24 September 2021, Factiva

<sup>72</sup> AP, *El Salvador captures gang members who ordered homicides*, 5 January 2022, Factiva

<sup>73</sup> Noticias Financieras/La Prensa Grafica, *Seven out of 10 homicide victims were civilians*, 31 December 2021, Factiva

<sup>74</sup> Insight Crime, *El Salvador's gangs send a message in blood*, 16 December 2021, [url](#)



screen entry point into poor areas and conduct door to door searches for gang members.<sup>75</sup> Infobae media source alleged that the escalation was a result of a break in government negotiations with the gangs which the state denied.<sup>76</sup> Insight Crime provided the view that street level gang members carried out the wave of violence to pressure their own jailed leaders who have received perks from the truce with Bukele that did not extend to street level gang members.<sup>77</sup> In January 2022, specialised police and soldiers arrested 8 MS-13 gang leaders (*palabrerros*) and individuals who transmit orders (*corredores*) whom they blamed for the November 2021 murder spike.<sup>78</sup>

Bukele and government officials have taken credit for reduced gang-related homicide rates in 2020-2021 by crediting his Territorial Control Plan,<sup>79</sup> claiming the historic reductions in violence as one of the government's primary achievements in 2020.<sup>80</sup> Sources report that the exact reasons for the drop are not clear, however, and point to factors such as a secret gang truce made by the government as playing a role.<sup>81</sup> The secret deal was exposed in September 2020, when Salvadoran newspaper El Faro revealed through an investigation that the administration of President Bukele secretly met and negotiated with El Salvador's main gangs (MS-13 and two factions of Barrio 18: Revolucionarios and Sureños<sup>82</sup>) to reduce homicide rates in exchange for concessions and privileges for gang leaders dating back to 2019.<sup>83</sup> Bukele has denied the allegations of gang collusion and reportedly shut down a government investigation by the anti-corruption office within the Salvadoran Prosecutor's office in 2021.<sup>84</sup> Sources report that the negotiations are evidence that the gangs themselves are responsible for the reduction in the murder rate not the state security actions;<sup>85</sup> leading to one of the lowest murder rates in the country's recent history'.<sup>86</sup> COVID-19 related restrictions and confinements mean that analysts have difficulty analysing the effectiveness of the Territorial Control Plan, noting that there was an initial sharp decline in homicides with the COVID confinement, but which sharply increased after it was lifted.<sup>87</sup> Sources also remarked that in 2012 and 2015, previous governments also made truces with gangs that resulted in reductions in violence, followed by spikes in violence

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<sup>75</sup> AP, El Salvador sends troops, police into streets amid killings, 12 November 2021, Factiva; Al Jazeera, El Salvador orders army into streets after spike in killings, 12 November 2021, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch Database: November 2021 – El Salvador, [url](#)

<sup>76</sup> International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch Database: November 2021 – El Salvador, [url](#)

<sup>77</sup> Insight Crime, El salvador's gangs send a message in blood, 16 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>78</sup> AP, El Salvador captures gang members who ordered homicides, 5 January 2022, Factiva

<sup>79</sup> Insight Crime, Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims, 24 August 2021, [url](#); EFE, About 200 gang members arrested in El Sallvador, government says, 24 September 2021, Factiva

<sup>80</sup> El Faro, Bukele has been negotiating with MS-13 for a reduction in homicides and electoral support, 6 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>81</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. i

<sup>82</sup> Europa Press, El Salvador: Bukele's government negotiated with three gangs in El Salvador, 24 August 2021, Factiva

<sup>83</sup> El Faro, Bukele has been negotiating with MS-13 for a reduction in homicides and electoral support, 6 September 2020, [url](#); Insight Crime, Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims, 24 August 2021, [url](#); US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>84</sup> Reuters, Salvadoran ex-prosecutor says government quashed probe into pact with gangs, 28 December 2021, Factiva; El Faro, Criminal investigation found the Bukele administration hid evidence of negotiations with gangs, 23 August 2021, [url](#)

<sup>85</sup> AP, Gang negotiations a sensitive topic in El Salvador, 9 December 2021, Factiva; Insight Crime, Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims, 24 August 2021, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), pp., 24-26

<sup>86</sup> Insight Crime, Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims, 24 August 2021, [url](#)

<sup>87</sup> IHS Global Insight, Gang-led extortion targeting pharmacies, cargo carriers in El Salvador likely to increase business security costs in 2021, 21 April 2021, Factiva



when those truces with gangs broke down.<sup>88</sup>

In 2021, Human Rights Watch continued to report that officials from the government and political parties allegedly colluded with gang members on criminal operations or to win electoral support.<sup>89</sup> In December 2021, the US Treasury announced an investigation into certain individual officials who met and made agreements with the gang leadership to keep gang violence and homicides low in exchange for political support during elections, as well as support for the government's national COVID-19 quarantine in gang-controlled areas, among other acts of corruption related to misappropriation of state assets and government contracts.<sup>90</sup>

## 6. Armed confrontations and use of lethal force

Since 2014, International Crisis Group reported that the carving up of territory between gangs and administration of 'invisible borders' has reduced the inter-gang violence over turf wars that were primarily responsible for past high homicide rates; however, the drop in violence rates has not affected the territorial presence and control that gangs exert, including during COVID-19 lockdowns when gangs reportedly reduced extortion payments and were involved in enforcement of curfews.<sup>91</sup> Intergang feuds have been replaced with violence targeting security officers and family members, as well as 'internal purges' and those who fail to pay extortion.<sup>92</sup>

During 2021, President Bukele continued to use the military for public security functions although this was stopped under the 1992 peace agreement,<sup>93</sup> which he has done since 2019, when he issued a decree authorising military involvement in policing such as 'peacekeeping' in high crime areas, conducting joint operations, and making arrests.<sup>94</sup> There has been a significant reduction in the number of shootouts between gangs and security forces since Bukele took office,<sup>95</sup> however Crisis Group also remarked, that reductions in violence are fragile and volatile and can change rapidly.<sup>96</sup>

ACLED reported that during the second half of 2019, there were reportedly 156 clashes between security forces and alleged gang members leading to 107 civilians killed and 43 injured.<sup>97</sup> During the first half of 2020, there were reportedly 90 armed confrontations between security forces and alleged gangs, leaving 44 people dead, 29 injured, and 70 detained.<sup>98</sup> In April 2020, there was another spike of gang-driven violence that killed 80 people in 5 days.<sup>99</sup> In 2021, there was a gang-related murder spike in November which reportedly caused up to 124 victims. The majority of victims (75 % or 91 people) were found to be civilians, while 18 were from Barrio 18 and 15 were from MS-13. However, the government blamed the violence on inter-gang

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<sup>88</sup> El Faro, Bukele has been negotiating with MS-13 for a reduction in homicides and electoral support, 6 September 2020, [url](#); Insight Crime, El Salvador homicides skyrocket after gang truce unravels, 9 January 2015, [url](#)

<sup>89</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>90</sup> US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>91</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 25-26

<sup>92</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>93</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>94</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>95</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>96</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 28

<sup>97</sup> ACLED, Regional overview: Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean 5-11 February 2022, 11 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>98</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>99</sup> International Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 2020, [url](#), p. 27





rivalries.<sup>100</sup>

A 2020 report on extrajudicial killings from 2015-2020 by the University Observatory of Human Rights (Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos - OUDH) reported that the government used the narrative of ‘armed confrontations’ to ‘cover up abuse of lethal force by police officers’ against civilians.<sup>101</sup> USDOS reported that the security forces were involved in killings and arbitrary detentions of suspected gang members.<sup>102</sup>

Police committed 179 extrajudicial killings between 2015 and 2020, with 25 resulting in convictions, according to the national Ombudsman.<sup>103</sup> However, OUDH reported that there were 1 824 victims of lethal violence by police in the same period.<sup>104</sup> In May 2021, authorities discovered a mass grave at the home of a former police officer in Chalchuapa, east of San Salvador, with between 8-40 bodies (mainly women). Authorities indicated the involvement of a murder ring, including at least 10 other people, that may have been operating for a decade.<sup>105</sup>

OUDH reported that young males between 18-30 years of age were the most vulnerable group to encounter violent deaths between 2015-2020, particularly due to ‘armed confrontations’ with police.<sup>106</sup>

## 7. State protection for victims of gangs and state violence

### 7.1 Investigations and prosecutions

Sources report that crimes such as disappearances<sup>107</sup> are underreported to authorities. FESPAD’s study found that underreporting was due to factors such as high levels of impunity and lack of protection for citizens, increasing power of gangs to intimidate victims, inaction of entities that deal with targeted crime, fear of being discredited, the state’s ‘invisibilising’ of the crime of disappearances, and fear of stigmatization as gang members and delinquents.<sup>108</sup> According to Foreign Policy, reporting in March 2021,

‘gang control has become more entrenched. Homicides are just one way that gangs exert control on communities. They show their force through extortion, threats, and sexual violence as well. Even though crime statistics have go[ne] down, there is little evidence - such as fewer active gang members on increased entry into the formal workforce by former gang members - showing government police have actually dismantled the structures that enact this violence.’<sup>109</sup>

USDOS similarly stated that in many neighbourhoods, ‘gangs targeted certain persons’ and arbitrarily and unlawfully interfered with the privacy of their lives, noting, that the ‘efforts of the authorities to remedy these situations were generally ineffective’.<sup>110</sup> There is no national

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<sup>100</sup> Noticias Financieras/La Prensa Grafica, Seven out of 10 homicide victims were civilians, 31 Decemeber 2021, Factiva

<sup>101</sup> OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>102</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 2, 6-7

<sup>103</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#)

<sup>104</sup> OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>105</sup> Intercept (The), As Salvadoran leaders tout a safer country, more people are going missing, 13 June 2021, [url](#); France24, El Salvador: investigan un posible cementerio clandestino de victimas de feminicidios, 21 May 2021, [url](#); El Faro, En la fosa de Chalchuapa hay confusión y madres que buscan a sus hijos, 21 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>106</sup> OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>107</sup> FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 46-47

<sup>108</sup> FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), p. 46

<sup>109</sup> FP, El Salvador’s Homicide Rate Hit a Historic Low in 2020, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>110</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 11



database for missing persons.<sup>111</sup> Media reported that according to government statistics, there were 200 unsolved disappearance cases pending with authorities in 2020, compared to 488 in 2021.<sup>112</sup>

There is no monitoring system or adequate services to provide for victims of violence who have been displaced within the country.<sup>113</sup>

In March 2021, the Attorney General's office stated that 42 members of the Barrio 18 were found guilty of various crimes such as homicide, extortion, drug running, disappearance and illegally restricting free movement, and given sentences ranging up to 472 years in prison.<sup>114</sup>

## **7.2 State integrity**

There have been reports that police and military have collaborated with gangs whose members have permeated the ranks of the security forces.<sup>115</sup>

Sources also report that the government and security forces carried out abuses with impunity,<sup>116</sup> and the civilian authorities 'did not maintain effective control' over such forces.<sup>117</sup> Relating to the prosecution of state security forces' abuses, OUDH noted that there are 'institutional weaknesses that exist in the administration of justice in general, and in justice operators in particular, which result in deficient investigative processes' as well as long processing times and a context of 'high impunity'.<sup>118</sup> Recent statistics report on the prosecution of abuses by state forces:

- The OUDH study found that between 2015-2020, 92 % of cases where police or military officers have been prosecuted for violent deaths have been dismissed and only 2% of cases of those charged resulted in a conviction.<sup>119</sup>
- According to the Attorney General Public Prosecutor's Office, there were 924 complaints and accusations against the national police made between 1 January 2017 and 15 March 2021, for offences such as homicide (419 complaints), fraud (98), deprivation of liberty (98), and torture. Of all 924 complaints, 12 (2 %) were found guilty and convicted.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> FESPAD, Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador, April 2021, [url](#), p. 48

<sup>112</sup> Elsalvador.com, 2021 cerró con el doble de casis de desapariciones sin resolver, con respecto a 2020, [url](#)

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<sup>116</sup> HRW, World Report 2022 – Events of 2021: El Salvador, 13 January 2022, [url](#); OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>117</sup> USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020 – El Salvador, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>118</sup> OUDH, Report on Extra-judicial Killings in El Salvador 2015-2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 4

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