

# Escalating Violence in El Salvador

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During 2015, El Salvador posted the world's highest homicide rate, [104 homicides per 100,000 people](#). Homicides, many gang-related, have trended further upward in 2016, with more than [2,000](#) killings recorded through March, including [massacres, killings of police](#) and [their families](#), and [extrajudicial killings of suspected gang members](#). El Salvador has the [highest concentration of gang members in Central America](#). Many analysts assert that the government's tough anti-gang policies are worsening the violence; others maintain that the government has few policy options available. Escalating violence and political polarization in the country have inhibited U.S. and Salvadoran efforts to improve security and bolster growth.

## Gangs in El Salvador

The largest [gangs](#) in El Salvador have origins in and ties to the United States. The [18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang](#) was formed in Los Angeles in the 1950s as a Mexican gang; it later embraced other Latinos. The [MS-13 \(Mara Salvatrucha-13\)](#) was created during the 1980s by Salvadorans in Los Angeles who had fled the country's civil conflict. Both gangs expanded their operations to Central America after many of their leaders were deported in the 1990s. Some gang cliques (clicas) in El Salvador have [maintained ties with U.S. gangs](#).

El Salvador has struggled with gang-related violence for years, but homicides have escalated since the demise of a 2012-2013 truce between the country's largest gangs. Post-truce, the gangs are more [fragmented and violent](#) and the state appears [incapable](#) of restoring order. Gangs have become involved in extortion; kidnapping; and drug, auto, and weapons smuggling. They have extorted millions of dollars from residents, bus drivers, and businesses. Failure to pay often results in violence. In July 2015, gang threats prompted a [three-day shutdown of San Salvador's bus system](#). Gang-related crimes continue to drive [internal displacement](#) and illegal emigration.

## Government Efforts: A Return to *Mano Dura* (Firm Hand) Policies?

From 2003 to 2009, El Salvador pursued aggressive anti-gang policies referred to as *mano dura*. Those policies involved incarcerating large numbers of youth for illicit association and increasing sentences for gang membership. Delays in the judicial process and massive arrests led to severe prison overcrowding, and the government's lack of internal control allowed prisons to become like ["finishing schools" for gangs](#). Most youth arrested under *mano dura* provisions were released for lack of evidence. At the same time, gangs and gang tactics became more sophisticated to

avoid detection.

The Mauricio Funes Administration (2009-2014) initially adopted an approach for dealing with gangs that involved prevention and rehabilitation but failed to substantially reduce crime rates. President Funes appointed his defense minister as head of public security in 2011. With the minister's approval, top gang leaders were transferred from maximum security prisons to less secure facilities in March 2012 to "facilitate" a truce between the gangs. Between the time the prison transfers took place and May 2013, homicide rates declined dramatically. Some praised the truce, but many [expressed skepticism](#). During the truce, disappearances increased and extortions continued, while gangs gained [media attention](#). Gangs continued to conduct illicit activities using cell phones in the prisons. By 2014, the Funes government had disavowed the truce and murders had begun to increase.

In June 2014, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), took office. He inherited a security crisis with few resources and without a legislative majority. The government formed a National Council for Citizen Security that designed an integrated "[El Salvador Seguro](#) (Secure)" plan, which was announced in January 2015 and praised by international donors. After significant wrangling, El Salvador's legislature [approved a new tax](#) and \$100 million in loans to support the plan in late 2015. Implementation of the *Seguro* plan has been slow and will likely require additional resources.

In the meantime, President Sánchez Cerén has taken a [tough anti-gang approach](#). His government has refused to negotiate with gangs, returned gang leaders involved in the truce to maximum security prisons, and mobilized three military battalions to support police anti-gang operations. In August 2015, El Salvador's Supreme Court declared that gangs that had used grenades against government installations [could be charged with terrorism](#). Since March 2016, the government has sent nearly 300 mid-level gang leaders to more secure facilities, blocked phone signals near jails, deployed 1,000 military reservists, and secured legislative approval of another \$100 million loan for public security. Human rights groups and the [Secretary General](#) of the Organization of American States have warned the Salvadoran government that some of these policies could [exacerbate the situation and prompt human rights abuses](#) by security forces.

## U.S. Policy

U.S. law enforcement and prevention programs funded through the [Central America Regional Security Initiative \(CARSI\)](#) are being colocated through a "[place-based approach](#)" in the cities prioritized by the Salvadoran government. Those programs could potentially be scaled up using funds appropriated for 2016 ([P.L. 114-113](#)) and requested by the Obama Administration for FY2017. [P.L. 114-113](#) provides up to \$750 million to implement the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#), which supports the [Alliance for Prosperity](#) plan put forth by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The act includes up to \$68 million for El Salvador and \$349 million for CARSI. It places a number of conditions on the assistance, however, requiring the governments to take steps to combat corruption and address human rights concerns, among other things (see CRS In Focus IF10371, [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Background and FY2017 Budget Request](#)).

El Salvador has drafted a solid security plan and created a multi-sectoral Alliance for Prosperity Consultative Group to help oversee the plan's implementation. El Salvador is also receiving U.S. economic support through a \$277 million [Millennium Challenge Corporation compact](#). Nevertheless, it is the only country in the so-called northern triangle of Central America in which violence is trending upward and the attorney general [lacks a partnership](#) with an external entity to help him investigate corruption. These trends may not bode well for El Salvador's ability to meet U.S. conditions and make progress in confronting crime and impunity (see also CRS Report R43616, [El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations](#)).