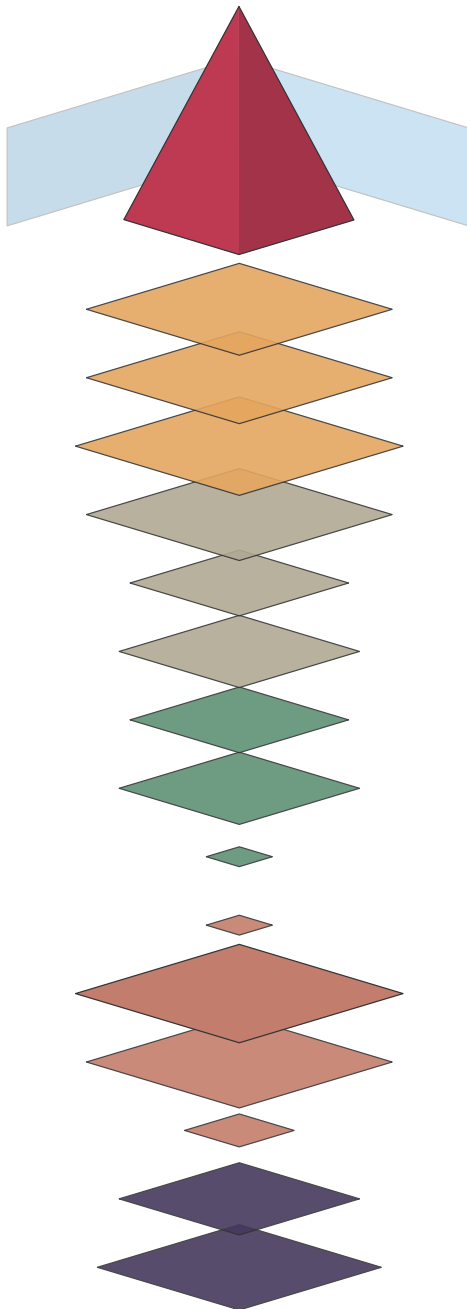



 **EL SALVADOR**



 **5.92**  
**CRIMINALITY SCORE**  
52<sup>nd</sup> of 193 countries  
13<sup>th</sup> of 35 American countries  
5<sup>th</sup> of 8 Central American countries

 **CRIMINAL MARKETS** **5.43**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	7.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	7.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	7.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	5.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	5.50
FLORA CRIMES	5.00
FAUNA CRIMES	5.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	1.50
HEROIN TRADE	1.50
COCAINE TRADE	7.50
CANNABIS TRADE	7.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	2.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	5.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6.50

 **CRIMINAL ACTORS** **6.40**

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	8.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	7.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	4.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	4.50

 **3.21**  
**RESILIENCE SCORE**



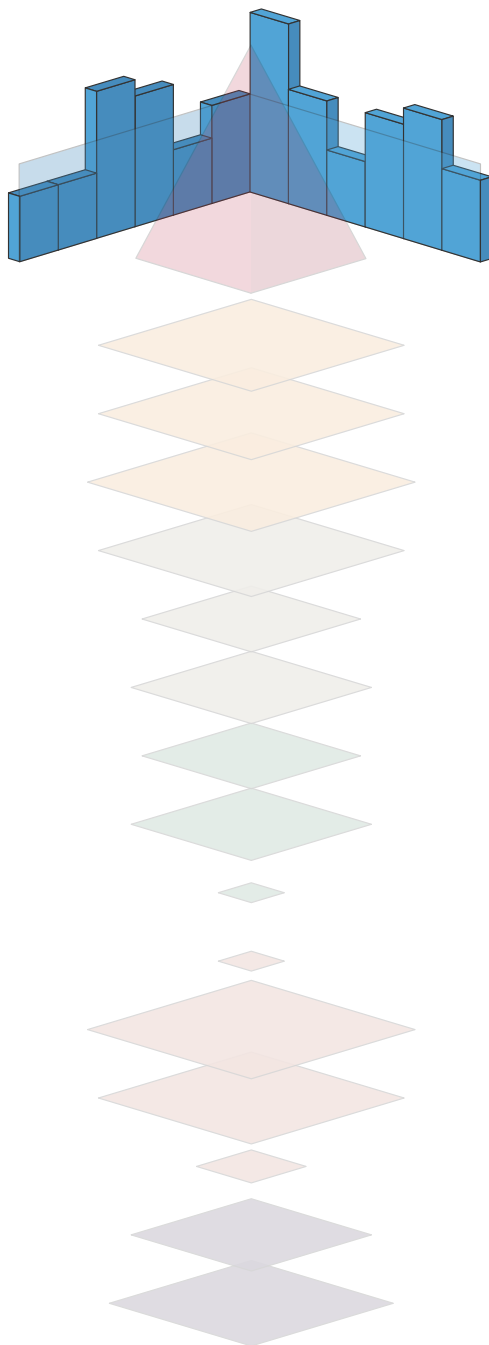
Funding provided by the United States Government.



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**



 **3.21 RESILIENCE SCORE**

163<sup>rd</sup> of 193 countries  
31<sup>st</sup> of 35 American countries  
7<sup>th</sup> of 8 Central American countries

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

 **5.92 CRIMINALITY SCORE**

 CRIMINAL MARKETS	5.43
 CRIMINAL ACTORS	6.40



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# CRIMINALITY

## CRIMINAL MARKETS

### PEOPLE

Human trafficking continues to be a notable issue in El Salvador, with organized crime organizations operating throughout the national territory by collaborating with their counterparts along the country's borders. Those Salvadorans who migrate irregularly to Mexico or the US are more exposed to the risk of human trafficking and are frequently abducted by groups affiliated with human smugglers who demand ransoms in exchange for their release.

Criminal actors control human smuggling in El Salvador and collaborate with corrupt security officers and public officials. Identifiable national networks have loose connections with foreign transnational groups and pay quotas for passages while bribing corrupt state actors to facilitate their activities. The government crackdown on gangs has provided more opportunities for smugglers, known as 'coyotes', to help current or former gang members, as well as families who were possibly unjustly targeted by security forces to cross borders. Victims of human smuggling face various risks, such as abandonment, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, sexual violence, torture and environmental exposure. However, most of these risks are more prevalent outside El Salvador's borders, and the smuggling networks do not typically generate violence within the country.

Extortion is the primary source of income for gangs in El Salvador. The gangs use the money to buy weapons, pay lawyers, and support the families of murdered and jailed members. It is estimated that El Salvador loses hundreds of millions of US dollars in extortion to gangs each year. Many shop owners still pay or contribute in other ways to gangs for fear of retribution. The transport sector is one of the most affected, and even food and beverage suppliers must pay extortion money to pass through certain communities to restock local shops. Some companies have designated people to make the payments, include extortion in their operational costs, or require their employees to bear the costs of extortion. Most extortion cases are not reported, with victims typically preferring to deal directly with the gangs rather than filing a complaint with the police. Gangs have typically reinvested extortion revenues by setting up their own car wash businesses, storehouses, or private transportation activities, displacing competitors by force. However, the mass arrest campaign launched under the state of exception has partially hindered gangs' capacity to collect extortion money.

### TRADE

Arms trafficking is of great concern in El Salvador, with most weapons entering the country by land or sea from neighbouring countries like Guatemala and Honduras. Criminal groups, including 'transportistas', act as intermediaries for Colombian and Mexican criminal organizations and are also involved in cross-border smuggling of legal and illegal goods. The high rate of crime-related homicides fuels the illegal arms market, with evidence suggesting that most homicides in El Salvador involve firearms, both legal and illegal. Although few large criminal groups traffic weapons, several factors contribute to the facilitation of the arms trafficking market, including the availability of weapons in the region, leftover stocks from past wars, the constant movement of people and goods to and from the US and the demand for weapons from criminal organizations, drug wars, violence, impunity and the lack of state monopoly over security in many areas. Corruption and impunity further enable these criminal organizations to operate without consequence.

El Salvador serves as a provenance economy for counterfeit clothing and leather articles. The central market and the historic center in the capital are the main distribution hubs. Criminal organizations participate in the distribution of these products and have all the logistics, storage places, contacts and experience needed. Gangs have attempted to take control of the wholesale market, but these criminal organizations are powerful and have prevented them from doing so. Transnational criminal structures that are not part of the gangs are also involved in smuggling merchandise and counterfeit products.

Cigarettes, liquor and cooking oils are the most smuggled excise goods in El Salvador. Most contraband goods enter the country through hundreds of illegal points, with technical smuggling representing almost all smuggling in the country. This type of smuggling is linked to under- and over-billing and the provision of erroneous information in public records. Since the current government took office in El Salvador, it has increased the number of armed forces officials at entry points to control contraband merchandise. Contraband cigarettes are a source of financing for Salvadoran gangs and it is estimated that four out of every 10 cigarettes in the country are contraband. These products mainly come from China, Korea and India and enter the country through Belize's duty-free zone. Whiskey and vodka are also widely smuggled, with almost half of the products on the market being contraband.

## ENVIRONMENT

In El Salvador, flora crimes are not particularly pervasive but illegal logging for fuel and building materials probably constitutes a large part of this market. Nevertheless, traffickers are not organized in large or sophisticated criminal organizations and can be considered part of loose criminal networks. Overall, flora crimes do not appear to generate violence and authorities do not usually intervene.

Fauna crimes are prevalent in the country and their impact on biodiversity is significant, as many endangered or nearly extinct species are captured and sold illegally. Iguanas and parrots are the main species confiscated, and up to half of the iguanas are estimated to be wild-caught and laundered as captive-bred. The country is often used as a bridge or destination for illegal exports from neighbouring Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Hundreds of birds are poached annually and trafficked to the central market in San Salvador. However, fauna traffickers do not appear to be part of larger criminal organizations.

El Salvador is the only country in the world where mining is completely banned. As such, non-renewable resource crimes are not prevalent in the country.

## DRUGS

There are few recorded deaths related to heroin in El Salvador and its prevalence appears to be negligible. This is mainly due to the economic dominance of the cocaine market in the north Central American triangle region. Although the cocaine trade in El Salvador may be small in comparison to other countries, it is growing and has become a considerable source of conflict and violence. Criminal networks, including gangs, are actively involved in cocaine transportation, and some have collaborated with Mexican and Colombian cartels. Drug traffickers commonly use low-profile-vessel semi-submersibles to transport cocaine between the Salvadoran coastal area and Guatemala. There are suspicions that the government has ties to drug traffickers, with reports of using hotels owned by a known drug trafficker as 'confinement centres' for COVID-19 patients during the pandemic. The small percentage of cocaine that stays in El Salvador is distributed by criminal networks in the urban peripheries of the main cities.

El Salvador is not a major marijuana trafficking route, but gangs remain important distributors of the drug in communities. The local demand for cannabis has remained stable in recent years. The drug enters the country mainly by land from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, with remnants of well-known smuggling cartels managing its entry and transport. Gangs usually manage the distribution, contributing to an increase in gang conflicts, homicides and arrests, especially of poor youths from provinces or slums. The mass arrest campaign increased pressure on gangs and disrupted some of their operations, including marijuana trafficking.

Although synthetic drug use has increased in El Salvador, it is not a major player in the transnational market. These drugs enter the country mainly by land from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. Despite the high market value of these drugs, they do not represent significant profits for criminal organizations, as they are more often handled by independent individuals. One of the reasons for the limited involvement of criminal organizations in this drug market is because of the profile of consumers of synthetic drugs in the country. Consumption is concentrated in the medium- and high-income population to which traditional criminal actors have restricted access. The national civil police force has detected several substances in the local market, including MDMA-Ecstasy, LSD, 2-CB, ICE, Crystal and Glass.

## CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes are on the rise in El Salvador. Businesses are frequently targeted by cyber-attacks, with over half of all companies in the country having experienced at least one attack in recent years. Journalists and activists have also been targeted, with criminals using the Pegasus programme to hack the cell phones of members of the media to extract messages, photos and emails. Criminals have also targeted the local crypto wallet system, seeking to take advantage of government bonuses. Online bank accounts and social media accounts are also frequently hacked in El Salvador.

## FINANCIAL CRIMES

Despite the implementation of an anti-evasion plan resulting in the recovery of hundreds of millions of US dollars from tax evasion cases and the filing of hundreds of cases in court, financial crimes remain a prevalent issue in El Salvador. Private companies continue to perpetrate tax evasion by providing false information or not reporting income accurately. Embezzlement of public funds by high level state officials and NGOs are also not uncommon in the country. These activities have not been linked to organized crime groups, but they do suggest that El Salvador is vulnerable to financial crime, given its geographic location, dollarized economy and cryptocurrencies.

## CRIMINAL ACTORS

El Salvador is plagued by two main mafia-style groups, each with tens of thousands of members, who maintain a presence in almost all the country's municipalities. These gangs extort Salvadoran citizens and businesses, collect rent from businesses in their areas of influence, and participate in other illegal activities like human trafficking and domestic drug dealing. The relationship between the two groups is one of fierce rivalry, and mobility between areas controlled by the gangs is prohibited and sanctionable by death. Both gangs have significant access to firearms,

thanks to permissive ownership laws, high gun imports and leftover weapons from the civil war. Gang members used to be heavily tattooed with gang imagery, but now younger members avoid these symbols to evade the authorities' attention. Due to strong law enforcement against these groups, the murder rate has decreased. However, gangs have historically increased murders as a political tool to negotiate with the government. Once an agreement is reached, they decrease violence and help with electoral support. The state of exception reduced gang operations and the murder rate, but thousands of members, collaborators and relatives remain at large, making gang presence considerable.

With respect to state-embedded actors, there is no evidence of a cartel-like state structure within the Salvadoran government, but there are numerous instances of state actors facilitating criminal acts, protecting criminal actors, obstructing criminal investigations, and selling weapons and ammunition to criminal actors on a systematic basis. The release of a top gang leader from prison demonstrates the extent to which the relationship between state-embedded actors and criminal actors is intertwined. Recent accusations suggest that state-embedded actors not only use their positions to facilitate criminal activities, but are also allegedly directly involved in illicit activities, including human smuggling and corrupt schemes.

El Salvador has seen a shift in criminal networks involved in commodities trafficking, with the main groups being dismantled and replaced by unfamiliar groups. Some of

these dismantled groups were composed of members of Salvadoran politics and business, who worked with international drug cartels to transport cocaine and other narcotics through El Salvador or they were the main group of contraband transporters. The new networks of 'transportistas' largely operate away from the public eye and avoid violence, making it difficult to obtain information on their recent operations or membership. However, reports suggest that there have been no significant changes in the country's criminal structures, except for the capture of some leaders of drug trafficking rings.

The presence of foreign criminal networks is limited in El Salvador. Salvadoran criminal actors involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking and human smuggling cooperate with transnational groups, including Mexican cartels.

Although private sector actors do not appear to be directly involved in gang-related criminal acts, there are two areas in which private sector actors do play an essential role in El Salvador's criminality. The first is the money laundering market for the proceeds from the gangs' criminal activities. This money laundering occurs in the form of paper companies, motels, auto hotels, transport, gas propane and water distribution companies, among others. The second is tax evasion, which reduces state income, as some companies provide misleading information or do not report accurate tax information. As gangs have transitioned from simply extorting from businesses to formalizing their illicit activities through representatives, it has become harder to determine the gangs' reach in the formal economy.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

El Salvador has an ineffective strategy for combating organized crime. This is due to high-level corruption and collusion with criminal groups. The current government and its allies have weakened the system of democratic checks and balances by enacting laws that remove hundreds of prosecutors and lower-level judges. In March 2022, an exception regime was declared to address an increase in gang violence, suspending several due process guarantees, including the rights to freedom of association and assembly, and privacy of communications. The government attributes the absence of homicides for 200 days to its territorial control plan and exception regime. However, accusations of human rights violations have been made and there are uncertainties about the death toll. Despite this, current government methods have a high approval rating. The government is proposing a bill to reform the constitution, which includes extending the presidential term and reforming some democratic institutions. The government of El Salvador

has relied heavily on social media to promote an anti-corruption message. However, state actors are believed to facilitate criminal activity and obstruct investigations. In recent years, there have been serious setbacks in terms of transparency, democratic dismantling and the system of checks and balances. This includes the unconstitutional dismissal of magistrates and the shutdown of an international anti-impunity commission. These setbacks have resulted in a reduction in civic space and dialogue between state actors and other sectors of society. As a result, violations of various human rights, including association, expression, press freedom and access to information have increased.

Although El Salvador has ratified major treaties on organized crime, high-level corruption and impunity impede the country's compliance with international standards. El Salvador has implemented several laws to investigate, prosecute and punish organized crime. However, corruption in judicial institutions and state cooperation with criminal

actors hamper the implementation of anti-organized crime legislation. Moreover, new laws have been proposed to silence critics, restrict freedom of expression and criminalize independent media and human rights groups. Recently, the National Assembly approved six reforms to regulations related to gang criminal activities, which increase jail sentences for gang-related crimes, including membership. The reforms also introduce a sort of ‘gag’ law that threatens 10 to 15 years in jail for those working in media outlets who spread messages from gangs that could create public ‘anxiety’.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in El Salvador has long struggled with inefficiency and corruption, creating major obstacles in the fight against organized crime. While the president’s control over the judiciary has reduced corruption surrounding the release of suspected criminals, it has also raised concerns about the independence of the judiciary. Judges have been forced to retire, which many see as an attempt to replace them with judges who are more loyal to the government. In addition, the fairness and equity of the judicial system have been called into question, with hundreds of accused people convened for hearings simultaneously, thereby limiting the right to a fair trial. Meanwhile, the country’s prison system is extremely overcrowded, with a high number of people in pre-trial or remand imprisonment. Deaths within the penitentiary system as well as lack of the knowledge of inmates’ whereabouts are also major concerns in the country.

El Salvador faces significant challenges in its law enforcement efforts, as organized crime groups continue to maintain territorial control and operate with impunity. The police force is limited by inadequate resources and faces considerable obstacles in building public trust due to a lack of investigation and reliance on anonymous complaints. The government’s approach to security has included an ‘iron fist’ policy that has led to a high number of extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses. Although there have been improvements in police work conditions and technological equipment, overall law enforcement remains weak and under-resourced. The government has relied heavily on donors to fund training for law-enforcement and criminal-justice officials. Recently, the National Assembly approved funding to create a national cybersecurity police, which is part of the government’s efforts to improve its law enforcement capabilities.

El Salvador also struggles to maintain its territorial integrity due to porous borders and limited resources to control cross-border flows of illicit goods. El Salvador participates in the container control programme and has intensified border checks and created border patrol units, but much work still needs to be done in terms of border and maritime control. Despite its relatively small size in the narcotics trade, El Salvador’s importance is growing as it serves as a reception and storage point for drugs along the Pacific

coast and as a bridge between the Pan-American Highway, the Gulf of Fonseca and some roads from Honduras. The navy has made progress in pursuing drug traffickers at sea, but overall, the country struggles to contain the flow of illicit goods due to limited resources and infrastructure and corruption.

## ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

El Salvador is considered to be at an increasing risk of money laundering and terrorist financing. Previous governments have failed to grant autonomy to the anti-money laundering investigative body, damaging the country’s legitimacy and effectiveness in combating this crime. Another challenge is the unregulated introduction of cryptocurrencies, which makes it more difficult to detect illicit financial flows. Currently, all companies in the country are required to report their accounts to the government.

El Salvador’s economic regulatory environment has traditionally struggled to protect legitimate businesses from criminal activities, such as extortion. This contributes to an unfavourable environment for economic growth. The country consistently has the lowest economic growth rate in Central America due to crime and burdensome regulations. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on people’s lives and household incomes, resulting in an increase in poverty rates. However, signs of recovery were observed in 2021, driven by remittance-based consumption, exports and an increase in cryptocurrency-driven tourism.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The government of El Salvador is failing to adequately support victims of organized crime, particularly women, children and LGBT+ victims of human trafficking. Civil society actors are taking the leading role in providing victim support, as the government has not provided resources to address this issue. The government’s territorial control plan (PCT) includes crime prevention measures, such as the construction of youth centres to prevent gang involvement, but it does not offer support for victims or witnesses. Although there is a promise to create a national system of attention to victims, El Salvador does not have a specific law focused on providing support and reparation to victims of extortion, which results in a lack of mechanisms to encourage victims to report this crime. In addition, disappearances in El Salvador are increasing and few cases are being investigated. Concerns have been raised that the PCT, which promises access to justice, reparations and better opportunities for communities abandoned by the state, is increasingly relying on law enforcement and militarization, prioritizing a punitive approach rather than prevention.

El Salvador is currently experiencing widespread violence that not only affects citizens but also media and civil society organizations. Journalists have been physically attacked or

killed, and legislation provides little protection for them. Officials harass and threaten journalists who investigate corruption or government finances. Civil society organizations and churches play a crucial role in filling the gaps left by the government, but their work was made more difficult during the state of exception. The government discredits NGOs, including international human rights NGOs, by implying they are affiliated with opposition parties or criminal gangs. Since the new government took office, aggression against journalists has increased, raising concern. The country has suffered one of the steepest declines in this area in the Americas region.

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