



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

[New Search](#) | [About RIRs](#) | [Help](#)

11 April 2006

SLV101083.FE

El Salvador: Crime in El Salvador; government actions to fight crime, including crime linked to gangs (*maras*); international co-operation to fight crime, including gang-related crime (April 2006)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Crime Figures

According to a 7 February 2006 article by Society Without Violence (Sociedad sin violencia), the country's murder rate remains high. In January 2006, 316 murders, an average of 10.2 a day, were committed, marking an increase over the same period in 2005 (Sociedad sin violencia 7 Feb. 2006; see also *Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006). In 2005, 3,761 murders were committed (Sociedad sin violencia 7 Feb. 2006; BBC 13 Feb. 2006), which represents an average of 9.6 a day (Sociedad sin violencia 7 Feb. 2006). According to data from the Civilian National Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC), violent deaths in El Salvador in 2005 increased 34 per cent over 2004 (*ibid.*). PNC data also indicated that the country's murder rate reached 54.7 per 100,000 people in 2005, ranking it first in numbers of violent deaths per capita in Latin America, followed by Honduras, Guatemala and Colombia (*ibid.*; BBC 13 Feb. 2006). The PNC, the Institute of Forensic Medicine (Instituto de Medicina Legal) and the Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía General de la República), each collecting and publishing their own crime statistics, all reported that most murder victims in 2005 were young men between the ages of 18 and 30 (Sociedad sin violencia 17 Feb. 2006) and that nearly 80 per cent of homicides were committed using a firearm (*ibid.*; BBC 13 Feb. 2006). It is estimated that half a million firearms are in circulation in El Salvador (*ibid.*; *La Opinión* 14 Feb. 2006), a country whose population is estimated at 6.7 million (Canada Nov. 2005). The highest numbers of violent deaths in 2005 were recorded in the cities of San Salvador, Soyapango, Santa Ana and San Miguel (Sociedad sin violencia 17 Feb. 2006).

Salvadoran authorities attribute the majority of the country's homicides to *maras* or gangs (*Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006). An article sent in correspondence to the Research Directorate by a researcher and analyst at the José Siméon Cañas Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, UCA) cites a report published by the Prison Authority (Dirección General de Centros Penales) in September 2005, which indicated that more than 40 per cent of the 2,575 murders committed in El Salvador since January 2005 involved gang members (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 17). According to the same report, of those murders 548 were committed by gang members, 389 were attributed to clashes between rival gang members, and 188 were the result of an attack on a gang member by a non-gang member (*ibid.*). El Salvador's Minister of the Interior,

cited in an article published by *Inside Costa Rica*, indicated that "[j]uveniles are responsible for 55 per cent of homicides in El Salvador, [the remaining] 38 per cent result from personal quarrels, four per cent are related to other criminal behaviour, and ... three per cent to drug trafficking" (3 Aug. 2005). In addition, according to the UCA researcher and analyst, the gang phenomenon seems to have become more complex, insofar as the profile of the *maras* resembles more and more that of [translation] "organized crime" (7 Feb. 2006, 7). An opinion piece appearing on the Globalizacion.org Website, which provides information on globalization, development and civil society in Latin America, characterized the *maras* as [translation] "vertically integrated criminal organizations" that obey [translation] "mafioso codes" (n.d.). The scope of their violent actions is broad and includes extortion, abduction, theft and murder (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 7). According to certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work with these gangs, the *maras* are [translation] "also the product of a society where there is no social safety net, where the economy is in crisis, where salaries are minimal and do not exceed 150 dollars, and where mass migration to the United States has destroyed the family unit" (*Le Figaro* 28 Feb. 2006).

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005 noted that El Salvador is "a point of origin and destination for international trafficking in women and children" (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 5). Other crimes such as theft, extortion and family violence are also common in El Salvador (BBC 13 Feb. 2006). According to a fact sheet produced by the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), substance abuse is on the rise in El Salvador (US 30 June 2005). Money laundering by international criminal organizations is also a major problem for the country (*INCSR 2006* Mar. 2006, Vol. II).

Government actions

In August 2004, the Salvadoran government introduced a law enforcement initiative called the Plan Super Heavy Hand (Súper Mano Dura) (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 13; see also US 30 June 2005), a three-tiered approach consisting of punishment, rehabilitation and prevention (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 13). The Youth Secretariat (Secretaría de la Juventud) is responsible for the prevention-centred Plan Friendly Hand (Mano Amiga), as well as the Plan Outstretched Hand (Mano Extendida), which focuses on rehabilitation and on reintegrating gang members into the community (*ibid.*, 14).

Under the punitive component of the plan, Plan Iron Fist (Puño de Hierro), police officers, whose main objective is to arrest and jail gang members, are deployed to communities with a strong *mara* presence (*ibid.*, 13). Plan Iron Fist required the creation of anti-gang squads and units within the police force, as well as the co-ordination of different agencies such as the Salvadoran Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada de El Salvador), the Office of the Attorney General, the Department of Communications (Medios de Comunicación) and the Youth Secretariat (*ibid.*, 14).

According to an article published by *Inside Costa Rica* on 3 August 2005, the PNC director "asked the government for 700 soldiers to join another 800 already in a Task Force formed to deal with the problem" of *maras*. An article published by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in November 2005 indicated that approximately 1,000 troops had already been deployed to fight the increasing level of crime in the country (25 Nov. 2005). A 31 January 2006 Agence France-Presse (AFP) article reported that the police and the army planned to launch a massive operation in 21 of the neighbourhoods most affected by gang

violence. President Elías Antonio Saca, cited in that same AFP article, stated that the objective of the operation was to apprehend members of youth gangs (*mareros*) in order to help stop the rash of homicides in the country (AFP 31 Jan. 2006). He added that he was going to deploy other soldiers to help the PNC (*ibid.*). In early 2006, a Special-Operations Police Unit (Grupo de Operaciones Policiales Especiales, GOPES) was formed to fight *maras* and organized crime (*Día a día* 14 Feb. 2006; *Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006). The group consists of about 40 black-hooded, black-clad, armed police officers (*ibid.*; *La Voz* 1 Mar. 2006). An article published by *Le Figaro* reported that members of the gangs known as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the samara 18 (M-18) [translation] "condemn the existence of armed commandos supported by the authorities and tasked with 'cleaning up the streets'" (28 Feb. 2006). The same article noted that these armed groups are reminiscent of the secret paramilitary groups formed after the civil war to eliminate [translation] "communists, unionists, academics and members of religious orders suspected of supporting the Marxist guerrillas" (*Le Figaro* 28 Feb. 2006; see also *La Voz* 1 Mar. 2006).

Salvadoran president Elías Antonio Saca stated that, with the Outstretched Hand and Friendly Hand plans, his government was addressing the root causes of crime in the country, which include the crumbling of the family structure and social exclusion and marginalization, responsible for, in his opinion, driving young people to join *maras* (BBC 24 Feb. 2005). As reported by the BBC, the Salvadoran government also assured that although the commission of common crimes remains high, Plan Super Heavy Hand has yielded positive results: before implementation, common crimes numbered 8,464 and after, 7,917 (*ibid.* 13 Feb. 2006). However, the article received in correspondence from the UCA researcher noted that, despite the government's efforts over the last three years, homicides continue to increase in El Salvador, which calls into question the effectiveness of the programs developed by the authorities (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 15). The researcher also indicated that the government's policies focus on incarcerating gang members rather than on preventive measures (*ibid.*, 18). An article published by EFE reported that only 4,000 of the 14,000 gang members arrested between 1 January 2005 and 15 December 2005 were "remanded to jail to await trial," while "the vast majority were released for lack of evidence" (27 Dec. 2005). The Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC) reported that, according to the president of El Salvador's National Council on Public Security, these penal measures are ineffective "in view of the weakness of rehabilitation capabilities in the prison system" (May 2005).

In an article posted on EFE's Website, a researcher with the UCA's Public Policy Institute indicated that the Salvadoran government's rehabilitation and prevention measures "are insufficient for dealing with the [gang] problem because the most violent gangs have converted themselves into 'real powers' in their zones of influence" (15 Feb. 2006). He also appealed to "the organizations that work with youths to help the actors to mediate in the search for solutions to gang violence" (EFE 15 Feb. 2006). The researcher also stated that "the identity of the gangs is based on the exercise of violence and the possession of weapons" and that "the phenomenon . . . requires a more intense and constantly updated analysis" (*ibid.*). In the researcher's opinion, the Salvadoran government's policies "have resulted in the gangs reacting by becoming more organized and structured and by acquiring the capacity to exercise more violence" (*ibid.*; see also *Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006). The head of Plan Super Heavy Hand informed the BBC that the *maras* have started to thwart the plan, no longer sporting the tattoos which made them recognizable in order to avoid arrest and legal prosecution (24 Feb. 2005; see also *Diario CoLatino* 27 Feb. 2006). The work of the police has been complicated by this absence of markings of gang affiliation (*ibid.*, BBC 24 Feb. 2005). According to the UCA researcher, although

the government programs have fostered a certain sense of public security, they have not yielded the anticipated results, instead provoking repercussions that have worsened gang-related problems overall (UCA 7 Feb. 2006, 22; see also *La Opinión* 14 Feb. 2006).

"Proponents of prevention" argue that progress needs to be made on prevention programs since "law enforcement solutions alone cannot resolve the gang problem" (US 10 May 2005, 6). "Some argue that prisons have become 'gangland finishing schools'" and are no longer fulfilling their correctional role (*ibid.*). Others assert that, regardless of the efforts made, "gang prevention programs may not show immediate results, and will require a sustained high-level commitment by Central American leaders to attack the underlying factors of poverty and unemployment that have contributed to the rise in gang activity" (*ibid.*).

The opposition party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN), has condemned the measures introduced by the government of President Elías Antonio Saca to fight crime (*Inside Costa Rica* 3 Aug. 2005). According to the FMLN, these measures crack down on juvenile gang members but do not address the sources of the problem (*ibid.*). The National Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA) "has also criticized the failure of the government's strategies in recent years, which have resulted in juveniles being sentenced to periods of 14 years in overcrowded prisons with no opportunities for study, work, or rehabilitation" (*ibid.*).

According to the PNC director, the extradition of Salvadoran offenders from the United States is only exacerbating the gang problem (*Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006; see also *La Opinión* 14 Feb. 2006). In an EFE article, the head of El Salvador's immigration service was cited as saying that of the 69 Salvadoran criminals deported from the United States in September 2005, five belonged to the MS-13 (9 Sept. 2005). An article published by *La Opinión* reported that, in 2005, approximately 1,900 Salvadoran criminals were extradited to El Salvador, while in 2006, as at 14 February, criminal deportees from the United States numbered 500 (14 Feb. 2006; see also *Diario CoLatino* 25 Feb. 2006). The head of El Salvador's immigration service noted that crimes committed elsewhere are not punishable under Salvadoran law, so criminals "are coming directly to live in society and they have a propensity to continue committing crimes" (EFE 9 Sept. 2005). The same source added that "the Salvadoran government plans to seek legal changes that would permit emigrants with criminal convictions who are deported from the United States to be tried and jailed [in El Salvador]" (*ibid.*; *La Opinión* 14 Feb. 2006).

The *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2006* indicates that the Salvadoran government has systems for identifying and seizing "narcotics-related and other assets of serious crimes, but the PNC lacks the resources to do so" (Mar. 2006). Even if it had the resources, however, it is questionable whether it could co-operate effectively with other government agencies (*INCSR 2006* Mar. 2006). A *La Opinión* article reported that the Salvadoran government has asked the United States government for help in its fight against the *maras* (14 Feb. 2006).

International efforts

In February 2005, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to "coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts" (US 10 May 2005). In March 2005, President Bush declared that the *maras* were a problem of national security and announced the creation of a \$150 million fund to set up a task force to combat these groups, which could become assimilated into terrorist organizations in the future (*Libération* 23 Jan. 2006). Also in March 2005, the presidents of El Salvador and Guatemala "agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activities along their common border (US 10 May 2005). Military leaders in the region also requested assistance from the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) - "the unified command responsible for all US military activities on the land mass of Latin America south of Mexico, the waters adjacent to Central and South America, the Caribbean Sea" (FAS 5 Sept. 2001; US n.d.)-"to create a multinational force to tackle organized crime and criminal youth gangs" (US 10 May 2005).

According to an article appearing on the Website of the Network of Information and Solidarity With Latin America (Réseau d'information et de solidarité avec l'Amérique latine, RISAL),

[translation]

[t]he governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have decided to resort solely to repressive police measures to crack down on *maras*, whose activities extend from Canada to Central America. During the 26th summit of the Central American Regional Integration System (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana, SICA), held at the end of June 2005, the representatives of those three countries, plus Nicaragua, Costa Rica and the United States, decided to create a strike force composed of soldiers and police from each country to deal with drug traffickers, gangs and terrorism. They also agreed to set up a database in San Salvador on gangs that are active in the region, a single passport and a regional arrest warrant that will be in effect, at first, in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. . . . [T]he summit decided to open a Salvadoran branch of the International Law Enforcement Academy, with US advisers (22 Dec. 2005; see also *INCSR* 2006 Mar. 2006).

No information on the implementation of these measures could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In terms of prevention, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) partnered with the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) of the United States Department of Justice "to create a community policing program in some 200 municipalities in El Salvador" (US 10 May 2005). According to USAID, its programs "strive to promote judicial reform, expand democratic governance, create economic opportunities, strengthen education, and improve public health in Central America" (*ibid.*).

No information on the outcome of the policing program could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Agence France-Presse (AFP). 31 January 2006. "Gobierno emprende amplia operación contra la delincuencia en El Salvador." (Factiva)

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 13 February 2006. Mariana Martínez. "El Salvador y el costo de la violencia." (BBC Mundo)
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/business/barometro_economico/newsid_4708000/4708008.stm> [Accessed 24 Feb. 2006]

_____. 25 November 2005. "El Salvador Army to Tackle Gangs."
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4469434.stm>> [Accessed 14 Feb. 2006]

_____. 24 February 2005. "Maras: combate internacional." (BBC Mundo)
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_4295000/4295895.stm> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2006]

Canada. November 2005. International Trade Canada, Trade Commissioner Service. "Fiche documentaire - El Salvador." <<http://www.infoexport.gc.ca/ie-fr/DisplayDocument.jsp?did=259&gid=217>> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2006]

Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). May 2005. *Strategic Insights*. Volume IV, No. 5. Thomas C. Bruneau. "The *Maras* and National Security in Central America." <<http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/May/bruneauMay05.pdf>> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2006]

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005. 8 March 2006. "El Salvador." United States Department of State.
<<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61727.htm>> [Accessed 3 Apr. 2006]

Día a día. 14 February 2006. "Lanzan grupo policial contra pandillas."
<<http://www.diaadia.us/default.asp?c=nota&t=14170&f=2006-2-14>> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2006]

Diario CoLatino [San Salvador]. 27 February 2006. Néstor Martínez. "La violencia urbana en América central. Les Maras, gangs d'enfants."
<<http://www.diariocolatino.com/trazocultural/detalles.asp?NewsID=76>> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2006]

_____. 25 February 2006. Juan José Dalton. "La criminalidad se ha vuelto más compleja y brutal en El Salvador."
<<http://www.diariocolatino.com/nacionales/detalles.asp?NewsID=11425>> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2006]

EFE News Service. 15 February 2006. "Experts on Gangs Say Police Action not Working." <<http://www.efenews.com/includesasp/noticias.asp?opcion=1&id=716418>> [Accessed 15 Feb. 2006]

_____. 27 December 2005. "Most of 14,000 Gang Members Arrested in El Salvador Were Released." (Factiva)

_____. 9 September 2005. "El Salvador Wary of Deportees from US." (Factiva)

Federation of American Scientists (FAS). 5 September 2001. "United States Southern Command, USSOUTHCOM." <<http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/ussouthcom/>> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2006]

Le Figaro [Paris]. 28 February 2006. Frédéric Faux. "Les gangs du Salvador lâchent les armes." (Factiva)

Globalizacion.org. N.d. Patricia Peralta Gainza. "De la búsqueda de inclusión a las *maras* y otras hierbas urbanas." <<http://www.globalizacion.org/opinion/GainzaMarasHierbasUrbanas.htm>> [Accessed 6 Feb. 2006]

Inside Costa Rica. 3 August 2005. "Homicides Already Exceed 2,040 this Year in El Salvador" <<http://insidecostarica.com/dailynews/2005/august/03/reg01.htm>> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2006]

International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2006 (INCSR 2006). March 2006. Vol. II. "Country Reports: El Salvador." United States Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2006/vol2/html/62143.htm>> [Accessed 22 Mar. 2006]

Libération [Paris]. 23 January 2006. "Les *maras*, du Canada au Panama - United violence of Americas." <<http://www.liberation.fr/page.php?Article=353204>> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2006]

La Opinión [El Salvador]. 14 February 2006. Juan José Dalton. "El Salvador pide ayuda a EU para combatir las *maras*." <<http://www.laopinion.com/home/?rkey=00060213172448464427>> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2006]

Réseau d'information et de solidarité avec l'Amérique latine (RISAL). 22 December 2005. Eduardo G. Tamayo. "Les '*maras*': Une nouvelle menace internationale." <http://risal.collectifs.net/article.php?id_article=1536> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2006]

Sociedad sin violencia. 17 February 2006. "Las cifras de homicidio siguen sin concordar." <<http://www.violenciaelsalvador.org/sv/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=220&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2006]

_____. 7 February 2006. "Los homicidios siguen al alza en El Salvador." <<http://www.violenciaelsalvador.org/sv/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=217&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2006]

United States (US). 30 June 2005. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). "Counternarcotics and Law Enforcement Country Program: El Salvador." <<http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/fs/48915.htm>> [Accessed 4 Apr. 2006]

_____. 10 May 2005. Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. Clare Ribando. *Gangs in Central America*.

<<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/47140.pdf>> [Accessed 8 Feb. 2006]

_____. N.d. Department of Defense, United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM). "Area of Responsibility (AOR)."
<<http://www.southcom.mil/pa/Facts/AOR.htm>> [Accessed 25 Apr. 2006]

Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública. 7 February 2006. Report received in correspondence from a researcher and analyst.

La Voz. 1 March 2006. María Elena Salinas. "María Elena dice."
<<http://www.azcentral.com/lavoz/editorial/articles/030106mariaelena-CR.html>> [Accessed 27 Mar. 2006]

Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), Centro de Estudios de Justicia de las Américas (CEJA), Clarin.com, Children in Organised Armed Violence (COAV), Human Rights Watch (HRW), El Mundo.com, elsalvador.com, elfaro.net, Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES), The Heritage Foundation, Hispanic American Center for Economic Research (HACER), *Le Monde diplomatique*, Organization of American States (OAS), Punto de noticias, Prensa Latina, Starmedia, *El Universal*, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.