

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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14 July 2014

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El Salvador: The presence and activities of Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and of Barrio 18 (Mara 18 or M-18) in El Salvador, including recruitment; information on measures taken by authorities to fight maras, including legislation and protection offered to victims of the maras (2011-June 2014)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Structure

Sources indicated that both the MS-13 and M-18 are divided into loosely organized groups called "cliques" or *clicas* (Wolf 24 June 2014; Professor 26 June 2014). The hierarchical organization follows a chain of command at the regional level, but there is no unique leader for either the MS-13 or M-18 (*ibid.*; Wolf 24 June 2014). According to the same sources, the number of gang members within cliques varies (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University, who conducts research on gangs in Central America, including maras, indicated that the number of gang members in cliques ranges between 15 and 30, although lower or higher numbers can be present (*ibid.*). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, Sonja Wolf, a researcher at the Institute for Security and Democracy (Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia) in Mexico city, who researches security issues in Central America and Mexico, including maras in El Salvador, indicated that large cliques can reach up to 100 members (Wolf 24 June 2014).

A clique is led by *palabrer*os, or gang leaders, and which comprise of a *primera palabra*, or first gang leader, and in some instances a *segunda palabra*, or second gang leader (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014). According to the Professor, the MS-13 leadership in El Salvador consists of something close to a "board" of 7 or 8 leaders who control all cliques in that country (*ibid.*). The M-18 leadership in El Salvador is composed of 3 or 4 leaders (*ibid.*). Leaders are usually in prison (Wolf 24 June 2014; Professor 26 June 2014). According to the Professor, the MS-13 leadership works collegially to decide how conflicts with other gangs are to be managed, whereas the M-18 leadership is not as collegial (*ibid.*). The M-18 was divided into two main gangs, the *sureños* (southerners) and the *revolucionarios* (revolutionaries), because of "differences" among their leaders (*ibid.*; Wolf 24 June 2014). The Professor indicated that the election of *palabrer*os does not follow a unique pattern throughout the gang; in some cases, it is the result of internal dynamics, and in other cases it may be by imposition from "higher" leaders (26 June 2014.). Wolf indicated that in some cases, the election of *palabrer*os is democratic within the clique and that they can be substituted (Wolf 24 June 2014).

The number of mara members in El Salvador is difficult to establish (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014). InSight Crime, a website that provides research and analysis on organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean (InSight Crime n.d.b), indicates that there are about 20,000 members in El Salvador (*ibid.* n.d.a). Other sources indicate that there are about 60,000 members in the country (*El País* 26 Apr. 2014; GlobalPost 29 Jan. 2014). The Associated Press (AP) reports that the number of gang members in that country is more than 70,000 (4 Mar. 2014). Sources also indicate that there are about 10,000 gang members in Salvadoran

prisons (AP 4 Mar. 2014; US 27 Feb. 2014, 4). The US Department of the Treasury indicates that the MS-13 consists of more than 30,000 members in Central and North America (US 5 June 2013). *La Prensa Gráfica*, a San Salvador-based newspaper, reports on a study initiated by the Salvadoran Ministry of Justice and Public Safety in 2012, which focuses on the number of gangs across all 14 departments of the country, and encompassing 262 municipalities (*La Prensa Gráfica* 25 May 2013). The study shows that, in the 184 municipalities where the census has already been completed, the number of gang members has increased by 134.6 percent since 2008 (*La Prensa Gráfica* 25 May 2013). The study, by multiplying the number of cliques recorded (1,955) by 15 members per clique, puts the total number of gang members in that area at 29,325 (*ibid.*). The Ministry also infers that 470,264 people in these municipalities have ties with gang members, by using the following numbers: the gang members themselves; an errand boy and an apprentice each; a life partner and 2 family members each; as well as gang members in prison in, or deported back to, El Salvador and their families (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1.1 Recruitment

InSight Crime asserts that the reasons for the growth of maras include the following: "poverty, marginalization, lack of access to basic services and educational opportunities; dysfunctional families" (InSight Crime n.d.a). Two sources corroborate this assertion (Wolf 24 June 2014; World Bank 14 June 2012 29, para. 22). The World Bank adds the lack of employment opportunities, especially the high unemployment rate of youth, among other factors (*ibid.*), while InSight Crime adds the "repatriation of experienced gang members from the United States" (InSight Crime n.d.a). Sources point out that the civil war contributed to the growth of maras: InSight Crime states that it left a "culture of violence" (*ibid.*) and the World Bank calls this phenomenon a [translation] "legacy of conflict and violence" (14 June 2012 29, para. 22).

Wolf indicated that children are also recruited by the gangs at schools and within their communities (Wolf 24 June 2014). As a response, families are opting to send children to family members in other parts of the country to avoid forced recruitment (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014), which may begin at age 8 or 9 (*ibid.*). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* indicates that the maras recruit children into gangs "to perform illicit activities related to the arms and drug trades, including homicide" (27 Feb. 2014, 26).

Sources indicate that gang members can leave a gang for three reasons: creating a family, employment, or religious conversion (Wolf 24 June 2014; Professor 26 June 2014). These gang members are called *calmados* [literally "calmed down persons"], and even though they keep identifying with the gang, they are no longer involved in violence (*ibid.*; Wolf 24 June 2014). In order to become a *calmado*, a gang member has to ask permission (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014), and if granted, he or she must do a deed for the gang before exiting (Wolf 24 June 2014). However, the Professor indicated that it is now more difficult to leave a gang, including for family reasons (Professor 26 June 2014). Gangs are also becoming more rigorous by demanding the exiting gang member prove his or her fidelity to the church (*ibid.*). Also, according to Wolf, permission to leave a gang is not granted when a clique has lost many gang members (Wolf 24 June 2014). She further indicated that *calmados* can return to the gang anytime (*ibid.*). Both the Professor and Wolf stated that gang members who leave the gang without consent are considered "traitors" and killed (*ibid.*; Professor 26 June 2014), or seriously beaten or hurt (*ibid.*). According to Wolf, *retirados* [retired persons] or *pesetas*, as "traitors" are also called, may be pardoned if they are involved in Christian activities, but it is not a guarantee (24 June 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Areas of Operation

La Prensa Gráfica's article on the census undertaken by the Ministry of Justice and Public Safety included a map of the areas of operation of gangs within El Salvador (25 May 2013). The territorial map of gangs in El Salvador according to this census is attached to this Response.

The US Department of the Treasury indicates that the MS-13 operates in El Salvador, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and the United States (US 17 June 2014). InSight Crime reports that both maras are present in Central and North America (InSight Crime 21 Nov. 2013a; *ibid.* 21 Nov. 2013b). Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) reports that the Italian police arrested 25 people in Milan who are mostly from El Salvador and reportedly members of the MS-13 (DPA 8 Oct. 2013). The accused were charged with criminal association, robbery, battery, and illegal possession of firearms (*ibid.*). Sources also report the detention of 35 people in Spain linked to the MS-13 and who are accused of violent robbery, battery (Europa Press 25 Mar. 2014; *El País* 26 Mar. 2014), and money laundering by opening pubs and restaurants in that country (*ibid.*; ContraPunto 27 Mar. 2014). Among the detained are two leaders of the MS-13 who arrived from El Salvador to create a clique in Spain, according to police sources (*ibid.*; *El País* 26 Mar. 2014).

Sources report that, from prisons in El Salvador, the maras organize kidnappings and extortions (InSight Crime n.d.a) or extortions and homicides (*El Diario de Hoy* 20 May 2014). *Country Reports 2013* indicates that [g]ang activities in prisons and juvenile-holding facilities remained a serious problem. ... Officials separated gang members from the regular prison population when possible, but gangs continued to exercise influence within the prisons and judicial system.

Prisoners reportedly conducted criminal activities from their cells, at times with the complicity of prison guards. Smuggling of weapons, drugs, and other contraband such as cell phones and cell-phone SIM cards was a major problem in the prisons. (27 Feb. 2014, 4)

La Prensa Gráfica reports that, according to sources from the General Directorate of Penal Institutions (Dirección General de Centros Penales, DGCP), despite the agreements with telecommunication companies to reduce the intensity of signals within the prisons, there is a [translation] "large number of people who smuggle objects into the prisons because prisoners threaten to kill them or their families" (*La Prensa Gráfica* 6 Jan. 2014). Among the objects listed by DGCP sources are drugs, cellphones, BlackBerries, medicines, and SD cards (ibid.). *El Diario de Hoy*, a San Salvador-based newspaper, reports that 14 out of 19 penitentiary centres already have a signal-blocking mechanism (20 May 2014). Another article by *El Diario de Hoy* reports on a teleconference that was intercepted by Salvadoran authorities between imprisoned MS-13 members in El Salvador and in California, in which assassinations were ordered (29 Oct. 2013).

3. Activities

According to InSight Crime, in addition to extortion and kidnapping, maras engage in drug trafficking and assassinations by hire (InSight Crime n.d.a). The US Department of the Treasury indicates that the "MS-13 has been involved in serious criminal activity, in the United States and around the world, including human smuggling, sex trafficking, drug trafficking, kidnapping, murder, assassinations, racketeering, blackmail, extortion, and immigration offenses" (US 5 June 2013). For the first time, in October 2012, the Department designated a criminal street gang, the MS-13, as a "transnational criminal organization" and, on 5 June 2013, specifically designated six of its members in accordance with Executive Order 13581, which, among other stipulations, prohibits US persons and businesses from engaging in any transactions with them and freezes any of their assets under US jurisdiction (ibid.).

Gangs are responsible for more than 50 percent of homicides committed in El Salvador, and 35 percent of the victims are gang members (AP 4 Mar. 2014; IPS 24 May 2014). In a report titled *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* that compiled data collected between 2012 and 2013, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates the homicide rate in El Salvador to be 41.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, ranking third in Central America, after Honduras (90.4) and Belize (44.7) (UN Mar. 2014, 24).

El Diario de Hoy reports that local bus companies are on the [translation] "brink of collapse" due to extortion by gang members, which amounts to around US\$36 million per year (19 Jan. 2014). According to the President of the Public Transit Association (Asociación de Transporte Público, ATP), extortions range between US\$1,000 and US\$3,000, but on "special" holidays the amount increases to US\$6,000 (ibid.). The president of the ATP also indicated that when a complaint is filed with the police, gang members become aware of the complaint, and this leads to an "increase of homicides in the public transport" or, as noted by a bus driver also quoted in the article, a "doubling" of the extortion amount (ibid.). According to a representative from the Cooperative Association of Motorists and Transportation Workers (Asociación Cooperativa de Pilotos Automovilistas y Trabajadores del Transporte, ACOPATT), gang members also force bus drivers to lend them their buses (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In San Miguel, at least two companies close every month due to extortion by gangs, according to the President of the city's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (*El Diario de Hoy* 14 May 2014; *El Mundo* 14 May 2014). *El Diario de Hoy* reports that, according to the Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce and Industry, two companies close every week on average in the country, due to extortion by gangs and unpaid bills from the government as a client (*El Diario de Hoy* 13 June 2013). According to the article, most companies pay extortion monthly or weekly to gangs (ibid.). *ContraPunto*, a digital newspaper based in San Salvador, reports that, according to a survey conducted by the National Council for Small and Medium Businesses (Consejo Nacional de la Pequeña Empresa de El Salvador, CONAPES), 79 percent of business owners are being extorted by the maras, and 84 percent of these victims did not file a complaint with the authorities because of threats and killings committed by gang members against those who do (30 Jan. 2014). *La Prensa Gráfica* also reports that, according to the National Civilian Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC), gang members are lending money to small business owners in the department of San Vicente, with an interest rate of 5 percent (*La Prensa Gráfica* 8 July 2013). The article indicates that gangs are also opening businesses, buying motor rickshaws, and organizing private [translation] "security services" (ibid.).

La Prensa Gráfica reports that, according to an official of the PNC at the Salvadoran embassy in Washington, DC, 114 cases of extortion have been reported to the diplomatic mission between January 2012 and 30 September 2013 (*La Prensa Gráfica* 28 Oct. 2013). The official indicated that gang members in El Salvador extort Salvadorans who live in the United States but still have family members in the Central American country, with amounts that range between US\$200 and US\$20,000 (*ibid.*). He indicated that 60 people have been arrested in El Salvador in connection with this extortion and that complaints to the embassy have dropped to [translation] "almost half" in comparison to 2012 (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

InSight Crime reports that maras engage in the local distribution of drugs, selling crack, cocaine, amphetamines, and marijuana "in mostly poor neighborhoods" (n.d.a). InfoSurHoy.com, a news source on Latin America and Caribbean issues sponsored by the US Southern Command (InfoSurHoy.com n.d.), cites the Chief of investigations of the Anti-narcotics Division of the PNC as saying that counter-narcotic efforts are concentrated on the MS-13 and the M-18 (*ibid.* 31 Jan. 2013). The police officer added that the MS-13 is more involved in the trafficking of [translation] "large quantities" of drugs, whereas the M-18 deals drugs in "smaller quantities" (*ibid.*). According to the Anti-narcotics Division, 349 gang members were arrested for drug-related activities in 2011 and 562 [590 (*La Prensa Gráfica* 18 Dec. 2013)] in 2012 (InfoSurHoy.com 31 Jan. 2013). The same police unit reported arresting 1,036 gang members in 2013 for similar crimes (*La Prensa Gráfica* 18 Dec. 2013).

According to the Salvadoran Ministry of Justice and Public Safety, the maras are receiving military training (La Página 21 Apr. 2014; AP 9 Apr. 2014). La Página, a San Salvador-based digital newspaper, reports that, according to the Ministry, the training is provided by Mexican drug cartels (21 Apr. 2014). AP reports that training is provided in the departments of Morazán, Usulután and Santa Ana, according to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety, and in the departments of Morazán and San Vicente as well as in the area of Guazapa, in the periphery of San Salvador, according to the Minister of National Defense (9 Apr. 2014). *El Diario de Hoy* reports that military training has also been provided in the department of La Unión, according to police sources, and that in February 2014, 60 gang members were trained, of which 13 were then sent to Honduras for further training, according to [translation] "several sources" (16 Mar. 2014). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that the maras use military weapons, and that in several crime scenes, authorities have documented the use of AK-47 [and M-16 (*La Página* 21 Apr. 2014)] rifles, as well as Uzi machine guns (*La Página* 21 Apr. 2014; *El Diario de Hoy* 16 Mar. 2014). *El País* reports that, according to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety, these weapons are obtained on the black market in Central American countries as well as through connections with Mexican drug cartels (*El País* 26 Apr. 2014). The Minister also indicated that some weapons are also obtained through [translation] "armament leaks" from the armed forces and the police (*ibid.*).

Sources report that gang members have infiltrated the military and the national police in El Salvador (InSight Crime 6 May 2014; *El País* 6 May 2014). *El País* explains that about 120 gang members who have infiltrated the academy of both security forces have been detected (*ibid.*). According to the Minister of Justice and Public Safety, gang members infiltrate these institutions to [translation] "thwart security plans and get training" (*ibid.*).

3.1 Gang Truce

In March 2012, the truce announced by gang leaders contributed to lower the rate of homicides in the country (Agencia EFE 9 Mar. 2013; AP 4 Mar. 2014). Sources add that the gang leaders belonged to the MS-13 and the M-18 (*ibid.*; DPA 31 May 2013). The truce was reached with the mediation of bishop Fabio Colindres and Raúl Mijango (AP 4 Mar. 2014; Agencia EFE 9 Mar. 2013), a former congressman for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) (*ibid.*). Sources report that before the truce, the number of homicides was 14 (*ibid.*) or 15 (DPA 31 May 2013) per day (*ibid.*). The same sources report that after the truce, the number of homicides was reduced to about 5 per day (*ibid.*; Agencia EFE 9 Mar. 2013). However, other crimes such as extortions and assaults persisted (*ibid.*; DPA 31 May 2013). The UNODC report indicates that, even though extortion levels "appear to have decreased slightly since the truce" began, they are "still extremely high throughout the country, particularly its eastern region" (UN Mar. 2014, 48).

Two news services, Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias (ACAN) and Agencia EFE, reported in a joint article that the number of homicides began to increase in [translation] "the second year of the truce" [March 2013 to March 2014] (ACAN and Agencia EFE 30 Mar. 2014). According to the Chief of the PNC, between 1 January and 1 March 2014, 501 assassinations were committed, 106 more than the number committed during

the same period of 2013 (ibid.; AP 4 Mar 2014). Sources report on the authorities' discovery of a mass grave in Lourdes [neighbourhood of Colón, near San Salvador], in December 2013 (*La Prensa Gráfica* 10 Dec. 2013; GlobalPost 29 Jan. 2014). The burial site, which is attributed to the M-18, hides the remains of 44 people (ibid.; *La Prensa Gráfica* 10 Dec. 2013). *La Prensa Gráfica* reports that, according to the General Attorney's Office, the M-18 operates in that area (ibid.). The GlobalPost, an online news portal, cites the Director of the medical examiner's office in San Salvador (Instituto de Medicina Legal, IML) as saying that all the victims were murdered during the truce and that not all of them were gang members (29 Jan. 2014). *La Prensa Gráfica* reports that, according to data from the IML, 15 more victims were exhumed from clandestine burial sites in Colón between August 2012 and August 2013, for a total of 97 nationwide (ibid.). Sources also report that disappearances increased to more than 1,000 in 2013 (GlobalPost 29 Jan. 2014; *La Prensa* 16 Dec. 2013), from 545 in 2012 (ibid.).

Sources quote the archbishop of San Salvador as saying that the truce between the two gangs [translation] "did not work"; he asked the elected-president Salvador Sánchez Cerén to create a new security policy that is "participative" and "transparent" (ACAN and Agencia EFE 30 Mar. 2014; *La Prensa Gráfica* 31 Mar. 2014). Attacks against the PNC have also been reported (*El País* 20 May 2014; *La Página* 21 Apr. 2014).

4. Measures Taken by the State

On 9 September 2010, the government enacted the Law Banning Criminal Gangs, Bands, Groups, Associations and Organizations (*Ley de Proscripción de Maras, Pandillas, Agrupaciones, Asociaciones y Organizaciones de Naturaleza Criminal*) (El Salvador 2010). A copy of the law is attached to this Response. Sources report that the mediators for the truce between the maras, Raúl Mijango and bishop Fabio Colindres, requested the Congress in December 2012 to abolish the 2010 law (*La Prensa Gráfica* 31 May 2013; *El Mundo* 2 Dec. 2012). However, *El Mundo* cites the Minister of Justice and Public Safety as saying that the government will keep applying the law (ibid.). On 31 May 2013, *La Prensa Gráfica* reported that, according to the Attorney General's Office, 180 sentences had been handed out from June 2012 to April 2013. Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

A study published by the World Bank on public expenditures on public safety and justice in El Salvador indicates that, according to the PNC, the institution counted 21,315 police officers among its ranks at the end of 2011 (World Bank 14 June 2012 46, para. 60). *La Página* cites a police officer as saying that police officers feel unprotected, lack the tactical training that maras and other criminals receive, and do not have the necessary weapons to respond to the capacity of the maras (*La Página* 21 Apr. 2014). The article quotes the chief of the PNC as saying that, even though the institution would like to have more, they have [translation] "the necessary resources and capacity" to deal with crime (ibid.). On 21 April 2014, *La Página* reported that the maras had launched 60 attacks against the police from 1 January 2014 to the week prior to the publishing of the article. On 20 May 2014, *El País* reported that the number of attacks had increased to 75. *La Prensa Gráfica* indicates that the maras were reportedly responsible for 114 attacks against the police in 2013 (10 Dec. 2013). AP reports that as of 15 April 2014, three police officers had been killed in the attacks and 11 injured, according to authorities (AP 16 Apr. 2014). Sources report that the Minister of Justice and Public Safety reached an agreement with the Attorney General's Office to charge persons involved in attacks on police officers under the antiterrorism law (ibid.; *La Página* 16 Apr. 2014). The Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism (*Ley Especial contra Actos de Terrorismo*) of 2006 stipulates prison sentences between 40 and 60 years for attacks against police officers and other public servants (El Salvador 2006, Art. 5).

Sources report that officers from the Antiterrorist Special Command (Comando Especial Antiterrorista, CEAT), the Police Reaction Unit (Grupo de Reacción Policial, GRP), the Special Operations Police Unit (Grupo de Operaciones Policiales Especiales, GOPES), and the Anti-gang Unit (Unidad Antipandillas) were deployed to travel undercover in public buses to prevent extortion and robberies (InfoSurHoy.com 23 Oct. 2012; *La Prensa Gráfica* 31 Aug. 2012). This plan was announced in August 2012 by the Ministry of Justice and Public Safety, according to *La Prensa Gráfica* (ibid.). However, on 26 August 2013, the same newspaper reported that the plan had been abandoned and quoted the deputy director of the PNC as explaining that undercover agents were no longer participating in this plan mainly because of the [translation] "high cost" involved (*La Prensa Gráfica* 26 Aug. 2013). The article adds that the number of thefts stayed [translation] "more or less the same" from 1 January to 21 August 2013 compared to the same period of the previous year (ibid.).

Country Reports 2013 indicates that

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, the judiciary suffered from inefficiency, corruption, political infighting, and insufficient resources. Substantial corruption in the judicial system contributed to a high level of impunity, undermining the rule of law and the public's respect for the judiciary. The criminal conviction rate was less than 5 percent. An ineffective public security strategy, inadequate government funding and training of the PNC, and ineffective senior-level leadership made it difficult to identify,

arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of human rights abuses and other crimes, thus diminishing public confidence in the justice system. Intimidation and killing of police officers, crime victims, and witnesses created a climate of fear, complicating investigation of violent crime and other alleged human rights abuses. (US 27 Feb. 2014, 7)

The World Bank report indicates that there is [translation] "little" coordination between public safety agencies, and that the low performance of safety and justice institutions undermines public trust in them (World Bank 14 June 2012 12-13, paras. RE8, RE16). The report also indicates that public expenditures in crime investigations are [translation] "low" compared to other aspects of public safety, and expenditures in the judicial system lowered from 38 percent of the total budget in security in 2006 to 31 percent in 2011 (ibid. 11, paras. RE3, RE4). The report further indicates that the conviction rate in 2011 was 12.4 percent; that same year, 10,149 cases received by the justice system in 2010 were dismissed by tribunals for exceeding the time period established to hold a trial (ibid. 52, para. 71). The report indicates that problems with the independency of the judiciary [translation] "seem to persist," and that there are cases of corruption or extortion with some members of the PNC, as well as cases of bribery in tribunals (ibid. 61, paras. 99, 101).

5. State Protection

On 26 April 2006, the government decreed the Special Law for the Protection of Victims and Witnesses (*Ley Especial para la Protección de Víctimas y Testigos*) (El Salvador 3 June 2014). The Law offers three types of protection measures:

- Ordinary: to protect the identity and location of the victim or witness;
- Extraordinary: to provide temporary or permanent protection through the provision of police escorts, temporary housing, or change of domicile or employment;
- Support measures: to provide medical care, psychological support and legal services, and to help with housing, food, maintenance and employment (ibid.).

There are also urgent measures, which are a combination of ordinary and extraordinary measures applied [translation] "immediately" and temporarily according to the risk, before a permanent solution is found (ibid.).

The program for the protection of witnesses is composed of six "technical evaluation teams" that receive applications for protection and are distributed as follows:

- three teams in San Salvador with jurisdiction over the central region,
- one team in Santa Ana with jurisdiction over the western region,
- one in San Miguel with jurisdiction over the eastern region,
- and one team in the city of Cojutepeque with jurisdiction over the central part of the country that is not under the jurisdiction of San Salvador (ibid.).

La Prensa Gráfica reports that, according to the Attorney General's Office of El Salvador, [translation] "at least" 10 people who are under the witness protection program have been ordered by a judge to provide testimony at trials without voice distortion or hood to cover their faces (*La Prensa Gráfica* 12 Dec. 2011). The article cites the case of a witness who provided testimony without these two elements; six hours later, this person lost a son and a niece, who were killed during an attack on the witness' house (ibid.). *Country Reports 2013* indicates that "[a]s of July, the PNC was providing protection to 52 victims and 89 witnesses. However, some judges denied anonymity to witnesses at trial, and gang intimidation and violence against witnesses contributed to a climate of impunity from criminal prosecution" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 7).

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Attachments

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