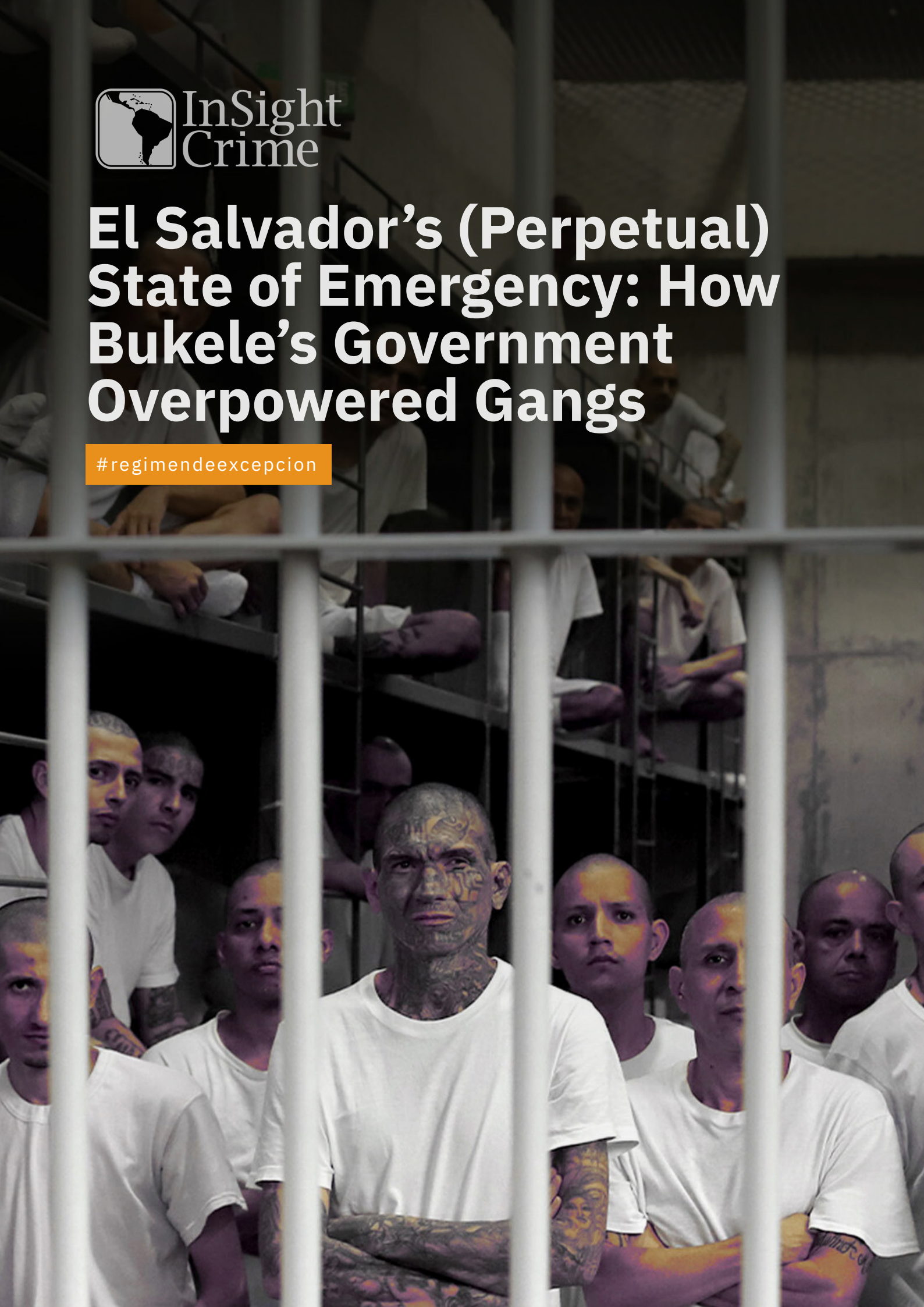




El Salvador's (Perpetual) State of Emergency: How Bukele's Government Overpowered Gangs

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December 2023

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1

Executive Summary



In March 2022, the government of El Salvador launched one of the most relentless security crackdowns in its history in its latest attempt to debilitate the country's three main gangs – the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13), the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios (18R), and the Barrio Sureños (18S). Past crackdowns spanning multiple decades had failed to quell the gangs, which had long terrorized communities throughout the country and beyond. This one, however, has greatly debilitated them.

President Nayib Bukele, who took office in 2019, is the architect of this effort. Following a sudden spike in gang violence in March 2022, the legislative assembly, at Bukele's request, declared a month-long *régimen de excepción* (state of emergency), suspending constitutional rights and loosening rules on making arrests. In a merciless campaign, security forces have since arrested over 77,000 people, over 1% of the country's population of 6.3 million.

The state of emergency has been extended for 20 consecutive months, despite widespread reports by human rights groups and the media of arbitrary arrests based on little or no evidence of wrongdoing and a lack of due process that includes no access to legal counsel. There are also reports of torture, as well as mass graves that include the over 150 people who have died in the penitentiary system since the state of emergency began.

Notwithstanding these abuses, the controversial crackdown appears to have at least temporarily crippled the gangs. It has also helped drive violence to historic lows and given breathing space to communities previously overrun by the gangs, something no past crackdown has achieved.

For his part, Bukele, whose policies enjoy broad approval among Salvadorans, has declared victory over the gangs. But both critics and supporters of the state of emergency question the long-term sustainability of such aggressive security policies. There are also concerns surrounding severe prison overcrowding and, crucially, the possibility that one day the gangs, or some facsimile of them, could return.

With these questions in mind, InSight Crime embarked on an investigation aimed at assessing how Bukele's crackdown has impacted the gangs. Over the last nine months, we investigated the gangs' response to the state of emergency. We also analyzed what may happen next.

Below is a summary of the investigation's **key findings**:

- **The gangs have been neutralized, for now.** The speed and scale of arrests made during the state of emergency have decimated gang ranks and sent scores of members fleeing abroad or into hiding in El Salvador. The gangs no longer possess a street-level structure capable of holding territory. By extension, they can no longer extort locals or sell drugs on a mass scale.
- **The gangs did not mount a coordinated response to Bukele's crackdown, armed or otherwise.** Unlike in previous crackdowns, the gangs have not taken up arms in response to the state of emergency. It is not clear whether the lack of a coordinated response was a deliberate tactic, or if the gangs were simply overwhelmed by the ferocity and speed of the crackdown. The latter seems more likely, given reports of ruptures in gang communication and hierarchy before and after the state of emergency began.
- **Gang members are lying low.** The imminent threat of arrest in El Salvador means few gang members dare leave their hideouts. Those seeking refuge in nearby countries -- Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States -- are mostly abstaining from crime in the hope of avoiding deportation. In fact, gang members in exile have yet to regroup MS13 or Barrio 18 cells abroad.
- **Imprisoned gang members are in survival mode.** Reports from inside El Salvador's prisons suggest government forces exercise near total control behind bars. Prison officials have reportedly subjected detainees to physical and psychological abuse. Gangs have almost no

contact with the outside world and struggle to communicate between cells. The extreme subjugation has so far prevented the gangs from capitalizing on severe overcrowding to consolidate and recruit new members behind bars or reorganize their structures and *modus operandi*, as they have done in the past.

- **Extreme legal tools, broad interpretation of existing legislation, and the centralization of political power proved decisive in overpowering the gangs.** The suspension of basic rights has allowed the government to arrest more people at a faster rate compared to previous crackdowns, and emergency legal measures also permit lengthy detentions without the need to present evidence or formal charges. The broad interpretation of existing laws, combined with the use of uncorroborated raw intelligence as grounds for arrest, also assist in this strategy of mass incarceration. The system relies on the alignment of the main branches of government around Bukele's presidency, which systematically ignores widespread violations of due process. The executive, legislature, and judiciary work in tandem to perpetuate these extreme legal measures and devise new legal tools aimed at keeping gang members behind bars at any cost.
- **The gangs have been weakened, but they are not defeated.** At least a third of gang membership remains at large, and some 53 gang cells are still active in El Salvador, according to police estimates. This suggests MS13 and Barrio 18 structures, though dormant, still exist in some form. Remnants of the gangs may also still be engaging in extortion or drug peddling in some areas, albeit on a much smaller scale.
- **The gangs, as they existed before the state of emergency, may never return.** Barring a radical shift in government security policy, the chance of a swift comeback seems remote, given the legal tools at the government's disposal for arresting gang members and keeping them behind bars. But social and economic hardship, which fueled the gang's rise and persists in neighborhoods once overrun by the MS13 and Barrio 18, could drive remnants of these groups back into criminal activity or spawn new criminal groups. The government does not seem to have any plan to address the root causes of gang violence.

Methodology

This project had three research goals. First, we aimed to assess how the state of emergency impacted gang structures in El Salvador. Second, we sought to analyze strategies implemented by gangs and their individual members in response to the government crackdown. Third, we explored possible scenarios of the future evolution of gang and criminal dynamics in El Salvador.

To conduct the research, InSight Crime formed a team comprising five investigators in El Salvador and Mexico, a project coordinator in Guatemala City, and a project director in Washington DC. The team began research with a thorough revision of open-source information on gang dynamics in El Salvador. This included a review of previous InSight Crime investigations into gang dynamics and extortion, press reports, Salvadoran gang laws, legislation enacted during the state of emergency, and primary source materials posted on government social media accounts. This allowed us to gain an initial insight into the relationship between Bukele's security policies and gang dynamics. During this initial phase, we also identified gaps in the research and defined our investigative priorities before conducting fieldwork. The team also filed official requests for data on homicides, extortion, common crime, and prison populations from the El Salvador government but did not receive a response before finalizing the report.

Following the initial research phase, the team went into the field. In El Salvador, we interviewed key stakeholders and visited former gang strongholds in the municipalities of San Salvador, Apopa, Soyapango, Ilopango, Mejicanos, Ciudad Delgado, San Julián, Tonacatepeque, Zacatecoluca, and San Miguel. The team also conducted fieldwork in Tapachula, Mexico, in addition to interviews in Mexico City and Guatemala City. Throughout all phases of research, we conducted remote interviews with stakeholders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States.

In total, the team conducted 100 qualitative interviews with 107 sources in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. Sources included: active and semi-retired gang members; security and prison officials; politicians; independent lawyers; diplomatic sources; residents living in former gang strongholds; people detained during the state of emergency; religious and community leaders; businesspeople; migration authorities in Mexico; representatives of civil-society organizations; and workers in migrant shelters. Where possible, we have qualified the sources in the report to allow better assessment of the authenticity of the information provided. In most instances, sources requested anonymity to speak more freely. In all cases, we sought to corroborate their statements with other sources of information but have indicated where we were unable to do so.

The team also obtained intelligence reports compiled by El Salvador's national police. We verified the authenticity of these reports and used them to include

more precise estimates of the number of gang members arrested during the state of emergency, given the difficulty of accessing public information via government transparency channels. These documents also helped us assess other criminal activities, such as extortion, and shine light on possible strategies implemented by gang leaders following the onset of the state of emergency. In some cases, these reports were sourced from databases compiled by the organization “Guacamaya Leaks.” In other cases, we obtained them via human sources.

Based on this research, the report is divided into four sections. The first section provides background on the evolution of gangs in El Salvador and previous security strategies aimed at debilitating the gangs. The second section assesses the strategies implemented by gangs in response to the state of emergency in El Salvador and abroad. There, we seek to differentiate between street-level gang members and gang leaders, as well as between responses on the street and responses behind bars.

The third section focuses on how the state of emergency has impacted the gangs, their territorial control, and their main criminal economies. There, the report draws heavily from multiple field visits and previous InSight Crime studies that allowed the team to compare life before and after the state of emergency in some of the country's most notorious former gang strongholds. We complemented this analysis with quantitative data sourced from police intelligence reports. In the fourth section, based on the findings of our field and desk research, we posit a series of possible scenarios on the future evolution of gang and criminal dynamics in El Salvador.

To narrow the study's scope, the team focused its research in El Salvador on urban areas known for having a strong gang presence. There is ample room for further research on the differentiated impact of the state of emergency in urban and rural areas in El Salvador. What's more, the criminal dynamics of El Salvador appear to be evolving rapidly, thus any conclusions drawn from this research should be considered preliminary.

2

Introduction: Prelude to the State of Emergency



In late March 2022, the government of El Salvador launched one of the most ferocious security crackdowns ever seen in Central America, shifting hard-line security measures into overdrive in an attempt to wipe out the country's main street gangs -- the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the two factions of the 18th Street, or Barrio 18. Dubbed a "war on gangs" by El Salvador President Nayib Bukele,¹ the crackdown was the latest in a string of government campaigns aimed at mitigating gang-related crime and violence, a goal that had eluded Salvadoran administrations for decades.

The country's gang problem is part of a vicious migratory circle. The gangs took root in California, formed by Central American émigrés, many of whom were fleeing violence and civil war during the 1980s. In the 1990s, as El Salvador was emerging from a brutal civil war, the US government shifted its policies to deport thousands of ex-convicts, many of whom were affiliated with the MS13

¹ Nayib Bukele [@nayibbukele], 10,094 terroristas arrestados en 17 días. Seguimos... #GuerraContraPandillas, [Tweet](#), Twitter, 12 April 2022.

and Barrio 18.² Once back in El Salvador, the deportees began establishing new criminal cells that mirrored the gang culture they had learned in the United States.

Over the following years, the gangs spread quickly, forming loose networks of cells operating under the banners of the MS13 and Barrio 18. Controlling certain territory opened the door to lucrative criminal economies such as extortion and drug peddling. It also led to bloody turf wars between these rival gangs, which increasingly targeted civilians and engaged in battles with security forces and other criminal organizations.

To combat the gangs, governments in the 2000s devised a program of heavy-handed security measures. Coined *mano dura* (iron fist) by the administration of former president Francisco Flores Pérez (1999-2004), and later *super mano dura* by his successor, Antonio Saca (2004-2009), these measures broadly relied on beefing up police presence and jailing gang members en masse. Despite some short-term reductions in violence, the campaigns failed to prevent the spread of street gangs or disrupt their main criminal activities. What's more, the hordes of captured gang members began taking advantage of weak security and overcrowding in prisons to strengthen their ranks, create a more hierarchical and disciplined structure, and develop more organized criminal rackets from behind bars.

The gangs continued to wreak havoc into the 2010s, leading the El Salvador government to plot a different course. In early 2012, the administration of then-president Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) brokered a ceasefire with the MS13 and the two Barrio 18 factions, known as the Revolucionarios (18R) and the Sureños (18S). The government promised to transfer gang leaders away from maximum security prisons in exchange for cooling violence.³ The so-called *tregua* (truce) quickly cut murders in half, but the gains did not last. Rather, the ceasefire unraveled in spectacular fashion, sparking brutal clashes between rival gangs and the security forces. The violence peaked in 2015, when El Salvador's annual homicide rate of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants made it the most violent country in the Western Hemisphere.⁴

Since peaking in 2015, the country's murder rate has been declining. This started during the administration of former president Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019), whose government launched a new offensive against the gangs and enacted strict measures to disrupt criminal rackets coordinated from behind bars. The decline in homicides was substantial, falling by 50%

2 William Wheeler, "How the US helped create El Salvador's bloody gang war," The Guardian, 10 January 2020.

3 Geoffrey Ramsey, "Is El Salvador Negotiating with Street Gangs?," InSight Crime, 15 March 2012.

4 David Gagne, "InSight Crime's 2015 Homicide Round-up," InSight Crime, 14 January 2016.

between 2015 and 2018, though the murder rate stayed well above regional averages. Increased pressure from authorities also failed to disrupt the gangs' widespread territorial control and extortion operations.

President Bukele took office in June 2019 following a landslide victory earlier that year. The start of his tenure saw a radical drop in murders, accelerating the trend begun during the previous administration. The Bukele government attributed the rapid decline in murders to the president's flagship security plan. Dubbed the Plan Control Territorial (Territorial Control Plan), the strategy was poorly defined and mostly hidden from public view.⁵ Critics were quick to point out that key elements of the plan, including increased police patrols and more security forces on the street, mirrored those of previous *mano dura* campaigns.

What's more, just over a year into Bukele's tenure, it emerged that some of his administration's top officials had, in fact, sought negotiations with jailed leaders from the three main gang factions, trading prison benefits in exchange for their help lowering the murder rate.⁶ The Bukele government repeatedly denied these accusations, instead leveraging the drop in homicides to boost the president's popularity, help his party win a supermajority in the legislative assembly, and assist him in reforming the judicial system in his favor. But subsequent sanctions by the United States Treasury Department on two of Bukele's interlocutors privy to the arrangement seemed to confirm the backroom deals.⁷

Although by 2020 homicides had dropped considerably, the gangs still controlled territory and various criminal economies. And they were still able to rattle Bukele, using sporadic outbursts of violence to signal discontent with the negotiations or squeeze the government for further concessions. One of those outbursts came during the final weekend of March 2022, when the gangs allegedly murdered 87 people across the country in just 72 hours.⁸

The bloody weekend sparked nationwide horror and marked a turning point. On March 27, the country's legislative assembly, acting on Bukele's instructions, declared a month-long state of emergency, suspending constitutional rights and loosening rules on making arrests in an attempt to retaliate against the gangs.⁹ The heavy-handed measures shared some similarities with previous government efforts, albeit with a crucial exception: The use of emergency legal

5 Seth Robins and Héctor Silva Ávalos, "[Homicide Drop in El Salvador: Presidential Triumph or Gang Trend?](#)," InSight Crime, 13 August 2020.

6 Steven Dudley, "[3 Dirty Secrets Revealed by the El Salvador Gang 'Negotiations'](#)," InSight Crime, 4 September 2020.

7 US Treasury Department, "[Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime](#)," 8 December 2021.

8 Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Gang Murder Rampage Sends Shockwaves Through El Salvador Government](#)," InSight Crime, 28 March 2022.

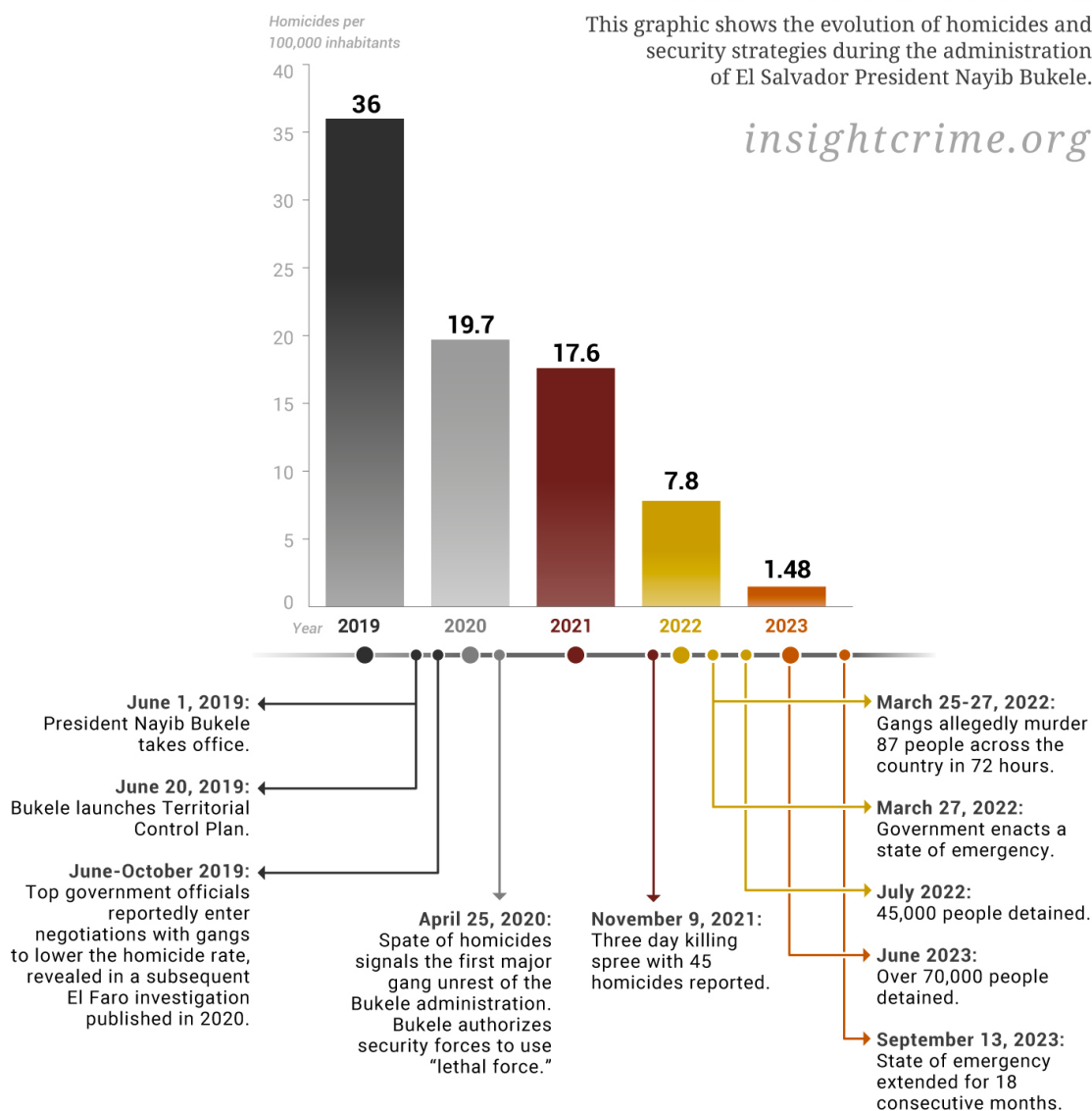
9 Ibid.

measures, combined with Bukele's influence over the three main branches of government, removed several checks and balances that had, during previous crackdowns, prevented state authorities from shifting *mano dura* into overdrive.

Major Gang-Related Events During the Bukele Administration

This graphic shows the evolution of homicides and security strategies during the administration of El Salvador President Nayib Bukele.

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Sources: Homicide data from El Salvador National Police; InSight Crime reporting; *El Faro*; press reports

Dubbed the *régimen de excepción* (state of emergency), as of November 2023, the measures have been extended for 20 consecutive months.¹⁰ In that time, El Salvador authorities have launched a ruthless campaign of raids in areas with gang presence, arresting anywhere between 72,000 people¹¹ or 77,000 people¹² -- over 1% of the country's 6.3 million population.¹³ The government claims most of those arrested belong to street gangs, but civil-society groups, religious organizations, and academics have flagged widespread arbitrary detentions amid more than 5,800 alleged human rights violations during the crackdown's first year.¹⁴

The indiscriminate nature of arrests makes it difficult to estimate exactly how many gang members have been detained. But information from El Salvador police intelligence reports obtained by InSight Crime suggests the majority of people arrested during the state of emergency are not fully-fledged gang members. Most are aspiring members and "collaborators."¹⁵ In addition, by the government's own estimations, there were over 21,000 fully-fledged gang members at large as of the end of September 2023.¹⁶

Regardless, the controversial crackdown appears to have at least temporarily crippled the gangs, driving violence to record lows and leading Bukele to declare victory.¹⁷ Reports in prominent independent Salvadoran media outlets also concluded the *mano dura* measures had succeeded in breaking up the gangs.¹⁸ The crackdown has won Bukele further political points at home, and political leaders throughout the region appear increasingly keen to appropriate his strategies to deal with their gang issues.

But questions remain about the long-term feasibility of sustaining the aggressive crackdown, and whether failing to address the socioeconomic conditions that facilitated the gang's rise in the first place could create space

10 El Salvador Legislative Assembly, "[Diputados reafirman compromiso de velar por la seguridad de los salvadoreños](#)," 12 October 2023.

11 Diálogo [@dialogo21], #Diálogo21 | El ministro de @SeguridadSV, @Vi11atoro, confirmó esta mañana, que a la fecha han liberado a más de 7 mil salvadoreños, de los 72 mil que han sido capturados en el régimen de excepción. "Esto quiere decir que el sistema de justicia está funcionando", aseveró., [Tweet](#), Twitter, 22 August 2023; Gabriela Villarroel, "[Asamblea aprueba 17a prórroga al régimen de excepción en El Salvador](#)," La Prensa Gráfica, 10 August 2023.

12 El Salvador National Police, "Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023," 1 October 2023.

13 World Bank, "[Population, total - El Salvador](#)," 2022.

14 Yolanda Magaña, "[El Salvador: 66.417 presos, 5.802 víctimas de abuso en 1 año](#)," Associated Press, 27 March 2023.

15 El Salvador National Police, "Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023," 1 October 2023.

16 Ibid.

17 Al Jazeera English, "[El Salvador's president claims victory against gangs after crackdown](#)," 2 June 2023.

18 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "[Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador](#)," El Faro, 3 February 2023.

for these structures to regroup or mutate. Critics, and even some supporters of the state of emergency, also point to mass human rights abuses and arbitrary arrests, in addition to deplorable conditions in the country's overcrowded jails, as possible detonators of future criminality.¹⁹

In light of these concerns, this report aims to assess how the state of emergency has impacted the gangs, how these groups have responded, and how their position in El Salvador's criminal landscape could evolve going forward.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, [“‘We can arrest anyone we want’: Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador's ‘State of Exception’,”](#) 7 December 2022.

3

Gang Strategies



El Salvador's gangs have been unable to mount a coordinated response in the face of Bukele's crackdown. The speed and scale of the arrests appear to have taken the MS13 and the two factions of the Barrio 18 by surprise. And a sizable chunk of the gangs' rank-and-file and street-level leaders -- reaching into the tens of thousands -- were detained, went into hiding, or fled the country.

During the earlier crackdowns by previous governments, the gangs reacted, in part, by attacking security forces or targeting individual police officers or soldiers. But since the onset of the state of emergency, the gangs have shown minimal signs of armed retaliation. Those not arrested appear to be hiding or abroad. Amid the disarray, many gang members are now fending for themselves, with the possible exception of exiled leaders who may be regrouping in Mexico.

Gang Members on the Run

The gangs' primary reaction to Bukele's crackdown appears to have been to go into hiding. In some cases, this was a deliberate tactic. But the ferocity of the government's campaign also appears to have left the gangs with little option other than to disperse. In all cases, those on the run or in hiding appear to be from every stratum of the gangs.

From the beginning, the gangs scrambled. An internal intelligence report compiled by the Salvadoran anti-gang police unit at the state of emergency's onset concluded that the MS13's top leadership ring in El Salvador, known as the *ranfla*, had ordered gang bosses and fully-fledged gang members (homeboys) to either seek refuge in safe houses, mountainous areas, and private residences, or attempt to flee to neighboring countries and wait for the crackdown to subside.²⁰ InSight Crime could not corroborate this account, and government intelligence can be unreliable.

But during nine months of research, InSight Crime did not find any indication that MS13 and Barrio 18 leaders had ordered gang members to retaliate with arms in response to Bukele's crackdown. In fact, there have been no signs of a coordinated, violent response. This stands in stark contrast to the bloody clashes between gangs and security forces during previous state crackdowns. In dozens of interviews held with current and former MS13 and Barrio 18 members in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, InSight Crime's research team heard no mention of plans for a counterattack.

Other research backs this finding: According to a veteran gang leader interviewed by El Faro, for example, the lack of "guidelines" sent from gang leaders to homeboys on the street marks a significant difference between the crackdown today and that of the mid-2010s.²¹

The only hint of an armed retaliation discovered by InSight Crime's research team comes from an El Salvador police intelligence report, compiled in August 2023. In the report, police officials claim that in May 2023, MS13 leaders, termed "cabecillas,"²² sent orders for gang members to murder collaborators,

20 El Salvador Transnational Anti-Gang Center, "Situación de las pandillas en El Salvador en el marco de la implementación del régimen de excepción, relacionado a la migración pandilleril," 20 April 2022.

21 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador," El Faro, 3 February 2023.

22 Cabecillas is a term used by El Salvador authorities to categorize gang members occupying a range of leadership roles, including national-level leaders (ranfleros) and cell leaders (palabrero).

common criminals, and rival gang members.²³ The orders did not include calls to target state security forces with violence. But they do instruct gang members to continue evading police and military operations, in addition to maintaining extortion rackets, concealing illicit goods, sustaining the strength of gang cells, and locating high-impact targets for possible assassinations. However, InSight Crime found no indication that these plans have been executed.

With no coordinated response, gang members have scattered. Some street-level members and gang collaborators²⁴ have seemingly remained in El Salvador, lying low with relatives or seeking refuge in areas outside of major urban hubs with associates or allies. These gang members and alleged affiliates appear to stay mostly confined to their hideouts, as venturing outside or meeting with other gang members carries the risk of immediate arrest and indefinite incarceration. Some gang members may leave their hideouts to work discrete jobs, often at night, either to subsist while waiting for the gang crackdown to eventually cool or to save money before fleeing the country.

The gangs' sudden disappearance was corroborated by numerous interviews. During research, InSight Crime spoke to 36 residents in 15 former gang strongholds in the capital, San Salvador, and in the municipalities of Apopa, Soyapango, Illopango, Mejicanos, Ciudad Delgado, San Julián, Tonacatepeque, and San Miguel. None of the residents said they had witnessed any kind of response from gang members, armed or otherwise, aimed at protecting territories or securing their criminal economies.

Most residents were left guessing as to where these gang members went. But one community worker in Apopa said some gang lookouts, once a ubiquitous presence in the area, were now monitoring from their residences to avoid arrest. Residents in Mejicanos told InSight Crime that children and adolescents who once collaborated with the gangs still roam the streets. But they are no longer feared by locals, and it is unclear whether they are still patrolling on behalf of the gangs.²⁵

Bus company directors and drivers in the San Salvador metropolitan area, among the most common victims of gang extortion and murders prior to the state of emergency, also told InSight Crime the gangs no longer interfered in their day-to-day operations. A trio of bus drivers interviewed by InSight Crime at one bus depot agreed the gangs had, for the time being, “disappeared.”²⁶

23 El Salvador National Police, “Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 31 de agosto 2023,” 1 September 2023.

24 “Collaborators” is an ambiguous term used by El Salvador authorities to categorize people loosely associated with street gangs. It encompasses civilians who choose or are forced to assist the gangs with miscellaneous tasks, including stashing weapons and collecting extortion payments.

25 InSight Crime interviews, resident of former gang stronghold, Mejicanos, El Salvador, 19 June 2023; group of three residents in former gang stronghold, Mejicanos, El Salvador, 19 June 2023.

26 InSight Crime interview, group of three bus drivers, Soyapango, El Salvador, 27 July 2023.

Gang Migration

The constant threat of detention has led many active and semi-retired (often termed, *calmado*)²⁷ gang members to flee to nearby countries along well-established migrant routes passing through Central America and Mexico toward the United States. These routes have long provided a means of escape for gang members in El Salvador facing aggressive security campaigns or possible arrest. But anti-gang police in neighboring countries such as Guatemala have strengthened their border surveillance following Bukele's anti-gang crackdown, making passage more difficult.²⁸

In addition, embattled gang structures in El Salvador appear unable to provide meaningful support to street-level members fleeing the country. Rather, gang members appear to be relying on their savings or family funds to finance their escape or to provide temporary respite. One *calmado* now in Mexico told InSight Crime he arrived in the country after purchasing his own bus tickets to travel through Guatemala.²⁹ Others, hoping to reach the United States from Mexico, were saving money to hire a human smuggler at a cost of around \$5,000.³⁰ For some, fleeing El Salvador came after several months of hiding. Gang members in Mexico said many of their colleagues are still in El Salvador, unable to muster the funds to head north following disruptions to key gang economies like extortion.³¹

This does not mean that gang members do not rely on one another for support. Some MS13 and Barrio 18 members fleeing El Salvador have been housed by other gang members or their extended networks in Guatemala and Mexico. This support may include logistical assistance with informal border crossings, shelter, or connections to human smugglers. One *calmado* on the run told InSight Crime he had sought help from a contact to cross the Suchiate river,³² which divides Guatemala and Mexico and appears to be a common route for Salvadoran gang members seeking to enter the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico.³³ Police in Chiapas told InSight Crime they had noticed an uptick in

27 *Calmado* is a gang term referring to those who have aged out or have requested leave, often to join an Evangelical church. Since requesting permanent leave can generate suspicions that they could be collaborating with authorities, gang members prefer this middle ground. In emergencies, *calmados* can be called upon to perform some duty for the gang and assist the gang in some way.

28 Guatemala Interior Ministry, "[Centro Antipandillas Transnacional detuvo a más de 15 cenroamericanos](#)," 3 April 2023.

29 InSight Crime interview, semi-retired MS13 member, Tapachula, Mexico, 16 February 2023.

30 InSight Crime interview, semi-retired MS13 member (b), Tapachula, Mexico, 20 February 2023.

31 InSight Crime interview, semi-retired MS13 member, Mexico City, Mexico, 27 July 2023.

32 InSight Crime interview, semi-retired MS13 member (a), Tapachula, 20 February 2023.

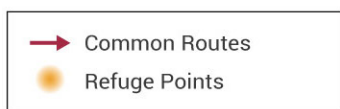
33 Carlos García, "[La huida a México de un pandillero de la Mara: salir del fuego y caer en las brasas](#)," Gato Pardo, 22 June 2023; Alejandro Gómez, "[Piden mayor vigilancia en la frontera sur por el posible arribo de maras de El Salvador](#)," *Diario del Sur*, 31 March 2022.

gang member arrests since the start of the state of emergency but did not offer data to support this assertion.³⁴

Salvadoran gang members living in Mexico have also provided refuge for active and semi-retired gang members.³⁵ A jailed member of the MS13's main umbrella group in Mexico, known as the "Mexico Program," told InSight Crime the group had received various colleagues fleeing El Salvador, but these members were only those who had been granted authorization to seek refuge in Mexico by members of the Mexico Program and their trusted gang contacts in El Salvador.

Gang Members On The Run

This map shows approximate routes taken by Salvadoran gang members fleeing the state of emergency. Individual journeys vary significantly.



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Sources: Interviews with government officials in Mexico and Guatemala; interviews with gang members in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico; internal intelligence reports compiled by El Salvador national police; press reports

34 InSight Crime interview, police official, Tapachula, Mexico, 22 August 2023.

35 InSight Crime telephone interview, active MS13 member based in Chiapas, Mexico, 20 July 2023.

Meanwhile, in Central America, members of the MS13's *ranfla* have reportedly asked gang bosses in Guatemala and Honduras to provide refuge for those fleeing El Salvador, according to an internal report compiled by Salvadoran anti-gang police shortly after the state of emergency began.³⁶ The same report claimed MS13 members were already seeking refuge in Guatemala City and the surrounding urban area, including in existing gang hubs like the Mixco and Villa Nueva municipalities. It is hard to gauge the extent to which these orders were implemented. But an MS13 member based in Mexico told InSight Crime that one of the gang leaders mentioned in the official report had contacted him from Guatemala about helping gang members reach Mexico.³⁷

Mexico is an attractive destination for gang members on the run. Many share the goal of avoiding deportation to El Salvador, where they would almost certainly be jailed on arrival. Four semi-retired Salvadoran gang members told InSight Crime they were able to acquire a humanitarian visa in Mexico by claiming to be victims of gang violence and covering their tattoos. This suggests a degree of leniency from officials not common in Central America, where authorities are more familiar with the gangs and make arrests based on appearance or loose gang affiliation. One active MS13 member based in Tijuana said gang members attempting to reach Mexico were struggling to cross Guatemala in the face of indiscriminate arrests.

"If the [police] see your tattoos, they'll send you back to El Salvador," the source said.³⁸

The head of Guatemala's anti-gang police, Ángel Cambara, told InSight Crime that "any arrested gang member from El Salvador is immediately sent back."³⁹

Criteria for identifying potential gang members includes checking suspects for tattoos and contacting Salvadoran authorities to verify gang status, Cambara said. He added: "The majority have a criminal record or a pending arrest warrant."

Though gang members appear to be moving to and through Mexico in large numbers, Mexican authorities only reported 36 deportations of suspected Salvadoran members of the MS13 and Barrio 18 between April 2022 and May 2023.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Guatemalan police had reportedly expelled 70 suspected gang members from El Salvador fleeing the state of emergency as of mid-

36 El Salvador Transnational Anti-Gang Center, "Situación de las pandillas en El Salvador en el marco de la implementación del régimen de excepción, relacionado a la migración pandilleril," 20 April 2022.

37 InSight Crime telephone interview, MS13 member based in Mexico, 1 March 2023.

38 InSight Crime telephone interview, active MS13 member based in Tijuana, Mexico, 11 July 2023.

39 InSight Crime interview, Ángel Cambara, head of Guatemala anti-gang police, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 28 July 2023.

40 Information provided by Mexican authorities upon request, 14 March and 15 June 2023.

December 2022.⁴¹ A further 64 were deported in the first nine months of 2023, according to police data reported by Prensa Libre.⁴² Official Guatemalan reports largely coincide with these numbers.⁴³ Guatemalan police also arrested a total of 73 suspected Salvadoran gang members between January and September 8, 2023, according to the Prensa Libre report.

There is also some evidence of collaboration between Mexican and Central American authorities when it comes to deporting gang members. In at least three cases, Mexican authorities have delivered Salvadoran MS13 and Barrio 18 members, detained in Mexico, to Guatemalan officials manning customs checkpoints on the shared border; Guatemalan officials then transported the detainees overland to the country's border with El Salvador and into the hands of Salvadoran authorities.⁴⁴

Some semi-retired gang members who made it to Mexico told InSight Crime they planned to continue traveling to reach family in the United States. Family reunification is a common driver of migration from Central America to the United States. This is no different for the gangs, with both the MS13 and Barrio 18 having spawned in California, and millions of Salvadorans residing in the US. But attempting to enter the United States also carries the risk of deportation, in addition to expensive smuggling fees associated with crossing the US-Mexico border, deterring some from venturing beyond Mexico.

InSight Crime sent an information request for figures on deported Salvadorans with gang connections to United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) but had not received a response before finalizing this report.

41 Guatemala Interior Ministry, "Plan 33-2022 deja 89 pandilleros salvadoreños remitidos y 16 guatemaltecos vinculados," 12 December 2022.

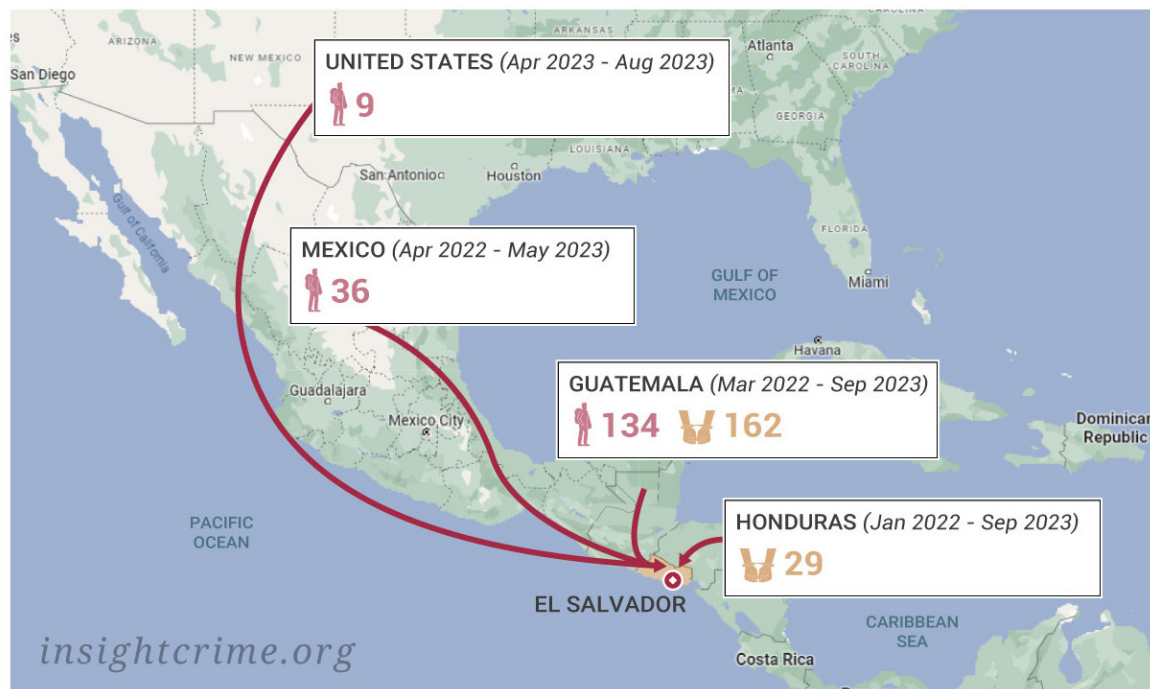
42 Raúl Barreno Castillo, "¿Cuántos presuntos pandilleros salvadoreños ha expulsado Guatemala en 2022? Esto es lo que dicen las autoridades nacionales," Prensa Libre, 29 November, 2022; Raúl Barreno Castillo, "Pandilleros salvadoreños en Guatemala: Cuántos presuntos criminales han sido capturados y expulsados en el cuarto año de Nayib Bukele," Prensa Libre, 14 September 2023.

43 Guatemala Interior Ministry, "Más de 60 pandilleros salvadoreños remitidos a su país de origen," 5 June 2023.

44 Guatemala National Police [@PNCdeGuatemala], *CAT de Guatemala entrega a las autoridades salvadoreñas a marero salvadoreño ubicado en México. Luego de las coordinaciones realizadas por investigadores del Centro Antipandillas Transnacional de la PNC de Guatemala, con autoridades de México.*, *Tweet*, Twitter, 25 April 2023; Guatemala Interior Ministry, "Autoridades mexicanas fortalecen labor con Guatemala en traslado de pandilleros," 10 July 2023; Guatemalan Interior Ministry, "Presunto pandillero salvadoreño es remitido a su país," 23 July 2023; InSight Crime interview, Ángel Cambara, head of Guatemala anti-gang police, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 28 July 2023.

Arrests and Deportations of Salvadoran Nationals Linked to Gangs

Reported arrests and deportations of Salvadorans with alleged gang connections from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States, starting in 2022. Figures based on press reports where official data was unavailable.



December 2023

Sources: Government data from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico; press reports



Gangs Abroad: Lying Low

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which street-level gang members fleeing El Salvador are re-establishing criminal economies abroad. Press reports from 2023 pointed to a possible increase in extortion perpetrated by Central American gangs, including the MS13 and Barrio 18 in towns on Mexico's southern border.⁴⁵ However, when InSight Crime investigators in Tapachula, Chiapas, asked residents about the reports of gang extortion, most said the extortionists were Guatemalans, not Salvadorans fleeing the state of emergency. And despite reports of extortion, the Chiapas Attorney General's

⁴⁵ Édgar Clemente, "Central American gangs raising fears in southern Mexico," Associated Press, 25 January 2023.

Office did not prosecute any MS13 or Barrio 18 members between October 2022 and February 2023.⁴⁶

In fact, active MS13 members based in Mexico told InSight Crime their Salvadoran counterparts are lying low and opting out of criminal activity to avoid drawing unwanted attention to themselves. Likewise, semi-retired gang members hiding in Mexico or hoping to reach the United States told InSight Crime they had little intention of re-entering gang life.⁴⁷

The gangs that are already established in those areas also appear to be keeping their distance from Salvadoran gang members. The MS13's Mexico Program, for example, has so far been reluctant to recruit gang members fleeing El Salvador for criminal activity given their heightened exposure to arrest.⁴⁸ And an MS13 member from Mexico, based in Tijuana, told InSight Crime that few Salvadoran members were reporting their arrival to the gang.⁴⁹

Although authorities in Chiapas, Mexico, which borders Guatemala, arrested 50 Salvadorans suspected of being members of the MS13 and Barrio 18 between January and September 2022,⁵⁰ data provided by Chiapas authorities shows there has been no significant increase in MS13 members jailed in the state's prisons since the start of the state of emergency. As of June 22, only 11 of the 90 MS13 members housed in Chiapas prisons were Salvadoran nationals.⁵¹

The situation is similar in Guatemala. The head of Guatemala's gang police told InSight Crime there has been no spike in gang-related crime as a result of the state of emergency.⁵² There are also few signs that fleeing Salvadoran gang members are attempting to re-engage in criminal activity by joining gang cells in Guatemala. One Guatemalan MS13 member housed in the Pavoncito detention center, a notorious prison just south of Guatemala City with a significant gang presence, said the gang's Salvadoran diaspora has not altered the group's structure on the streets or behind bars.⁵³ This was echoed by the head of Guatemala's anti-gang police.⁵⁴ The MS13 source added that the

46 Information provided by the Chiapas State Attorney General's Office upon request, 1 March 2023.

47 According to a study conducted by Florida International University (FIU), the vast majority of El Salvadoran street gang members want to leave the gang. See: José Miguel Cruz et al., "[The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador](#)," FIU, 2017.

48 InSight Crime telephone interview, active MS13 member based in Chiapas, Mexico, 20 July 2023.

49 InSight Crime telephone interview, active MS13 member based in Tijuana, Mexico, 11 July 2023.

50 Chiapas State Attorney General's Office, "[Despliega FGE combate frontal contra las pandillas](#)," 2 October 2022.

51 Information provided by Chiapas prison authorities upon request, 7 July 2023.

52 InSight Crime interview, Ángel Cambara, head of Guatemala anti-gang police, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 28 July 2023.

53 InSight Crime electronic correspondence, active MS13 member jailed in Guatemala, 15 July 2023.

54 InSight Crime interview, Ángel Cambara, head of Guatemala anti-gang police, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 28 July 2023.

presence of Salvadoran gang members in Pavoncito is practically irrelevant. The source estimated that around ten Salvadoran gang members had passed through the jail before being deported back to El Salvador following the onset of the state of emergency.⁵⁵

Likewise, the arrival of Salvadoran gang members to the United States does not appear to have altered gang dynamics in that country either. There has been no notable increase of Salvadoran MS13 or Barrio 18 members in states or prisons where the gangs have a presence, a source from the US Federal Bureau of Prisons told InSight Crime.⁵⁶ The head of a California-based NGO that works to reduce violence in communities impacted by gangs said Salvadoran gang members arriving in the United States are lying low rather than engaging in criminal activity, much like in Mexico and Central America.⁵⁷

Honduras, despite bordering El Salvador and having a strong presence of the MS13 and Barrio 18, does not appear to be a major refuge for gang members fleeing El Salvador. Honduran authorities arrested just six Salvadorans with suspected gang ties between January and September 26, 2023, compared to 23 the previous year.⁵⁸

The situation may be different for top gang leaders. This is more difficult to parse and the sourcing is not as strong, but there are reports of MS13 leaders from El Salvador seeking refuge in Guatemala and Mexico. Internal intelligence reports compiled by El Salvador police in April 2022 claimed MS13 leaders were traveling to Mexico to plan a response to Bukele's policies.⁵⁹ These exiled gang leaders may also receive some financial support from the gangs. One Salvadoran security official told InSight Crime that some gang members in El Salvador are now sending money to leaders in Mexico to ensure their protection.⁶⁰

Top MS13 and Barrio 18 leaders have been conspicuously absent from government social media accounts, which have been actively publishing photos, videos, and reports of mass detentions during the crackdown. Just months before the state of emergency began, a top MS13 leader jailed in El Salvador reportedly leveraged his political connections to escape prison and flee the country.⁶¹ The MS13 leader was one of four released from jail between July 2021 and February 2022, despite facing extradition to the United States.⁶²

55 Ibid.

56 InSight Crime electronic correspondence, US prison official, 15 August 2023.

57 InSight Crime telephone interview, Alex Sánchez, director, Homies Unidos, August 4 2023.

58 Information provided by Honduran authorities upon request, 26 September 2023.

59 El Salvador National Police, "Análisis Integrado de Inteligencia: Periodo: del 18 al 24 abril de 2022," 25 April 2022.

60 InSight Crime interview, security official, San Salvador, El Salvador, 20 June 2023.

61 Parker Asmann, "[Political Connections in El Salvador Help MS13 Leaders Escape Abroad](#)," InSight Crime, 19 July 2022.

62 Carlos García, "[Are MS13 Leaders Wanted for Extradition to US Free in El Salvador?](#)," InSight Crime, 31 March 2022.

In addition, arrests of gang leaders accounted for just 1,232 of more than 77,000 reported arrests (around 1.5%) made during the state of emergency as of September 30 2023, according to an El Salvador police intelligence report obtained by InSight Crime and arrest figures announced by Salvadoran officials.⁶³ Authorities reported the arrests of 945 MS13 cabecillas during that time-frame, compared to 287 for the two factions of Barrio 18 and other gangs, according to the same intelligence report.

The El Salvador government has yet to extradite any MS13 leaders, despite many being wanted by US authorities. The whereabouts of many gang leaders remain unknown, but so far InSight Crime has not found evidence to suggest this is linked to any dialogue, pacts, or truces with the Salvadoran government.

Prisons: A Muted Response

El Salvador's gangs once took advantage of severe overcrowding and weak security in the country's penitentiary system to operate jails as centers of operation, including coordinating extortion rackets, recruiting new members, and exerting discipline over their membership. The addition of over 77,000 new detainees during the state of emergency has further crowded the prisons, though at least 7,000 people had been released from jail as of mid-August, according to government officials.

The total prison population now stands at over 105,000 prisoners,⁶⁴ around 1.7% of the country's population. The total capacity of El Salvador's penitentiary system was estimated at just over 27,000 at the end of 2020.⁶⁵ Capacity has increased following the construction of a jail housing 5,000 inmates in 2021 and the completion of a mega-jail in 2022 with room for 40,000 prisoners, according to government estimates. (Press reports suggest the mega-prison's

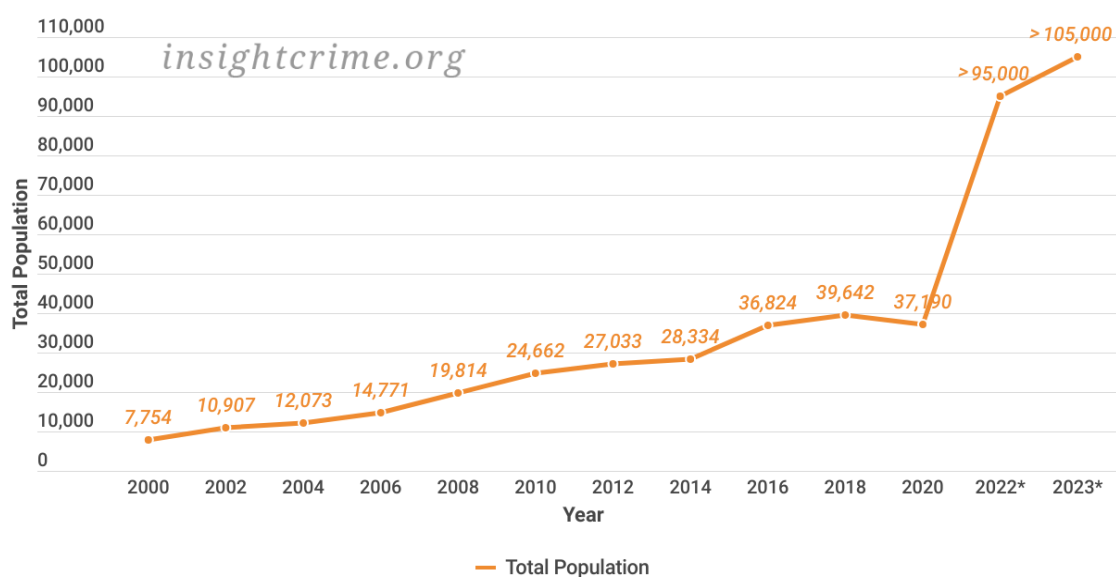
63 El Salvador National Police, "Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023," 1 October 2023; Diálogo [@dialogo21], #Diálogo21 | El ministro de @SeguridadSV, @Vi11atoro, *confirmó esta mañana, que a la fecha han liberado a más de 7 mil salvadoreños, de los 72 mil que han sido capturados en el régimen de excepción. "Esto quiere decir que el sistema de justicia está funcionando", aseveró.*, [Tweet](#), Twitter, 22 August 2023.

64 Javier Urbina and Edwin Segura, "[Ministro de Justicia confirma que capturados en cárceles suman 100,000](#)," La Prensa Gráfica, 14 September 2023.

65 Foundation for Studies on the Application of Law, "[Derechos humanos de las personas privadas de libertad](#)," December 2021.

capacity may be closer to 20,000.⁶⁶) Despite these new spaces, Salvadoran prisons are still severely overcrowded, possibly operating at double their capacity. This has raised concerns about whether the gangs could regroup in overcrowded jails or seek recruits from civilians swept up in the arrests.

Prison Population in El Salvador (2000-2023)



*2022 and 2023 estimates based on on pre-state of emergency data from El Salvador prisons authorities, in addition to arrest and prisoner release figures announced by government officials during the state of emergency.

December 2023

Sources: World Prison Brief and El Salvador government

So far, this does not appear to be happening, in part because of the extreme measures taken to control prisoners. Accounts from people jailed during the state of emergency suggest prison authorities maintain near-complete control behind bars and routinely subject prisoners to beatings and psychological torment.⁶⁷ Through April 2023, the human rights organization, Cristosal, documented 153 deaths in the penitentiary system. In a report published in May, the organization said none of these people had been convicted of a crime and that many of those who died were buried in “mass graves.”⁶⁸

66 Carlos García, “Radiografía al CECOT desvela su verdadera capacidad y falta de talleres,” La Prensa Gráfica, 23 July 2023.

67 Cristosal, “Un año bajo el régimen de excepción: una medida permanente de represión y de violaciones a los derechos humanos,” 12 May 2023; InSight Crime interviews, journalist detained during the state of emergency, Apopa, El Salvador, 12 July 2023; police syndicate representative, San Salvador, El Salvador, 24 July 2023; youth detained during the state of emergency, Mejicanos, El Salvador, 3 July 2023; InSight Crime telephone interview, youth detained during the state of emergency, 8 June 2023.

68 Cristosal, “Un año bajo el régimen de excepción: una medida permanente de represión y de violaciones a los derechos humanos,” 12 May 2023.

“It is highly probable that the number of deaths is much higher,” it added.

To restrict their ability to communicate with other inmates and the outside world, prisoners are often confined to their cells around the clock. There are accounts of this practice used in jails believed to be housing a high concentration of people detained during the state of emergency, such as the Esperanza (also known by the name of the community where it is located, Mariona) and Izalco penitentiaries.⁶⁹

Yet, there are some cases of gang members using their clout to secure benefits and impose rules on other inmates. A student detained during the state of emergency told InSight Crime that jailed members of the MS13 and Barrio 18 designated two cell leaders, one from each gang, to resolve day-to-day issues and set rules for their cellmates.⁷⁰ This includes granting permission to use the toilet or shower, and controlling the distribution of drinking water and food. Breaking these rules resulted in a beating, a common gang reprisal. The same detainee, who was released before speaking to InSight Crime, said that gang members could also secure privileges such as sleeping on a bunk bed or showering before others. This dynamic does not appear to be uniform; others detained during the state of emergency said they did not encounter gang members in their cells.

InSight Crime did not find any evidence of a coordinated or violent gang response to state authority behind bars. Communication between jailed gang members and the streets had largely been cut off even before the state of emergency began. Members of both gangs are now mixed in the same cells, according to three people interviewed by InSight Crime who were detained, then released. Communication between cells appears to be severely limited, hampering any efforts to coordinate gang activity.

Nonetheless, in January, El Salvador authorities reported receiving information about the possible use of gang violence in prisons as a means of drawing the attention of prison authorities, according to intelligence reports obtained by InSight Crime.⁷¹ These reports lacked detail, and InSight Crime found no evidence that this violence had materialized, but there is strict control of information emanating from prisons.

There have been multiple reports of prisoner abuse -- including electrocutions -- malnourishment, and deaths behind bars as a result of overcrowding and

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ InSight Crime telephone interview, student detained during the state of emergency, 8 June 2023.

⁷¹ El Salvador National Police, “Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 31 de agosto 2023,” 1 September 2023.

state aggression during the state of emergency.⁷² Widespread and systematic human rights violations notwithstanding, the extreme methods of subjugation appear to have forced the gangs into survival mode and may have hindered their capacity to communicate between cells, access weapons, and devise possible strategies to regroup or retaliate.

⁷² InSight Crime telephone interview, student detained during the state of emergency, 8 June 2022; InSight Crime interview, journalist detained during the state of emergency, Apopa, El Salvador, 12 July 2023; Cristosal, “Un año bajo el régimen de excepción: una medida permanente de represión y de violaciones a los derechos humanos,” 12 May 2023; youth detained during the state of emergency, Mejicanos, El Salvador, 3 July 2023.

4

How the State of Emergency Has Impacted Gangs



El Salvador's gangs have weathered a series of aggressive crackdowns since the government first enacted iron fist security policies in the 2000s. Since then, escalating *mano dura* campaigns have stretched the gangs and tested their resilience, particularly in the mid-2010s. But before the Bukele administration, no government had succeeded in breaking up gang structures at the national level, or causing significant disruptions to the gangs' widespread territorial control. Rather, the gangs had always found a way to regroup, retaliate, or reorganize their structures to operate under increased pressure.

That has changed. The state of emergency has succeeded in arresting a sizable chunk of the gangs' street-level membership and collaborators. It has cut off their communications. It has impeded their ability to manage extortion or drug peddling businesses, their main sources of revenue. It has disabled their

command structure and upended their hierarchies. It has temporarily inhibited their ability to mount a collective, organized response. It has, in other words, left them reeling. In the words of *El Faro*, the gangs are “disarticulated.”⁷³

Specifically, the government claims to have arrested 52,541 members⁷⁴ of the MS13, 13,682 members of the Barrio 18 Sureños, and 10,741 members of the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios, according to a police intelligence report dated October 1 obtained by InSight Crime.⁷⁵ Among those arrested were 1,232 gang leaders, including 945 from the MS13.

The report also says the number of “armed groups of gangs” (*grupos armados de pandillas*) is 53, down from 97 in 2022, and 107 in 2020. Of these cells, 43 correspond to the MS13 (80%), while six belong to the Barrio 18 Sureños (11%), and four to the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios (9%). Most cells are located in rural areas, with gang structures in urban hubs the hardest hit during the state of emergency. InSight Crime did not find any indication to support police claims that these groups are still involved in armed violence.

The key to the state of emergency's relative success in debilitating gang structures rests on three fundamental pillars: the use of extreme legal measures; the employment of a looser interpretation of *mano dura* laws regarding gang affiliation; and the concentration of political power around the Bukele administration.

The enactment of emergency legal powers usually reserved for catastrophic events, such as pandemics or natural disasters, appears to have played a crucial role in the gangs' swift decline. These powers have, for instance, allowed El Salvador authorities to arrest suspected gang members without a warrant or based on anonymous tips and hold them in detention for weeks or months without a hearing.

While it is beyond the scope of this report, it is important to note that authorities seemed to have exceeded even this incredibly broad mandate. In a report published in December 2022, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal wrote that, “detainees were rarely informed of the reasons for their arrest,” and many were taken away under the pretext of going in for “informal questioning.”⁷⁶ A report in *El Faro*, which analyzed 1,251 pages of official arrest records from the Attorney General's Office from the first weeks of the state of emergency, found that authorities frequently cited things like “suspicious appearance”

73 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, “Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador,” *El Faro*, 3 February 2023.

74 These figures refer to fully-fledged gang members (*homeboys*), aspiring members (*chequeos*), and collaborators.

75 El Salvador National Police, “Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023,” 1 October 2023.

76 Human Rights Watch, “‘We can arrest anyone we want’: Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador's ‘State of Exception,’” 7 December 2022.

(*apariencia sospechosa*), “nervousness” (*nerviosa*), “anonymous accusations” (*denuncias anónimas*), and “having tattoos” (*tener tatuajes*) as sufficient reason to detain suspects.⁷⁷ Other media and human rights reports thereafter cited similar arbitrary arrests and abuses, which have continued, albeit at a less frantic pace, throughout the state of emergency.

This permitted security forces to execute a *blitzkrieg* on the gangs, rounding up gang members and suspected collaborators at a much faster rate and with far less discretion when compared with previous crackdowns. In all, security forces arrested over 33,000 people in the first two months of the state of emergency, according to police intelligence data accessed by InSight Crime.⁷⁸

“There were too many soldiers everywhere all at once,” one active gang member told InSight Crime.⁷⁹

In March 2022, the legislative assembly passed legal reforms increasing jail sentences for gang membership and eliminating the possibility of house arrest for detainees belonging to “terrorist groups.”⁸⁰ Gangs are considered terrorist organizations under Salvadoran law. The reforms also lowered the age to 12 for which people can be tried for gang-related crimes.

At the same time, the administration has reformed existing anti-gang laws so they can apply them to a broader range of targets. Most notably, on March 30, 2022, the legislative assembly modified the law regarding *agrupaciones ilícitas* (unlawful association), expanding its purview to include anyone who “promotes, helps, facilitates or favors” the activities of a criminal organization.⁸¹ In effect, the law, which was already broad in scope, now gives authorities the power to arrest not just suspected members, or homeboys, but also aspiring members (*chequeos*) and suspected “collaborators.”

The government provides no clear definition of any of these positions nor the methodology about how it arrives at these conclusions regarding who is a member, who is an aspiring member, and who is a collaborator. Nonetheless, it is a major pretext for arrests in the current state of emergency. In January 2023, for example, Human Rights Watch and Cristosal, citing a leaked government database, said that 39,000 of the then-61,000 people who had been incarcerated under the state of emergency had been arrested for unlawful association.⁸²

77 Efrén Lemus and Gabriela Cáceres, “Los expedientes ocultos del Régimen: cientos de arrestos por ‘nerviosismo’ y ‘ficha policial,’” El Faro, 8 August 2022.

78 El Salvador National Police, “Análisis de Incidencia Criminal Antes y Después del régimen de excepción, actualizada al 11 de septiembre de 2023,” 12 September 2023.

79 InSight Crime interview, active MS13 member, Tapachula, Mexico, 2 August 2023.

80 El Salvador Legislative Assembly, “Diputados aprueban seis reformas a códigos y leyes relacionadas a la protección de la población, tras crímenes de pandillas,” 31 March 2022.

81 El Salvador Legislative Assembly, *Decreto No. 337*, 30 March 2022.

82 Human Rights Watch and Cristosal, “El Salvador: Leaked Database Points to Large-Scale Abuses,” 27 January 2023.

Previous attempts to employ this law ran into legal snags in the courts, and police were worried they might be prosecuted if they arbitrarily arrested suspects en masse. One police official in San Miguel, for instance, said he and his colleagues spoke to two judges to check whether they could face future legal backlash for signing arrest warrants based on vague charges that may violate human rights.⁸³ After receiving assurances from the judges, this official said their unit proceeded to arrest hundreds of suspects.

The state of emergency has suspended constitutional rights to defense, meaning detainees can be held indefinitely on vague charges, without the need for an arrest warrant or evidence to back up criminal allegations. Under the emergency laws, detainees also lose the right to a court hearing within 72 hours of arrest. Uncorroborated raw intelligence, rumors, and information sourced from social media profiles have formed the basis of arrests.⁸⁴ This is paradoxically the most troubling and the most effective aspect of this crackdown.

A police intelligence official operating in San Salvador's Historic Center told InSight Crime that security forces had mapped out the entire area prior to the state of emergency and had numerous criminal groups in their sights.⁸⁵ Likewise, police officials in San Miguel said rigorous gang mapping across eastern El Salvador allowed authorities to begin making arrests just two days after the state of emergency began.⁸⁶ Residents of former gang strongholds in the San Salvador area also said they witnessed police officials carrying lists with detailed information on gang members and collaborators.⁸⁷

As noted above, much of the administration's efforts rely on having near total control of various parts of the government. Bukele's party, Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas), used its supermajority in the legislative assembly to enact the state of emergency and has continued to prolong it. Legislators loyal to Bukele also passed the legal reforms related to the crackdown. The legislative assembly also purged the judiciary in late 2021, firing dozens of judges and appointing over 150 replacements, many with links to the Bukele administration, according to an investigation by the Salvadoran media outlet *Revista Factum*.⁸⁸ The courts have stood silent amid widespread allegations of state abuses, especially as it relates to due process. The Attorney General's Office, which is also heavily aligned with the Bukele administration, has worked in tandem with the security forces to facilitate mass arrests based on flimsy, little, or no evidence.

83 InSight Crime interview, police anti-extortion official, San Miguel, El Salvador, 27 July 2023.

84 Human Rights Watch, "['We can arrest anyone we want': Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador's 'State of Exception'](#)," 7 December 2022; Carlos Martínez, "['El vecino que me denunció'](#)," *El Faro*, 16 October 2023; Roberto Valencia, "['Portrait of a 'Terrorist' in El Salvador'](#)," InSight Crime, 23 October 2023.

85 InSight Crime interview, police intelligence officer, San Salvador, El Salvador, 24 July 2023.

86 InSight Crime interview, police anti-extortion official, San Miguel, El Salvador, 27 July 2023.

87 InSight Crime interview, community leader, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1 September 2023.

88 Gabriel Labrador, Claudia Palacios, Javier Ramón, Suchit Chávez, David Pérez, Karen Moreno, and Maryelos Cea, "['Jueces a la medida: la farsa de la depuración de Bukele'](#)," *Revista Factum*, 12 July 2023.

How Has the State of Emergency Outdone Previous Mano Dura Crackdowns?	
Tools	Results
<p>Emergency legal measures enacted by the state of emergency (suspension of constitutional rights):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits arrests with no warrant • Increases time detainees can be held without appearing before a judge • Removes guarantee of defense lawyer or being informed of reason for detention • Allows government to intercept civilian communications • Security forces can set up roadblocks and checkpoints to restrict freedom of movement <p>Related legal reforms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal reforms increase prison sentences for gang membership and eliminate pre-trial detention for gang-related crimes • New laws allow minors as young as 12 to be tried on gang-related charges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authorities can make arrests faster than previous crackdowns • Gang members and collaborators remain in jail for longer, as emergency measures allow for them to be held without formal charges or a trial • Ordinary Salvadorans lose legal rights guaranteed by the Constitution • Criminalization of population increases pool of potential detainees
<p>Looser interpretation of the mano dura laws:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authorities leverage existing gang legislation to arrest people with tenuous gang connections • Designation of aspiring gang members and ambiguously defined collaborators as gang members in police arrest figures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authorities can deplete extended gang networks of aspiring and semi-retired members, plus collaborators • Inflates arrest figures for people categorized as gang members

<p>Concentration of political power:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment between executive, legislature, and judiciary leaves minimal room for opposition to arbitrary arrests and human rights abuses • Supermajority in legislative assembly allows the Bukele government to prolong state of emergency indefinitely • Supermajority in legislative assembly allows the Bukele government to pass legal reforms to increase sentences for jailed gang members and hold mass trials • The Bukele administration purged the judiciary in 2021 and appointed a new crop of judges believed to be aligned with the government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang crackdown can be sustained indefinitely without political opposition or appeals • Gang members face longer periods in jail. Mass trials expedite sentencing for gang members. Both reduce chances of gang members returning to the streets • Judicial system can be weaponized to ensure gang members and collaborators remain in jail without evidence
<p><i>Sources: Emergency decree enacted by El Salvador legislative assembly, March 26 2022; El Salvador legislative assembly; confidential police intelligence reports; interviews with El Salvador security officials; Revista Factum</i></p>	

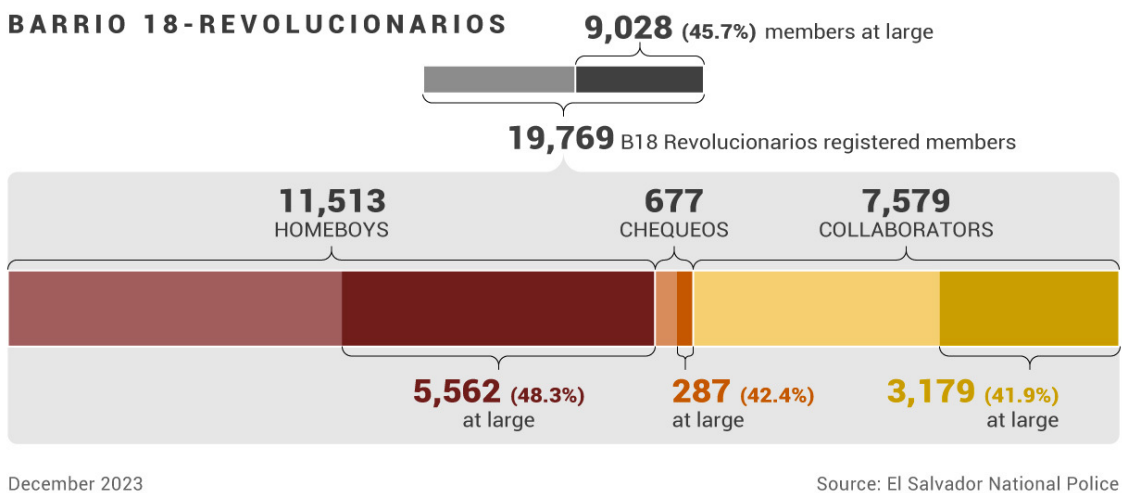
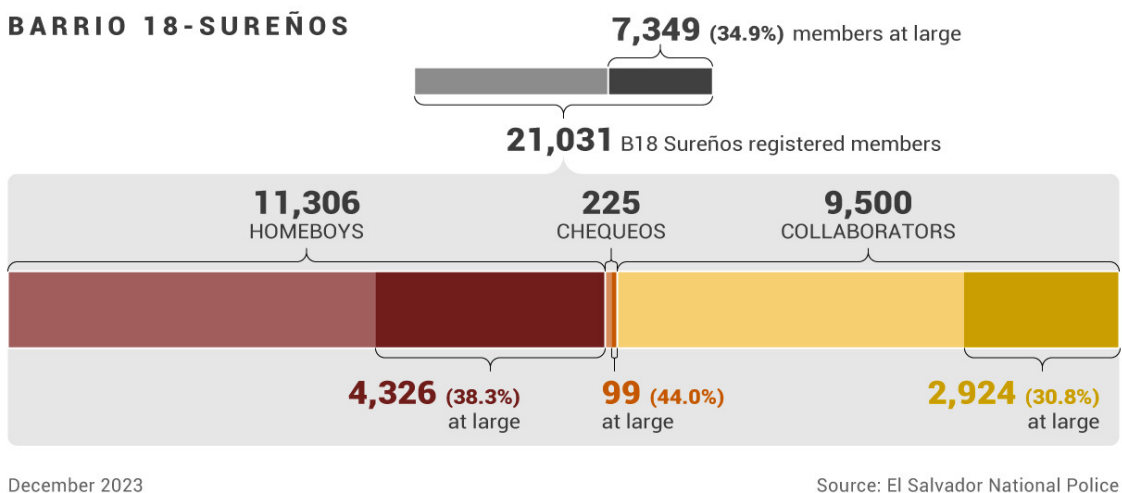
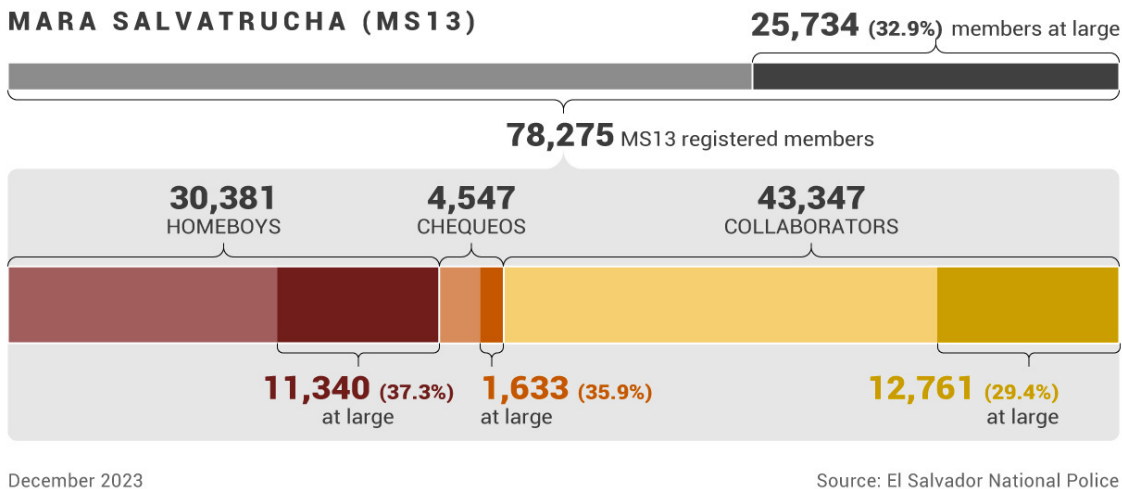
But while the impact has been transformative, the gangs are not finished in El Salvador. In fact, the government's own data contradicts the Bukele administration's narrative that the gangs have been completely defeated.

The same police intelligence reports say that over 42,000 homeboys, chequeos, and suspected collaborators remained at large as of the end of September 2023.⁸⁹ This accounts for 36% of the gangs' members and collaborators, according to police estimates. The data does not estimate how many of these people are still active in gang life. Accounts from former gang strongholds gathered during field research for this report overwhelmingly suggest that gang members and collaborators "at large" do not remain active or able to coordinate criminal activities, despite military, police, and gang sources all agreeing that some remnants of the gangs remain.

The same data also reveals that more than half of reported state of emergency detainees are not fully-fledged gang members. Homeboys accounted for 32,331 arrests (42%) as of September 30, 2023, compared to 41,733 for suspected collaborators (54%) and 3,435 for chequeos (4%).⁹⁰

⁸⁹ El Salvador National Police, "Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023," 1 October 2023.

⁹⁰ Percentages based on a figure of 77,499 arrests reported by El Salvador police intelligence, as of 30 September 2023.



Territorial Control

The clearest indicator of decreased gang presence in El Salvador is the absence of the MS13 and Barrio 18 in neighborhoods once dominated by the gangs. For decades prior to the state of emergency, the gangs exerted significant territorial control in urban hubs throughout El Salvador. In many areas, they relied on an extensive network of low-level members and collaborators, including lookouts and informants, to prevent unwanted intrusions and to establish rules for those living in communities under their control. The rules ranged from placing restrictions on movement to prohibiting common delinquency and forbidding grave crimes, such as rape. The gangs dished out hard punishments to rule-breakers, despite often breaking their own rules. Gang members also settled disputes between residents in lieu of the police or other government authorities. Residents could face reprisals for interacting with authorities. In extreme cases, the police did not enter territory where the MS13 and the two factions of Barrio 18 had significant influence.

The situation has changed radically following the enactment of the state of emergency. InSight Crime visited 15 former gang strongholds in the municipalities of San Salvador, Apopa, Soyapango, Ilopango, Mejicanos, Ciudad Delgado, San Julián, Tonacatepeque, and San Miguel, where residents said gang structures had ceased to operate almost entirely. Residents said they no longer faced near constant surveillance from gangs or strict rules on moving between different communities. Before the state of emergency, gang permission was frequently required when transiting through disputed territories, whether for routine commutes or medical emergencies. In many areas, the gangs also had a grip on the local economy, dictating who could sell what and where.

The residents have reclaimed recreational and community spaces previously used by the gangs as checkpoints or hangouts. Residents and community workers said they were able to initiate new community projects with no gang resistance for the first time in years. The revival of inter-community soccer tournaments in San Miguel and San Salvador, previously hamstrung by territorial boundaries set by rival gangs, is just one example of how gang restrictions on civilian movement have evaporated since the state of emergency began.

Few residents reported seeing remnants of the gangs in their neighborhoods. Some mentioned the return of active gang members who were released from jail, but they said these actors held far less power than before the state of emergency. Many residents suspected some gang members may still be in hiding. Some noted the ongoing presence of youth linked to the gangs in certain neighborhoods, though they were not sure whether this was still for surveillance.

Residents who reported gang members to the police during the state of emergency said they feared possible retribution from gang members released from prison, though there have been no reports of revenge attacks against civilians. InSight Crime's research team did not witness any clear indications of a lingering gang structure when visiting communities in urban areas throughout El Salvador.

Across the country, the absence of gang members in formerly strategic territories has been reported.⁹¹ A police officer stationed in San Salvador's Historic Center, where expansive informal markets were once a hive of gang activity, said gang members disappeared just two weeks into the state of emergency.⁹² A Salvadoran public security official working in the municipalities of Soyapango, Apopa, and San Martín told InSight Crime that authorities had dismantled the gangs in communities once so tightly controlled that police could not enter them.⁹³ The official added the gangs still have some active members and collaborators in hiding, but too few to operate or plan crimes. Residents of Soyapango told the Associated Press that the families of alleged gang members remain in the municipality.⁹⁴

The same security official told InSight Crime that schools are now housing minors linked to the gangs and may provide the only public space where remnants of these groups can still operate.⁹⁵ A prominent evangelical pastor who has spent decades working in gang communities also flagged the possible presence of gang structures in schools.⁹⁶ But residents interviewed by InSight Crime in Apopa and San Miguel did not consider this a pressing issue, with some saying they no longer feared their children would be groomed by the gangs while in school.

91 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "[Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador](#)," *El Faro*, 3 February 2023.

92 InSight Crime interview, police intelligence officer, San Salvador, El Salvador, 24 July 2023.

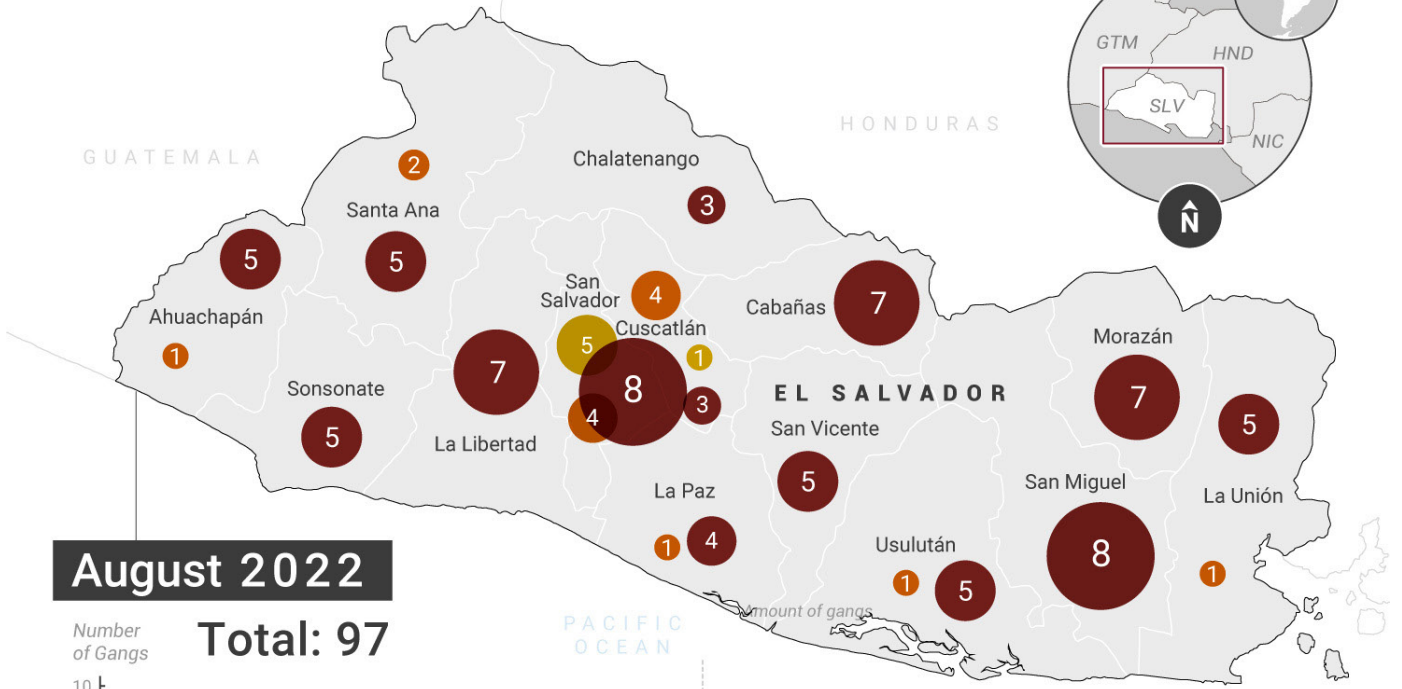
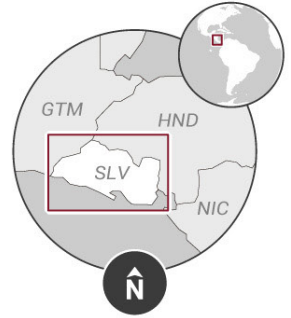
93 InSight Crime interview, security official, San Salvador, El Salvador, 20 June 2023.

94 Megan Janetsky and Fernanda Pesce, "[War on gangs forges new El Salvador. But the price is steep](#)," *Associated Press*, 22 March 2023.

95 InSight Crime interview, security official, San Salvador, El Salvador, 20 June 2023.

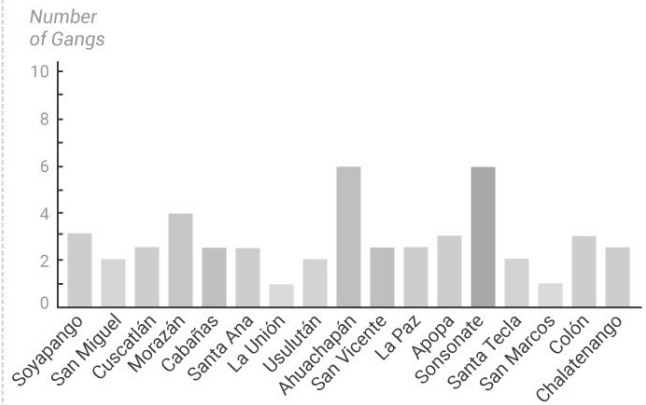
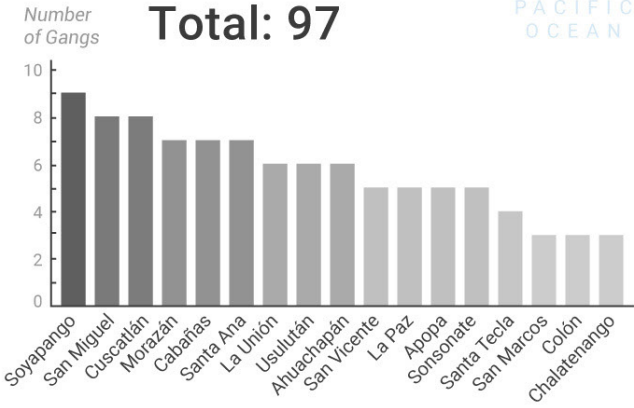
96 InSight Crime interview, Mario Vega, evangelical Pastor, San Salvador, El Salvador, 12 May 2023.

Total Number of Armed Gangs in El Salvador (August 2022 vs. September 2023)



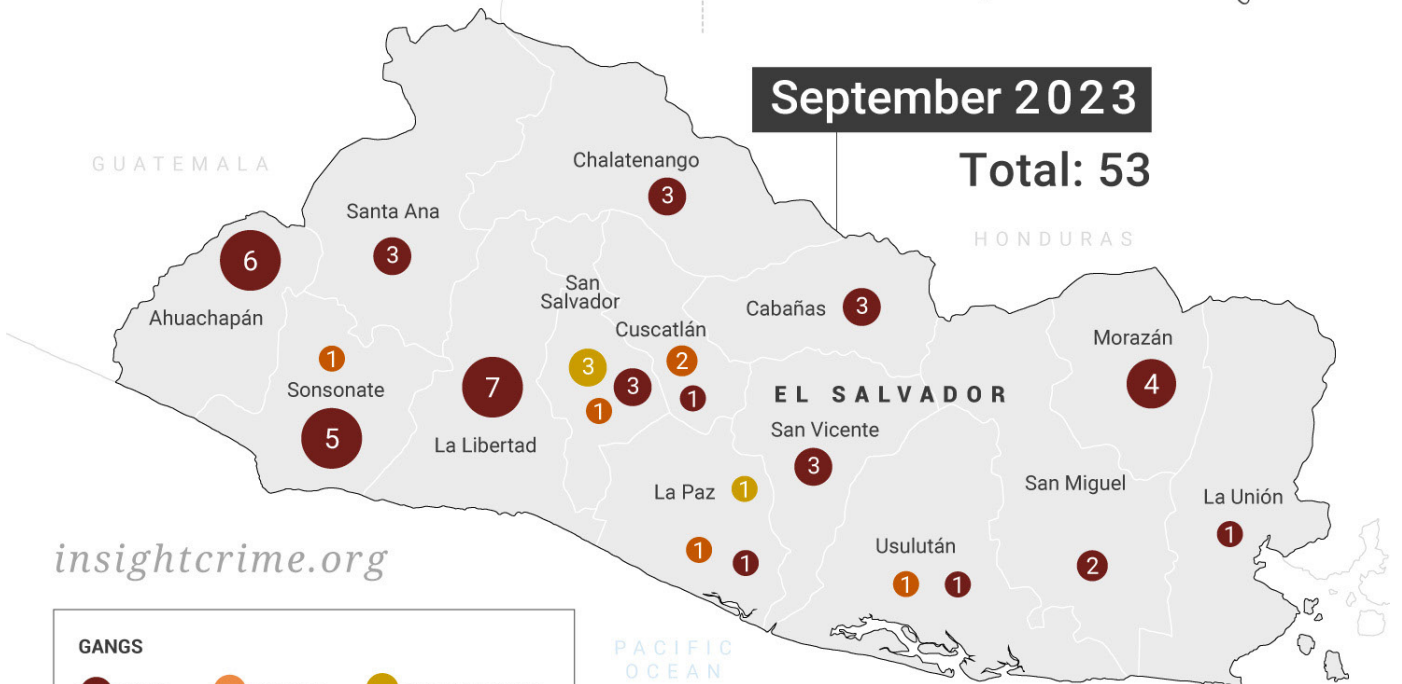
August 2022

Total: 97

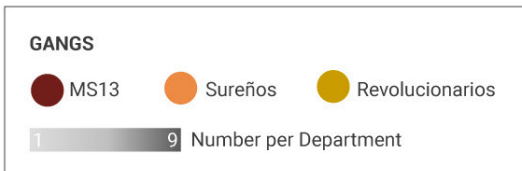


September 2023

Total: 53



insightcrime.org



Data as of September 2023
Source: El Salvador National Police

The situation may be different in rural areas that initially provided refuge for gang members after security forces began raiding gang-controlled neighborhoods in major cities. Sporadic reports of continuing extortion in rural zones⁹⁷ point to some prevailing gang structures, albeit in a reduced form. In August 2023, Bukele sent a military cordon to encircle the mostly rural department of Cabañas with the aim of extracting gang members in hiding.⁹⁸ Upon launching the campaign, the president said Cabañas now housed the highest number of remaining gang cells in El Salvador. His remarks contradict an internal police intelligence report from the same month, which named Sonsonate, with six armed groups linked to gangs, as the department housing the highest number of remaining gang cells as of August 2023, a number that had actually increased from the previous year.⁹⁹

Criminal Economies

Extortion

With the extensive loss of manpower and territory, it is clear that the gangs can no longer operate the criminal economies that have long kept them afloat, particularly extortion. Extortion previously represented the main source of income for many gang cells in El Salvador. Operating these rackets relied on an extensive network of gang members and collaborators to patrol gang territories and collect payments. But unlike previous crackdowns, which focused on gang members, this crackdown has focused on the gangs' broader networks, according to police data.¹⁰⁰ This presents an unusual situation for the gangs in which they can no longer rely on proxies to continue operating criminal economies while weathering state crackdowns.

97 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, “Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador,” *El Faro*, 3 February 2023.

98 Nayib Bukele [@nayibbukele], *En las últimas semanas y producto de nuestra guerra contra pandillas, Cabañas se ha convertido en el lugar con mayor número de células terroristas, que han llegado ahí buscando sus áreas rurales para ocultarse.*, *Tweet*, Twitter, 1 August 2023; Nayib Bukele [@nayibbukele], *Nuestras estrategias de seguridad han desarticulado a las pandillas, obligándolas a migrar de los grandes centros urbanos a esconderse en las zonas rurales de nuestro país, fuera de su hábitat natural. Estas últimas semanas, hemos identificado varios grupos de pandilleros que se esconden en el departamento de Cabañas, por lo que decidimos cercarlo completamente. 8000 hombres, entre policía y ejército, han acordonado más de 1000 kilómetros cuadrados. Ningún pandillero podrá salir, mientras nuestros equipos de extracción se encargan de sacarlos de sus escondites. La población honrada, visitantes y turistas no tienen nada que temer. La seguridad está garantizada. Dios bendiga a nuestro país.*, *Tweet*, Twitter, 1 August 2023.

99 El Salvador National Police, “Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 31 de agosto 2023,” 1 September 2023.

100 El Salvador National Police, “Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023,” 1 October 2023.

Prior to the state of emergency, the gangs primarily extorted people working for small- and medium-sized businesses in communities under their control. They euphemistically coined the payments “rent” (*renta*). Extortion victims spanned many businesses, including street vendors, shop owners, bus operators, and taxi drivers. The gangs could also leverage their territorial control to monopolize local trades by shaking down residents who provided basic services, from selling bread to installing internet.¹⁰¹

The gangs based their extortion fees on perceived wealth, ranging from a few dollars per day for street vendors to weekly or monthly payments reaching into the thousands of dollars for larger businesses. And in past years, the gangs have brutally killed civilians for failing to pay *renta*. What’s more, prior to the state of emergency, extortion revenues were the backbone of gang finances, used to fund daily activities, from paying gang members a wage to purchasing weapons and drugs.

However, residents of the same former gang strongholds visited by InSight Crime said they no longer received extortion threats from the gangs. And some residents said they had not witnessed any gang retaliation for not paying extortion fees during the state of emergency.

The inability to maintain extortion rackets, which primarily targeted the informal economy, represents a seismic financial blow to the gangs. Extortion rackets targeting informal markets in major urban hubs such as San Salvador’s Historic Center once provided the gangs with tens of thousands of dollars of daily revenue.¹⁰² A study conducted by InSight Crime in 2021 in San Miguel’s municipal markets -- housing over 5,000 vending spots -- concluded that the MS13 could be generating monthly extortion revenues of \$100,000 or more.

But following the onset of the state of emergency, the gangs showed no signs of protecting these spaces, a sign of their rapid capitulation even in spaces pivotal to their economic survival. The Salvadoran government has also taken steps to displace informal markets during the state of emergency,¹⁰³ potentially damaging future gang revenue streams.

Extortion in the transport sector also appears to have come to a standstill. Bus company representatives working in San Salvador told InSight Crime the gangs had quickly stopped charging extortion in the days and weeks following the onset of the state of emergency. One bus company owner who previously paid around \$6,000 in monthly extortion fees to the three main

101 InSight Crime interview, community leader in former gang stronghold, San Salvador, El Salvador, 9 June 2023.

102 Alex Papadovassilakis and Steven Dudley, “From Predators to Partners: How Gangs are Taking San Salvador,” InSight Crime, 1 October 2020.

103 Verónica Martínez, “Vendedores del Centro Histórico desalojados pierden la esperanza de una reubicación,” La Prensa Gráfica, 25 June 2023.

gang factions said he stopped paying rent to the MS13 immediately after the crackdown began. His payments to the Barrio 18 fizzled out in the following days and weeks, despite some lingering threats from members of the latter gang's *Revolucionarios* faction.¹⁰⁴ The same source said he does not know of any colleagues still paying extortion to the gangs. And bus drivers at one depot interviewed by InSight Crime in San Salvador said they no longer paid the gangs a weekly extortion fee of \$7 to \$30.¹⁰⁵

The widely reported decrease in gang extortion appears to have come as a direct result of the state of emergency, which, as previously noted, has so depleted street-level gang membership that they cannot muster the physical presence needed to demand and collect extortion payments. The gangs often relied on collaborators or relatives for this task, but these allies have also been arrested in droves. Issues may also stem from a reluctance among street-level gang members and collaborators to expose themselves to risk at a time when venturing outside, even momentarily, could result in arrest.

Despite the significant disruptions to gang infrastructure, multiple sources -- including police officials, politicians, and gang members -- told InSight Crime that extortion persists in some areas, albeit on a smaller scale. One police union leader said that remnants of MS13, comprising around five to seven members, are still operating extortion rackets in some urban areas.¹⁰⁶ The reduced cells recruit minors with no visible gang insignia to collect extortion fees from merchants and shopkeepers, the same source said. He added that this type of extortion is more about survival than making profit for the gangs. InSight Crime could not corroborate this account. And other police sources said they were unaware of this dynamic.

El Salvador police reported a 54% reduction in extortion complaints between the start of the year and September 11, compared to the same period in 2022.¹⁰⁷ As of September 11, the police had processed 572 reports of extortion; in 299 of those cases, the plaintiff identified the perpetrators as members of the MS13 and Barrio 18. But extortion is widely underreported and often misaligned with reality, making it hard to draw conclusions from the data.

InSight Crime did, however, find some information that corresponded to this data. Police and municipal employees in San Miguel, for example, told InSight Crime that some individuals are still extorting vendors in the city's main markets, despite a near complete disappearance of gang presence in these establishments. They said these people may belong to remnants of the

104 InSight Crime interview, bus company owner, San Salvador, El Salvador, 26 July 2023.

105 InSight Crime interview, group of three bus drivers, Soyapango, El Salvador, 27 July 2023.

106 InSight Crime interview, police syndicate representative, San Salvador, El Salvador, 24 July 2023.

107 El Salvador National Police, "Análisis de Incidencia Criminal Antes y Después del régimen de excepción, actualizada al 11 de septiembre de 2023," 12 September 2023.

gangs or may be individuals acting on their own. When asked about this, the city's longtime mayor, Will Salgado, said extortion had not been eradicated entirely, and that some gang members are now asking for "collaboration" from households as an alternative, small-scale revenue stream.¹⁰⁸

Other research also corroborates this smoldering issue. In February 2023, the director of a national bus company told *El Faro* that while gang extortion in San Salvador had dropped to imperceptible levels, in rural areas, including parts of the Usulután department, some problems remained.¹⁰⁹ El Salvador security forces have also arrested alleged extortionists with no apparent links to the gangs during the state of emergency.¹¹⁰

Drug Peddling

Unlike extortion, the gangs did not previously have a monopoly on this trade and often collected renta from dealers rather than selling drugs themselves. But in the areas where they were the sellers, there are few signs the gangs have retained a sufficient street-level structure to continue peddling drugs. It is not clear who, if anyone, has taken over this business. Some individual gang members may still be involved in selling drugs such as crack cocaine and marijuana, according to gang sources consulted by InSight Crime.

Arms Trafficking

One paradoxical finding concerns firearms. Firearms seizures during the state of emergency have lagged far behind detentions: El Salvador authorities confiscated 3,001 firearms between the start of the state of emergency between late March 2022 and mid-July 2023, according to data from the country's Defense Ministry.¹¹¹ And between January 1 and September 1, 2023, the police

108 InSight Crime interview, Will Salgado, mayor of San Miguel, San Miguel, El Salvador, 27 July 2023.

109 Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador," *El Faro*, 3 February 2023.

110 Gustavo Villatoro [@Vi11atoro], *#Seguimos limpiando nuestro país de las pandillas y no vamos a permitir que otros delincuentes comunes vengan a perjudicar a nuestra gente. Nuestros agentes de la @PNCSV capturaron a Orlando de Jesús Pérez Reyes y Jennifer Carolina García Durán, estos delincuentes no pertenecen a ninguna pandilla pero serán procesados por el delito de extorsión agravada, su modus operandi era mediante manuscritos en los cuales exigían dinero a las víctimas bajo amenazas. Además, en el procedimiento se les incautó 1 vehículo, 1 chip, 1 teléfono y dinero en efectivo. #GuerraContraPandillas, Tweet*, Twitter, 19 July 2023.

111 El Salvador Ministry of Defence [@DefensaSV], *Gracias al éxito del state of emergency se ha logrado la captura de 71,479 pandilleros, así como la incautación de 3,001 armas de fuego, 4,690 vehículos y 17,359 celulares, indicó el Ministro.*, *Tweet*, Twitter, 12 July 2023.

reported seizing 83 weapons.¹¹² In fact, the rate of arms seizures during the state of emergency has slowed when compared to the first years of Bukele's tenure and the final years of his predecessor, Salvador Sánchez Cerén.¹¹³

The disparity between arrests and firearms seizures has raised some questions as to whether gang members may be stockpiling weapons to ready a potential counter-attack, though InSight Crime has not unearthed any evidence to support this theory. Prior to the state of emergency, the gangs had already established firearm protocols that included keeping them hidden unless needed for a particular criminal or violent acts, according to the police union leader.¹¹⁴ The Salvadoran government has also arrested waves of non-active gang members and collaborators who did not routinely carry weapons. Both factors may explain why firearms seizures have not kept up with arrests.

Gang Communication and Hierarchy

The state of emergency appears to have limited the gangs' ability to communicate and transmit orders between ranks.

Prior to the state of emergency, top MS13 and Barrio 18 leaders had engaged in secret negotiations with the Bukele administration.¹¹⁵ Gang leaders showed they could influence the rank-and-file by ordering their subordinates to cease murders. They also did the opposite, instructing street-level members to unleash a spree of murders as a sort of bargaining chip in the negotiations¹¹⁶ or to murder members who did not adhere to their leaders' instructions. In short, the gangs have long understood that inflating the murder rate is a powerful political tool.

The gangs' near-complete collapse after the onset of the state of emergency may signal a rupture in communication between gang leaders and lower-ranking members or street-level leaders. One active gang member, for example, who went into hiding when the state of emergency began, said he lost communication with other cells and then threw away his phone to avoid being tapped by authorities.¹¹⁷ During previous crackdowns, the same source added, the gang would lie low before gradually re-establishing contact. But, he

112 El Salvador National Police, "Variables de Interés, Dirección General, del 1 de Enero al 1 de Septiembre 2022-2023," 2 September 2023.

113 David Bernal, Edwin Segura, and Claudia Espinoza, "Decomiso de armas durante régimen es 23% más bajo que en 2018-2019," La Prensa Gráfica, 15 April 2023.

114 InSight Crime interview, police syndicate representative, San Salvador, El Salvador, 24 July 2023.

115 Steven Dudley, "3 Dirty Secrets Revealed by the El Salvador Gang 'Negotiations'," InSight Crime, 4 September 2020.

116 Alex Papadovassilakis, "Gang Murder Rampage Sends Shockwaves Through El Salvador Government," InSight Crime, 28 March 2022.

117 InSight Crime interview, active MS13 member, Tapachula, Mexico, 2 August 2023.

said, the speed of the state of emergency arrests left the gangs with too little time to establish new communication networks.

Existing restrictions on communication and visits for imprisoned gang members have been tightened during the state of emergency. Civil-society sources told InSight Crime that even defense lawyers for gang members cannot visit their clients.¹¹⁸ In such circumstances, communication between the imprisoned and street-level membership remains difficult. “Communication in [El Salvador’s] prisons is undoubtedly cut off,” one semi-retired MS13 member who fled to Mexico told InSight Crime.¹¹⁹

International communications also appear to have been severed. Before the state of emergency, there was a direct line of communication between gang members in US prisons and the MS13 in El Salvador. But a US prison official told InSight Crime that imprisoned MS13 members no longer received communication from gang leaders in El Salvador.¹²⁰ Without its leadership in El Salvador, the source added, the gang lacks direction.

118 InSight Crime interview, Zaira Navas, rule of law and security director, Cristosal, San Salvador, El Salvador, 10 July 2023.

119 InSight Crime interview, semi-retired MS13 member, Mexico City, Mexico, 27 July 2023.

120 InSight Crime electronic correspondence, US prison official, 15 August 2023.

5

What Does the Future Hold?



The rapid decline of El Salvador's street gangs has radically altered the country's criminal landscape, liberating swaths of territory from criminal control and opening criminal markets. The nation's homicide rate, which had already sunk to historic lows before the state of emergency began, is now at its lowest level since the end of the country's civil war in 1992.

The sudden absence of gangs has provided much-needed breathing space in communities previously tormented by the MS13 and Barrio 18. The widely reported reduction in gang-related violence and crimes such as extortion has also radically improved access to former gang strongholds and created opportunities for addressing socioeconomic factors that once stoked the gangs' rise, such as poverty and social exclusion.

So far, however, there are no signs that the El Salvador government has a coherent plan for improving social and economic conditions in communities now free from gang rule. Rather, the strategy for avoiding a resurgence of

the MS13 and Barrio 18 appears centered on maintaining and enacting legal reforms that keep gang members and collaborators detained, and expanding prisons to house these detainees.

Both critics and supporters of the state of emergency interviewed for this report questioned the long-term sustainability of such aggressive security policies, which have relied on the suspension of constitutional rights for over a year and a half and opaque management of the budget. The optimism expressed by many residents of former gang strongholds was tempered with concerns that the gangs could one day return, mutate, or be replaced by other criminal actors.

It is beyond the scope of this report to determine how the overall situation will evolve. However, below InSight Crime explores how El Salvador's criminal dynamics might change.

Can Gangs Regroup in El Salvador?

A key question going forward is whether the MS13 and the two factions of Barrio 18 in El Salvador can regroup, reclaim territory, and resume violence and crime, as has occurred after previous crackdowns. This is not a likely scenario in the short- or medium-term, given the legal tools at the government's disposal for keeping people in jail and the imminent threat of detention for any gang member. President Bukele also plans to seek re-election in 2024 and has a commanding lead in the polls,¹²¹ meaning his administration could remain in government for at least another five years.

Rattled, the gang members appear to be in survival mode. Deprived of territory and revenue, regrouping is not an immediate option. They have also suffered from an apparent collapse in communication between cells following the onset of the state of emergency. Gang members that have stayed out of jail have largely been left on their own, according to gang sources interviewed by InSight Crime. Therefore, a collective response also appears unlikely.

Still, MS13 and Barrio 18 have a history of evolving and adapting to continue operating in the face of state aggression, and some of their members could return to criminal activity. Former gang cells, for example, could mutate into new structures and revive criminal economies such as extortion or drug peddling. Police, military, and gang sources told InSight Crime that remnants of the MS13 and Barrio 18 are still committing extortion and petty crimes in some areas, as is evident in the crime statistics cited above.¹²² One police

¹²¹ Reuters, "El Salvador's Bukele shows strong lead for 2024 vote -opinion poll," 28 August 2023.

¹²² El Salvador National Police, "Análisis de Incidencia Criminal Antes y Después del régimen de excepción, actualizada al 11 de septiembre de 2023," 12 September 2023.

source said some MS13 members had already regrouped and formed small, discrete cells in rural areas as a means of survival, though InSight Crime could not corroborate this account.

Many experienced gang members are still at large. According to police estimates, over a third of the MS13 and Barrio 18's membership remained at large as of the end of September 2023 -- this includes over 21,000 fully-fledged gang members and 19,000 collaborators.¹²³ The government also estimates that 53 armed groups remain in El Salvador, suggesting at least some gang structures remain, even if dormant. In addition, individual gang members could seek partnerships with common delinquents or other criminal networks active in El Salvador in criminal economies like drug peddling, contraband, and theft and resale.

But barring a radical shift in government security policy, it seems unlikely these groups will be able to establish the kind of territorial control that once allowed the gangs to operate criminal rackets nationwide. In fact, the state of emergency may have dealt a fatal blow to the gangs as they were known prior to March 2022. No previous *mano dura* campaign has disrupted gang operations, membership, hierarchy, and communication to such a significant degree. And the effectiveness of the state of emergency prototype may make it impossible for the gangs to regroup under the banners of the MS13 and Barrio 18.

Still, the seed remains. The MS13 and Barrio 18 emerged in urban or rural areas with precarious socioeconomic conditions, including widespread poverty, high unemployment, limited education, fractured families, and high levels of domestic violence and abuse. Mass arrests may have exacerbated social issues by breaking up families, reducing household incomes, and further marginalizing at-risk youths by linking them to the gangs, often without evidence. Civil-society organizations consulted by InSight Crime estimated that the number of people falsely imprisoned during the state of emergency ranges from 7,000 to 22,000.¹²⁴

Furthermore, the government does not appear to have a comprehensive plan for addressing the root causes of gangs. This places a disproportionate burden on community, and civil-society and religious organizations to fill these social and economic needs, something they have not been able to do in the past. As one source put it: "The government chopped down the tree, but left the roots."¹²⁵

123 El Salvador National Police, "Apreciación de las pandillas ante coyuntura del régimen de excepción actualizada al 30 de septiembre 2023," 1 October 2023.

124 InSight Crime interview, Ingrid Escobar, director, Socorro Jurídico Humanitario, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1 October 2023.

125 InSight Crime interview, Estuardo Escobar, lawyer, San Salvador, El Salvador, 10 July 2023.

The scale of future gang-related crime in El Salvador may also depend on the government's security plan. The state of emergency quelled gangs and common delinquency with an overwhelming show of force, but maintaining this level of engagement is costly. What's more, political priorities could change even within a Bukele presidency.

One option would be for the government to leverage its current political capital to create more permanent neighborhood-watch programs. The gangs were undone, in part, by the communities they once controlled. Residents of gang-controlled communities in the San Salvador area told InSight Crime that locals had used an anonymous hotline to inform the police of gang whereabouts.¹²⁶ But this also comes with risks. These tip-offs formed the basis of many arrests, including of innocent people, according to civil-society sources. Still, this could provide the state with a powerful, if controversial, tool for containing the gangs and other delinquent groups going forward.

The Possibility of Prison Gangs

As of the end of September 2023, Salvadoran authorities had arrested over 77,000 people during the state of emergency, among them tens of thousands of alleged gang members and aspiring gang members, as well as suspected collaborators. The country's prisons now house over 105,000 detainees and may be operating at double capacity. The mass incarceration has raised questions whether the gangs could capitalize on severe prison overcrowding to consolidate their presence behind bars and begin operating as prison gangs do in places like Brazil, Venezuela, and the United States.¹²⁷

There is some historical precedent to back up this assertion. Mass arrests made during El Salvador's *mano dura* campaign in the mid-2000s led to a reorganization of the gangs. The leadership in jail reformed the gangs' structures, *modus operandi*, and organization of their criminal markets. Within a few years, the gangs had converted the jails into their epicenter of operations inside and outside the prisons, as well as centers for recruitment and discipline of their rank and file. They also leveraged this control to boost their political capital, which helped them broker pacts with successive governments that gave them privileges and access to political parties and a widening political network.

126 InSight Crime interview, community leader, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1 September 2023.

127 For reference, see: Tren de Aragua, First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital - PCC), and Barrio Azteca.

But successive governments have since tightened security in the prisons, which, although controversial and in violation of the country's constitution and possibly international law regarding incarceration, have proven more effective in controlling gang activity. Multiple accounts from people detained during the state of emergency suggest security forces have established near total control in jails, often subjecting gang members to regular physical and psychological abuse. Authorities have also cut off communications with the outside world. Even family members and legal representatives have little to no contact with their relatives and clients inside the penitentiary system.

For the moment, these extreme measures appear to have achieved their goal of isolating the gangs and impeding a collective response both inside and outside of prisons.¹²⁸ This lack of communication has dealt a potentially critical blow to the gangs' modus operandi. Repression behind bars has also restricted communications between gang members in jail, with no signs that members of the MS13 and Barrio 18 can plan criminal activities or impose rules outside individual cells, according to multiple accounts from people detained in jails housing gang members. Gangs also appear unable to use violence behind bars, another sign of their diminished control in the penitentiary system.

But this bleak outlook for the gangs could change. Prison gangs require a steady turnover of recruits to give them leverage over members on the outside and provide access to key criminal economies. And the flow of gang members in and out of prisons may increase with the gradual release of state-of-emergency detainees and future arrests. Regaining that leverage and re-establishing communications with street-level gang members could also provide a stepping stone to the reactivation of some dormant cells and, by extension, a foundation for the masses of imprisoned gang members to reassert their influence as a criminal force behind bars -- something our research team considers unlikely at present. Perhaps more likely is a scenario in which the gangs draw from a large pool of imprisoned youths, resentful of the government, to facilitate this process. If the pace of prisoner releases quickens in years to come, this process may also accelerate.

The status quo relies on two variables, which may also change. The first variable is the budget. The costs associated with maintaining around 1.7% of the country's population in prison are very high. Any drop-off in resources allocated to prisons could weaken state control behind bars, potentially playing into the hands of the gangs.

The second variable is politics. The current regime depends on the systematic violation of due process and other fundamental rights, and it requires a steady diet of physical and psychological repression inside the penitentiaries. This

128 It is important to remember that the negotiations between gangs and the government have included members of civil-society groups who have advocated for prisoners' rights.

combination of factors is what led to the emergence of the now-dominant criminal structures in places like Brazil.

Gang Members Abroad

With waves of Salvadoran gang members fleeing to nearby countries following the onset of the state of emergency, there have also been questions as to whether these exiles could regroup in countries where the gangs already have a presence -- namely Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

There is now little evidence that Salvadoran gang members are seeking to re-enter criminal life abroad. Instead, signs suggest they are lying low in the hope of evading arrest and deportation. But this situation could also change if fleeing gang members with minimal employment prospects gradually seek revenue streams and support systems abroad, or if foreign governments decrease deportations of Salvadoran gang members.

The scenarios would likely differ between countries. In Mexico, the MS13 has a limited presence, mainly channeled through its so-called Mexico Program. The Mexico Program, formed by expatriate and fugitive Salvadoran MS13 members between 2014 and 2015, is involved in drug trafficking and human smuggling.¹²⁹ Several Salvadoran gang leaders are now operating from Mexico, according to a US indictment against top MS13 leaders unsealed in March 2023.¹³⁰

One of those leaders, Élmér Canales Rivera, alias “Crook,” was arrested in Mexico in November 2023 and subsequently extradited to the United States.¹³¹ Many consider Crook the second highest-ranking member of the MS13. His capture confirmed the presence of MS13 gang leaders in Mexico, which may make the Mexico Program the most likely vehicle for Salvadoran MS13 leaders to organize gang cells outside of El Salvador.

The presence of top Salvadoran MS13 leaders on Mexican soil was noted in reports compiled by El Salvador police before and after the state of emergency began.¹³² Specifically, El Salvador police reports allege MS13 leaders traveled to Mexico following the onset of the state of emergency to formulate a response to Bukele's anti-gang crackdown.

129 Carlos García, “[The Birth of the MS13's Mexico Program](#),” InSight Crime, 15 February 2022.

130 Parker Asmann and Carlos Garcia, “[MS13's Mexico Program Key to El Salvador Gang Negotiations](#),” InSight Crime, 1 March 2023.

131 Steven Dudley, “[Capture of MS13 Leader Exposes US-El Salvador Rift](#),” InSight Crime, 9 November 2023.

132 Ibid.

But while the recruitment of Salvadoran gang members could boost the Mexico Program's ranks and gang members may join or form their own small criminal organizations, it is unlikely to alter the gangs' position in a criminal landscape dominated by sophisticated drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) whose financial resources and firepower dwarf those of the Salvadoran gangs. Those larger criminal groups may integrate -- as they already do¹³³ -- gang members into their ranks. And Mexican cities with a high concentration of fleeing Salvadoran gang members, notably Tapachula, Chiapas, could see gang members involved in low-level criminal activity.

But the gangs do not have the power or agency of these larger, more sophisticated DTOs. And while reported ties between the MS13 Mexico Program and Mexican drug groups, including the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación - CJNG), could provide financial opportunities for Salvadoran gang members with extensive criminal portfolios, the dominance of Mexican drug groups would likely restrict gang members to the role of supporting actors in the drug trade.

In Guatemala and Honduras, the gangs will also struggle. The MS13 and the Barrio 18 both have a presence in urban areas and jails, though the gang's clout has never been as strong as in pre-state of emergency El Salvador. What's more so far, there is little to suggest the influx of Salvadoran gang members has altered the complexion of gang life. Neither country represents an appealing final destination for fleeing gang members, as Central American authorities usually resort to *mano dura* policies to clamp down on gangs and, as noted, have deported gang members since the state of emergency began.

Towards a Criminal State?

The collapse of El Salvador's gangs has raised the question whether other criminal networks could fill the void. As mentioned above, delinquent groups formed by remnants of the gangs or affiliates could attempt to revive street-level criminal economies once monopolized by the gangs. But the government's success in neutralizing the MS13 and Barrio 18 -- for decades an unrivaled criminal force and, in some areas, a form of parallel government -- could also pave the way for state-embedded criminal networks to monopolize the criminal landscape.

Notably, the gangs' downfall has gone hand-in-hand with the Bukele administration's consolidation and centralization of power. The state of emergency's success stems, in part, from leveraging control of all branches of government -- notably the security forces, the legislative assembly, and the

¹³³ Steven Dudley, "A Cartel Bodyguard in Mexico's 'Hot Land'," InSight Crime, 14 September 2022.

judiciary -- to repress criminal actors while simultaneously removing checks on government actions. This opens the door to a more criminalized state.

The Bukele administration has already faced allegations of corruption. The government's health minister and finance minister both came under investigation for allegedly misspending public funds following the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.¹³⁴ Prosecutors also launched preliminary investigations into prisons director Osiris Luna for allegedly diverting \$1.6 million in food aid during the pandemic, according to an *El Faro* investigation¹³⁵ and a designation by the US Treasury Department.¹³⁶ These investigations stalled when legislators aligned with Bukele ousted the Attorney General who was leading the corruption probes.¹³⁷ None of the officials have faced formal corruption charges.

Bukele's party also leveraged its supermajority in parliament to reshuffle the composition of the country's highest court -- a controversial move slammed by critics as unconstitutional. These legal maneuvers have virtually eliminated scrutiny on government spending, providing ample opportunity for state-embedded corruption schemes. The high courts have also made controversial decisions, such as overturning a money laundering case against an alleged criminal figure and refusing to extradite gang leaders wanted on terrorism charges in the United States.¹³⁸

Likewise, state security forces and prison authorities have faced minimal scrutiny on their actions during the state of emergency, despite widespread allegations of arbitrary arrests and other human rights abuses. And in silencing the gangs, the security forces have, at least temporarily, shaken off a rival. Unprecedented power in the hands of security forces with a questionable past -- factions of the El Salvador police have been linked to death squads¹³⁹ and corruption¹⁴⁰ -- could create the conditions for officials to engage in crime or even usurp criminal rackets left behind by the gangs. In August 2023, for

134 Seth Robbins and Héctor Silva Ávalos, "[Corruption Cries Mount Over Pandemic Spending in El Salvador](#)," *InSight Crime*, 25 August 2020.

135 Seth Robbins, "[Top El Salvador Officials Embroiled in Food Aid Theft Investigation](#)," *InSight Crime*, 21 September 2021.

136 US Treasury Department, "[Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime](#)," 8 December 2021.

137 Alex Papadovassilakis and Seth Robbins, "[Ousting of El Salvador's Top Prosecutor Imperils Rule of Law](#)," *InSight Crime*, 3 May 2021.

138 Seth Robbins, "[Chepe Diablo, Long Accused Cartel Leader, Let Off the Hook in El Salvador](#)," *InSight Crime*, 25 May 2021; Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Is El Salvador Willing to Extradite MS13 Leaders to US or Just Playing for Time?](#)" *InSight Crime*, 14 July 2022.

139 Parker Asmann, "[Police Again at Center of Latest Death Squad Uncovered in El Salvador](#)," *InSight Crime*, 4 October 2019.

140 Héctor Silva Ávalos, "[Charges Point to El Salvador Police Chief's History of Obstructing Justice](#)," *InSight Crime*, 17 December 2020.

example, one police investigator was arrested on suspicion of extortion; prosecutors say the official demanded \$10,000 from an individual in exchange for not arresting them under state of emergency powers.¹⁴¹ Prosecutors have also arrested police officials on suspicion of setting up unauthorized roadblocks to shake down civilians.¹⁴²

There may also be some scope for crossover between state-embedded criminal networks and remnants of the gangs. Top gang leaders have spent years cultivating strategic ties with successive El Salvador governments, at times negotiating payments in exchange for political support. The connections include some of Bukele's closest political allies, such as prison director Luna, blacklisted by the US government for his alleged role in facilitating secret gang negotiations before the state of emergency.¹⁴³ The sitting Attorney General, Rodolfo Delgado, appointed by Bukele in 2020, worked as a defense lawyer for an MS13 member accused of drug trafficking prior to taking the job as top prosecutor.¹⁴⁴ The Bukele administration also released a series of MS13 leaders from jail prior to the state of emergency¹⁴⁵ and has failed to extradite gang leaders wanted by the United States.

The existing relationship between the government and top gang leaders, whose whereabouts are largely unknown, could provide opportunities for gang leaders to continue engaging with top government officials linked to corruption. But this would not be a level playing field, as the dismantling of street-level gang structures has severely weakened the leaders' bargaining power in such alliances.

A criminal landscape dominated by a powerful state could take different forms. At its most vertical, power would rest on a strong criminal enterprise run from the top of the government that leverages its monolithic control of the state to eliminate all political and criminal opposition. This enterprise monopolizes control over corruption and criminal activity. It also erases

141 Jorge Beltrán Luna, "[Aumentan casos de policías acusados de extorsionar con el régimen de excepción](#)," *Diario de Hoy*, 27 August 2023; Alexander Pineda, "[Investigador PNC acusado por extorsión fue enviado a prisión; le sumaron otro delito](#)," *El Diario de Hoy*, 20 August 2023.

142 El Salvador Attorney General's Office [@FGR_SV], [#CombateAlCrimen | Con órdenes de la @FGR_SV, la @PNCSV ha capturado a varios delincuentes, entre elementos policiales y civiles, vinculados a delitos como: Cohecho Propio, Incumplimiento de Deberes, Extorsión Agravada, Hurto Agravado. Según las investigaciones, los elementos policiales realizaban retenes sin autorización en los cuales exigían dinero a las víctimas a cambio de no imponerles una infracción.](#), *Tweet*, Twitter, 12 August 2023.

143 US Treasury Department, "[Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime](#)," 8 December 2021.

144 Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson and Efren Lemus, "[El Salvador's Attorney General Worked for Top MS13 Ally](#)," *InSight Crime*, 31 October 2022.

145 Parker Asmann, "[Political Connections in El Salvador Help MS13 Leaders Escape Abroad](#)," *InSight Crime*, 19 July 2022.

spaces for gangs and collects taxes from DTOs, contraband, and other criminal activities. This profile is in line with the centralization of power surrounding the Bukele government and mimics other criminal governments in the region, most notably Nicaragua.

In a more horizontal model, various state-embedded mafias could hold control over some major criminal economies, namely high-level corruption schemes, forming several criminal blocs who exert control over their fiefdom. But competition among these blocs, as well as competition for less glamorous criminal rackets -- such as extortion, drug peddling, theft-and-resale, and contraband -- could still generate violence and crime between these various criminal factions. This scenario resembles Venezuela and, in some respects, Guatemala. It also requires strong control over key parts of the government, in particular its security forces and judicial powers. Nonetheless, given the atomized nature of this model, these security forces can become major criminal actors with their own agency and power.

Investigative Team

InSight Crime investigator Alex Papadovassilakis led the research team, assisted with field research, and wrote the report. InSight Crime's Co-director Steven Dudley administered the project, conducted fieldwork, and edited the report.

Journalists César Fagoaga, Bryan Avelar, Carlos Garcia, and Roberto Valencia, along with anthropologist Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, conducted the field research. Fagoaga helped edit the report.

InSight Crime Editor Liza Schmidt copy-edited the report, and InSight Crime's Ana Isabel Rico, Juan José Restrepo, and María Isabel Gaviria did the graphics. InSight Crime investigator María Paola Martínez and editor Peter Appleby contributed desk research.



InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions - as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource - to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

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