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How El Salvador Became The World's Most Violent Peacetime Country

The Central American nation registered more homicides in 2015 than in any year during its civil war.

03/04/2016 05:30 pm ET | Updated Mar 04, 2016



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MANU BRABO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Suspected members of the 18th Street gang travel in a livestock trailer to holding cells on May 28, 2015. The rise of street gangs have contributed to violence in El Salvador, a problem that likely can't be solved without greater investment in education, economic development and social programs.

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Homicide statistics released late last year showed that El Salvador had passed a grim milestone: The Central American nation registered more homicides in 2015 than in any year during its civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992.

El Salvador's Institute of Legal Medicine tallied 6,656 killings last year, for a homicide rate of roughly 116 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants — the highest in the world for a country not at war, and more than a 70 percent spike from the year before. It should come as no surprise that tens of thousands of Salvadorans, including children, have fled to the United States and other countries in the region seeking refuge.

The most immediate cause for the surge in killings appears to be fighting between powerful street gangs that erupted after a truce between the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang reportedly fell apart in 2014. But the violence that plagues El Salvador today can largely be traced back to the country's civil war.

Tens Of Thousands Die In Civil War

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The roots of El Salvador's current violence stretch back at least four decades, to a civil war between a Marxist guerrilla movement based in the countryside and the country's conservative government.

Viewing the conflict as a proxy for its own crusade against international communism during the Cold War, the U.S. government fueled the violence in El Salvador as it did [throughout Latin America](#) and elsewhere in the world, providing more than [\\$4 billion in military and economic aid](#) and training to a Salvadoran government that used death squads to snuff out the rebels and their suspected sympathizers.

More than [75,000 people died in those years](#), according to the Center for Justice and Accountability, and hundreds of others fled to the United States.

El Salvador's 1992 peace accords [ended the conflict](#), but came at a high price for the country's future. A 1993 [law granted amnesty to those accused of committing crimes](#) against humanity during the civil war, guaranteeing that a generation of victims would never see justice and a generation of perpetrators would learn they could kill without fear of punishment.

Impunity Is Institutionalized



LUIS ROMERO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Cunegunda Pena holds a photo of her son during a 2011 protest organized by relatives of people murdered or disappeared during El Salvador's civil war. Some 75,000 people were killed during the 1980-1992 conflict.

As the civil war came to a close, El Salvador was left with a large population that had once earned a living from violence — people employed in death squads, involved in illegal activities like arms trafficking, or serving a military that suddenly [saw its budget reduced](#) in peacetime.

At the same time, the country became an increasingly important route for international drug trade between South America and the United States. Some people who made their living illegally during the civil war turned to illicit activities during peacetime, according to Steven Dudley, the co-founder of [InSight Crime](#), a foundation dedicated to the study of organized crime in the Americas.

“There are criminal groups that follow the same paths and patterns as their forebears, and some are connected to the civil war,” Dudley told [The WorldPost](#).

Today, El Salvador's police lack the resources to carry out thorough investigations, and the courts are often ineffective and subject to political influence, leading to the [high impunity rates](#) that are common in the region. Between 2011 and 2013 — a period in which 9,464 people were murdered — Salvadoran courts issued only 490 sentences for homicide, an [impunity rate of over 94 percent](#).

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homicides, an impunity rate of over 94 percent.

And the political polarization that has marked the country since the 1970s continues today, Dudley says.

“[Politicians] can hardly even stand thinking about implementing the plan of the opposition,” Dudley said. “It makes it hard to gather up any force for long-term solutions.”

A Traumatized Generation Begets Violent Gangs



ROBERT NICKELBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Los Angeles Police Department gang unit officers question an alleged Mara Salvatrucha street gang member on Sept. 13, 2007. Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, was founded in Los Angeles by Salvadoran refugees.

The gangs that are wreaking havoc across El Salvador today originated in the United States, where child refugees initially sought to defend themselves in a hostile environment.

“An individual gang member is not just poor,” Salvadoran-American journalist Roberto Lovato told *The WorldPost*. “He’s also a walking, talking trauma that’s unresolved. And there’s nothing to treat that in the country. That’s not the priority.”

Alex Sanchez, a co-founder of Homies Unidos, a group that works with former gang members to build a culture of peace, described in 2014 how his parents sent him to the United States as a child in 1979 to escape the violence. Unable to speak English at first, he was treated as an outsider at school and bullied routinely. By middle school, he’d met other classmates with similar experiences who banded together to defend themselves.

“Eventually it became a gang, but initially it was just to protect each other from the other groups that were harassing us,” Sanchez said.

“

An individual gang member is not just poor. He’s also a walking, talking trauma that’s unresolved. And there’s nothing to treat that in the country. That’s not the priority.

—Salvadoran-American journalist Roberto Lovato

Like thousands of other Salvadorans who fled prior to or during the civil war, U.S. authorities deported Sanchez back to El Salvador in the 1990s during a Bill Clinton-era crackdown on crime. Many deportees who had been exposed to gang culture in the United States recreated it in the country of their birth, often recruiting impoverished youths whose

country of their birth, often recruiting impoverished youths whose marginalization mirrored that of the child refugees in Los Angeles.

“These kids were being treated like trash,” [Sanchez said](#). “Now all they had to do was to put a letter or a number on their faces and go ask for money, and people were so afraid of them. Before, nobody gave a damn about them. Police used to beat them up and tell them to ‘Get out of here, you huelepega, you glue-sniffer.’ Now, people were like ‘Please, don’t hurt me.’”

‘Iron Fist’ Policies Don’t Solve The Problem



MOISES CASTILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla, is sworn in on June 1, 2014. He has continued hard-line security policies.

Faced with rising violence, the Salvadoran government has responded in kind. A series of administrations from both the right and the left have implemented so-called “mano dura,” or “iron fist,” crackdowns on gangs.

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla leader who took office in 2014, planned to confront crime using a [multi-pronged plan](#) developed with civil society groups. The proposal involved not only putting more cops and soldiers on the streets, but also investing in social programs and more effective government institutions.

Instead, however, the government continues to rely on brute force to suppress crime, disappointing civil society groups that helped develop the plan, said Angelika Albaladejo of the Washington-based Latin America Working Group, who recently traveled to El Salvador to [research the security situation](#).

“Only the hard side has been implemented,” Albaladejo told The WorldPost. “The current security policy put in place by Sánchez Céren is nearly identical to the ‘mano dura’ policies of the past.”

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Many observers say Salvadoran security forces are also responsible for the uptick in violence. The military and police are widely suspected of [committing extrajudicial killings](#). Last year, [74 percent of alleged human rights violations](#) submitted to the attorney general’s office involved cops

or soldiers, according to Mexican news agency Animal Político.

By taking a one-dimensional view of the crime problem, experts say Salvadoran officials are losing the opportunity to address the poverty, inequality and weak government institutions that helped institutionalize El Salvador's violence in the first place.

"Instead of dealing with these problems of poverty, the Salvadoran and U.S. governments are combating the problem with violence," Lovato said. "Any expert down there I trust says that's going to lead to failure ... You don't get these murderous kinds of gangs in middle-class neighborhoods."

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