

EL SALVADOR

Invisible displacement by criminal and gang violence

El Salvador has consistently been one of the world's most violent countries over the last decade. We estimate that nearly 220,000 people were forced to flee generalised violence in 2016. This puts the country second in terms of the number of new displacements relative to population size (see figure 1.8).

Despite the scale of displacement, however, there is no official recognition of the role violence plays in driving the problem. This means there is also no national strategy, legislative or policy framework in place to comprehensively monitor, address and respond to it.

Displacement in El Salvador is driven by organised criminal groups committing egregious acts of violence against civilians with impunity. The population's perception is that the state is unable, and given the human rights violations committed in the "war on gangs", in some cases unwilling to provide protection and assistance.

Efforts to document internal displacement and assist victims are further frustrated by the secrecy in which people flee and their reluctance to report crimes to the authorities. IDPs in El Salvador tend not to seek refuge in camps

or shelters, but rather go into hiding, behaviour that local civil society organisations (CSOs) call "confinement."⁴⁸ IDPs feel forced to restrict their own basic freedoms and rights to avoid detection by criminal groups or the authorities. Of 193 cases documented by four CSOs in 2016, only 43 per cent reported crimes to authorities.⁴⁹

The main reasons victims give for not reporting crimes related to their displacement are fear of reprisal by criminal groups, fear of infiltration and corruption in state institutions, and a belief that the state is unwilling or unable to help them.⁵⁰

Eighty-four per cent of the people displaced in 2016 reported fleeing persecution and violence by gangs, which use many forms of violence including murder, torture, forced disappearances, rape, sexual exploitation and threats to exercise control over territories and populations.⁵¹

Victims describe a daily life in which they negotiate with, and acquiesce to criminal groups over basic aspects of their lives such as freedom of movement, and whether and where to attend school and work, access medical care and seek justice. They also balance their safety and security against coercion by succumbing to blackmail,

Figure 1.8: Countries with most new displacements by conflict and violence in 2016, absolute and relative to population size



Source: IDMC, with UN Population Division data



collaborating in criminal activity, submitting to sexual abuse and forced relationships and joining the ranks of criminal organisations themselves. Resistance can trigger threats and violence.

Victims of violence and displacement also face stigmatisation and discrimination based on their perceived association with criminal organisations. In the polarising and bellicose narrative of the “war on gangs,” public officials regularly associate them with “the enemy” rather than recognising them as citizens with a right to protection.

The implementation of extraordinary security measures has also contributed to the erosion of the human rights environment in communities most vulnerable to criminal violence. In pursuit of the legitimate goal of suppressing criminal groups, state security forces have allegedly perpetrated extrajudicial executions, physical abuse, sexual harassment and mass arrests.⁵² Of the cases of displacement documented by civil society, the police and armed forces were directly responsible for eight per cent.⁵³

Humanitarian organisations and donors increasingly recognise the need to develop new approaches and more robust interventions in the region. They acknowledge that addressing criminal violence challenges many of their precepts and traditional working practices and will require considerable time.⁵⁴

A family enters the gates of the City of Childhood and Youth community centre in Santa Ana. Photo © UNHCR/Tito Herrera, September 2016