



A family from El Salvador who fled gang threats from their hometown and moved to Guatemala. Photo: UNHCR/Michael Muller, July 2018

AN ATOMISED CRISIS

Reframing displacement caused by
crime and violence in El Salvador

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Displacement caused by crime and violence has, by any measure, risen to the level of a humanitarian crisis in El Salvador and the broader Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA). The cross-border dimension of the phenomenon and associated asylum claims are well acknowledged, but much less is known about the drivers, triggers, patterns and impacts of displacement within the country's borders.

What little data is available suggests that the number of people internally displaced by criminal violence in El Salvador is high, and has risen significantly in recent years. In a 2017 public survey, 5.1 per cent of respondents said they had been forced to move in the previous year because of threats. This percentage, extrapolated to reflect the population of El Salvador, produces a figure of 296,000 new displacements, with over a quarter of people having moved twice or more.¹ Using a different methodology, a government-led profiling

study published in 2018 found that 1.1 per cent of the households questioned had been forced to change their residence within the last ten years because of violence.²

The number of asylum claims from Salvadorans has risen in parallel. There were roughly 60,000 new claims lodged globally in 2017, a nearly 40 per cent increase on the previous year. The number of current and imminent deportations and returns to El Salvador is also high, and includes people who are unable to return to their places of origin because of ongoing protection concerns and those who may be otherwise at risk once back in the country.

1 For more information, see IDMC's figures analysis for El Salvador, available at: <https://goo.gl/5X1Uff>.

2 Minister of Justice and Public Security in El Salvador, "Caracterización de la movilidad interna a causa de la violencia en El Salvador," March 2018, available at <https://goo.gl/uhoo81>.

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION AS A FIRST STEP TO IMPROVED RESPONSE

Addressing displacement comprehensively and achieving durable solutions for people displaced will be challenging. Much internal displacement is not even documented and the government is still to officially recognise the phenomenon let alone collect data on it systematically. Its aforementioned publication of a profiling study on “internal mobility” caused by violence in March 2018 was, however, a positive development. In July 2018, the Supreme Court also issued a landmark ruling ordering the government to officially recognise displacement in the country, develop appropriate legislation and policies to assist and protect displaced people, allocate a budget for the response and take action to prevent displacement.

Official acknowledgement is a vital first step toward the government fulfilling its duties, in line with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to protect and assist the country’s internally displaced people (IDPs) and uphold their right to ask for and receive such support. A deeper understanding of the dynamics that drive displacement, from the *modus operandi* of gangs to the effects of the state’s failure to facilitate durable solutions and its repressive response to criminality, could help to encourage state recognition of the phenomenon and inform an effective response.

A BASELINE FOR ACTION: UNDERSTANDING AND ESTIMATING DISPLACEMENT

This study seeks to reframe internal displacement caused by criminal violence in an effort to establish a shared understanding of the phenomenon in El Salvador and the NTCA. Academic studies, civil society and ombudsman reports and the recent government-led profiling study have contributed to this end, but significant data and knowledge gaps remain.

The study draws on extensive desk research covering the academic literature and latest empirical reports, and qualitative data collected in 51 interviews with 80 experts in El Salvador and Mexico City during March and April 2018. The research findings were analysed using a systems dynamics approach to look beneath the surface of the observable phenomenon and explain why it happens, identify its drivers and dynamics, as well as high-leverage entry points for an effective response.

This research includes seven key findings drawn from the analysis and presented against the backdrop of the principle of national sovereignty as responsibility. They offer new insight into the phenomenon as a basis for developing protection and assistance interventions, guiding government and civil society responses, and informing policy recommendations.



A city bus burned by gang members in Apopa, El Salvador. Photo: Shutterstock/ES James

| KEY FINDING 1: DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS ARE OSTENSIBLY RANDOM

In the absence of state support, people displaced by criminal violence rely on social capital and family networks during their displacement. A safe haven is hard to find, and depends on the cause and circumstances of each displacement, particularly the reach of criminal gangs. Some IDPs are able to access support from civil society organisations, certain state agencies and municipal bodies, but there is no centralised or coordinated mechanism for doing so. Much displacement also remains invisible because IDPs choose not to report their plight and seek support for fear of their persecutors finding them. This makes patterns difficult to discern, and movements appear to be random.

| KEY FINDING 2: TARGETED THREATS CREATE A CONTINUUM OF RISK

Although the term “generalised violence” describes the widespread and sustained situation of violence in El Salvador, it does not adequately convey the highly targeted and individualised nature of criminal gangs’ threats and persecution, nor the varied dynamics of displacement they provoke. This must be understood as a continuum of risk that affects the decision to flee, its immediacy, options in terms of a safe haven and the diverse nature of IDPs’ protection needs.

| KEY FINDING 3: THE NATURE OF A SAFE PLACE IS HIGHLY INDIVIDUALIZED

Criminal violence is both pervasive and highly targeted, which provokes atomised patterns of displacement and make options for a safe place highly individualised. What may constitute a safe place for one person may not be safe for someone fleeing an ostensibly very similar situation. The individualised nature of a safe place is linked to the trigger of displacement, and people fleeing individual persecution and targeted threats or violence will be further limited in their options, particularly those perceived to have committed an act of betrayal and who are likely to be pursued after flight.

| KEY FINDING 4: THE PRECARIOUS NATURE OF DISPLACEMENT LEADS TO REPEATED TRANSITORY MOVES, “SELF-CONTAINMENT” AND SIGNIFICANT CROSS-BORDER FLIGHT

The absence of a state response and the individualised nature of a safe place mean that people fleeing criminal violence have few safe or sustainable options inside the country. Internal displacement is often ineffective and precarious, which leads to repeated transitory movements, severe restrictions on freedom of movement such as the phenomenon of “self-containment” and significant cross-border flight.

| KEY FINDING 5: REPRESSIVE STATE RESPONSES ALSO CONTRIBUTE TO DISPLACEMENT

In combatting the extremely high levels of violence in El Salvador, state security responses to gang activity have been counterproductive, and have triggered new displacement patterns. Repressive measures have increased enmity, which has led gangs to target police and military officers and their families, often leading to their displacement. The security forces themselves have also provoked the displacement of young people from gang-affected areas who flee arbitrary harassment and violence. This suggests an emerging state role in displacement, one of commission as well as omission.

| KEY FINDING 6: DISPLACEMENT HAS MAJOR IMPACTS AT ALL LEVELS OF SOCIETY THAT ARE AGGRAVATED BY THE LACK OF A STATE RESPONSE

Displacement has significant socioeconomic and psychosocial impacts, which get worse if people are unable to find security and stability. These impacts also perpetuate and aggravate some of the underlying causes and drivers of criminal violence and displacement at the individual, community and national level. This highlights the failure of the state to fulfil its responsibility to intervene to address these causes and facilitate durable solutions.

| KEY FINDING 7: DATA AND REPORTING ISSUES IMPEDE UNDERSTANDING AND ACTION ON DISPLACEMENT

The lack of robust data and reporting impairs understanding of the scale of displacement caused by criminal violence in El Salvador and the needs of the people affected. In the absence of timely and reliable data, the state is unable – even if it were willing – to develop a comprehensive response to IDPs’ plight or effective measure to prevent future displacement. Instead, a protection void is left in which further human rights violations take place and the precarious nature of internal displacement leads to transitory movements, self-containment, and cross-border flight abroad.



The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement worldwide. Since 1998, our role has been recognised and endorsed by United Nations General Assembly resolutions. IDMC is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organisation.

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