

## THEMATIC SERIES THE INVISIBLE MAJORITY

This thematic series addresses the gap in awareness, data and knowledge about the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions.



### RETURNING TO EL SALVADOR

Signs of an internal displacement crisis

SEPTEMBER 2018

Barack Obama, then president of the US, declared in July 2014 an “urgent humanitarian situation” on the southern border of the country. In that year, 137,000 children and families had arrived from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, twice as many as the year before.

Women, children, and families escaping extreme levels of violence challenged established assumptions that Meso-american migration was primarily undertaken by lone Central Americans seeking work, and raised questions about states’ responsibility to protect throughout the region. Since then, however, little has changed.

Asylum requests from citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the states of the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), rose from fewer than 6,900 in 2009 to more than 94,900 in 2016. Requests to the US government accounted for about 5,000 or 72 per cent of the applications lodged in 2009 and about 78,800 or 83 per cent in 2016. The US authorities accepted about 1,100 requests in 2009 and about 10,400 in 2016.

El Salvador, which has the smallest population of the three NTCA countries, has been the source of the majority of the region’s asylum requests since 2005. Salvadorans’ desperation to move has many causes but one mentioned regularly by the men, women and children who flee their homes is violence and/or the threat of extortion, targeting and attack.

Seven thousand children were murdered in El Salvador in the last four years.<sup>1</sup> The levels of violence in the NTCA, where in 2017 the combined total number of homicides was around 12,000,<sup>2</sup> are comparable to armed conflicts globally, yet governments of countries of origin, transit, and destination have been reluctant to prioritise a humanitarian response.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of this report being completed, El Salvador’s government has still not officially recognised internal displacement by violence. The Salvadoran Supreme Court has determined that the government’s failure to recognise internal displacement and protect citizens constitutes a systemic violation of fundamental rights.

Despite this, 79,316 Salvadorans were deported from Mexico and the US in 2016 and 2017.

El Salvador’s immigration department (*Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería*, DGME) is obliged to register all deportees to the country. In the course of this, it conducts a wide-ranging interview asking the reason for their migration, how long they were away, which municipality they fled from, which they are returning to, their economic dependants and other information.

The DGME database is the main source of information on these men, women and children, shedding light on the displacement continuum from their perspective, and the situation they face once back in the country. One of its findings is that 40 per cent of deportees who fled El Salvador because of insecurity fear they cannot return to their communities of origin.



A man from El Salvador carries a child on the stretch that divides Arriaga (Chiapas) from Chautitlan (Oaxaca) on their way to United States, in Chiapas, Mexico. Photo © UNHCR/Markel Redondo, October 2015

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM DGME'S DATABASE

DGME's database has registered 79,316 Salvadorans as having been returned to the state in 2016 and 2017; 11,509 children and 67,807 adults. Fifty-three per cent were removed from Mexico and 46 per cent from the United States. The proportion of deportations from the US rose significantly from 40 per cent in 2016 to 59 per cent following Donald Trump's inauguration as president in January 2017. Among those returned deportees, 10,577 adults and 1,483 children had fled El Salvador due to violence ("Domestic Violence" or "Insecurity"); forty-five per cent of them had economic dependents.

Local human rights organisation Cristosal and IDMC conducted 16 surveys and four in-depth interviews in autumn 2017 with returnees who had fled El Salvador to escape violence. The study was designed to examine conditions for returning deportees and the risks of them becoming internally displaced, often not for the first time.

As a result of the lack of comprehensive quantitative data on internal displacement in El Salvador, the study also brings together qualitative data and analysis of other information on issues such as violence, crime and human mobility, to build a clearer picture of how the phenomenon is developing and its impacts on those affected.

The deportees interviewed by Cristosal report that when they fled their homes they had no expectation that any state, whether their country of origin, transit or destination, would assume responsibility for the protection of their lives and fundamental rights. The persistence of forced internal displacement and cross-border movements caused by violence demonstrates the ineffectiveness of current security strategies in reducing violence and restoring the rule of law to areas controlled by criminal groups. It also illustrates that harsh immigration policies do not deter families from fleeing for their lives. Reports like this, however, are currently far too scarce to act as the foundation of a meaningful response.

The absence of a governmental protection response is also evident in the decision-making processes of victims of violence and persecution and of refugees who have fled for safety in other studies. The Salvadoran Ministry for Justice and Security reports that 70 per cent of people internally displaced do not report crimes or seek state assistance.<sup>4</sup>

This protection failure, from country of origin to destination and back again, feeds a cycle in which NTCA families fall outside the protection of any state. IDMC and Cristosal's report highlights the real possibility that the deportation of Central Americans with protection needs condemns them to return to a condition of internal displacement.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Of the 16 people Cristosal interviewed using a structured survey, 13 reported the US as their intended destination, but only eight managed to get there. The other five made it as far as Mexico.

Fourteen had been direct victims of violence, and two had family members who had been. The main perpetrators were gang members and the crimes committed included death threats, attempts to recruit children or adolescents, homicide of a family member, and extortion.

Five had reported the crimes to the Salvadoran authorities, but none had received a response. Eight reported that fleeing the country had been their last resort after first displacing internally and all 16 used social and family networks to leave.

Six of the interviewees were victims of crimes after their return. The deportees had spent varying amounts of time outside the country, but their time abroad did not reduce the dangers they faced in El Salvador.

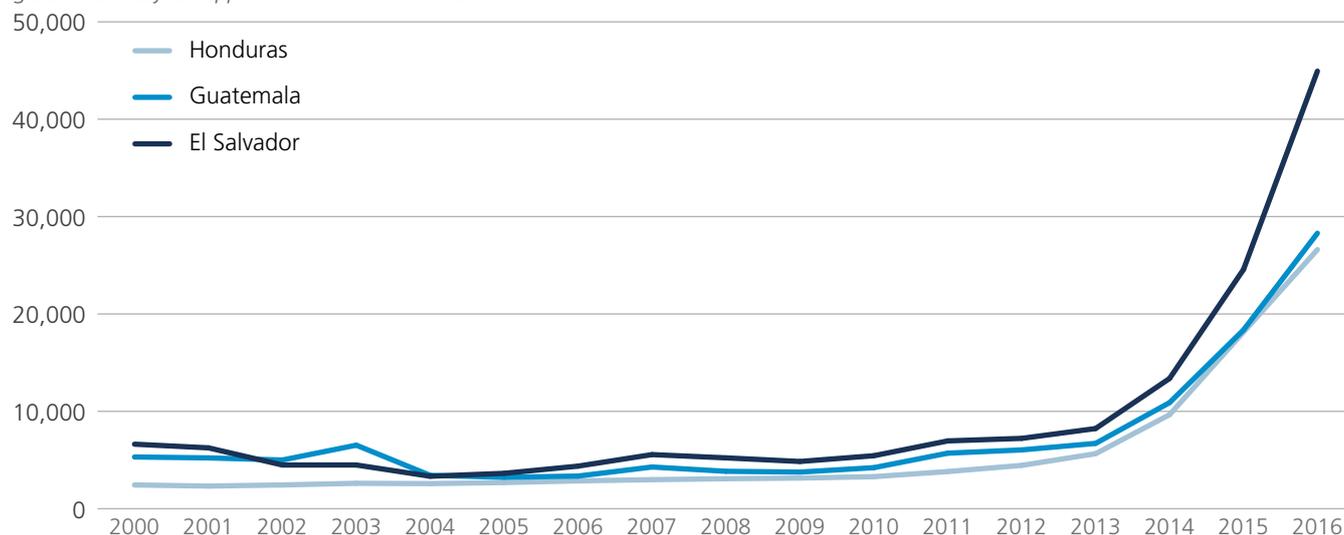
Responding to humanitarian needs across the Mesoamerican migration corridor is a moral and strategic imperative. A regional commitment to protection and responsibility-sharing, including a recognition of internal displacement by El Salvador's government and the gathering and sharing of data on the ongoing crisis, is necessary to stabilise the region and save lives.

## CRIME AND MOBILITY

El Salvador has suffered epidemic levels of violence for many years, which shows no signs of abating.<sup>5</sup> Organised crime associated with drug trafficking and gang activity has contributed to a prolonged security crisis that affects every aspect of society.<sup>6</sup> Politicians and security experts pay close attention to crime data, but not to the human tragedies that lie behind the numbers, which play out every day when families are torn apart as their members flee violence and seek safety.

Many kinds of violent crime are under-reported, which means that official data does not fully convey the extent of the phenomenon, but its generalised nature in El Salvador is well-established. The country was the most violent in Latin America in 2016, according to police figures, with a murder rate of 81.2 per 100,000 people.<sup>7</sup> San Salvador was among the 10 most violent cities in the world with a murder rate of 83.4 per 100,000 people.<sup>8</sup> Impunity is rife, making it difficult if not impossible to know exactly who is responsible for these crimes or to attain justice for the victims.

Figure 1: Total asylum applications from NTCA countries



Source: UNHCR<sup>12</sup>

The most widely reported and feared violence is that committed by the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs, often referred to as *maras*. Gangs are still expanding their presence in the country and using territorial control to consolidate their identity and criminal activity, and it is widely acknowledged that they are responsible for a significant number of El Salvador's murders.<sup>9</sup> They also regularly carry out rape, extortion, threats and intimidation.<sup>10</sup>

Such violence and threats from gangs, drug traffickers and other organised crime groups are among the main causes of internal displacement and irregular migration from El Salvador.<sup>11</sup> People report fleeing for fear that they or their families will face further persecution, to prevent their sons from being forced into gang activity, their daughters being trafficked as sex slaves, and to escape repercussions for not paying extortion demands.

One indicator that El Salvador is experiencing significant internal displacement associated with violence is the increase in the number of its nationals seeking asylum in other countries who have been, or fear becoming, victims of violence. Asylum requests from citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras rose from fewer than 6,900 in 2009 to more than 94,900 in 2016. The largest number of asylum requests from citizens of NTCA states since 2005 have come from Salvadorans, even though El Salvador has the region's smallest population (see figure 1).

The available data on cross-border movements, however, is likely to represent only a fraction of the internal displacement that takes place. Cross-border movements must also be considered in relation to internal displacement, because a change in one often precedes and/or follows a change in the other. What will happen, for example, to the 89 per cent of NTCA asylum seekers whose requests are not granted?<sup>13</sup> People forced to flee their homes in El Salvador find themselves at different points on a continuum – and facing different needs, risks and vulnerabilities – which begins with their initial movement and only ends when they escape the displacement cycle by achieving a durable solution.<sup>14</sup>

There is currently not enough data to quantify internal displacement in El Salvador and its relationship with cross-border movements with the accuracy needed to design public policy, while the quantitative data that is available is not collected in a consistent manner among the agencies that document cases. Nor do many internally displaced people (IDPs) come forward to reveal their situation, either out of fear of retaliation, mistrust of the authorities or because they are not aware of any organisations that would document their cases.

The Salvadoran government has so far refused even to acknowledge the existence of the phenomenon and so keeps no consistent records or reports. Given the widespread nature of the violence, conducting field research and collecting data can also be dangerous.

The trends that have emerged through qualitative analysis are alarming and should be sufficient motivation to create a systematic and comprehensive data system to provide evidence across the whole displacement continuum. The need to collect interoperable data on displacement trends from internal flight to refuge abroad and return has been identified in the past, and current trends reaffirm the importance of ensuring we have comprehensive data about the situation. Any effective policy and programming in El Salvador will need to be based on accurate information about the number, profiles, locations and needs of people being displaced.

## BRINGING THE EXISTING DATA TOGETHER

Despite the limitations described above, there are important sources of quantitative data that help to at least outline the potential scale of internal displacement in El Salvador. The Central American University's Institute For Public Opinion (*El Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública*, IUDOP) regularly collects information from national surveys that include a question about whether respondents had to change their place of residence during the previous year because of threats. An extrapolation of IUDOP's data for 2017 yields a figure of almost 227,000 people forced to flee their homes during the year.<sup>15</sup>

The Civil Society Working Group Against Forced Displacement (*Mesa de Sociedad Civil Contra el Desplazamiento Forzado*, MDF) also maintains a register of cases its member organisations have attended. The register contains information on more than 1,300 IDPs (between August 2014 and December 2016) that helps to build a profile of people who have sought assistance.<sup>16</sup> MDF is currently made up of 14 organisations, among which Cristosal, the Salvadorean Red Cross, the Pasionista Social Service, the Quetzalcoatl Foundation and the Human Rights Institute of the Central American University (*Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana*, IDHUCA) are the most active in terms of providing protection.

Some of the MDF organisations also keep their own registers of assistance requests and cases they have managed. Cristosal in particular keeps detailed information on cases it has documented, including people who had previously fled abroad to escape violence but have since returned. Between January 2016 and December 2017, it supported 1,055 people, 68 of whom had tried crossing the border.

The organisations do not, however, collect their information in a standardised way and their data is limited to the areas they work in. The reporting system they use is still being refined, so duplication errors cannot be ruled out, and it should also be noted that not all victims of violence who seek assistance have been or end up being internally displaced.

The Salvadoran government's Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (*Procuraduría Para La Defensa De Los Derechos Humanos*, PDDH) registers cases of internal displacement but, like MDF, its data is limited to cases in which citizens have come forward to report their situation and ask for assistance. PDDH worked on 138 cases between April 2016 and May 2017 which involved 458 internally displaced people.<sup>17</sup>

The International Organisation for Migration's (IOM) displacement tracking matrix for the NTCA for 2016, includes interviews with key informants at the municipal level about people forced to move within or between municipalities and people arriving having been forced to flee other municipalities.<sup>18</sup> The study, which concluded violence, disasters and climate change are among the causes of people's movement, identified 3,010 cases of expulsion and 2,810 cases of reception.<sup>19</sup>

Official collection of data on displacement caused by violence is based on crime reports of illegal restriction of freedom of movement, which was introduced to Salvadoran statute in 2016, as part of reforms to the state's penal code.<sup>20</sup> At least 83 cases affecting 141 people were reported that year. Information from government housing programmes also indicates displacement caused by violence. According to data from the government housing authority, the Social Housing Fund (*Fondo social para la vivienda*, FSV), 640 families had to abandon their homes between 2010 and 2015 due to threats, extortion, and murder of family members by gangs. The Low-Income Housing Fund (*Fondo Nacional De Vivienda Popular*, FONAVIPO) has 110 registered cases of property usurpation – however, the current situation of the original owners and their reasons to leave are unknown.<sup>21</sup> Besides this, in March 2018, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (*Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública*, MJSP) of El Salvador published a report of its profiling exercise, which was also supported by JIPS and UNHCR among others.<sup>22</sup> This study does not provide extrapolated results. It does however provide a characterization of IDPs and finds that 1.1 per cent of all enumerated families had at least one member internally displaced due to violence between 2006 and 2016. This figure that seems to be an underestimate, considering previously mentioned evidence.

In terms of those who leave El Salvador altogether, some people apply for asylum and are registered by the countries where they lodge their requests, or the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). UNHCR received 43,302 applications from Salvadorans in 2016, a sevenfold increase on the number in 2013. It approved only 4,708, or 10.9 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Information from the courts in destination countries that handle asylum requests is harder to access. Cristosal has so far only received data from Costa Rica, which shows a significant increase in applications submitted and approved since 2016 (see table 1).

Voluntary returnees to El Salvador have no obligation to report and little incentive to provide information about their situation. Indeed, those who fled violence may wish to keep a low profile for fear of further abuses. The country's immigration department (*Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería*,

Table 1: Cases received and approved by Costa Rica's second immigration court

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Cases received	3	36	30	80	30	154	478
Cases approved	3	-	7	22	41	106	304

Source: Government of Costa Rica

DGME) does, however, conduct a detailed interview with all people deported back to the state, and this provides another data point.

The DGME questionnaire asks the reason people left, how long they were away for, which municipality they left and where they plan to return to, their economic dependants and for other information. The answers amount to a census of deportees, and the data sheds light on the whole displacement continuum from the perspective of displaced Salvadoran people, including the situation they face once back in the country. The database forms the basis of most studies on Salvadoran migrants, but it does not include information about irregular migrants who are not deported, those who return voluntarily, people who left with legal visas or those who are granted asylum in other countries.

The questionnaire has some significant drawbacks, not least that is administered by uniformed officials, which may intimidate people and make them less likely to report violence and crime issues. Lack of trust in the government and its representatives is a common factor in people's decisions to flee the country rather than report crimes to the authorities.

DGME's method only allows respondents to cite a single factor behind their decision to leave the country, which is another significant limitation when it comes to analysing its data, as interviewees may have had a number of reasons for leaving. If, for example, someone leaves because extortion demands mean their business is no longer viable, they may report their reason as economic while it is at least as much a result of crime.

To complement DGME's information and deepen understanding of deportees' whole journey, Cristosal conducted 16 structured interviews in September and October 2017. Twelve were with returnees already on the organisation's database, and four who were contacted through the Salvadoran Institute on Migration (*Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante*, INSAMI) and the NGO Renaceres. Unfortunately, the DGME declined Cristosal's request for access to the migrant assistance centres, which created an unexpected obstacle to establishing contacts with and interviewing returnees.

Eleven men and five women were selected for interview on the basis that they had been forced to emigrate because of violence or crime. 14 of them were deportees and two returned voluntarily. They came from seven of El Salvador's 14 departments – La Libertad, San Salvador, San Vicente, San Miguel, Sonsonate, La Unión and Usulután. Five were over 40 years old, two aged between 30 and 39, eight between 20 and 29, and one under 19.

Cristosal also conducted four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people who had fled El Salvador because of violence or crime. The three men and one woman selected were participants in Cristosal's programmes.

Table 2: data and evidence considered

Source	Sample size
IDMC/Cristosal structured interviews – Sept to Oct 2017	16
IDMC/Cristosal in depth interviews – Sept to Oct 2017	4
DGME database of adults processed by IOM – 2016	43,591
DGME database of adults processed by IOM – 2017	24,216
DGME database of children and adolescents (under 18) processed by IOM – 2016	9,262
DGME database of children and adolescents (under 18) processed by IOM – 2017	2,247
Cristosal database on people in need of protection due to violence or insecurity who were assisted by Cristosal between January 2016 and December 2017	1,055
Cristosal database on people in need of protection due to violence or insecurity who were assisted by Cristosal between January 2016 and December 2017 and who had fled the country because of violence or insecurity before the moment of registration	68
IDPs assisted by the Civil Society Working Group Against Forced Displacement between August 2014 and December 2016	1,322
IDPs assisted by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman between April 2016 and May 2017	458
Number of adults forced to flee their homes during 2017 due to threats - based on IDMC's extrapolation of a survey by the Central American University's Institute for Public Opinion	226,567
Government reports of victims of illegal restriction of freedom of movement during 2017	141

## A MEASURE OF LAST RESORT: LEAVING EL SALVADOR

According to DGME, 79,316 Salvadorans were deported from the US and Mexico between January 2016 and December 2017, of whom 11,509, or 15 per cent were under the age of 18. Fifty-three per cent were removed from Mexico and 46 per cent from the United States. The proportion of deportations from the US rose significantly from 40 per cent in 2016 to 59 per cent following Donald Trump's inauguration as president in January 2017. The total amount of deported men far outnumbered women among adult deportees; 79 per cent men, to 21 per cent women. The difference between boys and girls was much less significant, at 60 per cent and 40 per cent.

Table 3: Reasons for leaving El Salvador, 2016-2017

Reasons for leaving El Salvador	Minors		Adults		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Economic	1,709	35.9%	49,104	73.1%	50,813	70.6%
Violence (Insecurity or Domestic Violence)	1,483	31.1%	10,577	15.7%	12,060	16.8%
Family Reunification	1,544	32.4%	6,989	10.4%	8,533	11.9%
Other	26	0.5%	532	0.8%	558	0.8%
Total	4,762	100.0%	67,202	100.0%	71,964	100.0%

Source: DGME <sup>25</sup>

Of the 79,316 men, women and children deported in 2016 and 2017 back to El Salvador, 4,762 children and 67,202 adults specified the reasons they originally left the state. Among them, 73 per cent of adult deportees cited economic factors such as poverty and unemployment as their main reason for having left El Salvador. Across the sample as a whole, the figure was 71 per cent. Violence (“Insecurity” or “Domestic Violence”) was the second most common factor, cited by 16 per cent of adults.

Among children and adolescents the figure was almost twice as high, at 31 per cent (see table 3). All of the 1,483 children who were returned after reportedly fleeing due to violence were detained in Mexico.<sup>24</sup> When asked about the crimes they had fled, interviewees cited threats from gangs, followed by threats from unidentifiable sources. They also referred to forced recruitment by gangs, extortion and family links to gangs.

There are only very weak indications of a close correlation between departments that have high murder rates and departments from which the highest number of irregular migrants originate. Usulután had the highest expulsion rate and the second highest murder rate in 2016 and 2017,<sup>26</sup> but departments with high rates of people leaving did not significantly

correspond in other cases with those which have high murder rates. This indicates that violence measured by homicides is not enough to solely explain cross-border displacement, at least within the subset of deportees.

Cristosal’s structured surveys provide further insight into how and why people leave El Salvador. Nine of the 16 interviewees said they and their family members had been direct victims of violence, and five said they but not their families had been. Two said they had been indirect victims, meaning other family members had been the direct victims. Most said gang members had been the perpetrators and that death threats had been the main act of victimisation, followed by attempts to recruit children or adolescents, homicide of a family member, and extortion. Only five said they had reported the crimes they experienced, and none received government support as victims.

With no protection or assistance from the state, even for those who reported the crimes, all of the interviewees used personal connections and social networks to protect themselves and their families and flee the country. In some cases relatives living outside of El Salvador helped by paying their expenses and contracting smugglers, also known as coyotes.



The Suchiate river is one of the main entry points northward for many Central American people escaping violence in their countries. © UNHCR/Markel Redondo, October 2015

Salvadorans have a long history of emigration for economic and family reunification reasons, but this study shows that those displaced by violence had economic and family reasons to stay in El Salvador. Twelve of the interviewees were working, and seven were either married or in stable relationships. Eight said they had felt forced to leave the country as a last resort, having first been internally displaced as they tried to move to another municipality in an effort to escape the perpetrators of threats or violence against them.

Other evidence from Cristosal suggests that significantly fewer people who leave the country because of violence become IDPs first. Of 1,055 people the foundation assisted between January 2016 and September 2017, 68 had already left the country (and returned) due to violence or insecurity at the moment they were registered. And of those 68 only seven had been internally displaced before leaving. However, in this case there might be a selection bias, as the 68 all came to Cristosal only after leaving the country, while the rest might have opted to seek help before deciding whether to leave.



**Jorge\***, 26, received a series of death threats from members of the MS gang while he was studying law at university.

They accused him of preparing to become a police officer, and one occasion they intercepted him on his way home and beat him up.

His mother sent him to stay with his aunt, while he gathered the money he needed to travel to the US. He eventually left with his brother and cousin, who had also been threatened. They rushed their plans through after his brother was stabbed in the chest.

They set off with a coyote (a smuggler) who charged them \$7,500 each for the journey, but one night unknown men dragged Jorge's brother from the hotel room they were staying in and returned him a few hours later badly beaten, demanding money. In the morning they discovered their coyote had abandoned them.

With the help of a family member already in the US, they eventually made it to Houston, but were detected on CCTV when they arrived. They fled into the hills and Jorge became separated from his companions. He was eventually caught and sent to a detention centre, where he was detained for seven months. When his case came to court he was told he wasn't eligible to receive asylum. He was deported in June 2016.

His brother and cousin were also detained but won their cases, which Jorge assumes is because they bore the physical signs of violence. He remains in hiding in El Salvador and wants to migrate again, this time to Canada, because "this country isn't safe for people like me".

\* Name changed

## RETURN TO EL SALVADOR: THREATS AND OBSTACLES TO DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Cristosal and the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) in New York published a study in 2017 that analysed the situation of people deported to NTCA countries who had fled violence and insecurity in those states, but were not granted refugee status in Mexico or the US. The study is based on 18 interviews carried out between January and March 2017. Several interviewees said they had been unable to reintegrate in their home countries because of the persecution or threats to which they were subjected, which amounted to serious violations of their human rights.<sup>27</sup>

The interviews for this study also show that time abroad does not always mean an end to intimidation and violence. Many of the interviewees said once they returned to the country, they faced the same dangers that forced them to leave. Six of the 16 said they had suffered criminal acts soon after they returned. All six said they had received threats, one that they had been raped, one that a family member had been killed, one that they had survived a murder attempt, one had suffered ill-treatment and one extortion. In all cases, the perpetrators were gang members.

The idea that such threats put deportees at increased risk of internal displacement is given credence by DGME's data for 2016 and 2017, which shows that of all deportees who left the country to escape violence only about 60 per cent return to the places from which they had fled. This information is not available for unaccompanied minors because they are taken directly into the care of host families.

Returning to one's country of origin and facing continued threats and generalised violence is reason enough to plan to move again, whether internally or further afield, but many deportees also left family members and dependants behind. Forty-five per cent of the deportees in DGME's 2016 and 2017 sample who fled violence said they had economic dependants.<sup>28</sup>

More than 60 per cent of those in the 2016 sample who had fled violence and insecurity said they would prefer to go back to the country they had been deported from. Only 12 per cent said they intended to look for work in El Salvador, indicating a lack of firm plans to reintegrate, and 25 per cent had not decided what they were going to do. In the 2017 sample, 50 per cent wanted to go back to their destination country, 16 per cent intended to look for work, and 30 per cent were uncertain of their plans. This is not in itself necessarily evidence of internal displacement, as the people questioned could resettle in a new area. It could, however, be a contributing factor to further displacement, because integrating into a new area without local networks is a significant challenge.



Antonio, 24 (name has been changed) cannot show his face. He fled gang violence and persecution in El Salvador and is now living as a refugee in Guatemala. Photo © UNHCR/Michael Muller, July 2018

The more detailed information gathered from the 16 interviewees for this study reveals similar findings. Ten of the people surveyed returned to their place of departure only to take care of matters that were necessary before moving on again, fearing their aggressors would catch up with them again if they stayed any longer. Twelve said they hoped to leave the country clandestinely again, three said they wanted to settle elsewhere in El Salvador and one that they hoped to be granted refugee status and establish themselves legally in another country. None were prepared to return permanently to the places they had fled from, even though some had spent considerable time abroad and might have hoped the risks they faced had dissipated. However, seven had to move back to the departments they had fled, even if only temporarily, as they carried out plans to leave once again.

In common with the findings of previous reports on deported people, family and social networks were found by Cristosal to be important to deportees on their return to El Salvador. Five interviewees said they had taken refuge in family members' homes and two were staying with friends. Two said they were renting accommodation, and two that they had made alternative living arrangements. Three did not specify their circumstances. Only two of the 16 returned to a home they owned, although eight had owned their own home before escaping the country, underlining that many people returned to states they have fled find they have lost assets and possessions in the period since they escaped (see Table 1 in the annexes).

## NATIONAL RESPONSE: A FAILURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

The above evidence can be seen as a symptom of the failure to protect and assist people affected by, or at risk of displacement along the entire continuum, from internal flight and refuge abroad to safe and dignified reintegration upon return. El Salvador has still not formally acknowledged the existence of internal displacement, and so has no legal or policy frameworks on which to base the kind of programmes necessary to address the phenomenon.

The recent presentation of a "roadmap for the inter-institutional coordination of comprehensive protection and assistance for victims of internal mobility caused by violence" is the closest the government has come to recognising its duty to protect this vulnerable population.<sup>29</sup> The roadmap, however, focuses heavily on the role of civil society organisations in providing services.

The government has adopted a more systematic approach to migration abroad, and particularly irregular migration. The national assembly unanimously passed a law in 2011 that promotes policies and programmes to "develop constitutional principles for guarantees governing the rights of Salvadoran migrants and their families via the design, formulation, evaluation and monitoring of comprehensive public policies for protection and development, coordinated across government and civil society institutions and sectors and as part of national development processes".<sup>30</sup>

The law also established the National Council for the Protection and Development of Migrants and their Families as its implementing body, made up of public institutions, civil society groups and Salvadoran organisations abroad. Its function is to oversee compliance with the relevant public policies.<sup>31</sup>

Little has been done, however, in terms of formulating such policies, particularly those that apply to returnees and even less has been done for those who migrated because of insecurity. Assistance has been limited to immediate protection measures such as police interviews, psychosocial support, help in obtaining identity documents and protection measures for minors via the Council for Children and Adolescents (known by its Spanish acronym CONNA).

Table 2 in the annexes shows the government programmes available to returnees via the Government's Centre for Comprehensive Assistance to Migrants (known by its Spanish acronym CAIM), but few are designed specifically for them, but few are designed specifically for them. Most are offered to the general population, and migrants returning to El Salvador are entitled to apply on the basis of their citizenship rather than their status as returnees.

Some national institutions, such as PDDH, the Office of the Solicitor General (known by its Spanish acronym FGR) and the National Institute for the Advancement of Women (known by its Spanish acronym ISDEMU), have attended to some internal displacement cases, most of which they transfer to the organisations that form part of MDF.

PDDH published its first report on internal displacement associated with violence in 2016, and has been monitoring the phenomenon since.<sup>32</sup> The national police force also has a programme, but it is limited to processing information about criminal records and registering returnees. No concrete protection policy is in place.

The office of the vice-minister of Salvadorans abroad, part of the foreign ministry, has set up a number of economic and labour reintegration programmes aimed at deportees that provide seed capital and materials, but these have not progressed beyond the pilot stage (see table 2). They have so far benefitted only 4,000 people, while more than 100,000 have returned to the country as deportees in the last two years.

With the help of IOM, the EU, UNHCR and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the government has set up assistance counters for returnees at the department level, that provide information about local economic and education opportunities.<sup>33</sup> At the time of publishing this study, however, only three are in operation in Chalatenango, Santa Ana and La Unión.

As a result, it has been left to civil society organisations to attend to IDPs and their assistance and protection needs. As part of their efforts to do so, local NGOs formed MDF in 2014, but their resources and impact are limited.



**Hector\***, 45, was 15 when he emigrated to the US. It was 1988, El Salvador was at war, and one day a guerrilla fighter came to his mother's shop and threatened to recruit him. So she sought out a coyote and paid him \$2,200 to take Hector to Los Angeles.

He eventually moved to Arizona, where he was picked up by the immigration authorities, but given the situation in El Salvador at the time he qualified for temporary protected status, and he was released on \$500 bail.

In 2005 he became involved in a relationship with a woman, and 10 years later they had a fight in a local supermarket. He was accused of domestic violence and detained. The lawyer assigned to defend him advised him to plead guilty on the basis that he would be released after serving a six-month sentence. "They made me sign without telling me the consequences," he says. On his release he was detained again, and in March 2017 he was deported.

Once back in El Salvador, he took refuge initially with a family member before securing himself a room in San Salvador. While out one day a local gang member noticed his MS-13 tattoo, which he had done in the US when he was 18 and had tried, unsuccessfully, to have removed several times since. Armed men turned up at his room and threatened him.

He fled at 3.30am in his uncle's taxi, and for three weeks he stayed in various hotels until he had exhausted his savings. He has not reported the threats he has received to the authorities.

Today Hector lives in a parsonage<sup>34</sup>, but he fears for his safety because the M18 gang dominates the area. He has experience in construction and a vocational qualification, but he has been unable to find work because it is unsafe for him to go out.

He doesn't think about going back illegally to the US, because he has a long sentence hanging over him there, but he believes he will be killed if he remains in El Salvador so plans to try to set up in Costa Rica or Panama.

\* Name changed

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Returnees who fled El Salvador to escape violence and who fear going back to their places of origin receive virtually no support. The indifference of the state and the inability of civil society organisations to respond effectively to their needs leaves many trapped in internal displacement in a country that for them is synonymous with insecurity. The only option for many is to head for the border again in the hope they may be able to migrate successfully, legally or otherwise, the next time around.

There is far too little data regarding internal displacement in El Salvador. The most comprehensive and reliable source is IUDOP's end-of-year survey, but it only estimates the scale of new displacement. DGME and NGOs conduct interviews, but the information they gather is far from enough to be certain of the overall situation.

NGOs have limited capacity and no coordinated system of data collection, which raises the possibility of double counting, duplicated assistance efforts and missed opportunities to complement each other's work. DMGE's data only covers deportees' situations at a specific point in time. They are not tracked, so their trajectories can only be surmised from their stated intentions and plans.

Cristosal's surveys and in-depth interviews help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the process from someone's initial displacement through cross-border migration to return, including the challenges they face once back in the country. The number of surveys, however, does not allow for extrapolation or statistical interpretation.

The piecemeal evidence available on displacement within and from El Salvador should serve as motivation to collect robust data across the whole displacement continuum, from internal flight to refuge abroad and return to El Salvador. A comprehensive picture of the scale of displacement in El Salvador – prioritising the numbers, profile, location and needs of people displaced – is a baseline for any effective policy and programming response in the region.

A number of organisations in the region, including IOM, UNHCR and Cristosal, are working to establish observatories and monitoring centres. These could help to build a more holistic understanding of the displacement continuum, but to do so it is vital that they produce interoperable data.

In the meantime, what little information does exist shows a clear need for returnees to be better protected, and that without such protection they are likely to repeat the process, quite possibly from start to finish. That seems to be most deportees' intention at the moment they arrive back in the country, but there is currently no way of knowing whether that idea is acted upon.



Carlos\*, 62, used to work in administration. In 1995 he was told to dismiss a number of his firm's security staff, but a colleague let it be known that one of the guards had said he would kill Carlos if he were sacked, a threat that was repeated on a number of occasions. Carlos feared for his life. He began to take different routes to and from work and became secretive about his movements.

The guard was on duty one Saturday when a group of men drove up in a car and shot him dead. When the man's wife turned up at the company, she told Carlos he was to blame, slapped him in the face and said her husband's death would be avenged.

Unknown men began to stake out his house, and when Carlos began to receive written threats, he became too scared to go out. He decided to resign from his job, and a month later he left for the US on a tourist visa.

He managed to remain in the country for 20 years, but in 2015 he was deported. He requested asylum on the basis he feared for his life, but his application was refused and he returned to his home in the municipality of San Salvador. The dead guard's family heard he was back, and the death threats resumed.

He went to stay with his daughter in another part of San Salvador but his aggressors caught up with him, so he moved again within the municipality for three months until he was able to leave the area.

Today, Carlos lives in a rural area of Soyapango municipality, but he never goes out for fear his persecutors will find him. This means he is unable to work, and is only able to get by because of his family members' support. He wants to leave El Salvador again, but this time for Costa Rica or Panama.

*\* Name changed*

In order to improve this situation, which conceivably affects hundreds of thousands of people, those involved in monitoring and responding to it need to work together. NGOs, international organisations and the government should start by establishing which group is carrying out which task, what is being overlooked and how their efforts can be coordinated and made complementary.

This would be a significant first step, which could be facilitated by explicitly including the need for interoperable data and national policies on returnees in the programme of action for the global compact on refugees.

## ANNEXES

TABLE 1: A COMPARISON OF DEPORTEES' SITUATIONS, BASED ON CRISTOSAL'S INTERVIEWS

Situation/question	Possible answers	Before migration	In destination country	Now
Type of accommodation	Family member's home	7	6	5
	Friend's or neighbour's home	0	1	2
	Rented accommodation	1	3	2
	Own home	8	0	2
	Other	0	2	2
	Non-specified	0	4	3
Type of location	Urban	6	9	6
	Rural	8	0	4
	Non-specified	2	7	6
Main source of income	Farming	1	0	0
	Construction	2	2	3
	Manufacturing	1	2	0
	Transport	1	0	0
	Wholesale trade	0	0	0
	Retail trade	4	2	2
	Health	0	0	0
	Education	0	0	0
	Government/ public administration	2	0	1
	NGO	0	0	0
	Finance	1	1	0
	Arts and culture	0	0	0
	Industry	0	0	0
	Unemployed	3	2	8
	Retired	0	0	0
	Student	0	0	0
Non-specified	1	7	2	

Situation/question	Possible answers	Before migration	In destination country	Now
Type of job	Day labourer	1	0	0
	Salaried worker	4	3	1
	Contract/temporary worker	1	1	3
	Freelance	4	3	1
	Employer	0	0	0
	Unpaid family worker	4	0	4
	Unemployed	0	1	5
	Other	2	0	0
	Non-specified	0	8	2
Number of household members	Average	10.5	4.7	4.4
Monthly household income	Average	\$313.44	\$356.9	\$50.00
How safe do you feel at home?	Very safe	0	5	0
	Quite safe	0	3	4
	Not very safe	2	3	3
	Not safe at all	14	2	8
	Non-specified	0	3	1

**TABLE 2: GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS AVAILABLE TO RETURNEES**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Services offered to returnees</b>
Vice-minister for Salvadorans abroad	Support for return and reintegration processes of deportees, guidance for productivity projects and respect for human rights
DGME	Coordinator of the Welcome Home programme, responsible for returnees' initial orientation, renewal of travel documents and maintaining a register of migrants
Technical University of El Salvador	Grants of up to 50 per cent for returnees
Attention centres for childhood, adolescence, and family (CANAF)	Guarantee the rights of childhood and adolescence through the development of a set of systematic and organised actions in family and community environments in order to minimise illegal migration and its consequences. This currently operates in two departments of the eastern region: Usulután and San Miguel.
Ministry of education	Grants for child returnees, psychological support in schools and a flexible approach to returnees' re-entry into the education system
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Services offered to general public</b>
Ministry of health	Access to health facilities, family health teams and the hospital network
Ministry of education	Services for the continuation of education
Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents	Comprehensive support programme for minors
City Woman, a programme of the secretariat for social inclusion	Access to sexual and reproductive health services, comprehensive support for survivors of domestic violence, women's economic promotion and empowerment, and child support services
Attorney general's office for the defence of human rights	Handling of complaints about human rights abuses from personnel of national organisation or private businesses, including an investigation process and assistance to uphold the application of human rights
National police	Registration of police clearance or criminal records
National commission for micro and small businesses	Loans and training to carry out productive activities
Development Bank of El Salvador	Loans and technical support for business development
Family Solidarity Fund	Loans for productive activities
Bank for the Promotion of Agriculture and Livestock Farming	Loans and technical training for agricultural production projects
National Fund for Public Housing	Mortgages for low-income families
Social Fund for Housing	Mortgages for public and private sector workers
National Sports Institute	Personal development for minors through sport
Social Investment Fund for Local Development	Funding for municipal social infrastructure projects

Source: Cristosal based on information from DGME

## NOTES

1. Cristosal, "[Generación Sin Retorno](#)", June 2018.
2. InSight Crime, "[2017 Homicide Rates in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)", 19 January 2018.
3. Cantor, David James, "[As deadly as armed conflict? Gang violence and forced displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America](#)", *Agenda Internacional*, 2016, no.34, pp77-97.
4. Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica, Government of El Salvador "[Caracterización de la Movilidad Interna a Causa de la Violencia en El Salvador](#)", El Salvador, March 2018.
5. The World Health Organization, for example, cites 10 homicides per 100,000 people as epidemic level. Krug, E., Dahlberg, L., Mercy, J., Zwi, A., Lozano, R., "[World Report on Violence and Health](#)", World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002.
6. Cantor, David James, "[The New Wave: Forced displacement caused by organized crime in Central America and Mexico](#)", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 10 June 2014 Vol.33, No.3, pp.34-68.
7. Gagne, David, InSight Crime, 2016 "[InSight Crime's 2016 Homicide Round-up](#)", InSight Crime, 16 January 2017.
8. Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, "[Las 50 Ciudades Mas Violentas Del Mundo 2016](#)", 5 April 2017.
9. See, for example, INCIDE, Instituto Centroamericano de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo y el Cambio Social, "[El Salvador: Nuevo patrón de violencia, afectación territorial y respuesta de las comunidades \(2010-2015\)](#)", San Salvador, August 2016.
10. UN News Centre, El Salvador, "[UN expert urges swift action on 'hidden tragedy' of people fleeing gang violence](#)", 21 August 2017.
11. UNHCR, "[Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection](#)", 2014.
12. UNHCR, "[UNHCR Statistics](#)".
13. *Ibid.*
14. IDMC, "[Thematic Series: The Invisible Majority](#)".
15. Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, IUDOP, "[Evaluación del país a finales de 2017 y perspectivas electorales para 2018](#)", 9 January 2018. The survey is representative of the country's population. IDMC extrapolates the 5.1% of respondents who claimed they were displaced due to threats during the year to the country's total adult population – 4,442 495 in 2017, according to the 2014 revision of the population projections based on data from the 2007 Census available at <https://goo.gl/Wo67Px> (Spanish). For analysis, visit "[IDMC: El Salvador](#)".
16. MDF, "[Desplazamiento Interno por Violencia y Crimen Organizado en El Salvador 2016](#)", 13 January 2017.
17. Cruz, David Ernesto Morales, Flores, Sandra Carolina Rivera, "[Informe de Registro de la Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos sobre Desplazamiento Forzado](#)", Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (PDDH) San Salvador, El Salvador, 8 August 2016. Preliminary registration report, 2017, forthcoming.
18. The study looked at data from 242 of the 262 municipalities in El Salvador. IOM, "[DTM Matriz de Seguimiento de Movilidad Humana, El Salvador 2016](#)".
19. Estimating the total number of displacement cases was not the objective of DTM, which was to prioritise geographically-focused needs. However, a very important breakthrough was the distinction between municipalities with a high reception indicator and municipalities with a high expulsion indicator. The total amount of displacement cases is underestimated due to the lack of trust of these populations in the governmental institutions, which leads to underreported displacement.
20. The definition of this crime was a reform to penal code article 152-A. The law increases sentences if the threat or intimidation is made by two or more people—for example, by gang members—and if it forces someone to abandon their home (the specifically linked to displacement), school, job or any other legal activity. For more information, see the "[Salvadoran penal code](#)".
21. Cruz, David Ernesto Morales, Flores, Sandra Carolina Rivera, "[Informe de Registro de la Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos sobre Desplazamiento Forzado](#)", Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (PDDH) San Salvador, El Salvador, 8 August 2016; Ramos, Elsa, "[Desplazamiento interno forzado y su relación con la migración internacional](#)", 2016.
22. Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica Gobierno de El Salvador, "[Caracterización de la movilidad interna a causa de la violencia en El Salvador. Informe final](#)", March 2018.
23. UNHCR, "[UNHCR Population Statistics](#)".
24. "[Gobierno de El Salvador DGME database](#)", 2016 and 2017.
25. In some cases, because of their age, children are not asked why they migrated. In other cases, returning migrants prefer not to respond this question. For this reason, we are not taking into account those who did not respond in our analysis of the reasons to migrate: percentages are calculated based on the total of people who stated a reason to migrate.
26. Based on DGME data. Rates calculated using the following formula:  $NPI-NPe / PDpto \times 100,000$ . NPI = Number of immigrants. NPe = Number of emigrants. PDO = Departmental population projection. The rates refer to the departments where deportees lived right before leaving the country. Cuscatlán reported the highest rate of homicides at the departmental level in 2016, with 130 murders per hundred thousand inhabitants, while San Miguel reported the highest homicide rate during 2017, with 84.4.
27. CMS/Cristosal, "[Point of No Return: The Fear and Criminalization of Central American Refugees](#)", 2017. This study interviewed 17 deportees who had left El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala due to violence. Six in-depth interviews were done in El Salvador.
28. It is unclear whether these dependants are in El Salvador or in the host country.
29. Government of El Salvador, Roadmap for the inter-institutional co-ordination of comprehensive protection and assistance for victims of internal mobility caused by violence, March 2018
30. Gobierno de El Salvador, "[Special Law for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and their Families](#)", Decree No.655, 2011.
31. *Ibid*, Art.6 and 10
32. Cruz, David Ernesto Morales, Flores, Sandra Carolina Rivera, "[Informe de Registro de la Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos sobre Desplazamiento Forzado](#)", Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (PDDH) San Salvador, El Salvador, 8 August 2016.
33. Gobierno de El Salvador, "[Programa Integral de Inserción para la Población Salvadoreña Retornada](#)", 2016.
34. "Casa pastoral" is a community house run by the church.

Cover photo: Gerardo Menendez\*, 22, from El Salvador, and his son, Miguel, 3 months old, live with their family in the refugee settlement Valley of Peace in central Belize after the patriarch of their family was murdered and the rest of the family fled to escape the violent street gang responsible.

© UNHCR/Daniele Volpe

\*Names changed for protection reasons

Elizabeth J. Rushing  
elizabeth.rushing@idmc.ch

Andrés Lizcano Rodríguez  
andres.lizcano@idmc.ch

IDMC  
NRC, 3 rue de Varembe  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
www.internal-displacement.org  
+41 22 552 3600  
info@idmc.ch

Jeanne Rikkers  
jmrikkers@crisotal.org

Noah Bullock  
director@crisotal.org

Rina Montti  
rina.montti@crisotal.org