

World
Watch
Research

El Salvador: Full Country Dossier

March 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

March 2023

© Open Doors International

research@od.org

Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2023	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / El Salvador	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	6
Specific examples of positive developments	6
External Links - Situation in brief	6
WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / El Salvador	7
Links for general background information.....	7
Recent history	7
Political and legal landscape	8
Religious landscape	10
Economic landscape.....	13
Social and cultural landscape.....	15
Technological landscape	17
Security situation	19
Trends analysis.....	21
External Links - Keys to understanding	21
WWL 2023: Church information / El Salvador	25
Christian origins.....	25
Church spectrum today.....	26
Areas where Christians face most difficulties.....	26
Christian communities and how they are affected	26
External Links - Church information.....	27
WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / El Salvador	27
Reporting period	27
Position on the World Watch List	27
Persecution engines	28

Drivers of persecution.....	29
The Persecution pattern.....	30
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	31
Violence.....	36
5 Year trends	38
5 Year trends: Average pressure	38
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	40
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male	41
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	42
Future outlook.....	42
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	43
Further useful reports.....	43

Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

Copyright note

This document is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.

Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / El Salvador

Brief country details

El Salvador: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
6,550,000	6,317,000	96.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



El Salvador: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	46	73
WWL 2022	45	70
WWL 2021	42	74
WWL 2020	38	-
WWL 2019	30	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019–2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

El Salvador: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Organized corruption and crime	Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Christians in some areas of the country are being forced to submit to the rules imposed by criminal gangs (maras) controlling those territories. Christians who carry out preaching or other activities in a way that threatens criminal interests are likely to face reprisals, such as death-threats, extortion and even assassination. The government's repressive policies to curb crime have harmed church-work among former gang members and any pastoral activities in territories controlled by gangs appear suspicious in the eyes of the authorities. In the second half of the WWL 2023 reporting period, former gang members who converted to Christianity have frequently been arrested, despite having left criminal life for many years and being part of legally constituted or well-known churches in their community.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **May 2022:** At least 14 converts to Christianity (all fully tattooed former members of the MS13 group) have been [arrested](#) and charged since March 2022. These are not isolated cases: Complaints of arbitrary detentions have multiplied during the state of emergency first declared by the Bukele government in March 2022 (El Pais, 23 May 2022).
- **March 2022 – San Miguel:** A 50 year old evangelical pastor was [assassinated](#) in Cantón San Matías, municipality of Ciudad Barrios, San Miguel. He was shot many times in front of his young son (TVM, 27 March 2022).
- **January 2022 – Santa Ana:** An armed group overpowered the person in charge of the Catholic church in Santa Ana and [stole](#) all the money that was in the parish office (La Prensa Gráfica, 31 January 2022).
- **December 2020 - December 2021 – Paracentral and eastern zone of the country:** A group of gang members carried out a series of 21 looting attacks, including three [robberies](#) targeting Evangelical and Catholic churches (102nueve, 12 May 2022).

Specific examples of positive developments

Although churches in the country are in a vulnerable situation, especially due to threats from non-state actors, Catholic bishops have written to the government stressing the importance of human rights and [respect](#) for the rule of law and due process (Conferencia Episcopal El Salvador, 12 September 2021). They have also expressed [solidarity](#) with the situation of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua in its struggle with the Ortega regime (Agenzia Fides, 7 June 2022).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arrested - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-23/ser-expandillero-cristiano-en-el-salvador-un-pais-sin-lugar-para-los-arrepentidos.html%20-%20https://twitter.com/PNCV/status/1512995157272055808>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: assassinated - <https://tvm.com.sv/2022/03/27/asesinan-a-pastor-evangelico-en-ciudad-barrrios/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: stole - <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Fingen-querer-casarse-para-robar-dinero-de-ofrendas-de-iglesia-de-Santa-Ana-20220131-0061.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: robberies - <https://www.102nueve.com/2022/05/12/desarticulan-estructura-que-se-dedicaba-a-robar-en-iglesias-y-centros-escolares/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: respect - <https://iglesia.org.sv/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/COMUNICADO-DE-LA-CEDES-09-SEPTIEMBRE-2021.pdf>
- Specific examples of positive developments: solidarity - http://www.fides.org/en/news/72308-AMERICA_EL_SALVADOR_The_Bishops_in_solidarity_with_the_Church_of_Nicaragua_concerned_about_the_social_and_political_situation

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / El Salvador

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 157-159)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	1 July 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19401932	1 July 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/SLV	1 July 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/	1 July 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/el-salvador	1 July 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.49)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	1 July 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	9 September 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, El Salvador not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2022	1 July 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries, El Salvador not included	Freedom on the Net 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2023 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/el-salvador	13 March 2023
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/central.htm#sv	1 July 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/el-salvador	1 July 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/slv	1 July 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/SLV	1 July 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/el-salvador/	1 July 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, El Salvador not included	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador/overview	1 July 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncontry=SLV	1 July 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp. 26-27)	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bdd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-lac.pdf	1 July 2022

Recent history

Democracy and peace became reality at the close of the civil war in 1992; since then, five consecutive presidential elections with peaceful transitions of power have been carried out. However, the crisis caused by the high level of corruption has led the two main parties, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) to lose support. This allowed a new independent right-wing party to emerge, the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU), led by Nayib Bukele, who took office as president after receiving nearly [54%](#) of the votes in 2019 (The Guardian, 4 February 2019). Legislative elections were held on 28 February 2021 and gave the president's newly formed New Ideas Party the [majority of seats](#) in Congress (Al-Jazeera, 20 March 2021).

El Salvador, like Guatemala and Honduras, work jointly with the USA as an [important part of Operation Regional Shield](#) to combat transnational organized crime (ORS, November 2020). Violence and insecurity caused by gangs continue to be one of the biggest problems in the country causing large numbers of displaced people. In February 2021, the USA [initiated](#) the “first step to establish a cooperative, mutually respectful approach to managing migration across the region”, by doing away with the previous 'Asylum Cooperative Agreements' made with the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (US State Department Press Statement, 6 February 2021).

Due to the high level of citizen insecurity in the country, since the end of March 2022 the Bukele government declared a "[National State of Emergency](#)", which has been maintained throughout 2022 and has been the subject of harsh criticism due to accusations of human rights violations by state agents acting under the premise of ending gang criminality at all costs (Human Rights Watch, 7 December 2022).

In May and June 2020, during the COVID-19 health crisis, tropical storms Amanda and Cristobal hit El Salvador. A state of [national emergency](#) was called due to the severity of the storms, which damaged the homes of almost 30,000 families and caused 154 landslides. 27 persons were reported killed (UN Country Emergency Situation Report, 3 June 2020).

In September 2020, Spain's High Court sentenced a former Salvadoran colonel to a total of 133 years in prison for [murdering](#) - among others - five Spanish priests at the Central American University in El Salvador in 1989, during the 1979 - 1992 civil war (El País, 11 September 2020).

Political and legal landscape

Nayib Bukele has been the president of El Salvador since 2019. To date, his actions have been under scrutiny for allegedly undermining the democratic system in the country. There has been a growing concentration of power through measures that weaken the rule of law:

- i. Since February 2021, he has a [parliamentary majority](#), which has allowed him to make decisions that have affected the independence of the various branches of government (Reuters, 1 March 2021).
- ii. In May 2021 parliament [dismissed](#) the Attorney General of the Republic and five judges from the Supreme Court, known to be critics of Nayib Bukele (DW, 2 May 2021).
- iii. In September 2021, the new [Constitutional Chamber](#) opened the door for President Nayib Bukele to compete for a second consecutive term in 2024 despite being prohibited in the Constitution (Wola, 9 September 2021).
- iv. In January 2022, the [reform](#) to the Cybercrimes and Related Crimes law was published. One of the articles criminalizes the mere obtaining and transfer of information considered confidential (Article 25), leading to a 5-8 year prison-sentence, if convicted. Since in El Salvador there is little public information issued by the state, the use of anonymous sources or the sharing of data that the government has not released, can therefore be a punishable offence (Derechosdigitales, 11 February 2022).
- v. In March 2022, the government approved a controversial state of emergency (SOE) to combat the surge in gang criminality. The SOE [suspends](#) the right to freedom of association and assembly and the privacy of communications, as well as various 'due process' guaran-

tees (HRW, 29 March 2022). Since March 2022, this SOE has been [extended](#) nine times (Los Angeles Times, 14 December 2022). This has [allowed](#) the suspension of constitutional guarantees, especially for detainees, but has also eliminated legal controls over administrative processes for the use of public funds and state contracts and the right to access public information. It has fostered a lack of transparency and accountability regarding the management of public resources and has caused various human rights violations (Wola, 27 September 2022).

- vi. To make further progress in the Territorial Control Plan and 'War against gangs' campaign, the Legislative Assembly took just one day to [reform](#) the Criminal Code, the Law Regulating Activities Related to Drugs, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Special Law against Acts of Terrorism, the Criminal Law Juvenile and Special Law Against the Crime of Extortion, in order to increase the sentences used against gang members (Asamblea Legislativa, 31 March 2022).
- vii. The reforms to the Penal Code and the Law for the Prohibition of Gangs seek to sanction with up to 15 years in prison "any type of written statement that alludes to gangs", including "texts, paintings, drawings, graffiti" and especially "those that have as a purpose to allude to territorial control of said groups". The reform applies to those who "reproduce and transmit messages or communications originating or allegedly originating from said criminal groups that could generate anxiety and panic in the general population." The Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) sees this measure as an attempt to [gag](#) the media (Diario El Mundo, 5 April 2022).
- viii. The Legislative Assembly still has not filed the [draft](#) of the Foreign Agents law (Swissinfo, 6 August 2022). This proposed law would require anyone (i.e., independent journalists and civil society organizations) receiving funds from abroad to register as 'foreign agents' with the Ministry of the Interior. "Under the bill, those registered as 'foreign agents' are [barred from carrying out 'political activities'](#) that aim to alter 'public order or that 'endanger or threaten national security or the social and political stability of the country'." (HRW, 12 November 2021). According to the authorities, the objective is to prevent organizations from [disguising](#) sums received for political interference as donations (El Faro, 10 November 2021). The initiative levies a 40% tax on all transactions, disbursements or transfers received from abroad. If not complied with, the sanctions include a fine or cancellation of legal status.

Despite the president's controversial action against democratic institutions, this has not affected his popularity: 87.8% of Salvadorans approve of the work that President Nayib Bukele has done in his first three years in office, according to a [survey](#) conducted by LPG Data (LPG, 12 December 2022). Nevertheless, citizens did go out to [demonstrate against](#) the president's measures to concentrate power (EFE, 12 December 2021) and in 2022, [marches](#) have also been called to protest against the economic crisis (Telesur, 30 May 2022).

As a result of the president's undemocratic policies, the relationship between El Salvador and the USA has become [tense](#) (Congressional Research Service, El Salvador: In Brief, 29 April 2022): In November 2021, then-US Chargé d'Affaires Jean Manes announced a "[pause](#)" in efforts to repair US-Salvadoran relations and left her post (Reuters, 22 November 2021). In addition, US-Secretary Blinken has questioned the Bukele government's tactics in responding to increased

levels of gang-related violence. In an April 2022 statement, Secretary Blinken expressed concern about an amendment to El Salvador’s criminal code that criminalizes reporting on certain gang activities. In apparent response to Blinken, Bukele has further aligned his government with China and Russia. In March 2022, El Salvador was one of four Latin American countries to abstain from the UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

US Congress prohibited Foreign Military Financing to El Salvador in the FY2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-103) and placed several restrictions on aid to the Salvadoran government. In December 2021, the Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) two high-level officials, for providing illicit favors to the Treasury-designated Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) gang during covert negotiations (Congressional Research Service, 23 December 2021). By December 2022, the United States [sanctioned](#) two politicians close to President Bukele engaged in misappropriated public funds for personal benefit, and obstructing investigations into misappropriation of public funds intended to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Reuters, 9 December 2022).

Church leaders have also shown their concern about the authoritarian course the government is taking. On more than one occasion they have called upon the government to uphold [respect](#) for institutions and democracy (Swissinfo, 26 July 2021), they have also expressed their [concern](#) over disappearances and killings (Crux now, 15 February 2022). Regarding the SOE, the Archbishop of El Salvador [warned](#) the government to think about those who are unfairly affected or whose rights are being violated (La Prensa Gráfica, 6 June 2022). Protestants have also criticized this measure and [accused](#) the government of arresting young people belonging to their churches (Asap, 22 June 2022).

Religious landscape

El Salvador: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	6,317,000	96.4
Muslim	1,900	0.0
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	650	0.0
Ethno-religionist	36,100	0.6
Jewish	590	0.0
Bahai	5,800	0.1
Atheist	7,600	0.1
Agnostic	178,000	2.7
Other - includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.	2,840	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

El Salvador is a Christian majority country and mostly Roman Catholic. The Constitution recognizes the Catholic Church as a legal entity. Other churches can also gain legal recognition. The free exercise of all religions is guaranteed, with no limits other than those outlined by morality and public order. Likewise, it states that no ministers of any religious organization, no members of the armed forces in active service and no members of the national civil police may belong to political parties or run for public positions by popular vote. Nor may they carry out political propaganda in any form. The Roman Catholic Church has been historically privileged and that has caused tension with other Christian communities, at times leading to complaints of unequal treatment. Officials and secular groups often claim that the legal recognition of any religious body in the Constitution contradicts the secular nature of the state.

The government has opposed criticism from the media, opposition political parties, civil society organizations and human rights defenders. Church leaders, Christian organizations and religious groups have also exposed themselves to interrogation and attacks by the government where they have expressed criticism. Church leaders spoke out [rejecting](#) the president's use of the armed forces and the national police inside the Legislative Assembly building in February 2021 (Ysuca, 12 February 2021). Church leaders have also expressed their [disapproval](#) of the way Supreme Court magistrates and the Attorney General were dismissed (Agenzia Fides, 6 May 2021). These concerns have been voiced by both the Catholic Church and other [Christian denominations](#), such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America (Agencia Ecumenica de Comunicación, 11 May 2021). Later in 2021, the church was also a [strong critic](#) of further reforms, for instance concerning presidential re-election (Arpas, 13 September 2021). However, in September 2022, the Archbishop of San Salvador [pointed out](#) that the Constitutional Chamber's resolution endorsing presidential re-election was mandatory, and that although it could be debated, the ruling must be complied with. Many have criticized this statement as being a pronouncement favoring presidential re-election (Prensa Latina, 26 September 2022).

Interestingly, the authorities have also made use of religious references associated with Christianity to give legitimacy to their policies. Thus, President Bukele has called himself an "[instrument of God](#)" to change the country's history (ElSalvadorGram, 23 March 2021), he has also [stated](#) that he knows the divine will and offers rewards for fulfilling it, in addition to mentioning that God supports and guides his actions (Revista Factum, 12 June 2021). The room of the legislative presidency has the [message](#) "Put faith in God" (Connectas, last accessed 10 March 2023) and in official tweets, it is possible to read expressions such as "Thank God we are making progress", in reference to winning the war against gangs. This has generated a certain amount of confusion among many Christians, especially those in evangelical churches. It also generates the appearance to the public that churches support the president, whose actions are verging on the brink of dictatorship. In addition, as happens in other countries in the region where religious language is used by politicians, radical secularist groups see this as a breach of the principle of State-Church separation and attack the Church accordingly.

It is also worth noting that evangelical groups have been working at grassroots level in communities to help youth avoid recruitment into gangs and to assist anyone wishing to leave a criminal way of life. In contrast, historically, the state's response to the problem of gangs has been an iron fist policy, with President Bukele's security policy being one of the harshest and

least concerned with human rights. In this respect, the arbitrary arrests and cases of torture have also been affecting evangelical churches in the country. Christian programs are at [risk](#) since the police consider social reintegration centers, including Christian centers, as hiding places for gang members (El País, 22 May 2022). This means that indiscriminate operations are carried out, [arbitrarily detaining](#) numerous gang members who have long since left crime and become Christians (France 24, 2 July 2022).

Due to the government's harsh anti-crime policies, some churches are even viewed as colluding with gangs or as being a danger to society, where pastoral work is carried out among gang members. The police [know](#) that they can always find possible suspects in an evangelical church or places where projects related to an evangelical ministry (Resumen Latinoamericano, 2 August 2022). In many cases, ex-gang members are being arbitrarily [taken away](#) (El Salvador, 27 April 2022), despite many of them being enlisted in official government programs and having already served prison sentences for their past crimes. Christian work among former gang members is facing increasing hostility from the state; even the vice president, for instance, claimed in 2022 that [80%](#) of the evangelical pastors involved in this work are part of the gangs and that some are even leaders of gang networks (CBN, 23 August 2022). Leaders of evangelical churches have rejected such claims as defamatory.

The heavy-handedness of the government has put evangelization projects at risk and has also impacted the police force's right to conscientious objection. Many police officers have spoken out about being pressured into indiscriminately arresting anyone perceived as belonging to a criminal gang, regardless of due process, just to comply with the arrest quota imposed by their superiors. These actions have also led to the arrest of pastors not linked to gangs. (See below: *Security Situation*).

Despite the president's 'war against gangs' and the fact that the government action has caused some gangs to withdraw to safer areas where they continue to operate but with greater caution, organized crime continues to put church life at risk. Many gang members consider themselves religious or, at least, regard some aspects of Christian faith as acceptable, and so will often allow the activities of churches to take place unhindered, with whom they have affinity and some sort of economic arrangement. These are mostly Pentecostal groups. In some cases, it is even former gang members who lead a church and who influence younger gang members to join their church. There are also cases where gang leaders will put pressure on members of the local community (and their own gang members) to join the evangelical groups they recommend. This whole dynamic has influenced the rise in numbers of Pentecostal groups throughout the country. However, such churches are then subject to the rules of the gang. This became particularly evident during the COVID-19 crisis and has continued at various levels into 2023: Church leaders are expected to respect gang schedules, allow their facilities to be used for various gang activities and have to request authorization from local gangs for travel to or from other areas. Further, Christian leaders find they cannot preach freely, make home visits or carry out activities that might harm gang recruitment of youth. The degree of intimidation, pressure and violence used against a particular church depends upon how compliant it is. Some pastors are known to have faced extortion and assassination.

In the case of former gang members (although they do not cease to be members of the gang as such), sometimes they are allowed to '[calm down](#)' (BBC News, 15 July 2019) and not participate in criminal activities as long they [embrace](#) the gang-approved evangelical faith (NewsRND, 22 May 2022). However, despite a gang's sympathy for certain churches, there are also cases where the criminal group does not allow anyone to leave the group. This is to counter the aggressive government policy aiming to eradicate the presence of organized crime: The gangs need as many [active members](#) as possible.

Finally, as in most Latin American countries, there are ideological pressure groups (such as LGBTQ+ and radical feminist groups) seeking to influence society through social media networks and lobbying political parties etc. Their aim is to gradually eradicate all Christian presence from the public sphere. To date, their demands in the health and education fields have not been taken on board uncritically. During preparations for the latest constitutional reforms, some groups [sought](#) to include the decriminalization of abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia (VOA, 17 September 2021). Church leaders expressed their disagreement with these measures, for which they faced much [criticism](#) (Gato Encerrado, 15 December 2021). Ideological pressure groups maintain that, together with other conservative organizations, churches opposing gender equality and reproductive sexual rights are [meddling](#) in the debate on constitutional reform (La Mala Fe, September 2021) and [violating](#) the principle of separation between Church and State (DW, 11 February 2022). Church leaders have not hesitated to [support](#) the president where he has refrained from promoting constitutional reforms favoring abortion or euthanasia (Secretaría de Prensa de la Presidencia, 26 September 2021).

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI country profile:

- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita (2021):** 8,296
- **GNI per capita for women (2021):** 5,824
- **GNI per capita for men (2021):** 11, 015
- **Inequality in income (2021):** 22,5%
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (2021):** 9.9%

According to the World Bank country overview:

- “The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on people’s lives and families’ incomes. Although El Salvador was quick to adopt strong containment measures against the outbreak and the Government rolled out a robust fiscal response to limit the pandemic’s impact on households and businesses, the pandemic dealt a major blow to growth as GDP declined by 8 percent in 2020. Poverty increased by 4.6 percentage points between 2019 and 2020. Yet, estimates indicate that poverty would have increased by up to 7.6 percentage points without government mitigation measures. Inequality is expected to have increased from 0.38 to 0.39. In 2021, economic growth rebounded to 10.2 percent, supported by remittance-fueled consumption and exports. El Salvador’s economy is expected to grow by 2.4 percent in 2022 and 2.0 percent in 2023. The COVID-19 national vaccination campaign is well positioned, with 66 percent of Salvadoran population being fully vaccinated by March 2022.”

According to the [September 2022 Economic Report](#) of the Central Reserve Bank (BCR, October 2022):

- The Economic Activity Volume Index (IVAE) registered an annual rate of 1.8% in August 2022 as a result of the greater impulse of the activities: Construction, Information and communications; Public administration and defense, education and health; Real estate activities, among others.
- In September 2022, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) stood at 125.9, registering a monthly increase of 0.2%. In annual terms, an increase of 7.5% was registered.
- Family remittances received as of September 2022 totaled USD 5,689.3 million, showing a growth of 3.7%, equivalent to an additional USD204.5 million, compared to the same period in 2021. The United States, Canada and Spain concentrated 95.1% of the origin of the total of remittances.

According to the [2021-2022 Social Situation Report](#) Households with relatives abroad, those who receive remittances and their amounts have increased. Of Salvadoran households, 15 out of 100 indicate having a relative residing abroad, with differences between geographic areas: 19 out of 100 in rural areas and 13 out of 100 in urban areas. A similar gap exists between households that receive remittances, with 29 out of 100 in rural areas and 24 out of 100 in urban areas. Both indicators have exceeded their pre-pandemic values, but there is evidence of a growth trend in the receipt of remittances since 2018 (FUSADES, November 2022).

In 2021, El Salvador became the first country to [approve](#) the use of cryptocurrency (Bitcoin) in its financial system (La Nueva Asamblea Legislativa, 9 June 2021), which [came into effect](#) on 7 September 2021 (The Verge, 7 September 2021). Some analysts have [questioned](#) its effectiveness due to bitcoin volatility (Criptonoticias, 12 July 2021). Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund have urged El Salvador to [reverse](#) its decision to make Bitcoin legal tender (BBC News, 26 January 2022). According to the First Business Survey 2022, carried out by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of El Salvador-Camarasal, 91.7% of the respondents stated that the implementation of Bitcoin had made [no difference](#) for the running of their business and 86% reported that they had not made sales using the cryptocurrency. Only 3.6% of those surveyed stated that the use of Bitcoin had contributed towards increasing sales (Camarasal, 10 March 2022).

The cryptocurrency crash in May 2022 has raised [questions](#) about the reliability of Bitcoin: "The collapse of digital currencies reduced more than a third of the value of the government's holdings of El Salvador", reported America Economía on 19 May 2022). Due to the lack of public and transparent information on the part of the government, the exact amount of money invested in the purchase of Bitcoin is not known, although some sources say that it amounts to around [107 million dollars](#) (CNN Español, 11 November 2022). Due to the volatility of Bitcoin and the continued nosedive in its value in recent months, investment is estimated to have fallen by USD67 million. Some analysts [maintain](#) that the drop in the price produces what is known as latent capital losses, but that they do not become real losses until the asset is sold. If the government of El Salvador were to sell all its Bitcoin, losses would amount to more than half of the original 104-107 million dollars invested (DW, 7 September 2022). As yet, ordinary citizens have made little use of cryptocurrencies.

Additionally, due to the high levels of violence and the government's 'war against gangs', the state budget allocated for security institutions [increased](#): The new Legislative Assembly allocated \$30 million to finance equipment for the national police force in March 2022; \$20 million was allocated to go to the Ministry of Defense to buy weapons and technological equipment; and \$30 million was allocated for reward fund to encourage citizen participation in the fight against organized crime (Asamblea, 31 March 2022). In October 2022, the Assembly [boosted](#) funds for the Ministry of Defense and Security with an extra USD16 million (Infodefensa, 8 October 2022).

Faced with economic crisis in the country in 2022, the president announced the [implementation](#) of 11 measures, such as an increase in the subsidy for propane gas and a temporary removal of tax on fuel (The San Diego Union-Tribune, 10 March 2022). Another measure was the abolition, for one year, of import tariffs on products such as cereals, oils, fruit and vegetables. However, church leaders [drew attention](#) to the fact that there is a lack of information from the government regarding the introduction of austerity measures to combat the economic crisis (Canal 12, 14 March 2022).

The economic crisis has also affected churches in the country, since the number of people requesting help has increased and many churches are still suffering from damage caused by natural disasters and theft.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo 86.3%, White 12.7%, Amerindian 0.2% (includes Lenca, Kakawira, Nahua-Pipil), Black 0.1%, other 0.6% (2007 est.)
- **Main language:** Spanish
- **Urban population:** 75.4% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 89.1% (2019)

According to the World the Bank country data profile:

- **Population aged 15-64:** 65% (2021)
- **School enrollment (gross):** Pre-primary (2014) is 65%; primary (2014) is 106%, and secondary (2014) is 77%
- **Compulsory school education:** The duration of compulsory education, duration (years) is 15 (2021).
- **School enrollment, primary and secondary (gross), gender parity index (GPI):** 0.98 (2014)
- **Unemployment (modeled ILO estimate):** 5.9% (2021)
- **IDPs/Refugee population by country or territory of origin:** 52,041 (2021)

According to the UNDP's HDI country profile:

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.673, which put the country in the medium human development category. It ranks 124th out of 189 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy:** Female: 75.1, Male: 66.1 (2021)

- **Gender Inequality Index (2019) score and ranking:** 0.376 points at rank 88 out of 162 countries (2021)

Refugees/IDPs

Gang violence, poverty and violence perpetrated by government security forces are the main reasons for citizens to flee the country. In El Salvador, it is difficult to hide from well-organized mafia groups, so internal and external forced displacement continues to be a pervasive problem. According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#), violence have forced tens of thousands to flee internally in El Salvador. The Supreme Court of El Salvador officially recognized internal forced displacement in 2018. According to government figures published in 2018, there are 71,500 IDPs (UNHCR, August 2022). The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis led more refugees and asylum seekers to request assistance, mainly to cover basic needs such as rent, food and medicine. As of September 2021, around 550,000 refugees and asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and 318,700 IDPs in El Salvador and Honduras were categorized by the UNHCR as 'people of concern'. Despite the fact that official figures indicate that internal displacement figures have [decreased](#) (UNHUR-OAS, MIRPS 2021), representatives of civil society report that these figures continue to be [worrying](#) due to the serious levels of violence perpetrated by the gangs and also by the national police force (Swissinfo, 14 February 2022). In recent months, the context of the state of emergency and the violence exerted by state agents have also caused fresh [forced displacement](#) (Divergentes, 20 June 2022).

Impact of Covid-19 and food insecurity

According to the [2021-2022 Social Situation Report](#) in El Salvador, after the start of the pandemic, the percentage of the population in a situation of extreme poverty grew by 60%. According to data from DIGESTYC (2022), although there was a reduction of 0.3 percentage points between 2020 and 2021, 8 out of 100 people are still in this condition. This prevalence of extreme poverty corresponds to an intermediate proportion to that observed in 2016-2017 and, according to the same source, implies that 12 out of every 100 children found themselves in a precarious situation, with differences between the urban (10 out of every 100) and rural (14 out of 100). In 2021, 13 out of 100 people faced food insecurity (FUSADES, November 2022). The state is carrying out [measures](#) to overcome food insecurity, and has involved the World Food Program in its Country Strategic Plan 2017/2021 (WFP, September 2021).

Human rights

Organizations such as Amnesty International have reported that there are human rights violations occurring in the country in respect of the right to freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, to truth, justice and reparation and hostilities against human rights defenders, among others (AI country report 2021/22, pp. 157-159). Human Rights Watch has also reported that the security forces have been implicated in serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, sexual assaults, enforced disappearances, and other acts of torture (HRW 2022 country chapter). The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) has [reported](#) that it is investigating possible cases of extrajudicial executions by state agents committed in confrontations with alleged gang members. The IACHR also reported the presence of death-squads carrying out social cleansing actions against gang members (OAS, October 2021).

The state of emergency has been used as an opportunity for a series of human rights violations affecting not only people perceived as gang members or collaborators, but also human rights activists and critics of the government. The UN has [emphasized](#) that the measures of the emergency regime in El Salvador must be framed within the framework of respect for human rights. (DW, September 9, 2022). The organization Cristosal [documented](#) around 2,878 cases of complaints of human rights violations in the period 27 March - 18 October 2022. The cases include arbitrary arrests, illegal home searches and physical abuse, perpetrated by the national police and armed forces (CRISTOSAL, 19 October, 2022).

Various church-affiliated organizations have been running programs bringing humanitarian aid and other forms of assistance to vulnerable groups. According to in-country reports, aid issued to prisoners has sometimes been regarded with suspicion by the authorities.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 68.3% of the population – survey date: March 2021 (most recent survey available at time of writing)
- **Facebook usage:** 68.3% penetration – survey date: December 2021

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 153 per 100 people (2020)

According to [BuddeComm](#) Research (Publication date: March 2023):

- "Mobile penetration is remarkably high considering El Salvador's economic indicators, being about a third higher than average for Latin America and the Caribbean. The country was one of the last in the region to provide LTE services, mainly due to the inadequate provision of suitable spectrum. El Salvador's telecom legislation is one of the more liberal in Latin America, encouraging competition in most areas and permitting foreign investment. However, there are no regulations which promote wholesale broadband, and thus in the DSL market leader Claro retains a virtual monopoly. The only effective cross-platform competition in the broadband market comes from the few cable operators."
- The COVID-19 crisis "continues to have a significant impact on the telecoms market. On the consumer side, spending on telecoms services and devices is under pressure from the financial effect of large-scale job losses and the consequent restriction on disposable incomes. However, the crucial nature of telecom services, both for general communication as well as a tool for home-working, has offset such pressures. In many markets the net effect has been a reduced (and sometimes negative) subscriber growth."

Internet control

The Legislative Assembly [adapted](#) the Special Law on Cybercrimes and Related Crimes law to incorporate legal action against practices that could constitute crimes. The law seeks to prevent and combat crimes such as fraud, identity theft, pedophilia, seduction of minors, obtaining and disclosing unauthorized personal information, extortion, false documents and signatures, use of

personal data to commit illicit acts and protect electronic wallets (Asamblea Legislativa, 8 December 2021).

Media reporting

According to Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index 2022:

- The government manages a newspaper called El Salvador with public funds, which carries state propaganda and attacks the opposition. President Bukele is exerting particularly strong pressure on journalists and is portraying the media as the enemy of the people. By executive decree, the government has neutralized the entity that guarantees compliance with the Law on Access to Public Information. Although there were no journalists murdered in El Salvador, some have been fined and also attacked by police officers.

The above is confirmed by the Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES), who states that there is a [campaign](#) of defamation and hate speech against journalists and media outlets investigating cases that could negatively compromise the government. The most frequent risk is related to attacks and digital harassment. In the first four months of 2022, 39 cases against the press were registered. There have also been issues related to the forced displacement of journalists, defamation and lack of security guarantees by state institutions. In some cases, police have been preventing the work of the press at detention centers, where some journalists have not been allowed to take pictures or interview the families of prisoners detained under measures introduced along with the state of emergency.

There was also a series of hacks of WhatsApp accounts of various journalists, including the APES Center for Monitoring Attacks on Journalists (APES, 3 May 2022). Employees of the Legislative Assembly, high-level public officials and even the president have intensified their attacks, threats and smear-campaigns against journalists who publicize cases of corruption in the current administration, or against those who report on the [rise](#) in homicides (APES, 27 March 2022). According to the report "Defending human rights in crisis contexts: Analysis of cases of attacks against human rights defenders and journalists, 2021-2022", 246 attacks were identified, 64 of them collective (26%); that is, where more than one person suffered an attack. Media monitoring shows that there were 415 attacks. The [most affected right](#) was freedom of expression. Various organizations recorded that 3 out of 4 attacks were against this right (Mesa por el Derecho a Defender Derechos, September 2022).

Impact of COVID-19

As elsewhere in Latin America, Christians in El Salvador made use of the technology at their disposal for continuing church work during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to [statements](#) by a senior pastor of the Elim Christian Mission, churches located in areas of poverty suspended church meetings; those without online possibilities used social media apps to form prayer groups or hold worship services. Churches in wealthier areas had little difficulty to move services to online platforms, due to a greater availability and knowledge of digital technology (El Salvador, 20 March 2021). However, church leaders who were vocal against the government were exposed to the risk of being more easily identified online; some were harassed by the au-

thorities or regime sympathizers.

Security situation

Criminal groups control and carry out acts of violence in almost 90% of the country. It is estimated that there are around 60,000 active gang members in the country which has a population of just under 6.6 million. The main gangs in El Salvador are the MS-13 and the two factions of Barrio 18: Sureños and Revolucionario. If the number of sympathizers, relatives and those who depend on criminal activities to survive are considered, there are altogether around 500,000 people with some sort of involvement with gang activity. In El Salvador there are also so-called “[transportistas](#)” groups, which have their origins in the transport of contraband between the borders with Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala during the civil war (Insight Crime, March 2021). They continue to use these routes to smuggle migrants, contraband, pirated goods, chemicals and illegal drugs. These carrier networks often operate with the help of corrupt police, army and border officials.

For many years, the gangs have gained territorial control over the areas where they have been operating for decades. Gang members are known as the local authorities and often set up gates to control the entrance to communities. Local governments have had to negotiate many times with gangs in order to carry out such basic things as having a community meeting or repairing the streets. They may even have to pay “[rent](#)” to enter a certain area (WCJU Journal, January 2020). A high percentage of homicides in the country are carried out by these groups. Official figures indicate that since the implementation of President Bukele's Territorial Control Plan, there have been [247 days](#) with zero homicides (Presidencia, 29 November 2022). However analysts and civil society organizations point out that this lower level of killings [does not reflect](#) the violent deaths of suspected criminals or unsolved disappearances carried out by the national police force (Voice of America, 2 June 2022).

Despite the official narrative that criminal groups are being eradicated, 25-26 March 2022 was reported as been the [deadliest](#) weekend in the country with a total of 62 murders (New York Times, 27 March 2022). President Bukele's response was to declare a state of emergency (SOE) and suspend certain constitutional guarantees for a period of 30 days. As of December 2022, the SOE has been extended 9 times. Some constitutional guarantees have been [suspended illegally](#), such as the right to due process and the right to defense, the right to freedom of assembly and association, in addition to allowing the interception of private communications without the need for a court order (Wola, 28 March 2022). The human rights violations were not isolated cases or excesses of insubordinate agents of the security forces. Rather, similar abuses were committed by both soldiers and police repeatedly [across](#) the country over a period of several months (HRW, December 2022).

These irregularities also include alleged pacts between the Bukele government and gangs. In January 2021, the Attorney General's Office opened an investigation to determine whether government officials had made [some sort of pact](#) with gangs to reduce homicide rates (Insight Crime, 20 January 2021) but when a new attorney general was appointed, the Anti-Corruption Unit was dismantled and the investigation was [annulled](#). The former prosecutor of this unit confirmed that part of the investigation showed evidence of such a pact (América Economía, 29 December 2021). Some news outlets have alleged that the return to the situation of excessive

violence in the country is due to [negotiations](#) between the government and gangs being broken off (El Faro, 17 May 2022).

As a strategy to counteract the onslaught of the gangs, the president - under the slogan "war against gangs" - has proposed the construction of a [Terrorism Confinement Center](#), designed to house 40,000 "terrorists", who would be cut off from the outside world (El Universo, 21 July 2022). Similarly, one of his goals is to capture as many gang members as possible. The SOE proved to be an ideal opportunity for this: By December 2022, the government reported that an estimated [59,307 suspected gang members](#) had been arrested (Presidency, 7 December 2022). However, the Salvadoran Police Workers Movement reported that some police commanders were demanding a certain number of arrests per day, which on many occasions led to [arbitrary arrests](#) being made (France 24, 13 April 2022). As a result, many people not linked with gang activity have also been deprived of their liberty. The IACHR reiterated the state authorities' obligation to ensure judicial guarantees and due process. Likewise, it expressed its [concern](#) over the general suspension of rights during the state of emergency imposed by the government (CIDH, 3 June 2022).

Although gang control is being restricted by state forces, criminal groups can still be active in some areas of the country. In this scenario, religious communities in the country are doubly vulnerable. On the one hand, Christians suffer the same consequences as the rest of the population, but they can become particular targets if their teaching and church activities endanger criminal operations. While gangs sometimes respect Christian churches (mainly Protestant), they will still make it clear that they are in control of their area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, gangs took advantage of the lockdown and other measures to strengthen their control in certain areas and protect their interests. As was already the case in previous years, Christians could not conduct humanitarian assistance without gang authorization. It is common for the gangs to set an unofficial curfew and many churches in rural areas have had to hold their services in the early afternoon, to ensure that church worshippers are back home before dark. Many pastors and church members worry that their children may be recruited by gangs or involved in gang activities. Many have had their homes broken into, others have [experienced](#) beatings and extortion (WCJU Journal, January 2020) and some have been [killed](#) (El Salvador, 6 July 2022).

As the government crackdown on gangs intensified in 2022, clashes between gangs and security forces increased. This has increased not only the overall levels of violence, but also the levels of repression by the security forces which also affects citizens who are not linked to the gangs. Where residents once feared gangs, they now [fear](#) security forces (Insight Crime, 6 December 2022). Especially social reintegration centers or ministries that work with former gang members and converted gang members are targeted by state security. In May 2022, 27 ex-gang members were arrested while [gathering](#) at the Huellas de Esperanza Ministry. The police [assumed](#) that gang members hide in these places and justify their arrests by claiming that the detainees have a history of homicide, extortion and robbery; however the police do not check their records to see if those arrested have indeed served a sentence for these crimes (Diario El Mundo, 6 May 2022). The media outlet El País has documented at least 14 cases of former MS13 members converted to Christianity who were arrested and charged because of their tattooed [appearance](#) (El País, 22 May 2022).

During the state of emergency, a 44 year old pastor and school headmaster was arrested during a Mother's Day celebration dinner with members of his church for allegedly belonging to an illegal group. He [died](#) a few days later during his provisional detention after guards had refused to allow him medicine for his diabetes. He was the pastor of the Peniel Church network and had a ministry called Venceremos focused on providing care for young people. No proof of any connection to illegal gang activity was found (El Salvador, 7 June 2022).

Trends analysis

1) Many criminal gangs are fighting for survival

Criminal leaders and gang members are facing a government onslaught after the authorities apparently discarded previous agreements made with them. These are gangs who have dominated society and have been responsible for the high levels of violence and insecurity. However, now they are looking for new forms of survival and preservation of their territorial control. The risk for Christians is still present; where they work in particularly violent areas, they can be mistaken for government collaborators.

2) Concern over increasing state authoritarianism

The government has justified its authoritarian behavior through the need for strong-arm policies against criminal gangs and their corruption networks that have destabilized life in the country for decades. However, the government under President Bukele is progressively abandoning such justification and is broadening its authoritarian practice to target government critics among the press and civil society. Thus, when church leaders denounce injustices and demand respect for human rights, they quickly become vulnerable to government action against them.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: 54 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/04/el-salvador-anti-corruption-candidate-nayib-bukele-wins-presidential-election>
- Recent history: majority of seats - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/20/allies-of-el-salvadors-bukele-win-absolute-majority-in-congress>
- Recent history: important part of Operation Regional Shield - <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/more-700-members-transnational-organized-crime-groups-arrested-central-america-us-assisted>
- Recent history: initiated - <https://www.state.gov/suspending-and-terminating-the-asylum-cooperative-agreements-with-the-governments-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras/>
- Recent history: National State of Emergency - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/el-salvador-widespread-abuses-under-state-emergency>
- Recent history: national emergency - https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UN_Situation%20Report%2010_COVID19_del%2027%20MAY%20a%2003%20JUN_2020.pdf
- Recent history: murdering - https://english.elpais.com/spanish_news/2020-09-11/spanish-court-sends-ex-colonel-to-prison-for-1989-jesuit-killings-in-el-salvador.html?rel=listapoyo
- Political and legal landscape: parliamentary majority - <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvadors-bukele-poised-win-big-legislative-majority-2021-03-01/>
- Political and legal landscape: dismissed - <https://www.dw.com/en/el-salvador-lawmakers-sack-top-prosecutor-supreme-court-judges/a-57406228>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitutional Chamber - <https://www.wola.org/es/2021/09/el-salvador-presidente-reeleccion-judicial/>

- Political and legal landscape: reform - <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/17840/las-reformas-legales-en-el-salvador-un-gran-retroceso-en-los-derechos-humanos-y-el-estado-democratico/>
- Political and legal landscape: suspends - <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2022/03/29/el-salvador-amplio-regimen-de-excepcion-facilita-graves-abusos>
- Political and legal landscape: extended - <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/internacional/articulo/2022-12-14/el-salvador-aprueba-9na-prorroga-del-estado-de-excepcion>
- Political and legal landscape: allowed - <https://www.wola.org/es/2022/09/corrupcion-estado-de-excepcion-el-salvador/>
- Political and legal landscape: reform - <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/12072>
- Political and legal landscape: gag - <https://diario.elmundo.sv/politica/apes-califica-de-reformas-mordaza-cambios-en-leyes-que-castigaran-difusion-de-mensajes-de-pandillas-en-medios>
- Political and legal landscape: draft - https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-pol%C3%ADtica_l%C3%ADder-de-congreso-salvadore%C3%B1o--sigue-discusi%C3%B3n-de-ley-de-agentes-extranjeros/47809466
- Political and legal landscape: barred from carrying out 'political activities' - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/12/el-salvador-shelve-foreign-agents-bill>
- Political and legal landscape: disguising - https://elfaro.net/es/202111/el_salvador/25838/La-Ley-de-Agentes-Extranjeros-est%C3%A1-dise%C3%B1ada-para-perseguir-voces-cr%C3%ADticas-al-Gobierno.htm
- Political and legal landscape: survey - [https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-bukele_un-87-8---de-la-poblaci%C3%B3n-aprueba-gesti%C3%B3n-de-nayib-bukele--seg%C3%BAAn-una-encuesta/48128896#:~:text=%20Un%2087%2C8%20%25%20de,Prensa%20Gr%C3%A1fica%20\(LPG%20Datos\)%20publicada](https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-bukele_un-87-8---de-la-poblaci%C3%B3n-aprueba-gesti%C3%B3n-de-nayib-bukele--seg%C3%BAAn-una-encuesta/48128896#:~:text=%20Un%2087%2C8%20%25%20de,Prensa%20Gr%C3%A1fica%20(LPG%20Datos)%20publicada)
- Political and legal landscape: demonstrate against - <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/salvadorenos-protestan-nuevamente-por-acciones-dictatoriales-de-bukele/20000035-4696371>
- Political and legal landscape: marches - <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/convocan-protestas-salvador-gestion-nayib-bukele-20220530-0036.html>
- Political and legal landscape: tense - <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47083>
- Political and legal landscape: pause - <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-official-says-el-salvador-relations-paused-lack-interest-2021-11-22/>
- Political and legal landscape: sanctioned - https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2021-12-23_IN11658_b6ad141a3212fc885ea6ada42c28d703abf809bd.pdf
- Political and legal landscape: sanctioned - <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-sanctions-officials-close-el-salvadors-bukele-alleged-corruption-2022-12-09/>
- Political and legal landscape: respect - https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-constituci%C3%B3n_iglesia-salvadore%C3%B1a--normas-p%C3%A9treas-de-la-constituci%C3%B3n--no-se-deben-reformar-/46815994
- Political and legal landscape: concern - <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-americas/2022/02/archbishop-says-clandestine-graves-in-el-salvador-is-worrying>
- Political and legal landscape: warned - <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Regimen-de-excepcion-la-esperanza-de-que-la-situacion-de-violencia-se-resuelva-20220605-0049.html>
- Political and legal landscape: accused - <https://asap-tv.com/2022/06/22/pastor-mario-vega-se-queja-dice-muchos-jovenes-iglesia-estan-capturados/>
- Religious landscape description: rejecting - <https://ysuca.org.sv/iglesias-historicas-de-el-salvador-y-organizaciones-sociales-brindan-recomendaciones-al-presidente/>
- Religious landscape description: disapproval - http://www.fides.org/en/news/70061-AMERICA_EL_SALVADOR_The_Bishops_our_beloved_country_demands_a_change_of_course_not_with_violence_but_with_dialogue_and_fraternity
- Religious landscape description: Christian denominations - <https://alc-noticias.net/es/2021/05/11/preocupacion-de-iglesias-ante-decision-gubernamental-que-saltea-garantias-y-orden-constitucional/>
- Religious landscape description: strong critic - <https://arpas.org.sv/2021/09/iglesia-pide-respetar-debido-proceso-en-reformas-a-la-constitucion-y-depuracion-judicial-arpas/>
- Religious landscape description: pointed out - <https://www.prensa-latina.cu/2022/09/26/iglesia-catolica-en-el-salvador-en-favor-de-bukele>
- Religious landscape description: instrument of God - <https://elsalvadorgram.com/2021/03/nayib-bukele-se-autodefine-como-instrumento-de-dios-y-causa-revuelo-en-redes-sociales/>

- Religious landscape description: stated - <https://www.revistafactum.com/dios-bukele/>
- Religious landscape description: message - <https://www.connectas.org/presidente-beato-el-salvador/>
- Religious landscape description: risk - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-23/ser-expandillero-cristiano-en-el-salvador-un-pais-sin-lugar-para-los-arrepentidos.html>
- Religious landscape description: arbitrarily detaining - <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220702-los-posibles-da%C3%B1os-colaterales-en-la-guerra-contra-las-pandillas-en-el-salvador>
- Religious landscape description: know - <https://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2022/08/02/el-salvador-regimen-de-excepcion-desbarata-esfuerzos-de-reinsercion-social/>
- Religious landscape description: taken away - <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/regimen-de-excepcion-mario-vega-pastor/950600/2022/>
- Religious landscape description: 80% - <https://www1.cbn.com/mundocristiano/latinoamerica/2022/august/el-vicepresidente-de-el-salvador-dijo-que-el-80-de-pastores-son-parte-de-las-pandillas>
- Religious landscape description: calm down - <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-latin-america-48916978>
- Religious landscape description: embrace - https://newsrnd.com/news/2022-05-23-being-a-former-christian-gang-member-in-el-salvador--a-country-with-no-place-for-the-repentant.HkfgwF_P5.html
- Religious landscape description: active members - <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-salvador-cifra-mas-25000-presuntos-pandilleros-detenedos-medio-estado-excepcion-20220506055953.html>
- Religious landscape description: sought - <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/el-salvador-despenalizacion-del-aborto-y-matrimonio-igualitario-no-se-contemplan-en-reformas-constitucionales/6233344.html>
- Religious landscape description: criticism - <https://gatoencerrado.news/2021/12/15/despenalizacion-del-aborto-y-matrimonio-igualitario-excluidos-de-las-reformas-constitucionales/>
- Religious landscape description: meddling - <https://lamalafe.lat/el-salvador-iglesia-catolica-y-organizaciones-antiderechos-se-entrometen-en-reforma-constitucional-para-despenalizar-el-aborto/>
- Religious landscape description: violating - <https://www.dw.com/es/a-la-c%C3%A1rcel-por-perder-un-beb%C3%A9-el-salvador-y-la-ley-sobre-el-aborto/a-60750880?maca=es-Twitter-sharing>
- Religious landscape description: support - <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/la-iglesia-catolica-respalda-la-postura-el-presidente-nayib-bukele-de-no-promover-reformas-constitucionales-que-favorezcan-el-aborto-y-la-eutanasia/>
- Economic landscape: September 2022 Economic Report - <https://www.bcr.gob.sv/documental/Inicio/vista/0bd0a5d44ccdf41688e19c609d5111b1.pdf>
- Economic landscape: 2021-2022 Social Situation Report - <https://fusades.org/publicaciones/informe-de-coyuntura-social-2021-2022>
- Economic landscape: approve - <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/11282>
- Economic landscape: came into effect - <https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/7/22660457/el-salvador-bitcoin-legal-tender-currency-cryptocurrency-chivo-wallet>
- Economic landscape: questioned - <https://www.criptonoticias.com/comunidad/adopcion/jp-morgan-adopcion-bitcoin-el-salvador-metiera-problemas-ambos/>
- Economic landscape: reverse - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-60135552>
- Economic landscape: no difference - <https://camarasal.com/empresarios-proyectan-invertir-en-el-salvador-pese-a-los-retos-que-enfrenta-el-pais/>
- Economic landscape: questions - <https://www.americaeconomia.com/el-salvador-crisis-economia-criptomoneda>
- Economic landscape: 107 million dollars - <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/11/11/desplome-del-bitcoin-reduce-valor-de-la-inversion-de-el-salvador-orix/>
- Economic landscape: maintain - <https://www.dw.com/es/bitcoin-en-el-salvador-doce-meses-no-son-suficientes/a-63047762>
- Economic landscape: increased - <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/12073>
- Economic landscape: boosted - <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/3917963/salvador-refuerza-presupuesto-defensa-seguridad-16-millones-dolares>
- Economic landscape: implementation - <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/en-espanol/noticias/story/2022-03-10/el-salvador-anuncia-medidas-para-aliviar-la-crisis-economica#:~:text=Bukele%20anunci%C3%B3%20tambi%C3%A9n%20que%20se,del%20precio%20del%20transporte%20p%C3%BAblico.>

- Economic landscape: drew attention - <https://www.canal12.com.sv/noticia/iglesia-catolica-se-pronuncio-por-medidas-para-enfrentar-la-crisis-economica/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Refugee Agency - <https://reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/unhcr-el-salvador-factsheet-august-2022>
- Social and cultural landscape: decreased - https://www.acnur.org/publications/pub_mirps/61a58d894/iv-annual-report-of-the-comprehensive-regional-protection-and-solutions.html
- Social and cultural landscape: worrying - https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-desplazados_una-ong-atiende-a-m%C3%A1s-1.300-v%C3%ADctimas-de-desplazamiento-forzado-en-el-salvador/47347972
- Social and cultural landscape: forced displacement - <https://www.divergentes.com/estado-de-excepcion-el-salvador-desplazamiento/>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2021-2022 Social Situation Report - <https://fusades.org/publicaciones/informe-de-coyuntura-social-2021-2022>
- Social and cultural landscape: measures - <https://www.wfp.org/operations/sv01-el-salvador-country-strategic-plan-2017-2022>
- Social and cultural landscape: reported - http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/2021_ElSalvador-ES.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: emphasized - <https://www.dw.com/es/onu-a-el-salvador-medidas-deben-respetar-los-derechos-humanos/a-63075971>
- Social and cultural landscape: documented - <https://twitter.com/Cristosal/status/1582758898972229633/photo/1>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/El-Salvador-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: adapted - <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/11830>
- Technological landscape: campaign - <https://apes.org.sv/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/INFORME-3-DE-MAYO-2022-1.pdf>
- Technological landscape: rise - <https://apes.org.sv/alertas/funcionarios-publicos-y-usuarios-de-redes-sociales-arremeten-contra-periodistas-que-informan-sobre-el-alza-de-homicidios/>
- Technological landscape: most affected right - <https://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Resumen-ejecutivo-informe-Mesa-El-Salvador.pdf>
- Technological landscape: statements - <https://www.elsalvador.com/opinion/editoriales/cristianismo/819260/2021/>
- Security situation: transportistas - <https://insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/el-salvador/>
- Security situation: rent - <https://wciujournal.wciu.edu/area-studies/2020/1/3/co-existence-of-opposing-powers-a-study-of-the-relationship-between-the-evangelical-church-and-the-gangs-in-el-salvador>
- Security situation: 247 days - <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/la-tendencia-de-los-dias-con-cero-homicidios-se-mantiene-este-mes-en-el-salvador/>
- Security situation: does not reflect - <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/verificado-record-bukele-homicidios-enfrentamientos-autoridad/6600004.html>
- Security situation: deadliest - <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2022/03/27/espanol/bukele-estado-emergencia.html>
- Security situation: suspended illegally - <https://www.wola.org/2022/03/el-salvador-state-of-exception-contradicts-international-human-rights-standards/>
- Security situation: across - <https://www.hrw.org/es/report/2022/12/07/podemos-detener-quien-queramos/violaciones-generalizadas-de-derechos-humanos>
- Security situation: some sort of pact - <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/ms13-prison-releases-el-salvador/>
- Security situation: annulled - <https://www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/efiscal-de-el-salvador-acusa-al-gobierno-de-bukele-de-anular-investigacion-sobre-pacto-con-pandillas>
- Security situation: negotiations - https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroqu%C3%ADn-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurri%C3%B3-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm
- Security situation: Terrorism Confinement Center - <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/internacional/dentro-de-60-dias-estara-listo-el-gigantesco-centro-de-confinamiento-para-40000-terroristas-en-el-salvador-promete-nayib-bukele-nota/>
- Security situation: 59,307 suspected gang members - <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/en-ocho-meses-de-regimen-de-excepcion-el-gobierno-contabiliza-59307-pandilleros-capturados/>

- Security situation: arbitrary arrests - <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20220412-el-salvador-pandillas-detenciones-arbitraria-policias>
- Security situation: concern - <https://mailchi.mp/oas.org/cidh-urge-a-el-salvador-garantizar-politicas-penitenciarias-y-de-seguridad-ciudadana-con-respeto-a-los-derechos-humanos?e=2b11e82829>
- Security situation: experienced - <https://wciujournal.wciu.edu/area-studies/2020/1/3/co-existence-of-opposing-powers-a-study-of-the-relationship-between-the-evangelical-church-and-the-gangs-in-el-salvador>
- Security situation: killed - <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/pandillero-asesino-de-nueve-disparos-a-pastor-en-comunidad-belen/974792/2022/>
- Security situation: fear - <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/costo-desconocido-guerra-antipandillas-salvador/>
- Security situation: gathering - <https://diario.elmundo.sv/nacionales/policia-captura-a-27-expandilleros-en-una-iglesia-cristiana-de-san-salvador>
- Security situation: assumed - <https://diario.elmundo.sv/nacionales/policia-captura-a-27-expandilleros-en-una-iglesia-cristiana-de-san-salvador>
- Security situation: appearance - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-23/ser-expandillero-cristiano-en-el-salvador-un-pais-sin-lugar-para-los-arrepentidos.html>
- Security situation: died - <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/profesor-colegio-santa-tecla-muerte-regimen-excepcion/964294/2022/>

WWL 2023: Church information / El Salvador

Christian origins

According to [Oxford Reference](#) (accessed in September 2022):

- "Christianity came to El Salvador with the Spaniards who conquered the Pipil Indians in the 1520s. The country was part of the Spanish Captaincy General of Guatemala until 1821, a constituent of the Confederation of Central America (1823–39), and became an independent state in 1839. The diocese of San Salvador was recognized by the Papacy as independent of Guatemala in 1842."

The first Roman Catholic priest was Francisco Hernández who arrived in 1525. Later a layman, Pedro Ximenez, became well-known for mission-work among the Indians.

The first anti-clerical laws were established by the Liberal government of El Salvador in 1824. In 1871, the government proclaimed freedom of thought and religion, took over all church-administered cemeteries, legalized civil marriage and made education non-church-based.

Protestantism arrived in El Salvador in the 1880s, mostly Presbyterians from the USA. Seventh-day Adventists started work in 1915.

Church spectrum today

El Salvador: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	4,614,000	73.0
Protestant	1,071,000	17.0
Independent	1,102,000	17.4
Unaffiliated	25,500	0.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-496,000	-7.9
Total	6,316,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	807,000	12.8
Renewalist movement	1,739,000	27.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The main Christian denomination in El Salvador is the Roman Catholic Church, representing 73.0% of all Christians according to WCD 2022 estimates. There has been a great increase in the presence of other Christian denominations, especially in the poorest areas of the country, due to a great extent to pastoral work among youth and former gang members.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Main areas for Organized corruption and crime: The areas where this engine was frequently in action during the WWL 2023 reporting period were Ahuachapan, La Unión, Morazan, San Miguel, San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate and Usulután.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation and are therefore not treated as a separate category for WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities: This category consists mainly of Roman Catholic churches and small Orthodox and Protestant communities (such as as Presbyterians, Anglicans and Adventists), although only the Roman Catholics have constitutional recognition. All these churches can be victims of violence at the hands of gangs, especially when they are considered 'unfriendly'. They also face hostility when they criticize the government or do not support the

political agenda of some ideological pressure groups.

Converts: These are mainly former gang members who convert to Christianity and face persecution from their original gang and rival gangs. However, as discussed above, there are some cases where the conversion is allowed if it is considered genuine according to the gang leader's judgment or involved a church approved by the gangs. Also, as occurred during the WWL 2023 reporting period, they can face persecution from government security forces due to their tattooed appearance and their previous criminal history. They are also vulnerable to gang pressure when these try to re-recruit them or at least get them to collaborate in criminal activity, especially since many groups have lost active members through the harsh government measures.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category is made up of Baptists, Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, Church of the Prince of Peace and other groups. They suffer the same kind of persecution as the Historical Christian communities but by being a minority, they do not have the same representation at a social or political level. For their perseverance in violent areas, gangs usually see this category as 'more friendly', but it does not mean they work without risk when carrying out church activities which defy criminal interests. When their work in areas under the control of the gangs becomes better known, they are often targeted more frequently either in retaliation for the desertion of active or potential members and/or because of their refusal to collaborate with gang activities. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, many were more at risk from action by the police who suspected them of being involved in crime through their pastoral work with former gang members. Some of them - including church leaders - were detained, accused of complicity and defamed in public.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Oxford Reference - <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095748545>

WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / El Salvador

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

El Salvador: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	46	73
WWL 2022	45	70
WWL 2021	42	74
WWL 2020	38	-
WWL 2019	30	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

El Salvador's increase in overall score was mainly due to increased pressure by the government in the *Church sphere of life*. The lower violence score was due to the government's operations against the active presence of criminal gangs which began in the second half of the WWL 2023 reporting period. This government strategy has led to an abuse of power, including open hostility towards Christians who criticize the multiple human rights violations committed by state forces. The government has also been moving against churches which work closely with former gang members who have converted to Christianity and with young people who are being helped to escape gang life.

Persecution engines

El Salvador: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

Christians preaching and carrying out activities that oppose the influence of criminal gangs (maras) in society can expect a hostile response. Christians cannot move around freely or organize church activities, including worship, without asking the local criminal leader for authorization and paying the necessary protection money. Christian leaders and parents working with teenagers to prevent them from becoming affiliated with gangs, quickly become victims of reprisals and must sometimes flee their community or even the country to be safe. Also, the current repressive government measures aiming to reduce gang influence are making Christians vulnerable to attack when criminals respond violently against the state and other social actors such as local churches.

As explained above, some gang members consider themselves Christians and support certain Christian denominations. They use their understanding of religion to justify their criminal activities, including the use of violence when trying to defend their interests. Thus it has been the custom to allow genuine conversion to Christianity (as defined by the gang leader) although

converts, family and church leaders working with them will be closely monitored. However, if the conversion involved the 'wrong' church or the leader is not interested in losing active members of the gang, the mere intention of conversion represents a risk to the life of the new church member and his family.

Due to the introduction of SOE measures, church work among former gang members became riskier in 2022 and led to the state authorities arresting pastors and Christian converts (from gangs) who were suspected of participating in criminal activities.

Drivers of persecution

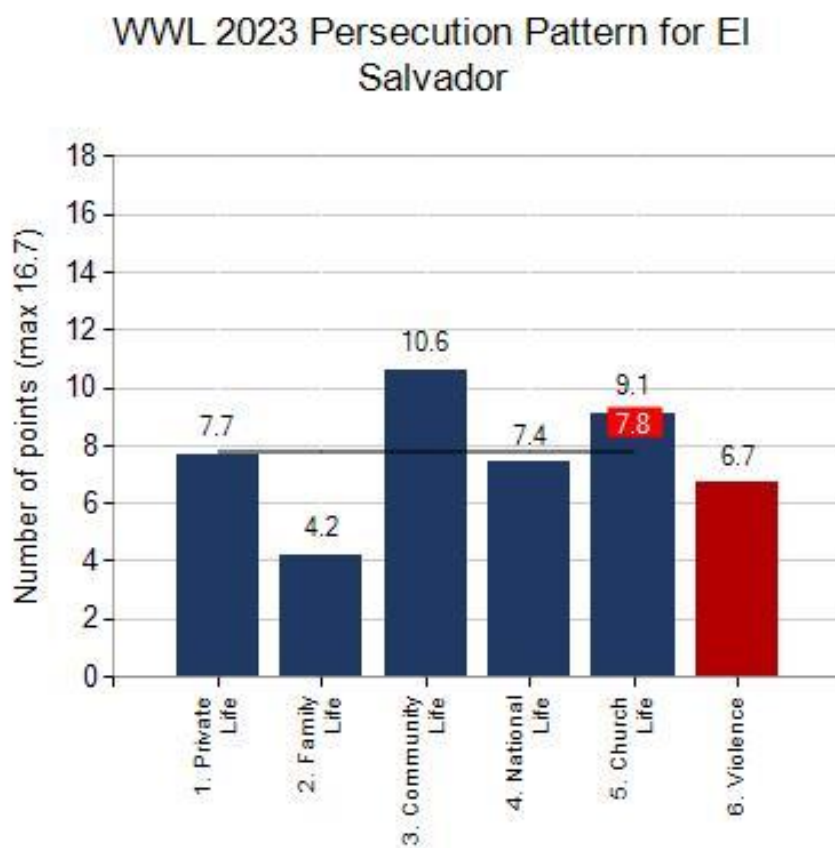
El Salvador: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	-	VERY WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	WEAK	STRONG
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Very weak	Weak	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Very weak	Weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Very weak	Very weak
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Weak	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime (Strong)

- **Organized crime cartels (Strong):** The insecurity resulting from violent gang activities and territorial control remains a threat to the whole of society. Despite the government's harsh 'war against gangs' campaign, many Christians cannot congregate or carry out church activities freely without fear of interference or attack. Church leaders whose faith impels them not turn a blind eye but to openly denounce criminal activities often become victims of threats, extortion and possibly even killing. One tactic has also been to sexually harass or rape pastors' daughters. Such acts were also carried out in retaliation for church leaders not helping gang members when they tried to escape police operations.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The authoritarian policy against gang violence has only generated more violence and with it, churches have been placed in a situation of greater vulnerability, now also suffering at the hands of government agents acting with apparent impunity.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for El Salvador shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in El Salvador is 7.8 points, rising from 7.5 points in WWL 2022.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community sphere* (10.6 points), followed by the *Church sphere* (9.1 points). This reflects the influence of *Organized corruption and crime* and how gangs

intimidate Christians.

- The score for violence is 6.7 points, a decrease from 7.2 in WWL 2022. This fall is explained by the government's controversial 'war against gangs' taking effect. However, there are still reports of Christians being targeted for killings, abduction and other kinds of violence where their church activities are seen as a threat to local gang interests and where government forces abuse their rights when carrying out operations.ose public policies.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (2.75 points)

Within areas coopted by gangs, Christian social media comments can be dangerous where considered to be defying the gang leader's authority, or if they show support to an 'unfavored' church denomination, or especially if they encourage others to abandon all contact with crime and corruption. There are also some signs of intolerance against Christians using social media for airing biblical views concerning the defense of life and family. In addition, Christians belonging to non-traditional churches in particular face the risk of government reprisals when discussing state violations of human rights.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (2.75 points)

Since the present government has introduced an iron fist policy against gangs, clashes between security forces and gangs are common and put at risk the lives of ordinary citizens, including Christians. This has caused variations in the territorial control of the gangs and, therefore, in the dynamics of pressure and violence exerted on Christians. It is risky to meet with other Christians in these circumstances, especially in the border territories of rival gangs. This affects especially those belonging to churches that are known to be unsupportive of criminal groups. On the other hand, in the context of the government measures implemented since March 2022, meetings between Christians who have had involvement with social reintegration of former gang members, youth projects and distribution of humanitarian aid to municipalities affected by gang violence of the gangs, can be reason enough to expose them to possible arrest by security forces.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (2.50 points)

Given that criminal groups often have the support of their members' own families, it is sometimes very risky to share any new faith with relatives of those families. It could be considered a sign of defiance of gang authority, especially if conversion involves belonging to a

church denomination that is not protected or tolerated by the local criminal group.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (2.25 points)

Although many gang members use religious symbolism in their tattoos, the gangs control the display of Christian images or symbols in their territories. Due to changes in gang territory caused by the government's 'war against gangs', many Christians are now uncertain whether the religious symbols they display will be considered a threat by a different gang taking control.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.25 points)

As explained above (in: *Security situation*), the high levels of violence and insecurity have caused many citizens to flee the country, even when that process itself involves several risks for them. Internal displacement is also a big issue in the country. Christian families are particularly vulnerable to displacement when they refuse involvement in criminal activities. To escape from the constant death-threats against them and their loved ones, Christian fathers and mothers have had to abandon their families to flee to other areas and even other countries. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, this situation was particularly challenging for many former gang members who converted to Christianity because they often faced persecution from both police and their former criminal groups. Their only choice in those circumstances was to flee and therefore to separate from their families. This situation, also occurred when former gang members were unfairly detained and thus kept separated from their relatives for several months (and sometimes died in jail).

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (2.75 points)

In general, parents can raise their children according to their own convictions, and parents choose whether their children receive religious education in private schools. However, criminal groups recruit youth through harassment and death threats, regardless of whether the parents agree or not. When criminal leaders want them to be part of gangs, it is difficult for Christian parents to do anything to prevent it. Also, the government is gradually implementing an educational model that could replace church-based religious instruction in schools.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (2.75 points)

Children of Christian religious leaders known for activities opposing organized crime may face retaliation because they are considered a threat to gang stability, especially due to the variations in territorial influence during the WWL 2023 reporting period. Harassment and/or threats against the children of Christians are an effective way of intimidating their parents and of forcing them to pay extortion fees. Also, the children could be especially targeted to be recruited into a local gang. If they oppose this, all the family members run the risk of being attacked.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (2.50 points)

In areas where the presence of gangs is more prevalent, some gang leaders did not allow the families of those they considered enemies to perform Christian funeral rites for them, even when it was a church leader assassinated by them. Although the impact of such threats has been reduced by the SOE measures introduced by the government, gangs still continue to spread a climate of fear.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Even after the changes in March 2022 (second part of the WWL 2023 reporting period), interrogations occur in three basic scenarios: a) *Gangs 1*: Christian converts are forced by criminal groups to report about their evangelization activities, especially those carried out outside the community in order to ensure that they do not represent a threat to their interests (i.e. by joining rival groups). They may also provide inside-information about accusations made against them by other Christians; b) *Gangs 2*: Christians in general are forced by gangs to provide information about personal and church life that could endanger their illegal activities. c) *The state police*: At times, police officers interrogate Christians - sometimes violently - to find out details about gang activities in the area. Generally, Christians are 'chosen' for that purpose either because they are presumed not to lie or because they are suspected of collaborating with gangs through church-work among former gang members and youth. This can be particularly dangerous where the police collude with criminal groups.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.00 points)

Gang members monitor all activities within the community they control to identify anyone who may be a potential risk or have contact with a rival group. Residents and even relatives of Christians working in community projects have been obliged to provide information about their activities. In some cases, MS-13 gang members pretend to join a church group to gain their trust and examine their daily activities to facilitate the collection of extortion fees. In the case of former gang members converting to Christianity, they are constantly monitored not only by members of their former gangs, but also by rival gang members and the state authorities.

Block 3.3: Christians have been under threat of abduction and/or forced marriage. (3.00 points)

Young Christian women are sometimes kidnapped and/or forced to become sexually involved with the members of gangs. This particularly affects Christian women, not only because of the physical abuse itself but also because of the damage it does for their future and the way their family and society will perceive her. In addition, Christian women can be harassed and kidnapped to be sold as part of the human trafficking business. In the case of young Christian

men, they are sometimes victims of forced recruitment by gangs. In general, in the areas coopted by gangs, any form of extortion implies a death threat or the possibility of being abducted by a criminal group.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.00 points)

Even though the government has made some progress in reducing gang territorial control, extortion was and will continue to be the main source of income for a gang's survival. Such extortion is basically protection money (also called “rent” or 'war tax') which Christians and others are forced to pay in exchange for being able to move from one area of the community to another, or to continue their businesses undisturbed, or to meet with others and distribute humanitarian assistance. Thus, as stated by US State Department (IRFR 2021): “According to law enforcement representatives, gang members continued to extort organizations with known funding streams, including religious groups, demanding payments in exchange for allowing them to operate in some territories.”

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.25 points)

Churches carrying out social projects among gang and former gang members to reduce levels of violence are generally treated with severe suspicion by some sectors of society (encouraged by the government's SOE measures). Church leaders have even been accused by government officials of belonging to gangs and have often been referred to as “Gang pastors” or “Devil's pastors”. Many people believe that Protestant/Evangelical pastors have been accessing prisons to serve as couriers and messengers between jailed gang members and those outside the prisons. Also, where church leaders and Christian activists are critical of government measures (particularly those related to human rights abuses) and President Bukele, they are often accused of being allied with gangs, international organizations or opposition political parties. Finally, radical ideological pressure groups have portrayed the Church as being intolerant and discriminatory, as opposing women's rights, and as being an obstacle for comprehensive sexual education. Biblical teaching has thus been portrayed as being too old-fashioned and obsolete for modern, inclusive society.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.25 points)

Despite some progress by the government authorities in fighting against gang violence, the criminal and justice system is still weak and easily bribed, which means that punishment has been avoidable in many cases. Many Christians have not received an adequate response from the state for the personal injury or property damage they have experienced both from the gangs and government operations.

There have also been cases in which some young church members (or pastors who belong to churches working among former or active gang members) who have been falsely accused of being in collusion with criminal activities and using the church as a cover. In these cases, despite

the damage to the freedom, integrity and reputation of these Christians, the government agents responsible for it have not been duly prosecuted.

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Ever since the COVID-19 crisis began, any movement from one location to another within the country has been monitored and kept under the strict supervision of the MS-13 and 18th Street criminal groups, who control access to neighborhoods and limit the mobility of residents. Some Christians, especially those who are vocal against criminal activities, are hardly able to move freely at all, whether inside or outside communities.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.00 points)

As mentioned by US State Department (IRFR 2021): “The law restricts support of and interaction with gangs, including by clergy members, and defines gangs as terrorist organizations.” Thus, there is no freedom for Christian civil society organizations to develop activities in that field without running the risk of being prosecuted by the government, which was especially the case in the WWL 2023 reporting period. Additionally, in areas coopted by gangs, there have been situations where criminals have become aware of the funding received (often foreign) by some Christian civil society organizations. Assuming that these organizations must be handling large budgets, criminal groups have begun to charge them 'permission and protection' fees for operating in the area.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)

Christians wanting to report criminal activities may suffer serious consequences if they give statements which bring gang members into difficulties. Reprisals can be more violent than actually threatened. In addition, churches and Christian organizations also risk government action against them when they work with youth and former gang members and also when they denounce injustices perpetrated by the state. As a result, self-censorship is widespread among Christians. In fact, people are becoming increasingly afraid to share any information at all. Even for sharing information about religious persecution with foreign organizations, there could be reprisals for them and their relatives.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)

Despite the payment of protection fees, gang members will often stand in church doorways to intimidate Christians during services. The purpose is to check that the teaching is 'acceptable' and to report if something is announced that could be advantageous for the gang's criminal activities. On the other hand, the monitoring of Christian preaching and materials can also come from the police or other state agents who view with special suspicion any churches working among active and former gang members. This was especially the case during the WWL 2023 reporting period. Several young church members and youth leaders have been erroneously ar-

rested as suspected gang members. Church leaders are aware that their teaching activities are monitored and could put them at risk.

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (3.25 points)

Even when social work and rehabilitation programs conducted by churches are theoretically legal, the government has promoted a deep suspicion within society towards Christians involved in such youth-work. On another hand, since the usual age for gang recruits is 12-14 years of age, anyone preventing such recruitment (e.g. through education, social programs or evangelization) represents a threat to gangs and will therefore be targeted. The danger is so serious that some Christians have had to flee the country since some church leaders have already been assassinated.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Christian leaders are particular targets for harassment, especially if they conduct activities that endanger or defy the influence and authority of gangs in many areas of the country. Church leaders face threats, extortion, beating, forced displacement, and even killings. Their families, especially their children, are also attacked in order to intimidate them and stop their influence in the community. On another hand, Church leaders and faith-based NGO workers have stated that police and other government agents continue to carry out searches, arbitrarily detain, question and prosecute them because of their ministry among active and former gang members. Some church leaders deliberately avoid involvement in violence prevention and drug-rehabilitation programs, fearing prosecution or being perceived as sympathetic to gangs (even though the courts have ruled that drug-rehabilitation programs are not illegal according to the Constitution).

Church leaders also face harassment by the government and its supporters when they have called for the respect of Rule of Law, denounced human rights violations or have been critical of policies promoted by President Bukele.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor’s article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

El Salvador: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	3	3
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	4	5
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	63	0
6.4	How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	3	5
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	2	9
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100 *	100 *

6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	5
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	4
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	5	9
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	4

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians killed (3):** Church leaders and active church members were killed by gangs because they carried out activities that put at risk the stability and influence of the dominant criminal group in the area.
- **Christians detained (63):** During the state of emergency and under the excuse of fighting against gangs, the police arrested Christians at gatherings involving former gang members, even when there was sufficient information available showing that there were no current connections to criminal life.
- **Christians attacked (100*):** At least 100 Christians faced acts of violence for refusing to pay extortion money or for carrying out church activities not tolerated by gangs. There were also cases of Christians being physically abused by state officials during the implementation of government measures against gangs.
- **Christian sexually harassed (2):** Pastors' daughters were sexually harassed by gang members to force pastors to obey their rules. Young Christian women received threats of kidnapping and some became victims of human trafficking.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes (5):** These were cases of pastors in various parts of the country being forcibly displaced by gangs after receiving death-threats and pressure to collaborate with their criminal activities. These threats included their relatives.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

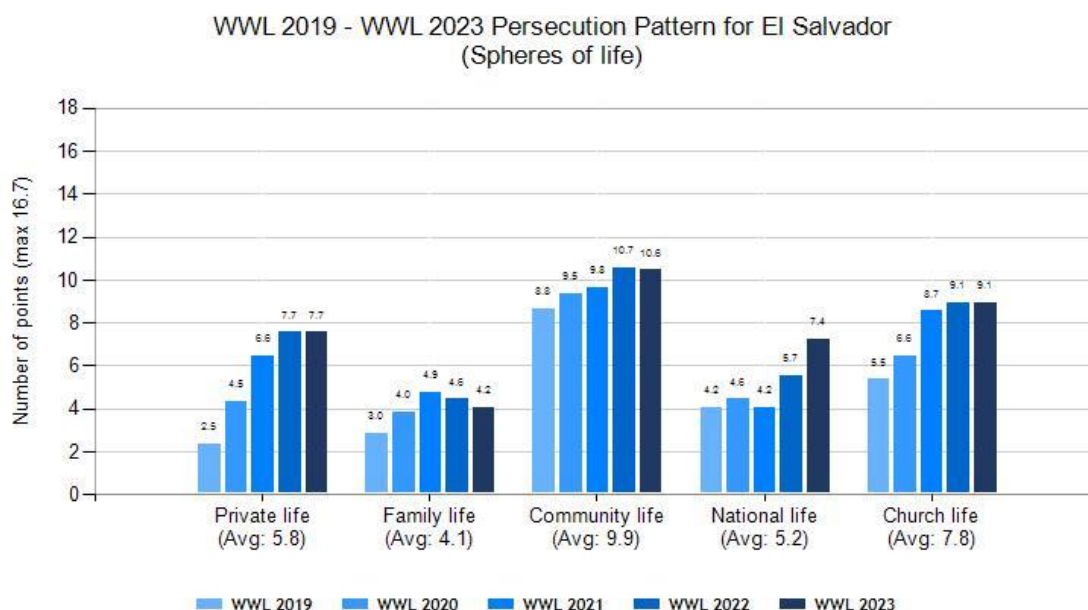
5 Year trends: Average pressure

The table below shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has increased in each reporting period and is now at the highest level (7.8 points) since WWL 2019. This is mainly the result of increased gang influence in the country that often regards church-work as a threat to their criminal interests. In more recent months, pressure has risen due to the vulnerability of churches when state officials do not respect human rights are not respected.

El Salvador: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023	
Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	7.8
2022	7.5
2021	6.8
2020	5.8
2019	4.8

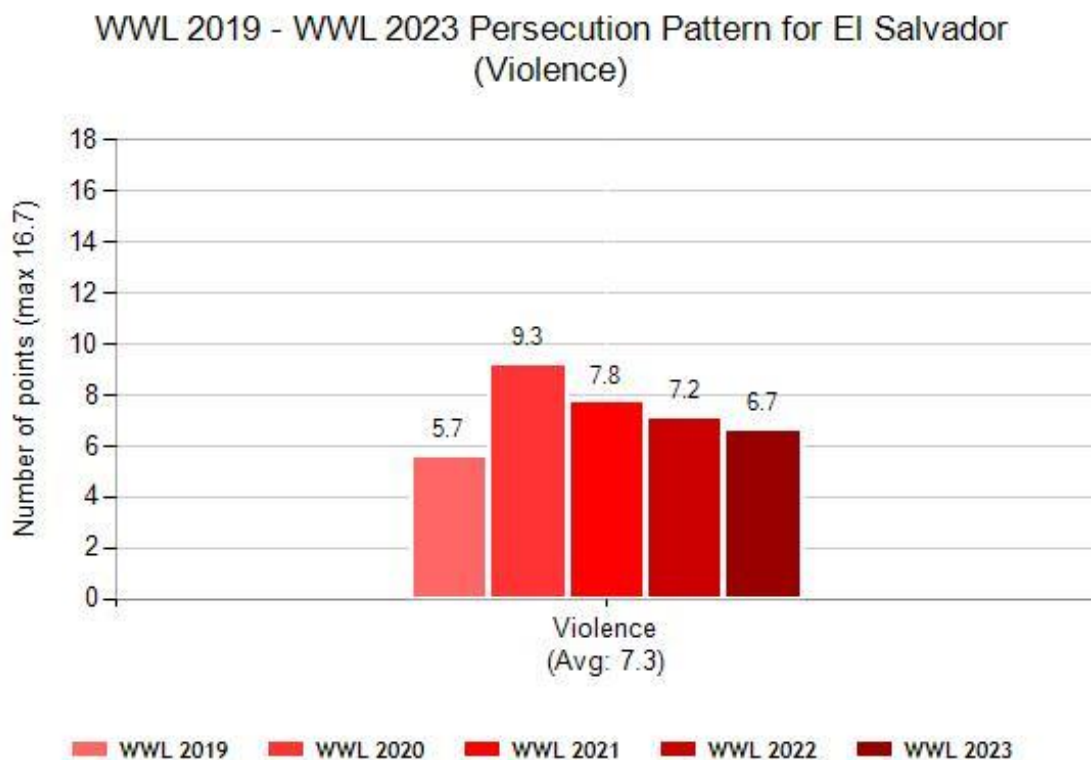
The table shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has increased in each reporting period and is now at the highest level (7.8 points) since WWL 2019. This is mainly the result of increased gang influence in the country that often regards church-work as a threat to their criminal interests. In more recent months, pressure has risen due to the vulnerability of churches when state officials do not respect en human rights are not respected.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that, in general, pressure in *all spheres of life* increased over the period WWL 2019 - WWL 2023, although in some areas there was a slight decrease in the last reporting period (WWL 2023) due to the immediate effect of government policies against organized crime. Pressure has been highest in the *Community* and *Church spheres*, showing the local influence of criminal territorial control. The recent large rises in pressure in *National life* is due to the progressive distancing of democratic practices by the government.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



In the chart above, the scores for violence have fluctuated but have been continually at a very high level. The majority of this violence is caused by the activity of gangs against Christians who are deemed to pose a threat to their territorial control. More recently this violence has also been caused by the harsh measures taken by government security forces against Christian former gang members.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Abduction; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Gender-specific religious persecution in El Salvador must be understood within a context of perpetuating cycles of violence, insecurity and criminal activity. Daily life is heavily impacted by the presence of gangs such as [MS-13 and Barrio-18](#), which reportedly took advantage of COVID-19 security measures to expand their criminal activity (BBC News, 27 March 2022). According to reports, numerous political leaders have been accused of collaborating with gangs in criminal

operations, or negotiating with them for personal gain (HRW 2023 country chapter). Gang activity is far from being eradicated, either because of state and police complicity, or because they simply do not have means to stop them due to a lack of state control in areas co-opted by criminal gangs ([Advocates for Human Rights, 22 March 2019](#)).

Within this context of violence and impunity for perpetrators, Christian women and girls fear a breadth of pressure and violence, most notably being forced into relationships with gang members or raped. Refusal is not an option and may result in them being killed, or family members being threatened. Daughters of pastors who actively work in gang territory are particularly targeted, both for their perceived purity and assumed obedience, and secondly as a way of intimidating the victim’s parents and halting pastoral activities in their gang territory. Sexual violence as a weapon of punishing girls, their families and wider society is reportedly common across El Salvador ([Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, accessed 26 January 2023](#)).

Women and girls also continue to suffer from stereotypes and prejudices about the role of women in the family and society. Women are slow to report domestic abuse, as the authorities consider such matters as marital problems, rather than a matter for the police. Finally, Christian women and girls are psychologically impacted by the extreme levels of pressure and violence directed at Christian men and boys, as detailed in the male gender profile below.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied custody of children; False charges; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Forced out of home – expulsion; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied/restricted healthcare; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Adolescent boys are particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment into gangs. Within these groups, they are forced to participate in initiation crime practices, run drugs and extort victims. Should he refuse, he puts his life - as well as the lives of his family members - at risk. In addition to being forced into gangs, Christians are commonly victims of gang violence. They are special targets of harassment, especially if they conduct activities that endanger the power and influence of gangs in certain areas. Pressures most commonly include threats, extortion, beatings and killings.

Pastors and church leaders, usually men, are particularly vulnerable. As many church leaders have used their position to actively speak out against the activity of gangs, or to minister to gang members, they have faced threats and reprisals. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, several leaders have been fined, harassed, threatened and assassinated. Exemplifying the dangers, in March 2022 an evangelical pastor was murdered in front of his own child ([TVM, 27 March 2022](#)). Church leaders have also been arbitrarily detained and questioned by state agents due to their ministry work with active and former gang members.

Gang members who convert to evangelical Christianity have historically been allowed to leave the gang on the grounds of their new religion. This is one of few possible pathways for members to leave gangs. According to one such member, there are [three options](#) available to young men in El Salvador: “You join the gang, you join the evangelical church. Or you leave El Salvador” (Insight Crime, 15 June 2022). Gangs have however, become more reticent to allow converts to leave in 2020; having lost members through the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict with police, they have been slow to let remaining members go. New converts who are allowed to leave will be constantly monitored, both by their old gang as well as rival gangs, to make sure that they do not join a new gang. In addition to being monitored by gangs, converts also experience challenges trying to reintegrate into society as Christians, particularly as many are visibly marked by scars and tattoos that indicate their former allegiance, making them more vulnerable to suspicion and arrest. Several reports of re-arrests of former gang members, including pastors, were recorded under the [protracted](#) State of Emergency, which has seen more than 60,000 people detained, amid [widespread](#) human rights violations (Al-Jazeera, 12 January 2023, HRW, 7 December 2022).

In light of constant threats and other acts of pressure and violence, many Christian men choose to flee El Salvador.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

Bahai groups reported difficulties experienced in making contact with their adherents in gang-controlled territories. They stressed the importance of being able to file complaints with law enforcement agencies and the ombudsman for human rights.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of the main persecution engine in the country:

Organized corruption and crime

Government action aiming to eradicate the presence of criminal groups throughout national territory has succeeded in reducing their influence, at least in the short term. However, the violence figures will not necessarily reflect this, due to the government carrying out human rights violations against its citizens under the guise of suppressing criminal activity. Any policy against crime needs to guarantee human rights and avoid any abuse of power. In order to prevent criminal groups from returning to strength in the medium/long-term and to prevent

violence from intensifying in the country, social projects need to be introduced among the younger generation in communities where there is particular risk of gang recruitment. Church humanitarian work along these lines can be seen as a positive contribution to the common good.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: MS-13 and Barrio-18 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-60893048>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Advocates for Human Rights, 22 March 2019 - <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=260>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, accessed 26 January 2023 - https://cgrs.uchastings.edu/talking_points_and_stories
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: TVM, 27 March 2022 - <https://tvm.com.sv/2022/03/27/asesinan-a-pastor-evangelico-en-ciudad-barrios/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: three options - <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/gospel-man-church-gang/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: protracted - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/12/el-salvador-renews-state-of-emergency-as-gang-crackdown-continues#:~:text=El%20Salvador's%20legislature%20has%20extended,tens%20of%20thousands%20of%20people.>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: widespread - <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/12/07/we-can-arrest-anyone-we-want/widespread-human-rights-violations-under-el>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- [https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=El Salvador](https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=El%20Salvador)