

World
Watch
Research

El Salvador: Full Country Dossier

March 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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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 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / El Salvador

Brief country details

El Salvador: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
6,512,000	6,271,000	96.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

El Salvador: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
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 2018-2022 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. In this context, 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. Certain authorities in collusion with the gangs contribute to the impunity of these actions. Also, ideological pressure groups are often

aggressively opposed to biblical views being expressed publicly, particularly concerning life from conception, marriage, family and sexual ethics.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

March 2021 - Chalatenango: Miguel Vásquez, Roman Catholic priest of San Bartolomé Apóstol church in Arcatao, made a public complaint about fraud taking place in the municipal elections held on 28 February 2021. In response he received [death-threats](#) (YSUCA, 13 March 2021).

April 2021 – San Salvador: Ricardo de Jesús Mejía Alfaro, pastor of the Elim Church in Apopa, was [shot dead](#). The pastor preached in gang-controlled areas and part of his ministry involved visiting believers in their homes. The incident is believed to have occurred when he was making one of these visits (Diario1, 1 April 2021).

May 2021 – Various: According to Open Doors Research sources, 5 properties which had been donated for conversion into church-run drug rehabilitation and refuge centers (in Cuscatlan, La Libertad and La Unión) were seized by local criminal gangs who have prevented all access since then. It is believed that weapons and drugs are being stockpiled inside.

Specific examples of positive developments

The Church in El Salvador continues to be a place of help for those most in need, particularly through Catholic NGO Caritas, which is included as a partner in the [UN Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (UN, September 2020).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: death-threats - <https://ysuca.org/sacerdote-jesuita-es-amenazado-en-arcatao-por-denunciar-irregularidades-en-las-elecciones-del-municipio/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: shot dead - <http://diario1.com/nacionales/2021/04/sicarios-matan-a-pastor-que-predicaba-en-zonas-controladas-por-pandillas/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: UN Humanitarian Response Plan - https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Plan%20de%20Respuesta%20Humanitaria_SV_rev08122020.pdf

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / El Salvador

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/el-salvador/	4 October 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19401932	4 October 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/SLV	4 October 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/	4 October 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	4 October 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	4 October 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2021	4 October 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report (Not included)	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/el-salvador	4 October 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/el-salvador	4 October 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/central.htm#sv	4 October 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/el-salvador	4 October 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/slv	4 October 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI 2020	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SLV	4 October 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/el-salvador/	4 October 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports (Not included)	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador	4 October 2021

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).

During the COVID-19 health emergency, tropical storms Amanda and Cristobal hit El Salvador in May and June 2020. A state of [national emergency](#) was called due to the severity of the storms, which damaged 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

In February 2020, Nayib Bukele was accused of staging an "[attempted coup](#)" after he entered the legislative assembly accompanied by armed police and soldiers demanding that the legislative assembly approve a \$109m loan to finance the third phase of his security plan called "Plan Control Territorial" (BBC News, 11 February 2020). Bukele also [defied](#) congress votes and constitutional court orders over lockdown enforcement measures related to the COVID-19 crisis (Jurist, 18 April 2020). Until February 2021, there was an opposition majority in parliament, which caused many conflicts between the executive power and the legislative and judicial powers. However, in the legislative elections held in February 2021, 55 deputies affiliated with the ruling New Ideas Party and 6 members of allied party Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GAN) were [elected](#). With a clear majority supporting the president, 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). This move was criticized at the [national and international level](#) as an attack on the democratic system (France, 2 May 2021). The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) the decision for violating the constitutional norms that regulate the procedure and the Inter-American standards for the removal of justice operators, such as due cause, right of defense and due process (IACHR, 3 May 2021).

In general, there has been a growing concentration of power through measures that weaken the rule of law in the country. In addition to those already mentioned:

- In June 2021, the work of the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (which had been set up through an agreement with the OAS in September 2019) was [abruptly terminated](#) (OAS, June 2021).
- In August 2021, the Assembly approved a [new Judicial Career Law](#) that automatically retires judges who are over 60 years old or have served for more than 30 years. This measure has a direct impact on the investigation of the El Mozote case since, due to his age, the Judge in charge, Jorge Guzmán Urquilla, would be forced to retire (CejiL, September 2021). A [Law to Reform the Attorney General's Office](#) was also approved which can be interpreted as a mechanism for removing officials who oppose the interests of the ruling party (Directorio Legislativo, accessed January 2022). Many see these measures as a purge of independent judges.
- In September 2021, the new [Constitutional Chamber](#) opened the door for President Nayib Bukele to compete for a second consecutive term in 2024 (Wola, 9 September 2022).

The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) the decision for violating the constitutional norms that regulate the procedure and the Inter-American standards for the removal of justice operators, such as due cause, right of defense and due process (IACHR, 3 May 2021). The UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers [called](#) on the international community to take action against the "dismantling of the judiciary" in El Salvador by President Bukele and the Legislative Assembly (Swissinfo, 2 May 2021).

Despite the president's action against democratic institutions, in general, this did not affect his popularity: 84.7% of Salvadorans approve of the work that President Nayib Bukele has done in his two years and three months in office, according to a recent [survey](#) conducted by LPG Data (LPG, 3 September 2021). Nevertheless, at the end of the WWL 2022 reporting period, citizens did go out to [demonstrate against](#) the president's latest measures in concentrating power (AP News, 15 September 2021).

As a result of the president's undemocratic action, the relationship between El Salvador and the USA has become [tense](#) (El País, 9 February 2021). USAID [redirected](#) humanitarian assistance away from channels administrated by state institutions (like the National Civilian Police and the Institute for Access to Public Information) and instead chose to direct aid through civil society organizations (USAID, 21 May 2021). In May 2021, the US government compiled a list of Central American politicians found to be corrupt or involved in drug trafficking, [including](#) President Bukele's chief cabinet minister (The Washington Post, 18 May 2021). The list, [updated](#) in September 2021, includes 19 public officials from El Salvador (US State Department Press Statement, 20 September 2021). The US Congress is also [assessing](#) the Biden Administration's \$860.6 million FY2022 request for assistance to Central America, which includes at least \$95.8 million for El Salvador (Congressional Research Service, September 2021). The House-passed version of the FY2022 State and Foreign Operations appropriations measure (H.R. 4373) provides \$860.6 million in assistance for Central America but prohibits Foreign Military Financing for El Salvador and withholds 75% of assistance to the central government until nine conditions are met.

In response to this pressure, in May 2021, El Salvador and China [ratified](#) the Framework Agreement for the Establishment of the Bilateral Cooperation Mechanism for the Execution of Economic and Technical Assistance Projects, an agreement for 500 million dollars in non-reimbursable public investment and without conditions (La Nueva Asamblea Legislativa, 19 May 2021).

In 2019, faced with the refugee and displacement crisis, the government joined the Regional Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS, 2020) together with Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama. El Salvador [assumed](#) the ProTempore Presidency for 2020 (UNHCR, 2020).

Leading figures in the country and abroad continued to be [concerned](#) about i) the Bukele administration's failure to ensure the existence of independent institutions; ii) the president's increasingly authoritarian approach to government; and iii) the repeated attacks against independent journalists and media outlets (AP News, 14 June 2021). Church leaders have also shown their concern about the authoritarian course the government is taking. On more than

one occasion they have made calls for the government to uphold [respect](#) for institutions and democracy (Swissinfo, 26 July 2021).

Religious landscape

El Salvador: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	6,271,000	96.3
Muslim	1,900	0.0
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	660	0.0
Ethno-religionist	36,400	0.6
Jewish	580	0.0
Bahai	5,600	0.1
Atheist	7,900	0.1
Agnostic	186,000	2.9
Other	2,840	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

El Salvador is a Christian majority country and mostly 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.

According to the El Salvador Public Opinion Study #110 conducted by CID Gallup, in a single generation the Catholic Church has [lost](#) 17 percent of its parishioners and has become the number two religion in El Salvador. Evangelicals are now the preferred religion of Salvadorans (CID Gallup, Mayo 2020). Every 31 October the Reformation Day of the evangelical churches is [commemorated](#) (El Salvador, 30 October 2019). In addition, a bill was proposed to reform the Constitution, to legally [recognize](#) the Evangelical Christian Church of El Salvador and other non-Catholic denominations (El Salvador, 4 February 2021), however, the bill did not advance. Often, some officials and secular groups are claiming that the legal recognition of any religious body in the Constitution contradicts the secular nature of the state.

Faced with the latest political events, church leaders spoke out [rejecting](#) the president's use of the armed forces and the national police inside the Legislative Assembly building (Ysuca, 12 February 2021). Also, some church leaders have spoken out in [support](#) of farmers and families affected by increased government militarization in the border region (Catholic News Service, 28 October 2020). In addition, church leaders have [criticized](#) the lack of will on the part of the authorities to stop the tension existing between the legislative (Agenzia Fides, 2 February 2021) and the executive and have 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 (WCRC) and its regional council, and the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America (AIPRAL) (Agencia Ecumenica de Comunicación, 11 May 2021). Towards the end of the WWL 2022 reporting period, the church was also a [strong critic](#) of further reforms, for instance concerning presidential re-election (Arpas, 13 September 2021).

Although President Bukele sometimes shows signs of intolerance towards criticism expressed by religious leaders, he has also made use of religious references associated with Christianity to give some legitimacy to his questionable political actions. Thus, President Bukele has not only called himself an ["instrument of God"](#) to change the country's history (ElSalvadorGram, 23 March 2021), but 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). This has generated confusion among many Christians, especially in the evangelical churches, and a false appearance of unity between religious leaders and the president, whose actions are closer to dictatorship than democracy. 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.

During the February 2021 parliamentary elections, a delegation of 80 members representing the Ecumenical Forum of the Latin American Council of Churches (FECLAI) acted as [electoral observers](#) (Swissinfo, 26 January 2021). The churches belonging to FECLAI are the Anglican Episcopal Church, Calvinist Reformed Church, Emmanuel Baptist Church and the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. They stated that this civic task is also a [way of 'being Church'](#) (Agencia Ecumenica de Comunciación, 3 March 2021). The Roman Catholic Church also issued [statements](#) reminding citizens to exercise their right to vote, and candidates to consider the weight of responsibility they bear (Vatican News, 22 February 2021).

In a context dominated by general insecurity and violence caused by gangs (sometimes operating in collusion with the authorities), churches have attempted to protect young people from criminal influence. Historically, the state's response to the problem of gangs has been an iron fist policy (including the current administration). In contrast, evangelical groups in particular have been working at grassroots level in communities to help youth avoid recruitment and anyone wishing to leave a criminal way of life.

Interestingly, many gang members consider themselves religious or, at least, regard some manifestations of Christian faith as acceptable. Gangs 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 that also influences 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 churches of their choice. 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, which was especially evident during the COVID-19 crisis: Church leaders have had to respect gang schedules, allow their facilities to be used for various gang activities and request authorization from local gangs for travel to or from other areas; Christian leaders cannot preach freely, make home visits or carry out activities that could directly harm gang recruitment of youth. The degree of intimidation, pressure or violence 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), they are allowed to 'calm down' and not participate in criminal activities as long they [embrace](#) the evangelical faith in the approved way (BBC News, 15 July 2019). 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 more aggressive government policy aiming to eradicate the presence of organized crime: The gangs need as many active members as possible. Due to the government's harsh anti-crime policies, some churches may be viewed as colluding with gangs or as being dangerous (where pastoral work is carried out among gang members).

Finally, as in most Latin American countries, there are ideological pressure groups (such as LGBT+ 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 in 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. Ideological 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). The Church has not hesitated to [support](#) the president in not promoting constitutional reforms favoring abortion or euthanasia (Secretaría de Prensa de la Presidencia, 26 September 2021).

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI 2020:

- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita (2019):** 8,359
- **GNI per capita for women:** 6,471
- **GNI per capita for men:** 10, 501
- **Inequality in income:** 21,8%
- **Poverty:** 9.9%

According to the World Bank (country overview):

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the poverty rate is expected to increase up to 5.9 percentage points. El Salvador has one of the largest shares of vulnerable population in the region (48 percent), and further decline in economic activity could result in a significantly higher number of people falling into poverty. The crisis also impacted growth in 2020, with GDP contracting significantly by 7.9 percent. In 2021, growth is showing signs of recovery, supported by remittance-fueled consumption and exports. El Salvador's economy is expected to grow by 8 percent in 2021 and 4 percent in 2022. COVID-19 vaccination rates were among the highest in the region.

According to the [September 2021 Economic Report](#) of the Central Reserve Bank (BCR, June 2021):

- The expansion of the Economic Activity Volume Index (IVAE) was produced mainly by the growth of a) Commerce, transportation, lodging and food services (15.5%), b) Professional, scientific and technical activities (29.0%), c) Manufacturing industries, exploitation of mines and quarries and other activities (8.7%), d) Public administration and defense, teaching and health (7.5%). Together, these activities contributed 8.7 points of the observed growth of 10.5%. The result during this period is related to the recovery process of economic activities, the increase in formal employment and the demand for industrial goods both internally and externally.
- As of July 2021, the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS) registered an upward variation of 4,646 contributors compared to June, while in relation to July 2020 an increase of 69,654 contributors was registered. Broken down by sectors, the private sector has recovered 61,703 jobs in relation to the year 2020; for its part, the public sector has increased by 7,951 positions, although in the last month a reduction of 891 positions can be seen.
- At the end of September 2021, remittances had increased significantly compared to 2020. The continued reduction in the unemployment rate of Latinos living in the USA and the recent announcement of the renewal of the Temporary Protected Status (until 31 December 2022) for Salvadoran beneficiaries are expected to favor stability in the sending of family remittances to El Salvador.

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, 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 [pointed out](#) that the adoption of digital currencies in emerging countries could undermine exchange and capital controls and alter financial stability (France24, 7 October 2021).

Additionally, the context of violence has had a negative effect on the economy as can be seen in the [increases](#) in the National Defense and Public Security budgets for 2021 (Ministerio de Hacienda, October 2020). The National Defense budget increased from 220.4 million to 248 million (12.5% more compared to 2020) and the Public Security budget rose from 554.7 million

to 655.3 million (18% more compared to 2020).

The economic crisis has also affected the churches in the country, since the number of people requesting help increased and the level of donated aid etc. decreased. The government approved a request made by the Evangelical Association for [government funds to be made available](#) to evangelical leaders for distribution in vulnerable areas (La Prensa, 10 September 2020). However, many pastors and Christians expressed their disagreement with this measure.

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%
- **Main language:** Spanish
- **Urban population:** 74.1% of total population (2021)
- **Literacy rate:** 89.1% (2019)

According to the World Bank (country profile):

- **Population aged 15-64:** 64.758 (2020)
- **School enrollment:** For preprimary (2019) is 63.179%; for primary (2019) is 90.313% and for secondary (2019) is 68.667%
- **Compulsory school education:** The duration of compulsory education, duration (years) is 15
- **Gender Parity Index (GPI):** 0.988
- **Unemployment:** 6.98%
- **IDPs/Refugee population by country or territory of origin:** 45,640 (2020)

According to the UNDP's HDI 2020:

- **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:** 73.3 (2019) Between 1990 and 2019, El Salvador's life expectancy at birth increased by 9.3 years.
- **Gender Inequality Index (2019) score and ranking:** 0.383 points at rank 85 out of 162 countries.

According to the 2020-2021 Social Situation Report, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the population, with the most affected being those who were already in a vulnerable situation (FUSADES, October 2021). Data from the 2019 and 2020 Multi-Purpose Household Surveys (EHPM) show that the rural population faces greater challenges than the urban population in accessing basic goods and services. The inequalities between the two areas persist and, for the most part, worsened after a year of the pandemic. The widest disparities are access to the Internet, piped water and health care. Both food insecurity and income poverty worsened in both areas. 21 of every 100 rural households and 15 of every 100 urban households were in a situation of food insecurity. Many boys and girls from 0 to 7 years old have been outside the formal educational system, leaving their development in the hands of their relatives. However,

many live in poverty, inadequate housing, economic instability and without computers or parental skills to accompany the process. Proof of this is the pandemic, a context in which some children managed to study due to the closure of schools and others not, putting early childhood development at risk, increasing pre-existing gaps in education and generating an unequal loss of learning. 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).

COVID-19:

- Human Rights Watch reported that, during the COVID-19 lockdown, President Bukele ordered law enforcement agents to detain violators and send them to overcrowded containment centers (HRW 2021).
- Gangs and other criminal groups continue to control entire communities. In various neighborhoods, armed groups and gangs [targeted](#) people and interfered with privacy, family and home life. Efforts by the authorities to combat this were generally ineffective (US State Department, Human Rights Report 2020). In some areas of El Salvador, the gangs imposed or reinforced [confinement measures](#) (BBC News, 23 April 2020) and took [control](#) of all humanitarian activities in their territories (Revista Factum, 26 May 2020). Pressure and violence exerted by gangs also affected the activities of civil society organizations working to improve the living conditions of the most neglected communities. The organization Doctors without Borders was forced to temporarily [suspend](#) its operations in the country after an ambulance team was attacked in Ilopango (eastern San Salvador) by an armed group (Reuters, 31 January 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](#), a complex interaction between gang violence, domestic abuse and food insecurity increasing poverty is forcing displacement from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (UNHCR, September 2021). 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'. According to the [III Annual Report](#) of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solution Framework, there were 71,599 IDPS, refugees and asylum seekers in the country in 2020 (MIRPS, 2020). Various church-affiliated organizations run programs bringing humanitarian and other forms of support to such vulnerable groups.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 68.3% of the population – survey date: March 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 68.3% penetration – survey date: March 2021

According to World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 161.102 per 100 people

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2021):

- Journalists are among the victims of the widespread violence and drug trafficking in El Salvador. State legislation provides the media with little protection, and officials harass and threaten journalists who try to investigate corruption or government finances. Since taking office as president in June 2019, Nayib Bukele has attacked and threatened journalists critical of his government, has blocked many of them on social media, and has attempted to portray the media as an enemy of the people.

According to [BuddeComm](#) Research (updated April 2021):

- 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. The multi-spectrum auction conducted at the end of 2019 has allowed MNOs to improve the reach and quality of their service offerings. El Salvador's telecom legislation is one of the most 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. BuddeComm notes that the Covid-19 pandemic 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, which will continue into 2021.

It is important to note that during the previous government administration, there had been a constant increase in violations targeting the media. The attacks were mainly focused on restrictions on journalism, digital attack, blocking access to public information and unjustified dismissal, not to mention life-threatening mishandling by members of the police and army. The Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) registered as of September 2021, [177 attacks](#) against journalists, 34 of them carried out by the National Civil Police (Latam Journalism Review, September 2021). For its part, the Roundtable for the Protection of Journalists issued a [statement](#) indicating that the government had intensified its campaign of attacks and harassment against the country's independent press (Apes, 20 September 2021). Employees of the Legislative Assembly, high-level public officials and even the president have intensified their

attacks, threats and smear-campaigns against journalists who publicized cases of corruption in the current administration.

The Legislative Assembly [reformed](#) the Special Law on Computer and Related Crimes 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).

As in many countries in the region, Christians in the country have made use of the technology at their disposal for continuing church work during the pandemic. According to [statements](#) by a senior pastor of the Elim Christian Mission, where churches located in areas of poverty suspended meeting for church services, 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).

Security situation

Unlike other Central American governments, the Salvadoran government has made a concerted effort to end violence in the country. The overall relationship between gangs and the police is not collaborative, but adversarial (according to organizations such as Insight Crime and Coalitions for Resilience). Gangs [target](#) state security forces and vice versa (Global Initiative, May 2019), although there are at times some cases of corruption and collusion.

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 approximately seven 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.

A high percentage of homicides in the country are carried out by gangs, but figures indicate an overall decrease in homicidal violence. According to [police data](#), between 1 January and 9 December 2021, there 33 days without any murders occurring (Gobierno de El Salvador, December 2021). Since January 2020, there have been 70 days in total without any killing. The month when the most days without murders were recorded was in August 2021. According to the authorities in charge of state security, the sustained drop in homicides between July and December 2021 is a result of the implementation of Phase 4 of the government's Territorial Control Plan. However, the Attorney General's Office has an investigation open to determine whether government officials have [made some sort of pact](#) with gangs to bring about this

decrease (Insight Crime, 20 January 2021). An investigation by the independent media outlet El Faro has [indicated](#) the high possibility of there being a background agreement between the government and the three most influential gangs in the country (El Faro, September 2020). The news outlet provided audio clips, photographs and testimonies to highlight the president's contacts with gang leaders in exchange for improvements in prison conditions and benefits for their released members. The editor of the newspaper El Faro was [expelled](#) from the country for this reporting (Prensa Libre, July 2021). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted [precautionary measures](#) in favor of 34 journalists from the editorial office of El Faro due to their "serious situation and urgent risk" (CIDH, February 2021).

During his election campaign, Nayib Bukele promised to deal with violence in the country through a culture of peace and working hand in hand with civil organizations. As a result, the Bukele government has set up [community centers](#) to help keep young people away from gang violence (Global Initiative, 2020). However, most funding has been steered into the security forces, which has created an increase in violence and violations of human rights through the president's 'iron fist' policy (Crisis Group, 8 July 2020). An example of this occurred in April 2020 after a four-day eruption of gang violence. President Bukele responded by ordering the country's prisons to [declare](#) a "maximum emergency in every detention facility holding gang members", meaning inhumane conditions, absolute lockdown, solitary confinement, sealed cells, and the placement of rival gang leaders in the same cells (HRW, 29 April 2020). The rival leaders inside the prisons managed to implement [norms of coexistence to survive](#) (El Diario, 4 July 2020). This was an internal truce that, although not replicated in the streets, may eventually reinforce the gangs' networks if they find a common enemy in the state.

Gang violence is far from resolved, however. The new [risk](#) is that the gangs are getting considerably less funds from extortion due to the pacification of the streets and the lockdown restrictions, so in case of non-compliance, the response from the extortioners could be significantly more violent (El País, 28 February 2021). In addition, the gangs still retain territorial control over the areas where they have been operating for decades. The government has not been able to reduce the influence of criminal groups because a situation has now emerged in which gang members need their neighborhood territory to survive, and the neighborhood often needs the gang, since it is these non-state agents who provide those living in their territory with 'security' and meet their immediate needs. In the communities, the gangs offer a completely different way of life from that offered elsewhere by the government. It is easier and 'safer' for young people to join gangs than to invest time in academic studies or employment opportunities offered by the government, which may lead nowhere. Gang members say they are the local authorities and often set up gates to control the entrance of communities. As a result, citizens in such areas have [nowhere](#) where they could file a complaint (Facebook Citizen complaint, 13 July 2021). 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 '[ren](#)' to enter a certain area (WCJU Journal, January 2020).

Christians suffer the same consequences as the rest of the population but can become particular targets if their teaching and church activities endanger criminal operations. Although 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 lock-

down 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 now hold their services in the early afternoon, to ensure that church worshippers can be back at 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, and some have been killed (WCJU Journal, January 2020).

Trends analysis

1) The influence of criminal gangs has affected far more than just security

The territorial control exercised by the most powerful gangs in the country is an undeniable fact. Their activities over time have not only influenced national security but have deepened the overall state of crisis in the country in its political, economic, migratory, legal and healthcare dimensions. Even when a criminal group's relationship with government authorities is not clear, their actions remain unpunished most of the time, which has caused the level of fear in the general population to rise. Churches have become more vulnerable in these circumstances too, especially where they run programs seeking to protect young people from gang life and/or refuse to give in to extortion or threats.

2) The lack of respect for democracy and human rights is a major concern

Government practices that do not guarantee full respect for democracy and the rule of law generate a context of insecurity. Many government measures show no clear signs of transparency and legality and have led to a greater weakening of the country's institutions. The country's instability becomes particularly visible when attempts are made to silence critical voices from civil society, including church leaders when they call for the respect for human rights, and churches when they set up programs to care for those most in need.

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 emergency - https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UN_Situation%20Report%2010_COVID19_del%2027%20MAY%20al%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: attempted coup - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51458947>
- Political and legal landscape: defied - <https://www.jurist.org/news/2020/04/el-salvador-president-defies-supreme-court-order-on-covid-19-detention/>

- Political and legal landscape: elected. - <https://diario.elmundo.sv/escrutinio-final-estos-seran-los-84-diputados-y-sus-marcas/>
- 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: national and international level - <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20210502-salvador-asamblea-bukele-destitucion-fiscal-magistrados-constitucional>
- Political and legal landscape: condemned - http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2021/110.asp
- Political and legal landscape: abruptly terminated - https://www.oas.org/es/centro_noticias/comunicado_prensa.asp?sCodigo=C-059/21
- Political and legal landscape: new Judicial Career Law - <https://cejil.org/comunicado-de-prensa/reforma-a-la-ley-de-carrera-judicial-amenaza-investigacion-de-el-mozote-corte-interamericana-pide-informacion-al-estado-salvadoreno/#:~:text=%20El%20pasado%20de%20septiembre,o%20quienes%20hay%C3%A1n%20cumplido%2030>
- Political and legal landscape: Law to Reform the Attorney General's Office - <https://directoriolegislativo.org/es/como-nayib-bukele-se-esta-convirtiendo-en-el-dictador-mas-cool-del-mundo-mundial/>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitutional Chamber - <https://www.wola.org/es/2021/09/el-salvador-presidente-reeleccion-judicial/>
- Political and legal landscape: condemned - http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2021/110.asp
- Political and legal landscape: called - https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-supremo_relator-de-onu-condena-intento-de-destituci%C3%B3n-de-magistrados-salvadore%C3%B1os/46583206
- Political and legal landscape: survey - <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/lpgdatos/LPG-Datos--Aprobacion-de-Bukele-casi-indemne-20210903-0001.html>
- Political and legal landscape: demonstrate against - <https://apnews.com/article/technology-elections-bitcoin-nayib-bukele-el-salvador-b4ca6f06417074dbd254a205a452b426>
- Political and legal landscape: tense - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-02-09/mas-presion-sobre-el-salvador-y-nicaragua-joe-biden-dibuja-una-nueva-relacion-con-centroamerica.html>
- Political and legal landscape: redirected - <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-21-2021-usaid-redirects-assistance-salvadoran-government-institutions-civil-society>
- Political and legal landscape: including - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/18/central-america-corruption/>
- Political and legal landscape: updated - <https://www.state.gov/united-states-announces-actions-against-seven-central-american-officials-for-undermining-democracy-and-obstructing-investigations-into-acts-of-corruption/>
- Political and legal landscape: assessing - https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2021-09-17_IN11658_a06cbc9d6f6b1909e046608fd86cb415e2a64e82.pdf
- Political and legal landscape: ratified - <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/11239>
- Political and legal landscape: assumed - <https://www.acnur.org/5f11bb644.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: concerned - <https://apnews.com/article/caribbean-el-salvador-democracy-6487ee734dacf9adc3d90abe9fe1f61f>
- 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
- Religious landscape description: lost - https://observatoriocovid19.sv/doc/biblioteca/nac/InformeOP_EI%20Salvador110N3.pdf
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WWL 2022: Church information / El Salvador

Christian origins

According to [Oxford Reference](#) (accessed 29 March 2021):

- "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 recognised 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	4,607,000	73.5
Protestant	1,061,000	16.9
Independent	1,086,000	17.3
Unaffiliated	25,300	0.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-509,000	-8.1
Total	6,270,300	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	794,000	12.7
Renewalist movement	1,720,000	27.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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 73.5% of all Christians according to WCD 2021 estimates. However, in recent years there has been a great increase in the presence of other Christian denominations, especially in the poorest areas of the country.

External Links - Church information

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

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / El Salvador

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

El Salvador: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
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 2018-2022 reporting periods

El Salvador rose 3 points in WWL 2022. Although there were less recorded violent incidents, the average pressure on Christians rose substantially, mainly due to the active presence of criminal groups in most areas of the country. As a result, there are big gaps in public policies, which are more difficult to fulfill when gangs act in collusion with government offices at different levels. Christians find themselves at the mercy of criminal leaders, especially when they carry out social work among the youth and former gang members. The government also rejects much of the criticism made by churches and Christian leaders, when they denounce the lack of respect for the rule of law and democratic practices.

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	Very 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 to 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 the Church.

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 involves the 'wrong' church or the leader is not interested in losing active members of the gang, the mere intention of conversion represents a risk for the life of the member and his family.

Drivers of persecution

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

- **Organized crime cartels (Strong):** The insecurity resulting from violent gang activities and territorial control represents a threat to the whole of society. In many areas, 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.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Even though the current government administration seems to have had some success in the fight against crime, many of the historical and deep ties of collusion between state officials, political representatives and criminal leaders are still intact and therefore negate the supposed progress in the fight against impunity. In this

context, the government's heavy-handed policies do not generate the desired impact if there are no concrete actions to combat the corruption of officials. Thus, although the measures against criminals are more severe in appearance, they are not comprehensive enough and still leave room for unpunished actions against churches.

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 2022 reporting period were Ahuachapan, Cuscatlan, La Libertad, La Unión, Morazan, San Miguel, San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate and Usulután.

Christian communities and how they are affected

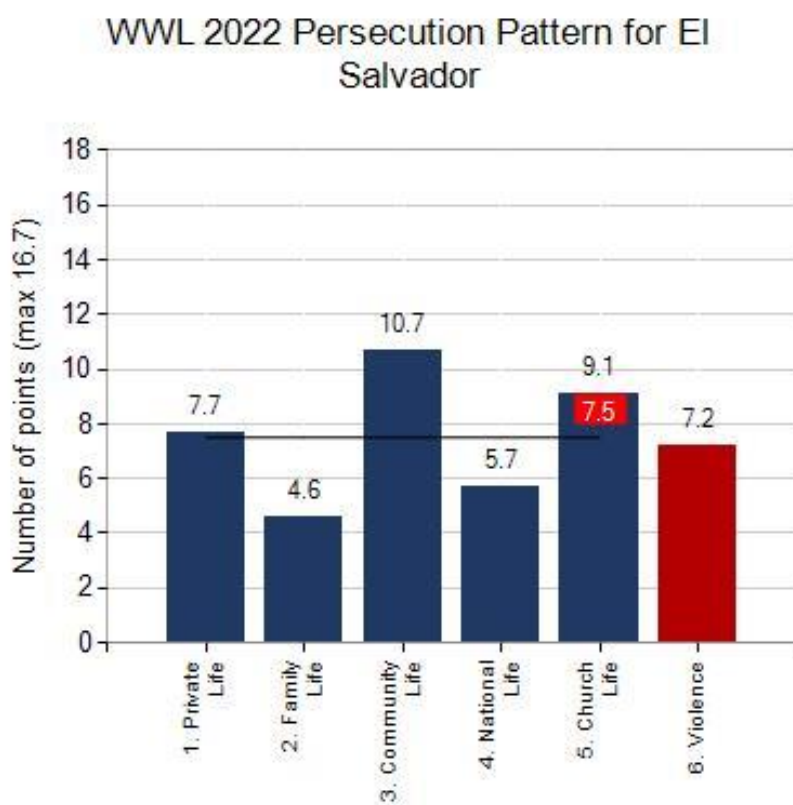
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation and are therefore not treated as a separate category for WWL scoring and analysis.

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 the same kind of persecution as traditional historical communities. They sometimes suffer persecution from their original gang, rival gangs, and security forces. However, as discussed above, there are some cases when the conversion is allowed if it is considered true according to the gang leader's judgement.

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 traditional communities and additionally, 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 are without risk when carrying out church activities which defy criminal interests.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for El Salvador shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in El Salvador is 7.5 points, an increase from 6.8 points in WWL 2021.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community sphere* (10.7 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 7.2 points, a decrease from 7.8 in WWL 2021. Christians continue to be targeted for killings, abduction and other kinds of violence where their church activities are seen as a threat to local gang interests.

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 2022 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 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.00 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. 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.

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 could be dangerous if considered as 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 some signs of intolerance against Christians using social media for airing biblical principles concerning the defense of life and family.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (2.50 points)

Although many gang members use religious symbolism in their tattoos, the gangs control the display of Christian images or symbols in their territories depending on whether the person is affiliated with a church that is friendly to them, whether they carry out activities that do not contradict their authority and, above all, if they have paid the required extortion fee. This situation represents an uncertainty for many Christians because they do not know to what extent and in what territories, the religious symbols they use will not be considered a threat to the control exercised by the gangs in those jurisdictions.

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

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.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.00 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. (3.00 points)

Children of Christian religious leaders known for activities opposing organized crime may face retaliation because they are considered a threat to the stability of the clique. 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 the local gang. If they oppose this, all the family members run the risk of being attacked. According to in-country sources, there are cases where schoolchildren from small non-traditional Christian groups are mocked by their classmates due to their parents being considered 'extremists'.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (2.75 points)

In areas where the presence of gangs is more prevalent, stricter anti-COVID measures rules were imposed than required by the government. For this reason, even funeral services were prohibited and burial was also prevented from properly following Christian rites. There were also cases in which gangs did not allow the families of those they considered their enemies to perform Christian funeral rites for them, even when it was a Christian leader assassinated by them.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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.). (3.25 points)

Gang members monitor the activities of the inhabitants of the community over which they exercise 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. (3.25 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 after being related with gang members. 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, any form of extortion implies a death threat or the possibility 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). (3.25 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. This extortion is basically protection money (or a 'war tax') which Christians and others pay in exchange for being able to move from one area of the community to another, continue with their own businesses, meet with others and carry out humanitarian assistance.

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

This situation occurs in three scenarios: a) Gangs: Criminal groups force Christian converts 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) The state police: Officers can at times interrogate Christians - sometimes violently - to find out details about the activities of the gangs in the area. Generally, Christians are 'chosen' for that purpose because they are presumed not to lie. In this case, they become an easy target to identify in case of possible retaliation by gangs. It is anyway unsafe to provide information to the police because in some cases they collude with criminal groups; and c) Gangs: Christians are forced by gangs to provide information about personal and church life that could endanger the illegal activities of the local gang. In any case, Christians are at risk.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Ever since the COVID-19 crisis began, any movement from one location to another within the country has been monitored and under the strict supervision of the MS-13 and 18th Street criminal groups. Some Christians, especially those who are vocal against criminal activities, are hardly able to move within communities or within the country or even to congregate with others in their respective churches. Thus, according to the US State Department (IRFR 2020): “Catholic,

evangelical Protestant, and leaders of other Christian denominations continued to state clergy sometimes could not reach their respective congregations in MS-13 and Barrio 18 (also known as 18th Street) gang-controlled territory throughout the country due to fear of crime and violence.”

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. On the other hand, there have been cases in which some young church members (or pastors who belong to churches who work with former or active gang members) who have been falsely accused of being in collusion with criminal operations and using the church as a cover. In these cases, despite the damage to the freedom and reputation of these Christians, the government agents responsible for it have not been duly prosecuted.

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (2.75 points)

The Constitution states that church leaders cannot take up public office or belong to political parties. The electoral code requires judges of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and members of municipal councils to be laypersons. Consequently, if a Christian leader tries to access a position such as the presidency, justice, governor etc, they are prevented by a legal barrier. In gang-controlled areas where there is collusion with the authorities, Christians will be prevented from taking a public post if they do not come to an agreement with the local group and thus represent a threat for the continuity of their illegal activities.

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (2.75 points)

Churches carrying out social projects to reduce levels of violence involving gang and former gang members are treated with severe suspicion by some sectors of society and ideological pressure groups. People think that Protestant pastors were gaining access to prisons to serve as couriers and messengers between jailed gang members and those outside the prisons.

Also, where religious leaders and activist Christians are critical of government measures and President Bukele, they are often accused of being allied with 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. Christian doctrine has thus been portrayed as being archaic and obsolete for inclusive modern society.

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 tend to want to report criminal activities but may suffer serious consequences if they give statements which bring gang members into difficulties. Reprisals can be more violent than actually threatened. There is no safe place for anyone considered an enemy of criminal organizations or the police. As a result, self-censorship is common. In fact, people are becoming increasingly afraid to share information. Even for filling out a research questionnaire for an outside organization, there could be reprisals for them and their relatives.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 points)

Church activities are regarded as competing for control if they have not had advance authorization from the local gang's leaders. There are reprisals for not respecting their authority; they like to dictate when, how, and where churches can operate. Thus, church-run programs are monitored closely and if anything is identified as opposing gang influence, those activities will be blocked and the lives of the leaders and participants will be endangered. Such action acts as a warning to other churches.

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 Christian leaders at the time of their preaching. 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. Several young church members and youth leaders have been erroneously arrested as suspected gang members.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Church leaders and faith-based NGO workers have stated that police and other government agents continue to arbitrarily detain, question, or search them because of their ministry among active and former gang members. Some church leaders stated that they avoid violence-prevention and drug-rehabilitation programs, fearing prosecution or being perceived as sympathetic to gangs (even though courts had ruled that drug-rehabilitation programs were not illegal according to the Constitution).

Christian leaders also become targets of the government and its supporters if they are critical of policies promoted by President Bukele. Christian leaders have experienced administrative reprisals when they have called for a return to democracy and transparent elections.

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.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

El Salvador: Violence Block question		WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	3	4
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?	5	4
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	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)?	5	2
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	9	10
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?	5	3
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?	4	6
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	9	10 *
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	4	13

In the WWL 2022 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 attacked (100*):** At least 100 Christians faced violence mainly in the form of death threats for refusing to pay extortion money or for carrying out church activities not tolerated by gangs.
- **Christian sexually harassed (9):** Pastors' daughters who 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 (9):** These are cases of pastors in various parts of the country being forcibly displaced by gangs after receiving death-threats .

5 Year trends

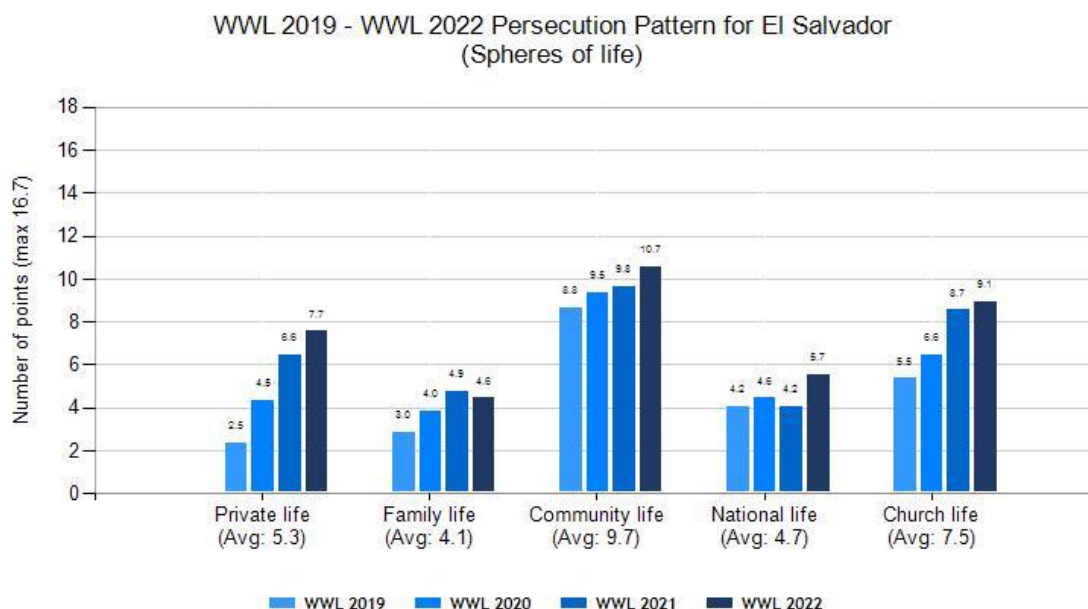
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

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

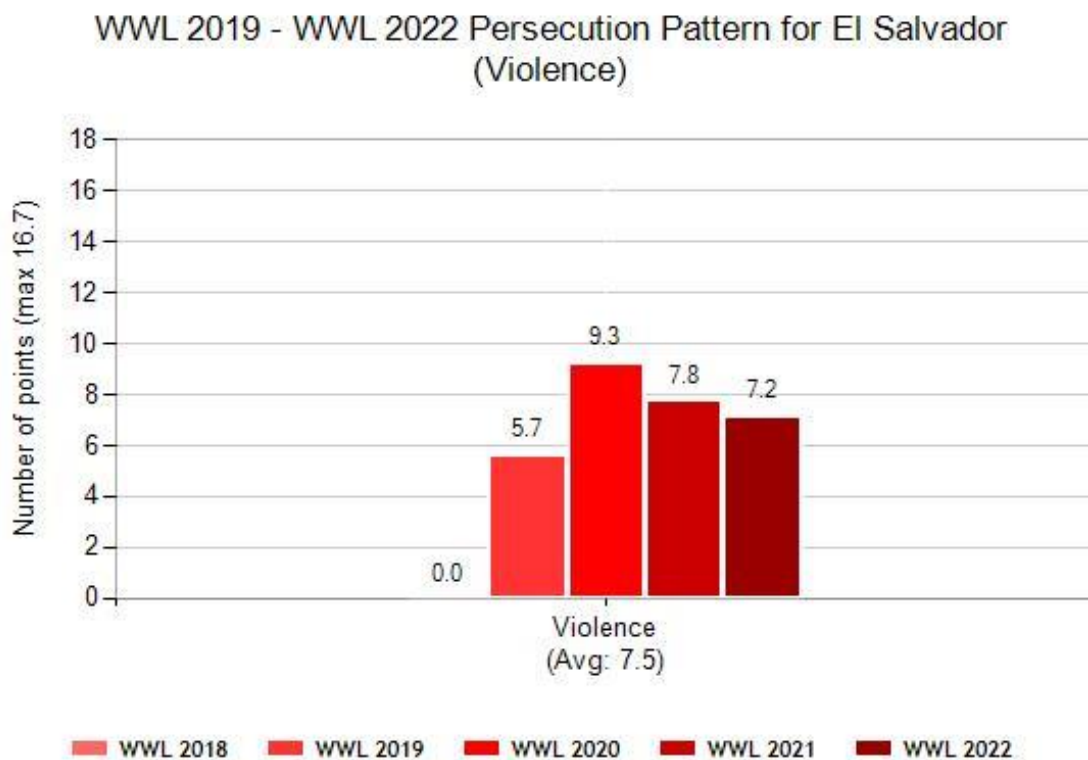
Because detailed analysis has only been conducted since WWL 2019, the table above lists the average pressure on Christians in the last four WWL reporting periods. It shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has increased in each reporting period and is now at a high level (7.5 points).

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 2022. Pressure has been continually highest in the *Community* and *Church spheres*, showing the local influence of criminal territorial control.

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.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Trafficking; 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 April 2020](#)). According to reports, numerous political leaders have been accused of collaborating with gangs in criminal

operations, or negotiating with them for personal gain ([Human Rights Watch, World Report 2022: El Salvador](#)). 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 ([The Advocates for Human Rights, 22 March 2019](#)).

Within this context of violence and impunity for perpetrators, Christian women and girls fear a wide range 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 for punishing girls, their families and wider society is reportedly common across El Salvador ([Ameco Press, 21 March 2019](#)).

In addition to the pressure described above, women and girls 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. According to country experts, women have also been expected to act as care-givers for children of gang members in prison. They are however, prevented from raising them in the Christian faith; they would otherwise face reprisals from the biological parents.

Finally, Christian women and girls are psychologically impacted by the high levels of pressure and violence on 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 fines
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	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 for harassment, especially if they conduct activities that endanger the power and influence of gangs in certain areas. Persecution most commonly includes 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 2022 reporting period, several leaders have been fined, harassed, threatened and assassinated. Exemplifying the dangers, in April 2021 an evangelical pastor was murdered while on his way to visit congregation members. He had reportedly preached in gang-controlled areas ([El Salvador.com, 1 April 2021](#)). 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” (NPR, 2 July 2018). 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.

“All these elements make the reintegration of the former gang very difficult,” a country expert explained: “On many occasions it is not possible for them to continue their experience of faith, renouncing it and becoming part of the mara, in order to find the security offered by their gangs as soon as possible. In other cases, he is forced to change his faith and adapt it according to the faith experience imposed by the mara, which does not mean leaving criminal activities, but continuing to be an active member, with all that that implies.” In light of these pressures and constant threats, many Christian men choose to flee El Salvador.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020):

- Muslim and 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.
- Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) first came to the country in 1945. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, there were no reports of specific acts of persecution targeting JW adherents.

Future outlook

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

Organized corruption and crime

The social phenomenon that has caused criminal groups to be so prevalent throughout the national territory needs to be examined from a variety of angles. Likewise, action must be prioritized that eradicates whatever serves to strengthen criminal groups. Not only government action is necessary for this, but also alliances with social actors who have direct contact with those sectors of society most affected by violence and structural poverty. However, no action will be effective or tough enough to tackle this national problem if political instability continues to generate mistrust among the country's population and the international community. In this context, it is important that the necessary guarantees are in place so that church groups can carry out their programs and mission without fear of attack or reprisals. Often, it is only the presence of Christian ministry that can give the most vulnerable hope for a life different to that offered by criminal gangs.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: BBC News, 27 April 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-52439856>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Human Rights Watch, World Report 2022: El Salvador - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/el-salvador>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: The Advocates for Human Rights, 22 March 2019 - <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/Index?id=260>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Ameco Press, 21 March 2019 - <https://amecopress.net/Huir-para-salvar-a-tu-hija-de-la-esclavitud-sexual>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: El Salvador.com, 1 April 2021 - <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/apopa-violencia-homicidios-pastor-ricardo-mejia-iglesia-elim/823047/2021/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: three options - <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/02/625259818/in-el-salvador-becoming-an-evangelical-is-a-way-out-of-a-gang?t=1610614725915>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=El Salvador>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/El Salvador>