Signs of a Crisis: Forced Internal Displacement Due To Violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018

Drivers of Displacement: The economic, social, and political conditions that make a population vulnerable to displacement (IDMC, 2018).

In interviews conducted by key Salvadoran actors, we recognized several factors that put a population group at risk of displacement. One of the main factors was human development because when people have less access to basic services, State agencies, security, and an environment that allows them to fully develop, the more vulnerable they are to displacement if they are the victim of violence.

People’s vulnerability also increases when they live in areas controlled by gangs or other criminal organizations; or if they distrust state institutions, because that means that they won’t activate protection mechanisms when they are the victim of a crime.

Another element that was highlighted was migration, which can be characterized in two ways: as an alternative solution to the violence they face, or, for returnees, as a precursor of forced displacement when they return to the country and face violence. Interviewees also mentioned stigmas towards internally displaced people when they are perceived as people involved in crime instead of victims of violence.

It’s important to highlight that there are groups of people that are consistently abandoned by the State, increasing their vulnerability. Among these groups are: women, the LGBTQ+ population, and police members or security forces. This is also related to the lack of information regarding where people can seek out protection if their rights are violated.
Experts stated that some of the reasons why a person or family would be displaced are threats, extortion, homicides, and the assaults that young people and adolescents face from gangs and security forces (National Civil Police (NCP) and Armed Forces).

The opinions of those consulted reflect the reality that Salvadorans face. According to data from the NCP (2019), in 2018 10,551 reports of threats and 1,684 reports of extortion were filed with the police. The Information and Analysis Directorate reported 3,346 homicides that same year.

The opinions stated in interviews are comparable to data from the Regional Displacement Monitoring System. In this particular case, it includes data from the regional human rights organization, Cristosal.

The three principle causes of displacement that Cristosal registered in El Salvador in 2018 were: threats (67.2%), homicide of a family member (29.8%), and a fear of violence in one’s community (22.5%). Extortion affected 9.6% of the people registered, and forced recruitment affected 4.1%. It’s worth mentioning that people could provide multiple answers to this question, because people are usually affected by more than one act of violence.

It’s important to note that, despite being the victim of a crime, 66.7% of the people registered by Cristosal did not report the crime to any State agency. Only 11.2% did, and 22.1% said a family member reported the crime on their behalf. This last answer was more common for children who were not old enough to file a report themselves.

Data on displacement has been analyzed by the Regional Displacement Monitoring System and doesn’t represent a national sample, but a specific set of cases attended to by the organizations that are part of the Monitoring System. This means that the data is limited by the amount of national reach these organizations have.
Victim Profile: People who, due to their social, sociodemographic and economic status, are at a higher risk of forced displacement

The victims most frequently identified in interviews were:
* Impoverished families without enough economic resources or support networks to overcome a crisis.
* Community leaders and human rights defenders, whose work can be perceived as contrary to the best interests of groups at the margin of the law.
* Children, adolescents, and young adults who are assaulted by gangs and, at a lesser rate, by the police.
* LGBTQ+ - their vulnerability stems from machista values held by gangs.

Using data provided by the institutions that make up the Regional Displacement Monitoring System, we registered 1,724 people at risk of displacement, of whom 1,549 were already displaced. Women were 53.8% of displaced people, and men were 46.2%. 45.4% were people ages 18-50, but we should highlight that children and adolescents were 44.3% of the population registered by Plan International El Salvador, EDUCO-El Salvador and Cristosal El Salvador.

The people interviewed stated that the three main actors responsible for their displacement were:
* Gangs: Due to criminal acts against the population. Particularly assaults against children, adolescents, and young people to forcibly recruit them into the gang or as sexual partners/girlfriends.
* Security Forces: Mentioned in fewer cases, interviewees alluded to the fact that adolescents and young people are sometimes perceived as gang members by police officers.
* Individuals or civilians: There are some civilians who take advantage of an atmosphere of insecurity to commit acts that cause displacement.

Data from Cristosal El Salvador reaffirms the statements made by those interviewed: on a question that allowed for multiple answers, 9 out of every 10 people registered said that their aggressors were the Mara Salvatrucha, while 7 out of every 10 identified Barrio 18. Additionally, 8.4% of people said an individual who did not belong to a criminal group was the victimizer, and 5% said the Police were their victimizer. In data provided by EDUCO-El Salvador, the Mara Salvatrucha were mentioned in 54 cases.

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How People Are Displaced: Displacement Typologies Reported According to How Often They Presented in Cases

**Confinement**
According to those interviewed, confinement is a security measure used by some people to avoid aggressions directed at them. This can occur before or after displacement, and it can be complete or partial. In 2018, Plan International El Salvador attended to 636 confined people, of which 54.1% were women and 45.9% were men. Cristosal El Salvador registered 178 cases, 51.3% of which were women and 48.7% of which were men.

**Relocation**
It’s imperative to provide durable solutions for the victims, and this implies helping them re-establish their life plans in a location where their physical safety is not endangered. Successful relocations should provide for the safety and service needs of the victim. Of the 561 people registered by Cristosal, only 96 (17.11%) wanted to relocate within the country. Of these, 41.7% did not state a preference for which municipality they wanted to relocate to, 31.3% preferred San Salvador, and the remaining 27% preferred other municipalities.

**Collective Displacement**
This refers to the displacement of various families that live in the same geographic area. While this type of displacement is uncommon in El Salvador, interviewees expressed some characteristics of this; depending on the level of organization of the criminal group, families sometimes split up and relocate to different zones. Furthermore, they explained that one family could move due to a violent act, while other relatives might decide to leave afterwards if the area is perceived as unsafe or the criminal acts continue.

**Irregular Migration and Migrant Caravans**
Migration and displacement become connected when victims don’t find a solution to displacement, or if they face displacement upon their return to the country because their is a latent threat of violence. In 2018, EDUCO-El Salvador identified 200 children and adolescents that migrated, principally to the US, other Central American countries, and Italy, due to violence. Cristosal El Salvador reported that 404 people of the total 561 registered intended to legally migrate.

Towards the end of 2018, four migrant caravans left out of San Salvador; some of the migrants joined the caravan due to violence.

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State Response, Existing Policies and Programs


The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (2018) passed the following ruling:

1. That the Legislative Assembly, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and the Coordination Commission and director of the Executive Technical Unit of the Justice Sector have a six-month period to comply with the following: a) recognition of the victims of forced displacement, through the approval of special legislation for the protection of victims and witnesses; b) creation and implementation of policies and protocols to prevent forced displacement, as well as implement public policies and measures to recover territorial control from gangs; c) provide protections for displaced people, and guarantee they can return to their homes; d) sign national and international agreements that guarantee the protection of victims and witnesses.

2. That the President of the Republic: a) coordinate actions to prevent and control violence with institutions of the Executive Branch, through social inclusion policies and actions that aim to recover state control of territories dominated by gangs; b) include attention to victims of forced internal displacement due to violence in the national budget.

Despite this mandate from the highest court in El Salvador, the Executive and Legislative Branches of Government still have not officially recognized the phenomenon.

Of the existing policies and programs aimed at addressing the issue, interviewees highlighted Plan El Salvador Seguro implemented by former President Sánchez Cerén’s administration. This plan, in its fourth aim, proposes two immediate actions regarding victims of displacement: carry out a census and provide psychosocial attention and protection. As a result of the latter, the Local Offices for Attention to Victims were formed, and they created a plan and protocol for providing protection. The Health Ministry has Comprehensive Attention Units for all Forms of Violence; the Police have prevention and containment mechanisms for displacement, to protect witnesses and victims of crimes, and implement the program Safe House. On the other hand, the work of the Group of Police Actions, an external monitoring system for the Police to prevent abuse of authority that could occur in police work.