

# El Salvador

Country Conditions by Cecilia Menjívar and William Pleites

## Social and demographic conditions:

According to the latest multipurpose household survey (BCR, 2023), in 2022 El Salvador had a population of 6.3 million, of whom 61.7% lived in urban areas and 38.3% in rural areas. 53.3% are women and approximately 25.8% were between 15-29 years old. The illiteracy rate (10-year-old and over) was 9.7% and the average educational level was 7.2 years (8.2 years in urban areas and 5.6 years in rural areas). 26.6% of Salvadoran households live in poverty (but see COVID effects below) and 8.6% live in extreme poverty; and over 60% of households do not have access to dignified housing.

Regarding health, another source (GOES, 2021) indicates that, for 2021, 10% of children under 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition (stunting); and the infant mortality rate is 16.6 deaths per 1000 live births.

27% of the population 15-29 years of age (from which 50% of migrants originate) do not work or attend school (Mora Téllez, 2022; Pleites, 2022).

The country is growing older; this group increased from 9.2% of the population in 2005 to 12.6% in 2022 (Minec/Digestyc, 2021). However, the proportion of individuals 60 years of age and over with access to retirement pensions is only 14% (Rivera, M., Argueta, C., Cisneros, G. Schwarzer, H., Ortiz, J., 2020).

If the country's socio-economic conditions continue unchanged, the migratory flow from El Salvador will continue to increase for the next 15 years (Mora-Téllez, 2022).

## The Economy:

The Salvadoran economy is not generating the jobs necessary to absorb its population increase. Jobs in the formal economy have been declining since 1989. Furthermore, 60% of the labor force is underemployed, meaning the jobs being created are not commensurate with prevalent educational levels (OIM and BCR, 2022; Pleites, 2022).

In the past 25 years, the Salvadoran economy has generated an average of 13,000 jobs annually, while 50,000 people enter the labor market each year. The economy should generate 106,000 annually in the next 20 years to absorb this labor force (Pleites 2022).

The average monthly salary as of 2022 was \$377.86 (\$403.99 for men and \$344.01 for women) (BCR, 2023). The average monthly household income in 2022 was \$629.38 (\$728.64 in urban areas and \$462.85 in rural areas), which translated into a rate of 24.9% of financial poverty in urban areas and 29.6% in rural areas (BCR, 2023).



Climate change is ravaging the country. According to the World Bank, the impact of climate change on the country's infrastructure has translated into losses of \$215 million annually, or about 1% of the country's GDP (Banco Mundial, 2022).

Estimates of Salvadoran migration vary significantly, from around 1.5 million based on the American Community Survey (2021), to 2.5 million based on OIM (2017) estimates, to 3 million based on estimates from El Salvador's Foreign Relations Ministry. It is estimated that 93.5% of Salvadoran migrants live in the United States, 2.7% in Canada, and 3.8% in Australia, Spain, Italy, Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and Costa Rica. According to the American Community Survey (2021), there are 1,418,147 Salvadorans living in the United States; 51.1% are men, 48.9% are women, and 93.4% are 18 years of age and older (ACS 2021).

Given the high migration rates, in 2022 remittances reached over \$7 billion (\$7,741,900 million), 3.2% higher than in 2021, or 23.8% of the country's GDP (El Salvador's GDP in 2022 was \$32.5 billion). Significantly, 93.9% of these remittances come from the United States, 0.9% from Canada, 0.4% from Spain, 0.3% from Italy, 0.1% from the UK, and 4.1% from other countries. Such remittances benefit approximately 472 million households (about 22% of all households), made up of 1.63 million people, and women receive about two-thirds of remittances.

## Insecurity and Violence:

69% of women in urban areas and 65% in rural areas of the country had experienced violence in their lives as of 2017 (Iraheta et al., 2021).

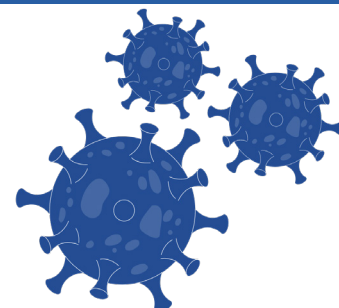
Violent deaths have dramatically decreased in recent years, going from 35.6 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants to 7.8 in 2022 (InSight Crime, 2023). However, formal complaints of disappearances have increased significantly in the past several years. Disappearances do not show up in homicide statistics, but they occur daily (FESPAD, 2021).

Renowned scholars and public intellectuals who conduct independent research and objective evaluations of the increased insecurity for most Salvadorans (despite official narratives) have been forced to leave the country due to threats to their lives. The main independent newspaper, El Faro, and a senior researcher of violence had to relocate to Costa Rica in April 2023.

According to the Human Rights Observatory, a research center at El Salvador's Catholic University (UCA), there were approximately 1,016 violent deaths in 2022 and 308 cases of disappearances. There are 86,046 individuals detained without being charged, 61,300 under the exception regime (<https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Muertes-violentas-en-El-Salvador-superarian-las-1000-en-2022-segun-LOUDH-20230418-0081.html>).

## COVID-19 Effects

A critical effect of the global pandemic on El Salvador is an increase in the country's poverty rate, which increased by 6.5 percentage points, while more than 20% of workers lost their jobs (INCAE, 2021). 2021 saw improvement, but with high inflation rates, by 2022, the poverty rate increased from 24.6% to 26.6% (BCR, 2023).



## Deporting Salvadoran immigrants residing in the U.S. would deepen El Salvador's already dire socioeconomic conditions and create ripe conditions for political unrest and destabilization. In addition:

- ◆ Remittances would decrease by more than \$1.2 billion dollars.
- ◆ Poverty rates would increase by 10 percentage points.
- ◆ Unemployment and underemployment would affect approximately two-thirds of the country's economically active population.
- ◆ Older deported immigrants would be unable to obtain jobs in El Salvador, and as they have spent their economically active years in the United States they would be ineligible for retirement pensions and for health coverage through the Instituto Salvadoreño de Seguridad Social.
- ◆ The country's public debt would increase to over 80%
- ◆ It would place the country at risk of de-dollarizing the economy and destabilizing the private sector.
- ◆ This scenario would likely provoke increases in crime and even larger emigration flows.

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