



Making the Invisible Visible: Hidden Signs of Violence

2017 REPORT ON FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN EL SALVADOR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2017 Report on Forced Displacement in El Salvador presents and analyzes the forced displacement cases received by Cristosal and the Quetzalcóatl Foundation in 2017. These organizations recorded 186 cases and 701 victims in 2017, an increase of 53% compared to the number of cases reported to these organizations in 2016. The 2017 report analyzes the generalized violence that has contributed to the significant flows of internal displacement. It also highlights the way victims of internal displacement are characterized, and the nature and dynamics of displacement. The 2001 Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement, from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, define internally displaced persons as:

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. (p. 1)

The report discusses figures from several organizations and the government itself that attempt to account for the magnitude of the phenomenon. As a whole, the report aims to make visible a problem that has traditionally been hidden. The Salvadoran state has repeatedly minimized and refused to recognize forced displacement, thereby omitting its responsibility to provide comprehensive protection and assistance to victims. The report shows that it is possible to take action to protect victims. For example, five rights-based appeals (*amparos*) filed with the Supreme Court have resulted in rulings in favor of victims.

This study was developed under a mixed approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative research techniques. The report presents data from the cases processed by Cristosal and the Quetzalcóatl Foundation during 2017. These cases were recorded by means of a single registration form, which allowed the information collected by both institutions to be aligned and then analyzed according to the main variables of interest.



The cases reflect only the activity of these two organizations; they do not comprise a representative sample of the country. It is not the purpose of this study to calculate the magnitude of internal displacement in El Salvador, but to draw trends and highlight the phenomenon so that it can become part of the national dialogue and agenda. Thus, the methodology employed in this study differs from similar studies with different goals, such as the one carried out by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), or the Salvadoran government's recently published *Characterization of Human Mobility*. Additionally, this study integrates additional data, such as statistics from international organizations, official national figures, and information from other studies carried out by civil society organizations (obtained through direct requests for information and bibliographic review). The report uses qualitative information to humanize the reality of forced displacement and thus deepen its impact; for this purpose, the report includes case studies, which allow us to glimpse the drama of internal forced displacement and its associated costs. This triangulation of sources, techniques, and methods of analysis allows us to reflect truthfully and objectively on the characteristics of forced displacement by violence and the suffering of its victims.

One of the first premises illustrated by the report is that generalized violence in El Salvador has to be considered a major cause of forced displacement. Despite the decrease in homicides in 2017 (from 81 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 60 per 100,000 in 2017), the homicide rate in El Salvador remains one of the highest in the world, and the highest in Central America. As if that were not enough, other crimes also affect the population. Threats are reported most often, at a rate of 157.7 reports for every 100,000 inhabitants, followed by injuries from acts of violence at a rate of 81 per 100,000, among others. The reality most likely exceeds these figures, since these data derive from officially filed complaints. There is a hidden number of criminal acts not reported to the authorities.

The report also traces the social and demographic characteristics of people who have been forcibly displaced by violence—mostly children, adolescents, and young adults. The average size of a family displaced by violence is four people, higher than the national average. Gender differences are not significant at the general level, but they become so when grouped by age: the largest displaced group is girls from 0 to 17 years old. The report also includes information on the acts of violence which generate displacement, indicating that threats, mostly from gangs, constitute the main displacement factor. A



worrisome minority of displacement cases was caused by crimes committed by members of the National Civil Police (PNC, from its Spanish name) and the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Regarding government action on behalf of victims of forced displacement, it was found that more than half of the displaced families did not file a complaint with authorities, either due to distrust of judicial institutions or for fear of reprisals. Displacement causes a serious deterioration of living conditions, reflected in the loss of employment, income, and education. 50.2% of people who were working had to abandon their work due to displacement, causing 45.9% of affected families to see their monthly income reduced.

Additionally, the study suggests a link between irregular migration and internal displacement. 93% of victims believe their displacement situation would be definitively resolved by leaving the country, although victims look for solutions to immediate emergencies inside the country first. Another significant consequence of forced displacement is that not all victims are able to leave the territories where they are at risk. At the time of their interviews, more than 40% of victims were confined to their places of residence, either because they did not have the resources to travel or because they did not have a safe place to go.

The report explores possible ways to fulfill victims' right to protection, including legal support, as well as guidelines for activating public institutions like the Attorney General's Office, local victim assistance offices, the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women, the National Council for Children and Adolescents, and others. The report emphasizes that according to a human rights approach, which opts preferentially for victims, the government is the ultimate protector and guarantor of rights.

This carefully-prepared and technically-sound report presents a study which forms a true, well-supported, victim-centered account of internal forced displacement caused by violence. Our final goal is that the information generated will have an impact on the political decision-making process, and ultimately generate better mechanisms of protection and integral attention to victims of violence.