

MAGAZINE

Inside El Salvador's battle with violence, poverty, and U.S. policy

As migrants flee the decimated Central American nation, changes in the United States could send thousands back into the chaos.

BY JASON MOTLAGH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOISES SAMAN

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THE DEPORTEES FROM the United States file out of the buses with their heads down, stripped of belts and shoelaces like criminals.

Rounded up from immigration detention centers around the country, they'd been boarded onto an unmarked jet near the Texas-Mexico border early in the morning and flown more than 1,100 miles to an airport outside El Salvador's capital, San Salvador. In just four hours a perilous journey north that had taken many of the migrants years to prepare for and weeks to complete was undone.

"Welcome," a Salvadoran migration officer greets them in a new reception center built with help from the U.S. government. "You are family here." A hundred and nineteen blank faces stare back. One by one, names are called out, and the men and women come forward to receive their belongings, undergo health screenings, and collect bus fare to get them home.



Salvadoran migrants cross the border from Guatemala into Mexico in November 2018. From here they would trek another 2,400 miles to reach the U.S. At that time, to deter migrants, President Donald Trump ordered more than 5,000 U.S. troops to the border with Mexico.

A 24-year-old man with a strong build and easy smile sits in the back wearing a white T-shirt hand-scrawled with the words “Faith Hope Love.” Like many in El Salvador, he doesn’t want to reveal his name. As a teenager in rural Usulután, one of the country’s 14 departments, he’d been pressured to join Mara Salvatrucha, the largest gang in El Salvador, also known as MS-13. He signed up for the police academy instead, and when the gang found out, death threats followed.

He fled south to Colombia, where he found work as a truck driver and fell in love. His girlfriend got a visa to the U.S. and took a plane to join relatives. He paid a coyote, or people smuggler, \$8,000 and spent the next month running a seven-border gantlet up the Central American isthmus, finally slipping into Texas and heading east to Atlanta. There, a relative who’s a permanent U.S. resident gave him a job installing sprinklers that paid \$3,000 a month, more than five times the average monthly household income in El Salvador. He sent \$500 back to El Salvador each month to help his mother and grandmother.

For five years in Georgia he kept a low profile. Work on weekdays, parks and malls on weekends, church on Sundays. No traffic tickets or run-ins with the law. Until an unlucky morning in September 2017, when he was stopped at a random police checkpoint and arrested for driving without a license. Georgia police handed him over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement authorities, who locked him up.

The man’s name is called out. He picks up his wallet and Bible and laces up his boots. “I’m really scared,” he confides. News reports about El Salvador that he’s watched in the U.S. have given him the impression that gangs have “taken over the whole country.” Of one thing he is sure: “I will go back to the U.S.A. as soon as I can.”

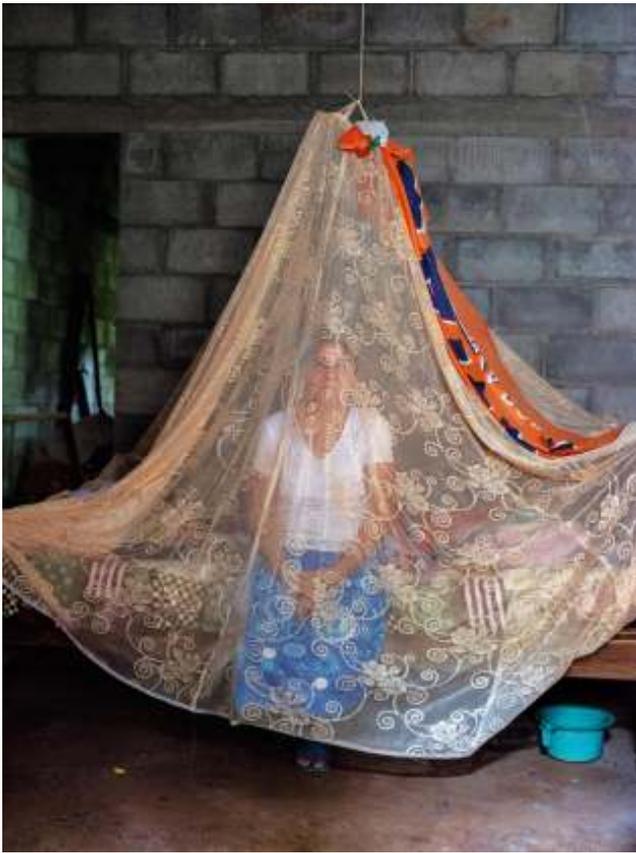


Members of the MS-13 gang crowd into their cramped cell inside Chalatenango prison, in northern El Salvador. Authorities house rival gangs in separate prisons to avoid deadly riots, but extreme crowding has stretched the prison system beyond its limits.

His next ordeal starts the moment he steps into the street in San Salvador. The reception center is located in an MS-13 stronghold, as graffiti on the opposite corner attests. The nearest cash machine is two blocks away on the turf of MS-13's archenemy, the 18th Street gang.

El Salvador's government says that criminal gangs command an estimated 60,000 active members, and their battle for supremacy has fractured this tiny country of 6.4 million people along an expanding web of invisible fault lines that run red. In 2017 the homicide rate was 61 per 100,000 people, making El Salvador the second deadliest of any country not at war, after Venezuela.

El Salvador is locked in the latest phase of a social conflict that exploded during the 1980-1992 civil war, in which leftist guerrillas rose up against a wealthy elite and the military state that had long dispossessed the rural underclass of land. With the stated aim of stopping communism in its backyard, the U.S. supported El Salvador's right-wing dictatorships with billions of dollars of economic and military aid that prolonged the bloodshed. By the time the war ended, in a stalemate, 75,000 people were dead and more than a million were displaced, hundreds of thousands of whom fled to the U.S. From Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., Salvadoran refugees found employment and community, and they sent money home.



A net protects María Agustina Márquez from mosquitoes in the home she shares with her husband and granddaughter near Intipucá. Many there rely on remittances from those in the U.S. Both her sons are in the U.S. but barely manage to send money home.

The children who came with them, displaced youths craving identity in a foreign land, created MS-13 on the streets of Los Angeles and swelled the ranks of a rival, 18th Street—a Hispanic gang that formed around 18th Street in the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles and absorbed wayward refugees from Central America. As gang wars, and the war on gangs, intensified, laws were enacted that made it easier to deport immigrants with criminal records. In the late 1990s the U.S. began exporting thousands of convicts back to Central America each year. In the vacuum of weak governance and poverty in their home country, gang members reproduced their social structures and tactics and multiplied exponentially.

“We knew how to use weapons, make bombs,” says Ricardo, a former barrio leader of 18th Street who was deported after a conviction for stealing cars. The returnees spawned “a social monster—and we’re still dealing with that monster,” he adds. In the teeming slums of San Salvador, a metro area of a million people, competition for turf and status bred a kill-or-be-killed strain of nihilism far more extreme than anything he’d known on the streets of Los Angeles.

A hell of hyperviolence and economic despair has since engulfed the country and its neighbors, driving tens of thousands of Central Americans north to the U.S., where generations of migrants have carved out safe, dignified, and law-abiding lives for their families. As the exodus continues, the U.S. is threatening to deport legions of Salvadorans back to the horrors they fled.

Today some 200,000 Salvadorans in the U.S. have temporary protected status (TPS), a designation that allows undocumented migrants deemed at risk because of armed conflict or environmental disasters in their home countries to stay in the U.S. [People like Abel](#) [/magazine/2019/03/el-salvador-immigrants-lives-threatened-by-immigration-law-change], in his 50s, a soft-spoken maintenance worker in the Washington, D.C., area who sends money back home every month. He says he came to the U.S. for “the dream”: honest work, security, a better life. The reality is bittersweet. He’s seen his children just once in 18 years, and his wife died in his absence. “Life is cold here,” he says matter-of-factly. “But there is opportunity, and so we must endure.”

THEY MADE NEW LIVES IN THE U.S.



Juan and Yesenia Valle and their U.S.-born daughters pose outside their home in New York State. Juan came to the United States almost 20 years ago to help support his mother and brother, who were already here. He is now the co-owner of a thriving sign and awning business. Juan hopes he and his wife can stay in the U.S. permanently: “I consider the U.S. my country. There is nothing in El Salvador for me now. If I go back, I die over there.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FERGUSON; LOCATION INFORMATION IN PHOTO HAS BEEN REMOVED.

In January 2018, President Donald Trump’s administration ordered an end to TPS for Salvadorans. It was set to expire in September 2019, but a U.S. district court halted that plan, allowing Salvadorans to continue to live and work in the U.S. until a final decision is made. The about-face has been accompanied by a surge of federal immigration raids and the forced separation of newly arriving migrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border. Like every TPS holder I spoke with, Abel plans to stay in the U.S. illegally if TPS ends, rather than return to El Salvador voluntarily. “I’ve sacrificed too much to give up,” he says.

Despite Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy that resulted in separation of families and increased detentions at the southwest border of the U.S., the seemingly endless cycle of revenge between rival gangs and between gangs and authorities—not only in El Salvador but also in [Guatemala](#) [/environment/2018/10/drought-climate-change-force-guatemalans-migrate-to-us] and [Honduras](#) [/photography/proof/2018/february/honduras-gang-violence-migration-corruption-boys] —keeps pushing

people north. Last fall [a caravan of more than 5,000 Central American migrants](#) [/culture/2018/11/el-salvador-migrant-caravan-photography] began walking toward the U.S., drawing renewed global attention to the crisis.

High in Morazán department, in northeastern El Salvador, the legacy of U.S. involvement still smolders. Driving past lush farms and volcanoes that thrust into the clouds, I reach the village of El Mozote. It was here in 1981 that Salvadoran soldiers armed and trained by the U.S. massacred more than 1,000 civilians, mostly children. According to a cable sent from the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador to the State Department, the U.S. government went to great lengths to bury the truth of the massacre.

Morazán is one of the most economically depressed regions of El Salvador, having never recovered from the war's devastation. It is also one of the least violent. Some ascribe this to the vigilance of the local people, many of whom are ex-rebel combatants. The simpler explanation is economic. Gangs, though present in nearly all the country's municipalities, gravitate toward urban areas where commerce concentrates and extortion opportunities are greater.

STATE OF FEAR

El Salvador may be Central America's smallest country, but it's also the most densely populated and one of the deadliest—long past the end of its 1980-1992 civil war. In August 2015 there was a homicide every hour. The following years have offered little reprieve, with nearly 4,000 homicides in 2017. The high count has multiple causes, including gang activity, drug trafficking, and extrajudicial killings by police and military forces.



Counting the victims

El Salvador reported 3,962 homicides in 2017 throughout its 262 municipalities. The homicide rate varies widely across the country but is generally higher in more densely populated

municipalities where gang activity concentrates. The exact location of each homicide is unknown, so dots (shown in red) are distributed based on population density.

Homicides by municipality, 2017

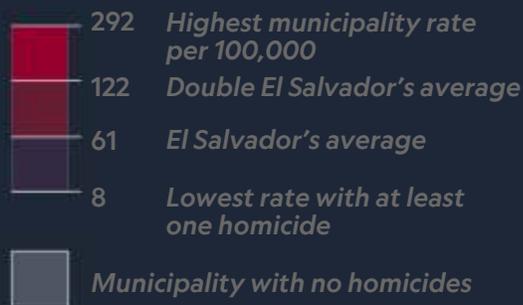
Each dot represents one homicide.



Land of gangs

El Salvador's most notorious gangs are MS-13 and 18th Street, both spawned in the United States. They took hold in El Salvador after thousands of members were deported.

Homicide rate by municipality, 2017



El Salvador has often had the world's highest homicide rate.* But in 2017 it was outstripped by Venezuela, a country in economic crisis.

Select homicide rates in the Americas, 2017

Homicides per 100,000

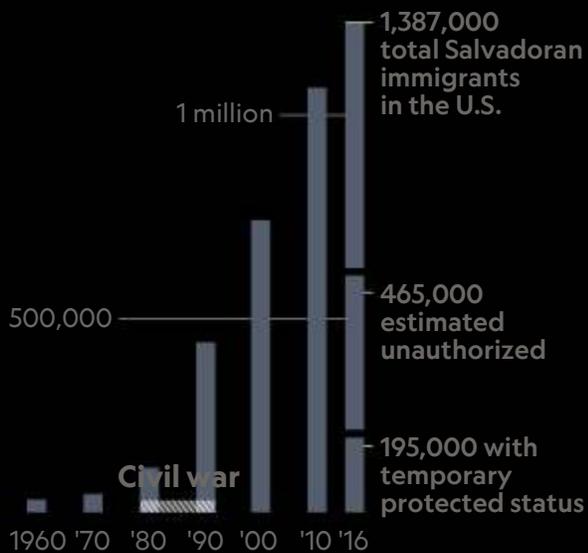


FLEEING TO THE U.S.

The number of Salvadorans in the U.S. is equal

to one-fifth of El Salvador's current population. Though some immigrants lack legal status, the safety and opportunities found in the U.S. outweigh the risk of deportation.

Immigrants to the U.S. from El Salvador



Uncertain future

Temporary protected status (TPS) legalizes U.S. residency for a limited time, until it's safe to return home. If TPS is ended, many could face deportation.

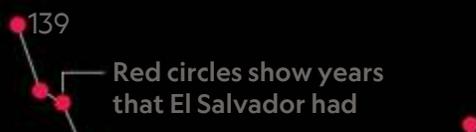
Cash flow at risk

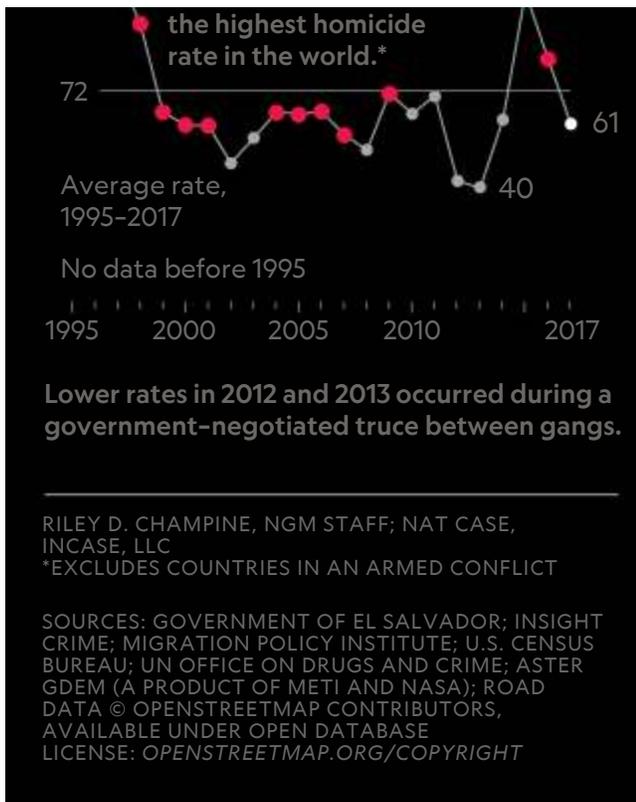
The five billion dollars Salvadorans sent home in 2017 amounted to 18 percent of their country's GDP. That flow will diminish if deportations increase.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

The U.S. supported the Salvadoran government in a civil war during which an estimated 75,000 people died, 8,000 disappeared, and more than a million were displaced. Since the conflict ended, El Salvador's homicide rate has consistently ranked among the top three in the world.*

El Salvador's homicide rate, 1995-2017 *Homicides per 100,000*





In a sunburned cornfield outside town, Bernaldino Vigil, a farmer who says his father was executed by government troops during the war, says droughts and fickle weather have wiped out successive crops. Debts have mounted, preventing him from leaving and forcing his two daughters still at home to drop out of school and work alongside him. “Sure, we have peace,” he says, “but it’s getting harder to survive.”

José María Guevara, a convenience store owner in El Mozote, lost 30 relatives in the massacre but survived because he left during the war and returned later. He has sent two of his children to New York City. One cleans houses; the other works as a gardener. His youngest daughter, Rosa, is eager to follow in their footsteps because it’s too expensive to continue her university studies in the city two hours away. “I’ll take any job in America,” she says. Most of her friends have left for the U.S. or moved to cities such as San Miguel and San Salvador, but Trump’s election put Rosa’s travel plans on hold. Guevara says he would have had to take out a loan to pay a coyote’s \$10,000 fee, a gamble that could have cost him his shop. “If she got caught and sent back, we’d all be screwed,” he says.

Distrito Italia, a barrio north of San Salvador, was built with Italian-government funding through the World Bank after a magnitude 7.6 earthquake in 1986 left 300,000 homeless. The barrio boasts wide brick lanes and graffiti-free walls thanks to a cleanup effort led by my guide, Pastor Mario Hernández. But MS-13 has no need to advertise its presence here—the gang’s control is total.

An alleged thief lies dead in a bus after a passenger, in self-defense, shot him and another assailant (who lived) during an attempted robbery in downtown San Salvador. The shooter fled the scene.

Gangs are known to help transport drugs and guns and even shake down transnational companies operating in El Salvador, but most of their money comes from what are called micro-extortions. Almost everyone with a business in Distrito Italia, from the bus driver to the *pupusa* vendor, pays something to MS-13—five dollars, \$10, \$50 a month. An estimate by the digital newspaper *El Faro*, based on the government operation investigating MS-13 finances, says it all adds up to annual revenue of more than \$30 million for the gang nationwide. Overall, violence costs the national economy four billion dollars a year.

Hernández introduces me to Aaron, a lean 20-year-old in a sports jersey and gold hoop earrings. He's never been jumped into the gang—beaten by a group for the symbolic 13 seconds—but he is “associated,” which means he's ordered to run the odd package, collect money here and there, keep watch. Aaron tells the pastor that overnight a gang member was gunned down by rivals, the 10th friend he's lost, he says, counting out with his fingers.

We walk deeper into the barrio, and Aaron nods to the “antennas” posted on every other corner. Lanky teens thumbing cell phones with seeming indifference, they're poised at the push of a button to relay word of any intruder. Where the sidewalk peters into dirt, we find Julio, 30, a veteran gang member dressed in all blue with a Los Angeles Dodgers cap—classic MS-13 dress code. He scans over our shoulders, uneasy. A text message says police are patrolling the area. “They could be over there,” he says, pointing across a small field, “and just start shooting.”

Salvadoran police check for gang tattoos on the arm of a suspect found to have a gun hidden in his car. El Salvador's intensified anti-gang measures allow authorities to stop and frisk anyone in the street. Gangs have adapted by discouraging members from getting tattoos that give away any affiliation.

After a state-brokered truce between MS-13 and 18th Street began to fall apart in 2013, the national homicide rate reached 104 per 100,000 people in 2015. Authorities have responded with a campaign of "extraordinary measures." They include the creation of elite police units, use of the army troops in security efforts, and near-free rein to conduct searches and seizures. In January 2015 the government gave officers a green light to shoot at criminals "without fearing consequences for their actions," heralding a shift toward shoot-to-kill tactics borne out by mounting reports of extrajudicial killings and torture that hark back to 1980s-era brutality.

Julio rocks back and forth. Another text comes through, and he takes off.

On our way back to the pastor's church, Aaron tells me he's several months from graduating from high school and wants to pursue a degree in physical education to support his mother, who sells secondhand clothes from the U.S. Trouble is, he can't leave the barrio. A couple of months back, he had to decline a spot with a soccer club because if he played on 18th Street turf, his neighborhood affiliation could get him killed.

"I try to keep my distance from the homeboys and stay on the right path," he says, "but it's like prison." Hernández says many young men like Aaron end up wasting away and getting girls pregnant, adding to the socioeconomic pressure that fuels *la delincuencia*, or criminal activity.

The last time Aaron asked his older brother in Houston to send money so he could travel north, his brother urged him to stay put because life in the U.S. was getting harder. "What's left?" Aaron sighs. "Join the gang? I don't want to do that because I know my fate—I'll end up dead."

At that moment a truck full of police officers in tactical fatigues and black ski masks whips around the corner, then slows down to size us up, assault rifles at the ready. Aaron throws them a wary glance; the truck moves on. A couple of blocks farther down the street, Julio pops out from a back alley, sweating and short of breath.

Left: Former gang members hang from their hammocks inside the San Francisco Gotera prison in Morazán department.

Right: Others at Gotera who have renounced their gang ties pray together. Prison-based... [Read More](#)

An MS-13 gang member attends a literacy class in Chalatenango prison. In exchange for good behavior, inmates can take part in a state-run rehabilitation program called Yo Cambio (I Change) that aims to prepare them for life after prison.

On a hot Sunday morning in the Dina neighborhood, an 18th Street stronghold in south San Salvador, Pastor Nelson Moz stands before a packed house at the Eben-Ezer Baptist Missionary Church. He opens his sermon with a call for divine protection in a time of darkness. The front line with MS-13 is less than 50 yards up the street, and tit-for-tat killings have spiked recently. Out front, latecomers stride past a derelict car with a blown-out rear window.

The pastor's words resonate with Sara, a lifelong resident whose grandson Alex was gunned down three years ago around the corner from her family home. She says he was killed by police officers after he refused to talk to them and kept walking. "He was a good boy," she affirms. Afraid to pursue justice for fear of reprisals from the police, the family raised money to hire a coyote to guide one of her daughters and a granddaughter to Indio, California, where two of Sara's other children lived. They send money home every month, but all are undocumented and the rise in immigration raids has her on edge. "Their fate," Sara says, "is in God's hands."

Wilfredo Gómez, a former 18th Street gang member turned preacher, speaks at a memorial service in San Salvador's Dina neighborhood. The service honored a parishioner and ex-gang member killed by rivals after his release from prison. "You walk with God or the devil, but you can't serve both," another former gang member said.

The sermon segues into a parable about sin and redemption, a theme important to the dozen or so former gang members in the crowd who have found their way to Moz's rehabilitation program. Some have covered their facial tattoos with makeup. Gang markings carry a heavy social stigma in El Salvador and make members an easier target for rivals and police. Eyes closed, palms raised to the sky, the men shed tears and offer up pleas for forgiveness.

Moz's charges live on the church premises, under strict conditions. To stay, they must renounce the gang and study the Bible. They sleep in cramped bunks, rise at dawn to bake bread, which they sell to support themselves, and pledge to get their ink removed.

It's life on a razor's edge. "The state knows nothing but pressure and violence, which creates more violence," Moz explains. "And the gang forgives nothing." He shows me a picture on his phone of a 19-year-old who strayed from the program, lying facedown in a pool of blood, one of five young men he's lost.

A memorial service is held that afternoon for another of his flock: an 18th Street member who joined Moz's church after seven years in prison, only to be gunned down in front of a corner store two blocks away. An evangelical rock band warms up next to the spot, and Ricardo, the former barrio gang leader, is rigging up the speakers.

AT HOME IN THE U.S.—BUT FOR HOW MUCH LONGER?



Aviela, nine, is a U.S. citizen, as she was born in the U.S. Her mother is undocumented, meaning that Aviela and her siblings potentially face either being separated from her if she's deported or returning to a country they've never called home.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FERGUSON

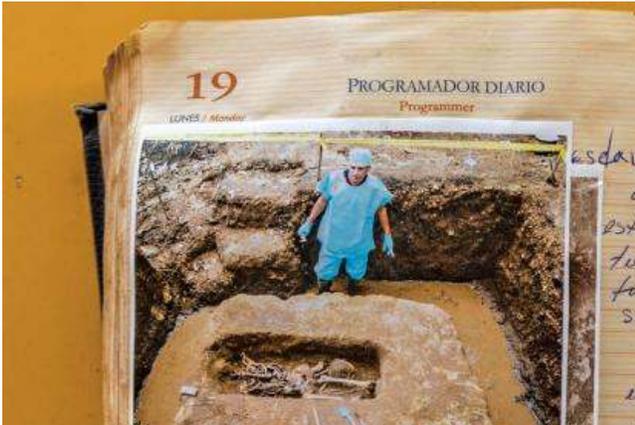
In 1983 Ricardo, then 18, fled Dina for the U.S. He arrived in Los Angeles as the gang culture there was metastasizing from street brawls into gun battles over the booming trade in crack cocaine. He gravitated toward 18th Street, which was becoming one of the city's largest and most violent gangs. He rose to lead its notorious Shatto Park Locos clique before landing in prison in Southern California and signing his own deportation papers back to El Salvador. Ricardo has been shot five times. "I know I have to pay for the things I've done," he says.

In 2007, Ricardo says, he heard God's call and told the gang he was walking away. As an example for his sons and grandsons, he lasered off the giant 18th Street tattoo that covered his chest and stomach. Now in his 50s, he drives a delivery truck to pay the rent, goes home early, and tries to keep his distance from the active members, who are always watching. "You walk with God or the devil," he says, "but you can't serve both."

Israel Ticas is an expert on the devil's work. One of the few forensic criminologists working for El Salvador's attorney general, he's tasked with digging up the casualties of gang mayhem and calls himself "lawyer for the dead." Prosecutors need bodies to convict the killers they catch, so gangs have gone to great lengths to dispose of victims—and anyone who would dare unearth them. Ticas, who has survived attempts on his life, says he carries a pistol wherever he goes and expects that one day he too will be killed.

At the end of a long, tree-shaded dirt road that runs into a coffee plantation outside San Salvador, Ticas is searching for his 66th body of the year, accompanied by a squad of armed police and a slight young man in baggy jeans and balaclava: the informant, a defector from 18th Street. The victim he's helping Ticas locate was a fellow 18th Street member whose arrest and swift release brought suspicion that he was a rat. According to Ticas, the gang lured him to the plantation on the pretext that they'd be killing an MS-13 rival, then strangled him with a wire, chopped up the corpse with a machete, and buried the remains at the base of a tree.

ON A MISSION FOR THE DEAD



The diaries of forensic criminologist Israel Ticas, with photos here showing two mass gravesites, document his relentless efforts to find the hidden victims of gang violence. Ticas has exhumed hundreds of bodies from clandestine graves across the country. Beheadings, dismemberments, and signs of torture are commonplace.

Three years have passed since then, and the informant's guidance yields nothing. "This dirt here is too dark and uniform," Ticas explains. "If this were the right spot, the colors would be mixed"—a sign the ground had been disturbed. "Like this," Ticas says. He starts a series of fresh holes and tells the informant to keep digging.

The last time I followed Ticas to a crime scene, he smashed through the floor of an abandoned house to exhume a man who'd been hog-tied and stabbed. In a country where murder has become mundane, Ticas keeps exhaustive records and chilling mementos in his office "museum": skulls, homemade weapons tainted with blood, snapshots of beheadings, flayed bodies, and other torture killings too obscene to describe.

Most victims Ticas unearths are women and girls—used, abused, and targeted in revenge killings. In 2017, 468 women were killed, one every 19 hours. Countless others are missing. One survey found that only six out of every hundred women would even report a rape, reflecting an overwhelming fear of gangs and the systemic betrayal by authorities, says Silvia Juárez of Ormusa, a group that works to stop violence against women. The state is "failing" to address an epidemic of femicide and sexual violence, she says, "and this is what's causing so many women to flee."

Salvadoran fisherman Arnovis Guidos Portillo watches his daughter and son in their home in Usulután department. After reaching the U.S. together in May 2018, father and daughter were detained by immigration authorities and kept in different facilities for more than a month before being deported separately to El Salvador, where they reunited.

At a safe house in the capital, a transgender woman who says she was gang-raped and then threatened by police after reporting the crime says it's too dangerous for her to try to leave. Her only option is to lie low and hope her asylum request is granted by a European country. In the past the destination of choice was reliably the United States, a haven for the oppressed. These days it's looking more like a dead end.

Jason Motlagh has reported on migration issues from Bangladesh to the Darién Gap. He lives in Mexico. Documentary photographer **Moises Saman**'s work has focused on the [wars in Iraq](https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/10/islamic-state-isis-iraq-mosul-syria-offensive) [https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/10/islamic-state-isis-iraq-mosul-syria-offensive] and Afghanistan and the [Arab Spring](/photography/proof/2016/05/moises-saman-discordia) [/photography/proof/2016/05/moises-saman-discordia] and its aftermath.



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