The Violence in El Salvador Today

With a homicide rate of 13 murders a day, in a country with a population of 6.2 million people, El Salvador has become one of the most violent countries in the world. Salvadorans live with the daily threat of violence hanging over their heads. Every day upon opening the newspaper, one reads about another homicide or set of homicides. Of young men and young women shot down on their way to school or on the bus, of bus drivers, street vendors, or even high profile people such as the Secretary of the Mexican Embassy and his wife (he survived, she did not).

One particular news article stood out on the *Dia de los Santos Inocentes* this past December, the Saints Day following Christmas which remembers the Bible story of King Herod who ordered the killing of all children under the age of two. It was a picture of children dressed up to celebrate this feast day in a small town outside of San Salvador. Underneath this picture, in an unrelated article, was a headline about how two children were killed when an unknown individual threw a bomb into a children's health clinic. The irony in the juxtaposition of the two articles was startling and a harsh reminder that the violence in El Salvador is not something you can escape.

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In a more [recent act of violence](#) closely related to one of our counterparts, three teachers were killed in a rural community in the Municipality of San Juan Opico. Opico borders San Pablo Tacachico, where SHARE and our U.S.-based sisters accompany the United Communities of Northern San Salvador and La Libertad, UCRES. Felipa Audelia Barillas Ayala, 44 years old, her sister and kindergarten teacher Marlene del Carmen Barillas, 35 years old, and computer and english teacher Tomás Antonio Gómez, 38 years old, were kidnapped and shot on Monday night in the La Copinola stream, in the community of El Ángel, in San Juan Opico, La Libertad. Students and teachers alike marched to demand en end to the violence and an investigation into these cases, and schools in the area were closed for days after these events. Fear of continued violence is palpable in the area. This is not an isolated act of violence against teachers; rather, public school teachers throughout the country have become a main target of extorsion and death threats in recent months. Instead of a safe learning environment, children are faced with an environment of violence and fear.

How do people respond? Some emmigrate to the States, some keep closer watch over their children, those who have the means put up high security fences and hire guards for their neighborhoods, making security companies and arms sales one of the most successful businesses in El Salvador. President Funes took a highly controversial, measure last October when he sent the Armed Forces out into the five most dangerous Departments of the country to work against crime with the police. While many people in those dangerous neighborhoods tell you that crime has gone down, others will ask: is militarizing our streets and neighborhoods really the answer?

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Is it the answer and does it go to the root of the problem? Many will tell you that gang violence and delinquency is not the only type of violence that exists in El Salvador. Certainly everyone hears about the notorious Salvadoran street gangs of the MS-13 and

the 18 Street Gang, and it is not deniable that the gangs are a big source of fear, intimidation and violence for many poor Salvadoran communities. But it may not be that simple.

First, one must remember the level of violence during the civil war, and the fact that much of the trauma caused by the war was left untreated, justice left unserved. Then think how the mix of untreated trauma, a sexist culture, and the great stresses of poverty can lead to a great level of domestic violence, which will continue to affect future generations of Salvadoran youth.

On top of all of this, there is the structural violence: a neo-liberal system that allows the persecution of the poor. In a place where security guards are a profitable business, the higher the level of insecurity, the more profitable the business.

This is also a country where a General Amnesty Law, signed shortly after the peace accords, has made it impossible for war criminals to be tried. Impunity continues to exist today in cases such as the murder of mining activists in Cabañas and the failure of the Attorney General to prosecute the intellectual authors. Political violence is another legacy that has been left behind from the civil war.

Taking all of this into account, it is hard to blame violence in El Salvador solely on the gangs and on delinquents.

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Looking at such a complex and intertwined web of violence, it is hard not to become disheartened and disillusioned, especially when one sees the affect it has on families of victims, children who are afraid to go to school and youth who flee to the United States to look for a way out. But in the true Salvadoran spirit of the continued fight forward, many groups and communities strive to take constructive approaches to confronting the violence. The communities in the UCRES region, as well as those in Chalatenango and San Vicente, where SHARE works see community organization as one answer to the violence. The better organized a community, the easier it is to respond to delinquency and structural violence. Another one of our counterparts, The Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA), works to combat the growing number of femicides in the country through an educational and justice seeking campaign.

At SHARE we continue forward by supporting those community organization efforts as well as the fight for justice against impunity as in the case femicide as well as in the cases of the mining activists and Monseñor Romero. Solidarity with El Salvador is just as important as it ever was, and as we approach our 30th anniversary as an organization, we hope to continue to give our support and solidarity to those groups who work for peace and justice in the face of violence.

-by Laura Hershberger, SHARE Grassroots Solidarity Educator