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LUIS ROMERO/AP

An inmate belonging to the Mara Salvatrucha gang inside the prison in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF JULY 09, 2015

Imagine if one in every thousand Massachusetts residents was murdered this year — more than 16 people killed per day. That scenario is unfolding in El Salvador, as the Central American nation has suffered a terrifying surge in violence in recent months.

The country and Massachusetts have similar populations, but while there are about 170 homicides on average each year in the Bay State, there were 2,965 killings in El Salvador during the first six months of this year alone.

And the situation has been getting worse. Last month's total of 677 murders in El Salvador was the highest monthly total seen there since the end of the country's civil war in 1992.

At the current pace, 97 out of every 100,000 residents in El Salvador will be victims of homicide this year. That's more than double the 41 per 100,000 the country saw in 2012, the most recent full year for which data was available from the World Bank.

This year's pace would rank as the fourth-highest annual homicide rate recorded in a single country in the period from 1995 to 2012.

El Salvador is on pace to pass its neighbor, Honduras, as the deadliest country on the planet.

Honduras saw homicide rates of 82, 91, and 90, during 2010, 2011, and 2012, respectively, the World Bank data show.

The only higher recorded homicide rates came in 1995, 1996, and 1997, when El Salvador — which for years has ranked as one of the world's most murderous countries — average 139, 117, and 113, per 100,000 people, respectively.

By comparison, during 2011, the deadliest year of Mexico's recent bloody drug wars, the homicide rate there was 23 killings per 100,000 residents.

Massachusetts' annual murder rate is about 2 per 100,000, and in the past five and a half decades the homicide rate here has never been higher than the 4.4 per 100,000 seen in 1973 and 1974, according to the FBI.

Murder rates in places with similar populations as Massachusetts

Location	Rate	Year rate recorded
El Salvador	96.8	pace for 2015

Papau New Guinea	10.4	2010
Paraguay	9.7	2012
Eritrea	7.1	2012
Arizona	5.4	2013
Indiana	5.4	2013
Tennessee	5.0	2013
Massachusetts	2.0	2013
Bulgaria	1.9	2012
Libya	1.7	2012

SOURCE: The World Bank, Federal Bureau of Investigation

This year's astonishing death toll in El Salvador has been fueled by a surge in fighting among gangs, as well as clashes between gangs and government forces, following a controversial truce that fell apart in the spring of 2013.

The violence reached new heights at the beginning of this year when police launched an aggressive crackdown on organized crime groups — including the 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha gangs — at the orders of the country's President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, who took office last summer.

Critics say the truce gave gangs time to strengthen, and that the recent imprisonment of some gang leaders as part of the government's crackdown means that the criminal enterprises are now controlled by younger and more reckless members.

Assistant national police chief Howard Cotto told the Associated Press late last month that the government has arrested 12,000 gang members in the last year with little to show for it. He said that nothing will change unless El Salvador addresses the issues of poverty and lack of opportunity for young people.

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele)

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