

# Key Drivers Contributing to Child-Parents Separation

## El Salvador



ALDEAS  
INFANTILES SOS  
EL SALVADOR

*Universidad Tecnológica  
de El Salvador*



Child Consulting Ltd



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## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

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## Foreword


Child-family separation is a major global problem that affects children and young people and entails serious violations of their human rights. In spite of this, children who find themselves in this situation are generally invisible. This is demonstrated in that there are few studies related to understanding the drivers of child-family separation and the situation of children and young people affected by it. In El Salvador, the evidence on child-family separation is particularly scarce, which, in different ways, limits the possibility of putting in place adequate responses and preventing it.

The present study aims to contribute to filling the evidence gaps concerning the issue of child-family separation. Its primary purpose is to achieve a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the underlying reasons that lead to it, and to inform interventions to prevent and address this issue.

A distinctive aspect of this research is that it has facilitated the participation of children, young people, and their families, including their voices and perspectives, to provide a rich picture from their perspective of the situation of children affected by child-family separation. Likewise, the study has included the participation of key professionals from the National Child Protection System and Civil Society Organizations who are recognized for their experience in the work of preventing family separation and care during early childhood, childhood and adolescence.

This research seeks to contribute to the improvement of the policies and services provided by the National Child Protection System to families at risk of or affected by child-family separation, in such a way that its scope is extended to all Public Institutions, United Nations Agencies, Civil Society Organizations, Academia, Private Companies, and all people who work for the rights of children and young people, and their families. Its added value is manifested in its transversal impact, benefitting sectors such as education, justice and, especially social protection, by providing scientific evidence that sheds light on the root causes of child-family separation.

From SOS Children's Villages in El Salvador, we hope that this important research becomes an essential tool to continue advocating for the rights of children, young people, and their families, through transforming public policies, programmes, plans, and/or services that prevent child-family separation and respond within the framework of the United Nations Guidelines for Alternative Care under the principles of necessity and suitability.



**Patricia Flamenco**

**National Director of SOS Children's Villages El Salvador**



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### Definitions

<b>Abandonment</b>	A situation in which children are anonymously left in a 'public' place by persons unknown e.g., a child is left on the steps of a mosque or in front of a hospital, or on the street.
<b>Adoption</b>	A child who is officially placed in the legal custody of the person adopting them 'pursuant to a final adoption order, as of which moment, for the purposes of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, the child is considered to be in parental care'. <sup>1</sup>
<b>Alternative care</b>	Care provided for children who are not living with parents. According to the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, this is care that is formally arranged including foster care, kinship care, placement in small scale residential settings or, informal care. All care in residential institutions even if not formally arranged, is alternative care.
<b>Care Leavers</b>	Children and young people who have left alternative care.
<b>Child</b>	A child is any person under the age of 18 years unless the law of a particular country sets the legal age for adulthood younger, as provided for under Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Children without parental care</b>	For the purposes of this report, this is children not in the care of both parents. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children note this to be 'All children not in the overnight care of at least one of their parents, for whatever reason and under whatever circumstances'. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Family based alternative care</b>	Refers to care arrangement whereby a child is placed in the domestic environment of a family, as opposed to institutional or residential care. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Formal care</b>	'All care provided in a family environment that has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority, and all care provided in a residential environment, including in private facilities, whether or not the result of administrative or judicial measures'. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Foster care</b>	'Situations whereby children are placed by a competent authority for the purposes of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family, other than children's own family, that has been selected, qualified, approved, and supervised for providing such care'. <sup>6</sup> This also applies to a formally arranged placement with family members i.e. formal kinship foster care.
<b>Gatekeeping</b>	A process by which the situation of a child is carefully assessed and decisions made about protection and care that is in their best interests. This requires adherence to the 'necessity' principle; no child should be separated from parental care and placed in alternative care unless necessary for their protection. Children should be placed in the most suitable alternative care, which should not include residential institutions, that meets their needs. This is a temporary measure and all efforts made to reunite a child with their parents, or other primary caregiver, as quickly as possible.
<b>Informal care</b>	Any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends also known as informal kinship care, or by others in their individual capacity. The arrangement is at the initiative of the child, his/her parents, or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>2</sup> based on Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>4</sup> European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care (EEG) 'The Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care', November 2012, available under: [www.deinstitutionalisation.com](http://www.deinstitutionalisation.com); hereinafter quoted as: "EEG (November 2012) op. cit."

<sup>5</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>6</sup> ibid.

<sup>7</sup> ibid.

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<b>Institutional care</b>	'Large residential care facilities,' <sup>8</sup> where children are looked after in any public or private facility, staffed by salaried carers or volunteers working predetermined hours/shifts, and based on collective living arrangements, with a large capacity. <sup>9</sup>
<b>Kafala</b>	A means of providing care for children as recognised under Islamic law and in Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. This may include providing financial and material support to a child in parental or alternative care, or may be an arrangement closer to adoption or fostering where a child is taken to live with another family. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Kinship care</b>	'Family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.' <sup>11</sup> Informal kinship care is 'any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends ... at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body.' <sup>12</sup> Formal kinship care is care in the same settings ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or duly accredited body. <sup>13</sup>
<b>Orphan</b>	For purposes of this report the term orphan refers to a child whose both parents have died.
<b>Other primary caregiver</b>	Legal or customary primary caregiver of a child who is not their parent.
<b>Reintegration</b>	The process of a separated child making the transition back into his or her family. <sup>14</sup>
<b>Relinquishment</b>	A process by which a parent/s or others with or without parental authority decide not to raise a child and hand them over to another 'carer' e.g., a child voluntarily taken to a residential facility. Relinquishment unlike abandonment is when the identity of the mother or father, or other caregivers, are known.
<b>Residential care</b>	'Care provided in any non-family based group setting, such as places of safety for emergency care, transit centres in emergency situations, and all other short- and long-term residential care facilities, including group homes.' <sup>15</sup> A distinction is often made between residential institutions (described above) and small group homes. Small group homes are settings in which children are cared for in small groups, usually of up to 12 children <sup>16</sup> , with usually one or two consistent caregivers responsible for their care, often in a community setting. This form of care is different from foster care in that it takes place outside of the natural 'domestic environment' of the family, usually in facilities that have been especially designed and/or designated for the care of groups of children. <sup>17</sup>
<b>Separated children</b>	Children who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. <sup>18</sup>
<b>Small residential care settings</b>	A 'public or private, registered, non-family-based arrangement, providing temporary care to a group of 4 to 6 children, staffed by highly trained, salaried carers, applying a key-worker system, with a high caregiver-to-child ratio that allows for individualized attention for each child, based on the professionally developed case plan, which takes into account the voice of the child.' <sup>19</sup>
<b>Street connected</b>	Children living and/or working on the streets

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> NGO Working Group on Children Without Parental Care 2013

<sup>10</sup> Cantwell and Jacomy-Vite 2011

<sup>11</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* Article 29b.i.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Inter-agency group on Children's Reintegration 2016

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* Article III, 29c. iv.

<sup>16</sup> A UNICEF report recommends no more than 8 children. Please see UNICEF

<sup>17</sup> Koenderink 2019; United Nations General Assembly 2019

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF 2020a

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children	
Violence against children	For this report the term 'violence against children' will be used to denote all forms of abuse and exploitation including and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, serious neglect and deprivation. <sup>20</sup>
Young person	There is no legal or internationally agreed definition of 'young person'. The United Nations for statistical purposes, has defined 'youth', as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. <sup>21</sup> In some countries, a young person is someone up to the age of 34 years (as for example, Cote d'Ivoire). For the purposes of this report a young person is defined as persons aged 18 to 25 years.

### Abbreviations

Attorney General of the Republic of El Salvador	AGR
Consejo Nacional de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia	CONAPINA
Court specialised in childhood and adolescence	JENA
Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia	ISNA
Junta de Protección (Child Protection Boards)	JDP
Juzgado especializado de la Niñez y la Adolescencia	JNA
National Council for Children and Adolescents	CONNA
Procuraduría General de República	PGR
Special Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents	LEPIN
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	UNCRC

<sup>20</sup> Please see: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/>

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Secretary General 1981

## 1. Background to the study of drivers of child-parents separation and placement in alternative care

A recent study<sup>22</sup> estimated the number of children in alternative care in 2015 in a total of 136 countries. The study acknowledged the challenges in obtaining an accurate figure whilst providing a median estimate of 5.37 million. Other studies have offered differing statistics whilst also pointing to the difficulty in obtaining data.<sup>23</sup> Researchers have also made efforts to gather information regarding children living in 'vulnerable'<sup>24</sup> situations believed to pose possible risks to children being separated from parental care, as well as research on the efficacy of family strengthening.<sup>25</sup> However, these studies often highlight a lack of information, due in part, to inadequate quantitative and qualitative research and data management systems and the failure to gather information as to reasons why children are in care, or at risk of being so.<sup>26</sup> As a result, there are perceived gaps in evidence that would inform the development of effective universal and specialist programmes and services to address the underlying causes of child-parents separation.

In preparation for our research, we have also taken note of studies examining the detrimental impact of adverse experiences in childhood, including separation of a child from parents, and extended family, and the impact of placement in alternative care.<sup>27</sup> Such studies illustrate the way these events can result in detrimental life-long consequences. It is the findings of these studies that highlight the urgent action needed to prevent all unnecessary placement of children in alternative care.

Clearly enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the right of a child, 'for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality', to 'grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.'<sup>28</sup> This is further endorsed in the 2019 UNGA Resolution, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN Guidelines)<sup>29</sup>. The handbook written to accompany the UN Guidelines, 'Moving Forward',<sup>30</sup> refers to the important principles of 'necessity' and 'suitability'. These principles recognise the primacy of preventing separation, and removal of a child from the care of their parents should be seen as a measure of last resort for the shortest possible duration. A further important premise is no actions should deprive a child of parental care unless it has been rigorously assessed as a necessary safeguarding measure. When such actions are taken, they must always be

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<sup>22</sup> Desmond et al. 2020

<sup>23</sup> Petrowski et al. 2017

<sup>24</sup> Nankervis et al. 2011; OECD 2017

<sup>25</sup> Delap 2013; EveryChild 2009; Laumann 2015; Lodder et al. 2021; Namey & Brown 2018; Ortea et al. 2022; Wilke et al. 2022

<sup>26</sup> Martin & Zulaika 2016; Petrowski et al. 2017; Willi et al. 2020

<sup>27</sup> Bruska & Tessin 2013; De Swart et al. 2012; Gale 2018; Howard et al. 2023; Simkiss 2019; Stein 2005.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations General Assembly 1989

<sup>29</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>30</sup> Cantwell et al. 2012

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in a child's best interest. The UN Guidelines echo the UNCRC in highlighting the importance of efforts being primarily 'directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members.'<sup>31</sup> To this end, the 'State should ensure that families have access to forms of support in the caregiving role.'<sup>32</sup>

Despite efforts to develop child protection systems that encompass the principles of 'gatekeeping'<sup>33</sup> and prevention of child-parents separation, children across the world continue to lose parental care. Furthermore, studies suggest many children experience separation from their parents that could have been prevented.<sup>34</sup> Drivers of separation are thought to be complex and varied with different studies placing emphasis on differing primary antecedents of separation.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, to develop effective and relevant strategies and programmes that help prevent the unnecessary placement of children in alternative care in different parts of the world, it is essential we gain a better understanding of which drivers are contributing to child-parents separation in differing contexts, to which degree, and how. And it is particularly important to draw such evidence by listening to the views of children, young people, and adult family members.

Most particularly, we need to gather this evidence in recognition that 'more research is needed to understand the effective approaches to antecedents to placement'<sup>36</sup> in residential and other forms of, alternative care. And with the understanding that the information that does exist, overwhelmingly originates in high income countries thus leaving further gaps in knowledge and understanding<sup>37</sup>. Clearly, to accurately inform future developments in policy and service delivery that contribute to prevention of child-parents separation, further documented primary evidence of risk factors is needed as relevant to different countries, contexts, and socio-ecological systems.

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Casky, and Gale 2015

<sup>34</sup> Chaitkin et al. 2017

<sup>35</sup> Bryson et al. 2017; Family for Every Child 2014; Laumann 2015

<sup>36</sup> Wilke et al. 2022

<sup>37</sup> Gale 2018; Martin & Zulaika 2016; Petrowski et al. 2017



## 2. Aim and Scope of the Study

The primary aim of the research is to address gaps in evidence relating to the key drivers that contribute to the separation of children from their parents and placement in alternative care.

To collate this evidence, the following questions were considered:

- What are the key challenges facing families that create conditions in which child-parents separation and placement in alternative care is more likely to occur?
- Who are the children already in alternative care?
- What are some of the gaps in multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches and service delivery that could help prevent child-parents separation?
- What are the ideas of children, young people, family members, and other key stakeholders, about the current support to families and how it could be improved?

Alternative care is recognised in the UN Guidelines,<sup>38</sup> as both informal and formal care. The difference being the former is a private arrangement that has not been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or other accredited body. Traditionally, alternative care includes a variety of settings including kinship care, foster care, other forms of family-based placements, as well as residential care, either in a small group setting or in large institutions, and supervised independent living arrangements.

We realise that around the world, interchangeable definitions are being used in relation to a child in alternative care. Some literature refers to separation of a child from parents or another primary caregiver or legal guardian. Some refer to children who have been separated from their parents as 'child-family' separation. Indeed references to both separation from parents and from family are used in the UNCRC. The UN Guidelines<sup>39</sup> most definitely recognise the important 'role played by the extended family and the community and the obligations of States for all children not in the care of their parents or legal and customary caregivers, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child'. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the cultural construct and concept of 'family' can denote different household arrangements including the norm of different members of the extended family being considered a child's primary caregiver through informal or formal arrangements. As Kendrick highlighted, over 'recent years, there have been significant developments in sociological and anthropological thinking in terms of the nature of family and intimate relationships'<sup>40</sup> with growing acceptance of differing concepts of what form a 'family' takes in different geographical and cultural contexts.

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<sup>38</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>39</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>40</sup> Kendrick 2012

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However, the UN Guidelines clearly define children in alternative care as those being no longer in the care of a parent/s.<sup>41</sup> Article 9 of the UNCRC also notes how 'States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child'.<sup>42</sup> Article 18 of the UNCRC requires 'States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child'.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, Article 3 of the UN Guidelines require efforts to be primarily directed toward 'enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents'. They also clearly state that 'preventing the need for alternative care' should first and foremost be through 'promoting parental care' (Article 32). This includes policies to 'promote the right to have a relationship with both parents', and to, 'strengthen parents' ability to care for their children' (Article 33). In this respect, Article 44 calls on States to implement measures that include, 'family strengthening services, such as parenting courses and sessions, the promotion of positive parent-child relationships'. Most importantly, we are aware of research that reflects the voices of children and their clearly articulated wish to remain with, or to return to, their 'parents'.<sup>44</sup>

With the differing guidance and terminology being taken into consideration, It has been decided to use the term 'child-parents separation' in this report in reference to situations where children lose parental care i.e., being separated from both parents and are placed in alternative care.

While discourse on the prevention of placing children in alternative care has been explored in previous research and reports,<sup>45</sup> our preliminary desk review found very little evidence that this topic had been directly informed by the voices and perspectives of children, young people, parents, and other primary caregivers themselves. Neither has the available research provided for these voices to be heard in different countries and contexts across the world. It was considered important therefore, to ensure the scope of this study included efforts to address these gaps by collating information from different stakeholders across diverse socio-economic locations, and most especially, from children and young people.

To this end, participatory research methodology has been developed with the support of children and young people in El Salvador and Lebanon. Their participation resulted in the development of questions and participatory research methodology then used in workshops with other children,

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<sup>41</sup> The UN Guidelines define children without parental care are all children not in the overnight care of at least one of their parents, for whatever reason and under whatever circumstances

<sup>42</sup> United Nations General Assembly 1989

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> SOS Children's Villages International 2020

<sup>45</sup> Casky & Gale. 2015; Family for Every Child 2014



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young people, and adult family members. These workshops allowed us to explore drivers contributing to child-parents separation and placement of children in alternative care. This process also helped us gather evidence by listening to children, young people, and adult family members, living in different socio-political and cultural environments in a further seven low, medium and high-income countries.<sup>46</sup> The knowledge of professionals with a responsibility to protect and support children and families was also evidenced.

The research has also been guided by the rights of children as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the 2019 United Nations General Assembly Resolution: 'Promotion and the protection of the rights of children' (A/RES/74/133)<sup>47</sup>. The UNCRC has been described as 'the most complete statement of children's rights ever produced and is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history.'<sup>48</sup> Every child in the world has rights. These rights, including those of protection and participation, are universal and indivisible, and must be upheld at all times. The UNCRC promotes the principle of 'best interest' and this has been a further important consideration in the undertaking of our research programme. The research has also been underpinned by the UN Guidelines including recognition of the importance of a child growing up in a family environment. The role of the state has also been taken into account when developing our research including responsibility to 'develop and implement comprehensive child welfare and protection policies within the framework of their overall social and human development policy'.<sup>49</sup>

Our research was not intended to comment on the situation of children whilst in alternative care. Neither was it expected to provide an evaluation of the services provided by SOS Children's Villages El Salvador. Other topics not covered by the research include the situation of migrant, asylum seeker, refugee unaccompanied and separated children, or children who are trafficked. We do recognise their plight however and draw attention to existing documentation on the reasons children affected by migration become separated from parental care.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, as the focus of our study has been prevention of separation, issues related to reintegration and adoption have been given very little consideration. The situation of children deprived of liberty through placement in detention was also not included in our research.

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<sup>46</sup> Please see: <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/stories/the-classification-of-countries-by-income.html>

<sup>47</sup> Please see: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3837858?ln=en>

<sup>48</sup> Please see: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

<sup>49</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>50</sup> International Organization for Migration 2013; International Organization for Migration 2015; International Social Services 2017; Marcus et al. 2020

### 3. Executive summary

This study *Key Drivers Contributing Child-Parents Separation in EL Salvador* was conducted by independent international and national researchers and facilitated by SOS Children's Villages El Salvador and SOS Children's Villages International.

Recognising that El Salvador has children who are being separated from parents and placed in alternative care, the study aims to support governmental and non-governmental bodies and organizations in mapping the drivers that contribute to this situation and help inform future policies and programmes of family support.

The research was led by Dr Chrissie Gale, the International Research Lead accompanied by Dr Paola Maria Navarrete Galvez from the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador. Dr Galvez was assisted by three research students, Carmen Andrea Carlos Pacheco, Samantha Nicole Rivera Donis, and Xiomara Guadalupe Portal Cornejo.

#### Research framework and process

The overall aim of the research was to explore:

- What are the key challenges facing families that create conditions in which child-parents separation and placement in alternative care is more likely to occur?
- Who are the children already in alternative care?
- What are some of the gaps in multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches and service delivery that could help prevent child-parents separation?
- What are the ideas of children, young people, family members, and other key stakeholders, about the current support to families and how could they be improved?

We recognise the presence of literature on children who have been separated from their parents often uses the term 'child-family' separation. However, the UN Guidelines clearly defines children in alternative care as those being no longer in the care of a parent/s.<sup>51</sup> We chose therefore, to use the term child-parents separation during our research in reference to situations where children lose parental care and as a result, are placed in alternative care.

Our research framework was designed to explore the drivers contributing to children's placement in alternative care. The framework was based on a child rights approach and international standards for the protection and care of children. It has also taken a socio-ecological framework, such as that of

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<sup>51</sup> The UN Guidelines define children without parental care are all children not in the overnight care of at least one of their parents, for whatever reason and under whatever circumstances

Bronfenbrenner,<sup>52</sup> into consideration, as well as the different elements of a national child protection system. Our study builds on and contributes to global evidence and outlines steps that might be taken to support families and prevent unnecessary placement of children in alternative care. To achieve this, we asked research participants about different factors impacting family life. We also sought research participants' ideas and opinions as to possible solutions that could help families overcome any challenges they may be facing.

This assignment received ethical approval from the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador. Detailed quality assurance measures and ethical principles that guided informed consent and other research protocols formed an important component of the ethical approval process.

The following methods were used to gather qualitative and quantitative data:

- **Desk review.** A desk review was conducted by means of a systematic exploration of academic and other web-based databases and search engines<sup>53</sup> as well as additional reports and materials. The review covered country background information as well as exploring topics that included participatory research methods, gatekeeping, and family strengthening.
- **Participatory research workshops.** In recognition of the importance of children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives, and indeed allowing for anyone to play an integral role in decisions making, coupled with recognition of children as 'competent social actors'<sup>54</sup> who should be 'actively involved in shaping their own social worlds',<sup>55</sup> we took steps to achieve as high a degree of participation as possible during our research<sup>56</sup>. To this end, in order to highlight the voices, and seek the knowledge and ideas, of children and young people, they were not only invited to join qualitative participatory research workshops, but efforts were made to engage them in the design of the research questions and methodology.

This process included participation of a group of 9 children living with their families in vulnerable<sup>57</sup> circumstances, and a group of 10 care experienced young people, in a series of research co-design workshops. Groups were deliberately kept to around this number to allow for close teamwork. During these workshops children and young people worked alongside researchers to develop a set of

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<sup>52</sup> Bronfenbrenner 1977; Bronfenbrenner 1986; SOS Children's Villages International 2023

<sup>53</sup> Including Science Direct, Wiley online, Taylor & Francis online, Springerlink, JSTOR and Sage Journals, UNICEF, the Better Care Network and other agency websites, Google, and Google Scholar search engines.

<sup>54</sup> Gilchrist et al. 2013:577. See also Davidson 2017

<sup>55</sup> Gilchrist et al. 2013:577. See also Davidson 2017

<sup>56</sup> Arnstein 1959

<sup>57</sup> For the purposes of the research, a definition of 'vulnerable' was extracted from: Bauer & Wiezorek (2016) Vulnerable Families: Reflections on a Difficult Category. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, Vol 4, pp.11-28.

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research questions and qualitative participatory research methods. The resultant research questions for children/young people were:

Question 1: What makes children/young people in this family happy when they are at home? (children and young people had drawn a home with a family in it)

Question 2: What makes children/young in this family worried or unhappy when they are at home?

Question 3: What makes the adults in the family feel happy, strong and united when they are at home?

Question 4: What makes the adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?

Question 5: What is needed to help families be happy, strong and united

The questions and methods developed in the research co-design workshops were then piloted in a series of research workshops with a total of 19 children and 17 young people. Participants were invited through the engagement of NGOs, including SOS Children's Villages. Efforts were made to invite equal numbers of girls and boys from different backgrounds. These workshops were led by Dr Paola Maria Navarrete Galvez from the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador. The results have informed the development of qualitative research participatory workshops that have now been successfully implemented in a further five countries to date.

We also wanted to elevate the voices and ideas of adult family members. To this end, a total of 34 adult family members living in vulnerable situations participated in 4 qualitative research workshops. These included recipients of family strengthening services run by SOS Children's Villages as well as support services offered by other organizations. Members of these workshops were predominantly female. These workshops were led by the International Lead Researcher.

Below are examples of the results of different participatory research exercises completed during the workshops (Figure 1). The picture on the left depicts a drawing produced by young people when asked to draw a typical house in their neighbourhood with a family in it and their answers to research questions placed on post-its. It is noted that all the pictures of families drawn by children and young people consisted of figures symbolising a mother, a father and a child/children. The second picture is a problem and solution tree completed by adult family members.

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Figure 1. A home in the community drawn by young people and a solution tree provided by adult family members



To allow for comparative research, workshops were conducted in one rural location, San Vicente, a town situated approximately 62 kms from San Salvador, one urban setting, Santa Tecla, a district of San Salvador. Care was taken to balance the available time researchers had to complete the field work with efforts not to disrupt the lives of participants. This included consideration of the times and length of workshops, and not impinging on time at school or at work etc.

- **Semi-structured interviews.** An interview guide was developed containing a set of guiding questions with the aim of exploring reasons children are entering alternative care in El Salvador.

A respondent selection guide was developed and purposive sampling was used to identify key informants. This included professionals who work in the child protection system and have a responsibility for taking decisions regarding a child's placement in alternative care, and alternative care providers. A total of 12 of semi-structured interviews were completed.

### Research ethics and protocols.

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All elements of the research process were designed and conducted in a manner guided by professional standards and ethical principles.<sup>58</sup> Ethical clearance to conduct the research was granted by the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador.

Age and respondent appropriate Information Sheets and Consent Forms were produced in Spanish. Information Sheets were distributed at the point of invitation to participate. At the start of each workshop, written consent was sought from all children, young people, and adult family members. At the start of each semi-structured interview, interviewees were also provided with additional copies of Information Sheets and a consent form.

Research participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, unless a risk of harm to a child was revealed. All data used in reporting has been anonymised, and care taken not to reveal the identity of participants. National researchers and the translator accompanying the international researcher each signed a third-party confidentiality agreement and asked to adhere to the SOS Children's Villages Child Protection Protocol.

Recordings were made using an encrypted recording device and uploaded to secure password protected folders held only by the International Lead Researcher. All data is stored in an electronic format and also held securely in password protected computer files. Any personal data will be destroyed within three years of the termination of the research programme.

The issue of child safeguarding was taken with the utmost seriousness and informed the design of an ethical research process. All steps were taken to ensure the rights and dignity of participants. An SOS Children's Villages social worker, or equivalent, (a 'responsible adult') was present at the same location as the research workshops with children and young people. It was agreed if any safeguarding concerns arose during the research they would be reported to the 'responsible adult' and, in the event of such disclosure, SOS Children's Villages child safeguarding procedures were to be activated.

All research findings have been triangulated and the use of NVIVO software assisted analysis that highlighted key issues raised by participants.

### Background

Clearly enshrined in the UNCRC is the right of a child, 'for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality', to 'grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.'<sup>59</sup> This is further endorsed in the 2019 UNGA Resolution, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children and the UN Guidelines. The handbook written to accompany the UN Guidelines,

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<sup>58</sup> See for example, Social Research Association (2020)

<sup>59</sup> United Nations General Assembly 1989



'Moving Forward',<sup>60</sup> refers to the important principles of 'necessity' and 'suitability'. These principles recognise the primacy of preventing separation and that removal of a child from the care of their parents is a measure of last resort as well as being for the shortest possible duration. A further important premise is no actions should deprive a child of parental care unless it has been rigorously assessed as a necessary safeguarding measure. When such actions are taken, they must always be in a child's best interest. The UN Guidelines echo the UNCRC in highlighting the importance of efforts being primarily 'directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members.'<sup>61</sup> To this end, the 'State should ensure that families have access to forms of support in the caregiving role.'<sup>62</sup>

Previous research has made efforts to gather information regarding children living in 'vulnerable'<sup>63</sup> situations that pose possible risks to children being separated from parental care, and on the efficacy of family strengthening.<sup>64</sup> Some of these studies highlight the lack of information regarding the reasons children are in alternative care, or at risk of being so.<sup>65</sup> As a result, there are perceived gaps in evidence that would inform the development of effective universal and specialist programmes and services to address the underlying to prevent any unnecessary placement in alternative care. Further studies have illustrated the detrimental effects of adverse experiences in childhood, including separation of a child from parents, and extended family, and impact of placement in alternative care.<sup>66</sup> This research also illustrates the way such events can result in detrimental life-long consequences and therefore, highlights the urgent action needed to prevent all future unnecessary placement of children in alternative care.

Despite efforts to develop child protection systems that encompass the principles of 'gatekeeping'<sup>67</sup> and prevention of child-parents separation, children across the world continue to lose parental care. Furthermore, studies suggest many children experience separation from their parents that could have been prevented.<sup>68</sup> Drivers of this separation are thought to be complex and varied with different studies placing emphasis on differing primary antecedents of separation.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, to develop effective and relevant strategies and programmes that help prevent the unnecessary placement of children in alternative care in different parts of the world, it is essential we gain a better understanding of which drivers are contributing to child-parents separation in differing contexts, to which degree, and how. And it is particularly important to draw such evidence by listening to the views of children,

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<sup>60</sup> Cantwell et al. 2012

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Nankervis et al. 2011; OECD 2017

<sup>64</sup> Delap 2013; EveryChild 2009; Laumann 2015; Lodder et al. 2021; Namey & Brown 2018; Ortea et al. 2022; Wilke et al. 2022

<sup>65</sup> Martin & Zulaika 2016; Petrowski et al. 2017; Willi et al. 2020

<sup>66</sup> Bruska & Tessin 2013; De Swart et al. 2012; Gale 2018; Howard et al. 2023; Simkiss 2019; Stein 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Casky, and Gale 2015

<sup>68</sup> Chaitkin et al. 2017

<sup>69</sup> Bryson et al. 2017; Family for Every Child 2014; Laumann 2015

young people, and adult family members. Most particularly, we need to gather evidence on these aforementioned topics in recognition that 'more research is needed to understand the effective approaches to antecedents to placement'<sup>70</sup> in residential and other forms of, alternative care. And, to address the concern that the information that does exist, overwhelmingly originates in high income countries thus leaving further gaps in knowledge and understanding<sup>71</sup>.

Clearly, to accurately inform future developments in policy and service delivery that contribute to prevention of child-parents separation, further documented primary evidence of risk factors is needed as relevant to different countries, contexts, and ecological systems.

### The context of El Salvador

Although research respondents suggested the number of children in alternative care in El Salvador may be on the decline, nevertheless, various aspects of social norms and the socio-economic situation of the country continue to place children at risk of separation from parents. This includes such factors as violence and inter-related issues of poverty.

Violence is pervasive in El Salvador, both in the home and throughout society as a whole. For many years, violence inflicted by gangs resulted in high rates of homicide, rape, extortion, and kidnapping.<sup>72</sup> It is understood such violence has 'stolen'<sup>73</sup> childhoods whilst other reports highlight the impact on children living in a society dominated by fear and reprisal.<sup>74</sup> A report issued in 2017,<sup>75</sup> found 22.1% of female and 18.7% of male respondents had experienced physical violence before the age of 18 years. For almost 1 in 7 females and 1 in 14 males, the physical violence they experienced in childhood was inflicted by a parent, adult caregiver, or other adult relative. Almost 35% of females said they had experienced sexual violence before the age of 14 years old.<sup>76</sup> The study highlighted the issues of under-reporting on issues of violence. In 2018, the UN said '67% of women had experienced some type of violence in El Salvador' and estimated the rate of violent death of women as '13.49 per hundred thousand women: one of the highest in the world'.<sup>77</sup>

Although over recent years the overall rate of those living in poverty has declined, the situation has altered very little for those living in extreme poverty.<sup>78</sup> In 2022, UNICEF revealed<sup>79</sup> almost a third of all

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<sup>70</sup> Wilke et al. 2022

<sup>71</sup> Gale 2018; Martin & Zulaika 2016; Petrowski et al. 2017

<sup>72</sup> Carcach & Artola 2016; See also: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/January/unodc-addresses-the-forced-disappearances-and-torture-of-women--girls-and-youth-in-el-salvador.html>

<sup>73</sup> Please see: <https://www.unicef.org/stories/stolen-childhood-gang-violence-el-salvador>

<sup>74</sup> Fry et al. 2021

<sup>75</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017

<sup>76</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017

<sup>77</sup> Please see: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/04/1431372>

<sup>78</sup> Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021, and Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>79</sup> UNICEF 2022



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households with children were experiencing multidimensional poverty. In the same year OCHA reported<sup>80</sup> that many households were unable to manage resources sufficiently to cover basic needs with approximately 1.1 million people classified as being 'in need' based on humanitarian standards.<sup>81</sup> Amongst the most vulnerable groups were children and women. Malnutrition in all its forms remains a concern and the percentage of underweight children has increased in recent years.<sup>82</sup> In 2022, 39% of households reportedly lived in poor and overcrowded living conditions with this being more prevalent in rural areas.<sup>83</sup>

A 2022 report<sup>84</sup> illustrated how 13% of primary schoolchildren and 17% of secondary students were not in full-time education. The OECD said<sup>85</sup> challenges facing the country in relation to poor quality education was resulting in high drop-out rates of young people leaving them without basic knowledge and skills. There are also concerns about lack of access to basic and specialist services for children and adults with disabilities, including inclusion in education. A 2020 UNICEF report<sup>86</sup> estimated the number of persons with disabilities in El Salvador to have been 463,075, of which 26% (119,944) were children. Human Rights Watch<sup>87</sup> has evaluated El Salvador's legislative framework as inconsistent with international disability rights law.

The Government is taking steps to develop and implement improved policies including those for the protection and well-being of children. This includes a comprehensive child rights law, 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia', that came into force in January 2023 with accompanying policies. This law has a specific focus on prevention of unnecessary separation and support to families. Investment is also being made in various components of the national child protection system. It is hoped these developments will contribute to improved gatekeeping<sup>88</sup> and increased support to families.

### Summary of findings

Our research had the primary aim of determining the reasons children are placed in alternative care in El Salvador. We believe the decision to place a child in alternative care is particularly influenced by two factors: the circumstances they are living in, and the decision-making of those with responsibility for child safeguarding judgements. Therefore, our research framework, included a focus on issues that directly impact households as well as the role of decision-makers, and factors that influence their determination whether or not to place a child in alternative care.

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<sup>80</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>81</sup> OCHA 2022b:19

<sup>82</sup> UNICEF El Salvador 2022

<sup>83</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>84</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>85</sup> OECD 2017

<sup>86</sup> Please see: [https://www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/8881/file/2022-PL8-El\\_Salvador-CPD-EN-ODS.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/8881/file/2022-PL8-El_Salvador-CPD-EN-ODS.pdf)

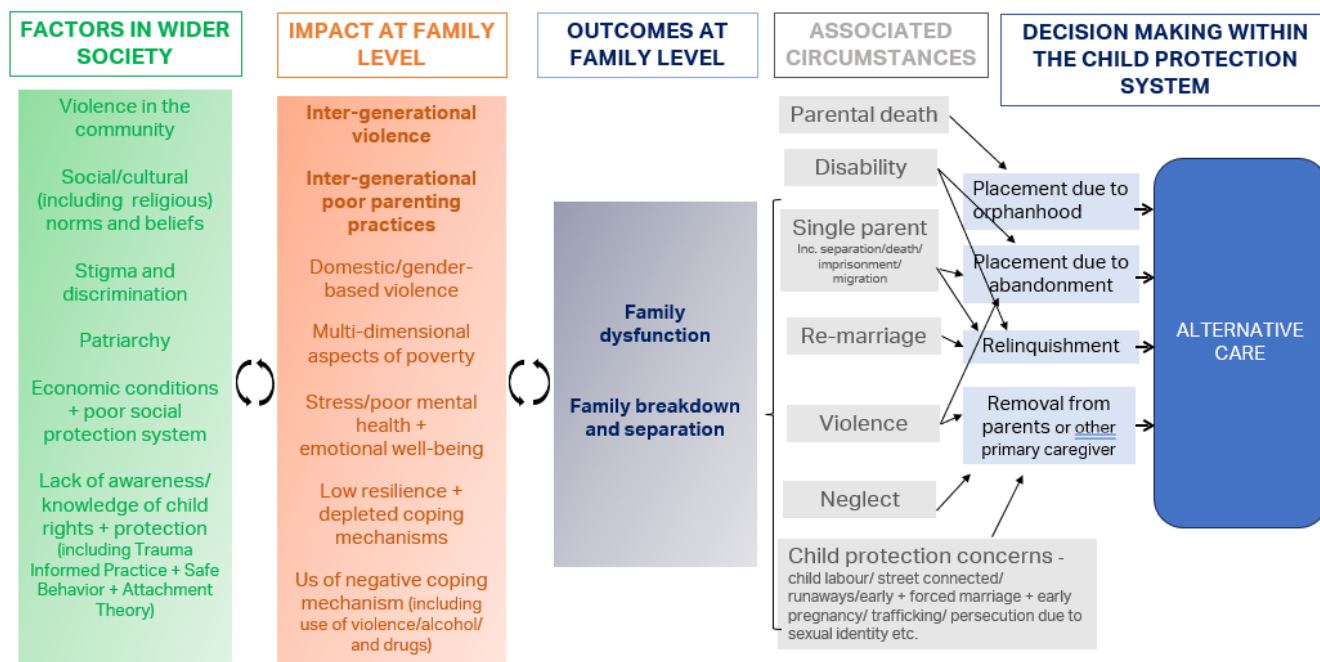
<sup>87</sup> Human Rights Watch 2022

<sup>88</sup> Casky and Gale 2015

## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the drivers associated with placement of children in alternative care in El Salvador. They reveal the multi-faceted and inter-related circumstances that bring children to the attention of the child protection authorities and decision-making that can result in their being placed in alternative care, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Factors leading to the placement of children in alternative care



(Source: Authors own illustration)

Our findings were very much informed by the information children, young people and adult family members provided during the research workshops. Below the words found in Figures, 3, 4, and 5 depict a compilation of all the answers they provided.

Figure 3. Results of workshops with children: What makes children feel unhappy and worried when at home?

## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation

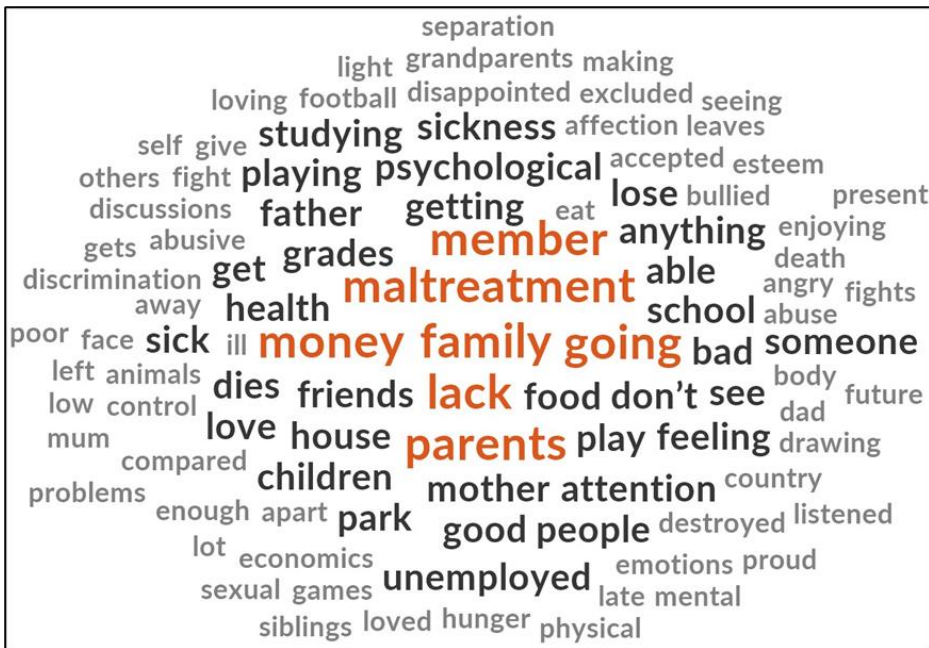


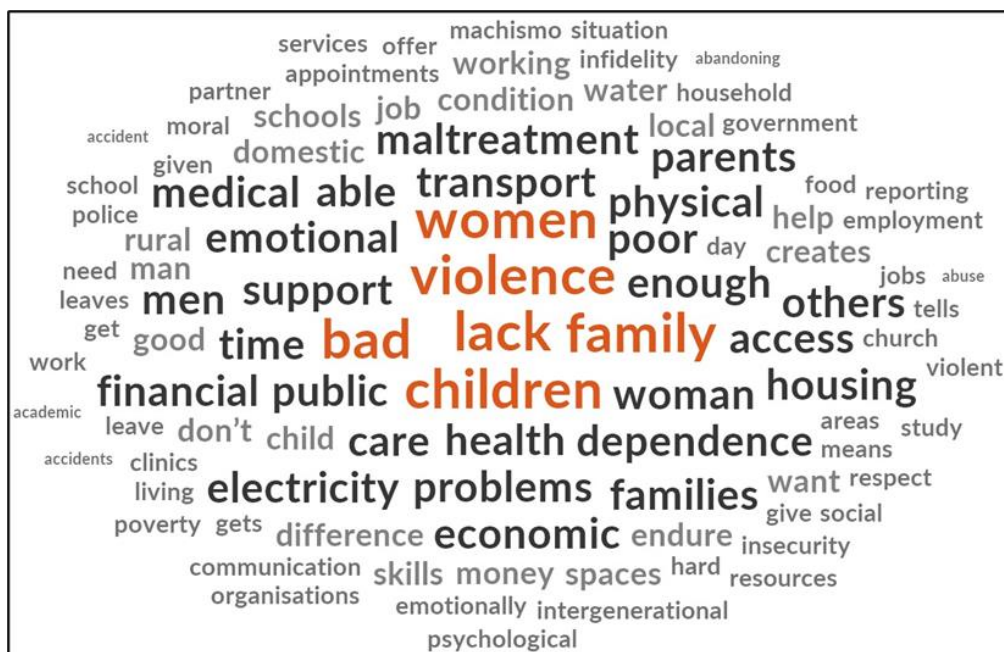
Figure 4. Results of workshops with young people: What makes young people feel unhappy and worried when at home?



As seen in these word clouds, when asked what makes children or young people unhappy or worried at home, the words 'maltreatment' and 'violence' were frequently used. Other words relating to such behaviour included 'abusive', 'abuse' and 'fights' and being 'hit'. They referred to physical and psychological/emotional violence. Only one child and one young person each wrote about sexual abuse. They also wrote about issues related to poverty including lack of 'money', 'hunger' and not having enough to 'eat', 'debt' and problems 'paying' for basic needs.

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Figure 5. What makes families worried or unhappy when they are at home as answered by adult family members



As seen in Figure 5, when adult family members were asked, 'what makes families worried or unhappy or worried when they are at home', the word 'violence' was frequently used. The word 'women' was frequently used, especially in relation to domestic violence, a factor discussed in further detail later in this report. Likewise, words such as 'lack' were used in relation to factors associated with poverty. This includes lack of 'financial' means, 'employment', 'electricity', 'water', and access to other 'services'. The cost of medical treatment and medicines is a particular concern.

Following an analysis of the research data, we found a strong correlation between the information provided by children, young people, adult family members, and professional key informants.

- **Violence**

Articles of the UNCRC that afford children the right to protection includes, protection from violence, abuse and neglect (Article 19 and Article 37(a)), from sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34) and, from sale, trafficking and abduction (Article 11, Article 35, Article 36, Article 39). Violence against children is described by UNICEF as taking many forms, 'including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and may involve neglect or deprivation.'<sup>89</sup>

Analysis of the information provided by children, young people, adult family members, and interviewees, complimented by findings of a desk review, suggests the presence of violence in the

<sup>89</sup> Please see: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/>



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home, and the manner in which this can contribute to family breakdown and a factor leading to placement in alternative care in El Salvador. Our research shows children are being subject to physical, sexual, and emotional violence. They are also witnessing and being impacted by violence between adults. Often these forms of violence are inter-related. In addition, serious neglect is a reason children are placed in alternative care.

Violence is believed to be pervasive across society with such external factors impinging on family life as years of civil conflict and gang violence. In addition, the consequences of a society impacted by a machismo culture is recognised as a factor in the enduring presence of domestic violence predominantly inflicted on women. As a result, mothers, especially when lacking family and other support networks, are in situations where they must endure abuse, and possibly that of their children, or face the challenges of being a single-headed household. If remaining within the household, not only do children witness such violence, but they may also become at risk to placement in care when the strain is impacting their mother's ability to adequately care for them, or they become direct targets of the violence.

Participants in our research highlighted the poor unity in families attributed to the 'lack' of love, mutual support, respect, communication, and ability to live together in harmony. In this manner, it is observed how, in some households, absence of paternal love and/or lack of attachment and bonding between parents and children, may escalate into violence and serious neglect. Interviewees revealed an understanding that parents who themselves lacked a happy, secure, protected, and loving childhood, may not have the understanding and ability to sufficiently care for their children.

Although not always directly related to violence, children are also living in alternative care because they have been abandoned or they are orphans. Children with disabilities are being separated from their family when their parents are unable, or do not want to, provide the care they need. Children are also being sent towards, or are placing themselves in, risky situations which then brings them to the attention of police and child protection services. For example, children who run away from home due to violence or family breakdown, and become street connected, as well as those involved in child labour, many of whom are engaged in hazardous work.

Of most concern, is findings that reveal a perpetuation of inter-generational violence and the continuation of adverse childhood experiences that can have a lasting impact on individuals, including the repetition of abusive behaviour, as well as on parenting ability, across generations. We believe that with each generation in which families in El Salvador repeatedly experience and witness violence, and/or lack strong attachment and positive parenting skills, issues related to family dysfunction, breakdown and separation, will be an ongoing concern. This in turn means the ongoing risk of placement of children in alternative care.

- **The correlation between the multiple dimensions of poverty, family breakdown and placement in alternative care**

Article 27 of the UNCRC requires State Parties to recognise the right of every child to a 'standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.' The Article also calls on State Parties to take appropriate measures to support and assist parents with their responsibility toward children and 'shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.' Other articles within the UNCRC also include a right to health (Article 24), education (Article 28 & 29) and survival and development (6). It is recognised that poverty is also an inter-generational as well as a multi-dimensional issue with measurements taking into account not only financial means, but other factors that contribute to well-being.<sup>90</sup>

We have observed how child-parents separation can be impacted by issues related to poverty, including poor or no access to basic and specialist services. In this manner, research findings suggest the inability to face such daily challenge as providing food, adequate shelter, paying utility bills, keeping children in school, being able to access and afford health care, and failure to find adequately remunerated employment etc., is contributing to stress within households. An inadequate national social protection system that fails to provide adequate support such as unemployment and sickness benefits, additional help for households in which someone has a disability, alongside other mechanisms that would help families in vulnerable circumstances cope with crises and shocks, is a further contributing factor. As a result, some households are facing ongoing challenges that exacerbate feelings of tension, distress, and inability to cope. Especially where this is compounded by such factors such as poor relationships, lack of communication, and little or no mutual care and support. According to our research this in turn can contribute to mental health problems, and lead some to negative coping mechanisms such as the use of alcohol and drugs, and the infliction of violence.

Although we have seen how issues related to poverty contributes to family breakdown and the presence of violence, nevertheless, it is important to recognise there are families living in very challenging circumstances who are supportive and caring of one another and create a safe environment for children. This illustrates how strong and loving relationships are an important factor in helping families to cope with the impact of poverty and other shocks experienced by households whilst also maintaining a violence free household.

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<sup>90</sup> Please see: [https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure#:~:text=The%20Multidimensional%20Poverty%20Measure%20\(MPM,the%20%242.15%20international%20poverty%20line;https://ophi.org.uk/video-poverty-in-el-salvador-from-the-perspective-of-the-protagonists/](https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure#:~:text=The%20Multidimensional%20Poverty%20Measure%20(MPM,the%20%242.15%20international%20poverty%20line;https://ophi.org.uk/video-poverty-in-el-salvador-from-the-perspective-of-the-protagonists/)

Consideration should be given to the voices of our research participants telling us children and young people, and adult family members, want to feel loved, protected, cared for, trusted, valued, respected, and to live in an environment where there is support, communication, time spent together and happiness.

- **Decision-making**

We believe the decision to place a child in alternative care is not only influenced the circumstances they are living in, but also the critical decision-making of those professionals with responsibility for child safeguarding judgements. In this respect, our research included a focus on decision makers, and factors influencing their decisions whether or not to place a child in alternative care. We particularly considered decision-making within the context of a national child protection system including the normative framework, sufficient data, functioning and resources of child protection services, training and capacity of professionals, and use of child and family assessments.

It is our understanding that improved legislation and policies for child protection, family strengthening, and gatekeeping have and continue to be developed in El Salvador. However, as much of the legislation and policy has only just been issued, it was not possible to evaluate the efficacy of their implementation. Gaps have been identified however, in the ability of the child protection workforce, especially those within the Junta de Protección, to respond to and support children at risk and their families. Factors contributing to this situation include insufficient numbers of staff and lack of resources necessary to effectively undertake child protection roles and responsibilities. High case numbers are resulting in what some believe to be incomplete assessments of children and families situations and as a result, there is a belief that incorrect decisions by which unnecessary separation of children from parental care are being taken in some cases.

Our research further revealed the need for further investment in building capacity and skills of decision makers to undertake their responsibilities to children and help prevent unnecessary separation from parental care.

An assessment of the quality of social work training in higher education institutions is missing from our research along with a review of provision and standards of in-service capacity building programmes.

Effective planning and resources for a national child protection system requires good data and it is recognised that the Government of El Salvador has developed a new data management system that will help provide evidence when developing new policies and programmes.

In conclusion, the findings in this study show an urgent need to protect children and prevent any unnecessary placement in alternative care, by addressing the inter-generational cycle of violence

being experienced in households. This requires an emphasis on building stronger and more caring relationships within families whilst addressing the social, economic, and other challenges contributing to stress, family dysfunction and breakdown. The need for investment in employment of additional, well-trained professionals with responsibility for decision-making, and especially those working in the Junta de Protección, is seen as a priority. We do recognise the latter is an issue currently being considered by the Government of El Salvador but we would also conclude that enhancing the ability of professional stakeholders with the opportunity to make better evidenced decisions, would enhance the protection of children and help prevent the unnecessary use of alternative care.

## Recommendations

### Protection

- There is an urgent need for investment in violence prevention programmes for adults and for children to help break the inter-generational cycle of violent behaviour. These programmes should be systematically applied in a repeated and sustainable manner. To this end, provision of violence prevention programmes that reach children at an early age could be built into the school curriculum and comprise not just one-off 'civic' lessons, but continuous learning that promotes positive messages and behaviour throughout school life. Violence prevention could also be built into family strengthening programmes that work with all members of the family together.
- Violence prevention programmes should include efforts to combat factors that contribute to the presence of abuse and exploitation including discrimination, stigmatisation, and lack of equality. They should incorporate clear messages that promote tolerance and understanding. Issues of gender equity, discrimination against persons with disabilities or from different religious, ethnic, or other specific backgrounds, acceptance of those identifying as LGBTQI+ are examples of topics such programmes should include.
- To help inform policies and programmes that promote safe and united families, professionals would benefit from a better understanding of the factors that are contributing to violence in the home in their country.
- In order to help break the cycle of inter-generational aspects of poor parenting ability, professionals would benefit from a better understanding of such topics as attachment theory – including the impact of separation from loved ones that children face when placed in alternative care - the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed practice. These topics should also be incorporated into programmes for parents and other caregivers as prevention of violence also requires sustained actions working closely with families to bring about an understanding of the harm being created when they use violence and finding ways to address such abusive situations.



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- Article 2 of the UNCRC guarantees children protection from discrimination. Violence prevention programmes should include efforts to combat factors that contribute to the presence of abuse and exploitation including discrimination, stigmatisation, and lack of equality. They should incorporate clear messages that promote tolerance and understanding. In this manner, issues of gender equity, discrimination against persons with disabilities, acceptance of those identifying as LGBTQI+ etc. are topics prevention of violence programmes should include.
- Women and girls living in situations of domestic violence need someone to turn to, as for example, access to counselling and psychosocial services provided within a caring and safe environment. When rejected by extended family and the wider community, and with nowhere else to go, crisis shelter centres for women and their children could offer immediate protection and help prevent situations from deteriorating to the stage where children may be separated and placed in alternative care.
- Men should be actively involved in family strengthening and other programmes that help them understand the importance of maintaining of strong and caring family relationships. This should include awareness on issues of gender parity and prevention of domestic violence.
- Efforts to increase the awareness of child rights amongst the general public as well as the harm to children when they lack love, affection and are victims of violence - including impact of separation from parental care - can help strengthen the protective environment in the home and community. Messages might also include information about risk of violence and exploitation children face if spending time on the streets, engaged in child labour, being exposed to drugs and alcohol, and the possibility of recruitment or harm by gangs.
- Efforts to ensure prohibition of corporal punishment into law would not only lead to less violence against children but also send a significant message that children should not be harmed.

### Adequate standard of living and well-being

- Addressing issues related to poverty is a structural issue that needs a strong and stable government. It is beyond the remit of this report to provide detailed recommendations as to government efforts to strengthen the country economically, politically and socially. However, different actors can instigate advocacy for change and information sharing that would help government policy makers, and others, gain a clearer understanding of efforts needed to prevent placement of children in alternative care. Especially information that takes into account the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and the impact on families. This requires awareness raising that informs the establishment of an evidence-based multi-sectoral and family-centred approach to the design, development and delivery of support to families with the understanding it is often more than one pathway or issue that contributes to family breakdown. One specific focus of such

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advocacy should include the development and availability of fully functioning of social protection systems that reach all those in need of social safety nets.

- Helping families address the many challenges they are facing requires closer multi-sectoral cooperation and improved coordination between Government and non-governmental bodies and agencies, UN entities, academics, faith-based leaders, the private sector, and donors, including those responsible for education, health, security, social protection and social welfare, justice, and child protection. There should be a concerted effort together, and within each organization, body or department, to assesses and recognise where each can most effectively contribute: whether it be direct service provision, advocacy to effect change, signposting so that families know how and where to receive the support they need, fundraising, or even leading/supporting such coordinated response. Organizations should also look at the breadth of their outreach to ensure they are reaching vulnerable families including those residing in rural areas.
- Families need informed and coordinated access to service provision in a way that will address all the inter-related challenges they face. This should be available universally to address the concern that support often comes too late and so that vulnerability of families might be prevented. To this end consideration should be given to providing families with signposting to basic and specialist services as well as ensuring joined-up provision in a way that overcomes barriers of access e.g. access to all support coordinated in one location rather than family members having to move from agency to agency to agency to resolve their problems. In some countries for example, this is sometimes called a 'one-stop shop'.<sup>91</sup>
- Helping families undertake the responsibility in providing for their families might include increasing access to income generation schemes and help with obtaining stable, well remunerated employment. This should be linked with the need for more easily available and free capacity building and training, as well as adult education programmes, especially those related to improved literacy for women. This should be undertaken by organizations that have the specialism to implement such programmes.
- The need for additional support for women in particular, whose lack of education, training, and literacy is not only precluding them from the job market, but also impacting their confidence. Confidence that is needed when facing everyday challenges in the home and community as well as standing up to such concerns as gender discrimination, domestic violence, preventing violence against their children and other circumstances that might lead to separation from them.

<sup>91</sup> Please see: <https://www.undp.org/botswana/news/undp-supports-establishment-one-stop-shop-public-services-botswana> And: <https://www.undp.org/kazakhstan/stories/one-stop-shop-window-problem-solver-people-difficult-life-situations>

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- Article 18 of the UNCRC requires States to 'take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.' Affordable or free day care for children would help women in particular, find their way into the work force. It can also provide respite for those struggling with household responsibilities, being overwhelmed by challenges in everyday life, and requiring help alleviating pressure building up within families. This includes day care for infants as well as after-school service provision.
- Opportunities to build better support and social networking within communities would be seen as a positive action. In this respect, resilience and existing coping mechanisms should be recognised, built on, and ways to bring families and communities together should be encouraged. Examples provided by respondents during the research include the provision of community centres and shared social and educational activities. Strengthening family networks is also important.

### Support in parenting

- As with previous recommendations, actions are needed that will break any cycle of inter-generational concerns including those related to parenting skills. This requires consideration of parenting programmes that take a holistic and family-centred approach and incorporate such topics as attachment theory, the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed practice.
- It is important that professionals working with families are in receipt of knowledge and understanding so as to prevent automatic dismissal of parents as 'bad parents', especially of those impacted by poverty. It requires a deeper understanding of the different factors impacting parenting ability, family dynamics, what is necessary to maintain harmonious, unified, supportive relationships in the home, and ways to build on existing resilience and coping mechanisms.
- Service providers should consider the locations where they work with children and families and ensure they are delivering support where it is most needed as for example, in rural communities.

### Disability

- Family support programmes should ensure the inclusion of families that have members with disabilities. They should be built on an understanding and consideration of the issues facing families, and the resources to guarantee inclusion of children and adults with disabilities. This should consider issues of inclusion as well as specialist services tailored to individual family needs and priorities.
- Violence prevention programmes, as previously mentioned, should inherently incorporate protection of children with disabilities.

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- Awareness raising programmes should promote an understanding and acceptance of disability, both within families and amongst the general public. This includes programmes that support and work with parents and promote increased awareness of special needs their children may have, as well as their child's right to care and protection. In this way, helping to build closer bonds within a family, may provide a valuable contribution in preventing violations of children with disabilities. Public information campaigns should speak about fair and respectful treatment of people with disabilities, the harm of stigmatisation, and topics that would help prevent violence and exclusion against persons with disabilities. Advocacy programmes by and with people with disabilities are important and help bring a specific focus to improving services, opportunities, and support.
- Promotion of inclusion in local schools will require not just building skills and understanding of teachers, but also providing resources, such as books in braille, and overcoming physical barriers when accessing buildings and transport to school.

### Play and leisure

- Time spent together is seen as being particularly important in the way it contributes to family unity and provides respite from the stresses they may be facing. Activities that address this important aspect of unity and spending time together would add value to parenting and family strengthening programmes. This would also include raising awareness amongst parents and professionals as to the important benefits of time spent as a family and how this can help forge closer bonds.

### Capacity of professional decision makers and the efficacy of the national child protection system

- To inform the development of future training and capacity building, it is recommended that an assessment of the quality of social work training in higher education institutions is undertaken along with a review of provision and standards of in-service capacity building. This should be coupled with a study of current skills, knowledge and capacities of all those responsible for making decisions about protection and care of children including social workers, police, judiciary, health and education workers etc
- Detailed statutory guidance on multi-sectoral and participatory assessments, decision-making and case planning, along with accompanying training, should provide decision makers, including members of the Junta de Protección, other social workers, police, and members of the judiciary, with the necessary skills and a clear understanding of risk thresholds and a framework that guides their decision-making.
- Certain topics that those with responsibility for child protection would benefit from include more intensive training on issues of violence prevention, trauma-informed practice, understanding of

attachment theory and ACEs, as well as decision-making that is in the best interest of the child. Again, this training should be made available to those working in different professions that can, and should, play a role in child protection and child welfare.

- Steps should be taken to address such issues as professional burn-out of social workers and making sure they are fully supported in their work, i.e., caring for the carers.

### Data management systems

- Data management systems that record information on the reasons children have been placed in alternative care would greatly contribute to accurate planning of policies and programmes for family strengthening and prevention of unnecessary placement of children in alternative care.

### Participation

- Children should be supported in a way that allows their full and meaningful participation in any decision-making processes that will affect them, including their placement in alternative care.
- All children should be acknowledged as active citizens and afforded equal opportunity to contribute to their society. In this respect, policymakers and programme designers and implementers may need help understanding that children are experts in their own lives. This will require challenging any negative assumptions regarding children's capacities to engage and participate and providing them with opportunities that allow them to build and demonstrate such capability.

## 4. Context

Understanding the socio-economic context in which children and families live in El Salvador was especially important to our study as these circumstances have a significant impact on the well-being and stability of life within a household.

### 4.1 Geography

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America bordered by Honduras to the north and east, the Pacific Ocean to the south, and Guatemala to the northwest.<sup>92</sup> (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Map of El Salvador

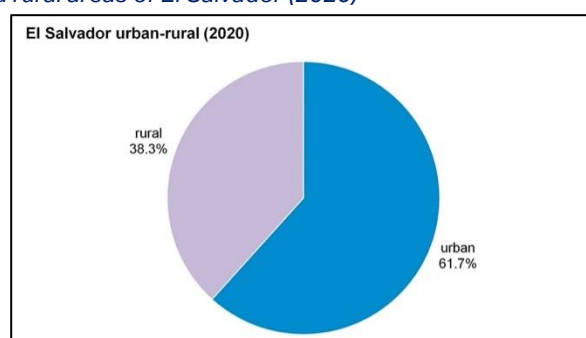
<sup>92</sup> Browning et al. 2023

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The country has a total area of 21,041 sq. km. The terrain is mostly mountainous with a narrow coastal belt and a central plateau.<sup>93</sup> In 2018, approximately 74.7% of land was estimated to be arable, 10.9% permanent crops, 30.7% pasture and 13.6% forest.<sup>94</sup> An estimated 61.7% of El Salvador is urban and 38.3% rural (Figure 7).<sup>95</sup>

Figure 7. Distribution of urban and rural areas of El Salvador (2020)



(Source: Britannica Online 2023)

The country has high exposure to natural hazards including volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.<sup>96</sup> According to the World Food Programme,<sup>97</sup> El Salvador is highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change including more frequent floods, droughts, and tropical storms. One result being the impact on crops which in turn, negatively affect the income of smallholder farmers and the country's food security. It is thought climate change is already contributing to an increase in malnutrition among children aged 6-59 months.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> World Fact Book 2023

<sup>95</sup> Britannica online 2023

<sup>96</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>97</sup> World Food Programme 2023

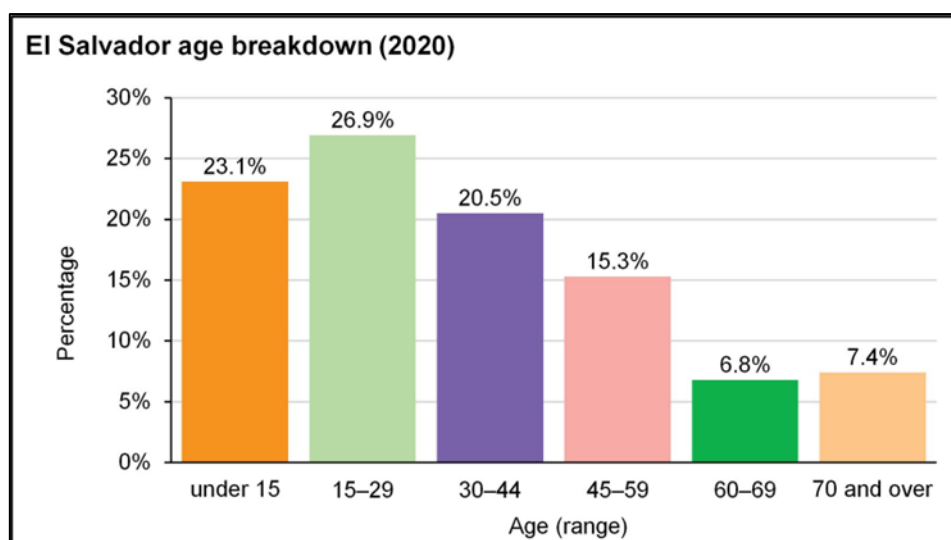
<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*

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### 4.2. Population

In 2022, the population of El Salvador was estimated at 6,330,947.<sup>99</sup> In 2022, 53.3% of the population were female and 46.7% male.<sup>100</sup> In the same year it is reported<sup>101</sup> that children comprised 28% of the total population. Figure 8 depicts the population age breakdown as of 2020.<sup>102</sup>

Figure 8. Population of El Salvador by age breakdown (2020)



(Source: Britannica Online 2023)

In 2007, the population of El Salvador was comprised of 86.3% Mestizo, 12.7% White, 0.2% Amerindian (includes Lenca, Kakawira, Nahua-Pipil), 0.1% Black, and 0.6% other.<sup>103</sup> Figure 9 depicts data published in Britannica Online in 2023.

Figure 9. Ethnic composition of El Salvador (2007)

<sup>99</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

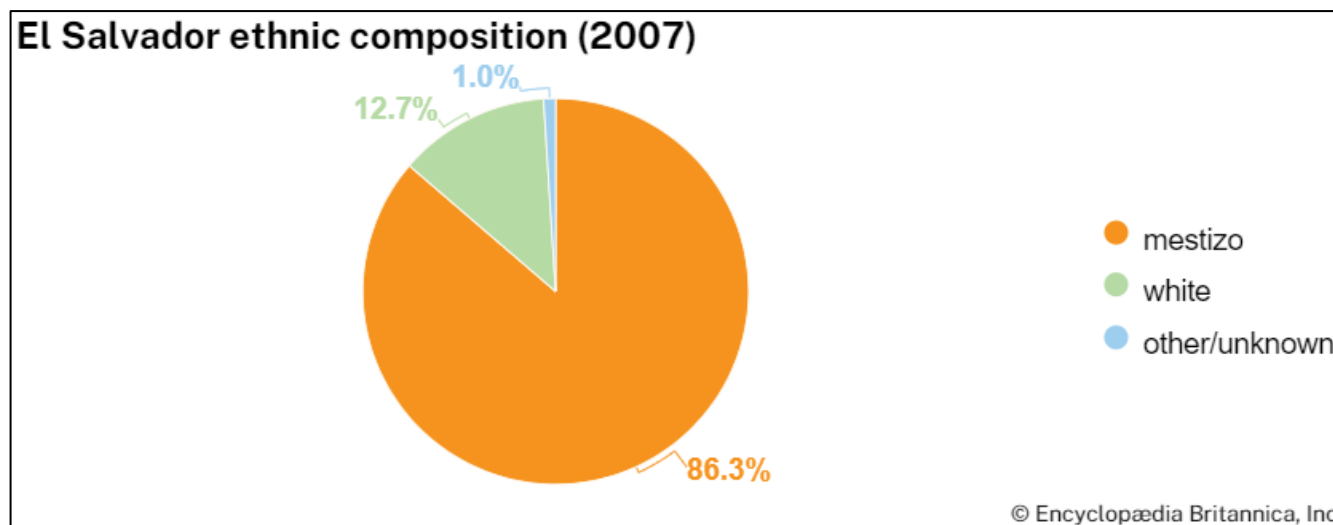
<sup>101</sup> UNICEF El Salvador 2022

<sup>102</sup> Browning et al. 2023

<sup>103</sup> World Fact Book 2023



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(Source: Britannica Online 2023)

The population of El Salvador is seen to be on a 'modest upward trend'.<sup>104</sup> The percentage of the population over the age of 60 years is increasing<sup>105</sup> whilst the birth rate is decreasing. The birth rate fell from 16.54 per 1,000 population in 2018, to 16.02 in 2021,<sup>106</sup> and is expected to continue declining over the next ten to twenty years.<sup>107</sup> Neonatal mortality rose from 5.1 per 1,000 live births in 2015 to 5.7 in 2021,<sup>108</sup> whilst child deaths per annum fell from 1,388 in 2019 to 1,288 in 2021.<sup>109</sup> Median age is 27 years of age<sup>110</sup> and average life expectancy is approximately 77 years.<sup>111</sup>

El Salvador has seen a significant reduction in homicide rates in recent years decreasing from 105 homicides per 100,000 people in 2015, to 17.5 homicides per 100,000 people in 2021.<sup>112</sup> However, the rate of violent deaths of women increased from 3.4 deaths per every 100,000 women in 2020 to 3.9 in 2021.<sup>113</sup>

As of November 2022, 13,721 of people who had left El Salvador, returned, a 91.2% increase on the number of returnees in 2021.<sup>114</sup> Approximately 32.4% were children, of which 7% were unaccompanied. The principal reasons cited for returns include economic factors (41.9%), insecurity

<sup>104</sup> Please see: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/el-salvador-population>

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> UNICEF El Salvador 2022

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> World Fact Book 2023

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Please see: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/21/bukeles-old-recipes-address-gang-violence-are-set-fail>

<sup>113</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>114</sup> UNICEF 2022



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(18.9%) and family reunification (17.3%).<sup>115</sup> El Salvador currently has a minus net migration. For example, in 2020, 42,767 migrants entered El Salvador whilst 1,599,058 migrated out.<sup>116</sup> A total of 52.4% of those arriving were women and 16.5% were children.<sup>117</sup> The majority of returnees were males (approximately 80%).<sup>118</sup>

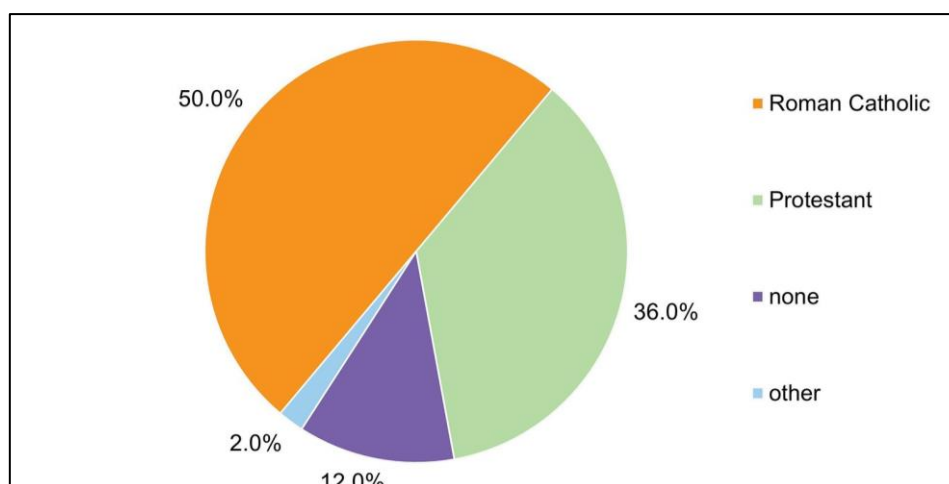
#### 4.3. Gender parity

UNDP<sup>119</sup> regularly reports on gender parity across the world. In 2023, El Salvador was marked as a 'low' ranking country in terms of achieving gender parity taking into consideration such measurements as fraction of life expectancy at birth spent in good health; population with completed secondary education or higher; youth not in education, employment or training; labour force participation; holding an account in a financial institution (e.g. a bank); share of women holding managerial positions and seats held (e.g. parliamentary seats).

#### 4.4. Religion

In 2014 half of all Salvadorans were Roman Catholics (50%), 36% were protestants, and 2% practiced other faiths<sup>120</sup> (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Population of El Salvador by religious affiliation (2014)



(Source: Britannica Online 2023)

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> ILO 2021

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> UNDP 2023

<sup>120</sup> Britannica Online 2023

#### 4.5. Economy and social protection

The World Bank<sup>121</sup> classifies El Salvador as a lower middle-income country. El Salvador has experienced modest economic growth and, despite a serious downturn in GDP because of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>122</sup> has seen a reported decline in poverty and inequality in recent decades. El Salvador's economy grew by 10.3% in 2021,<sup>123</sup> with recent reports<sup>124</sup> indicating expectations of GDP growth by a further 2.4% in 2023. It is understood this will be driven by private consumption, public investment, and tourism,<sup>125</sup> with the latter being aided by falling crime rates.

In 2022, annual average inflation reached 7.2%<sup>126</sup> and in early 2023, was expected to remain around 5.4%.<sup>127</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on family incomes and, according to OCHA,<sup>128</sup> and vulnerable populations in El Salvador, including women, children, indigenous people, those who identify as LGBTIQ+, and people with disabilities, continue to face significant needs that require an ongoing response.

The rate of those living in poverty has decreased from 40.62% in 2015 to 29.51% in 2022 (Table 1). However, in the same period, the percentage of those living in extreme poverty declined very little, from 10.03% to 9.1%.<sup>129</sup>

Table 1. Percentage of the population in conditions of poverty 2015 - 2022

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Extreme Poverty</i>	10.03	9.89	7.54	7.33	5.49	8.7	8.4	9.1
<i>Urban</i>	5.3	4.77	3.73	3.88	3	4.22	4.08	4.57
<i>Rural</i>	4.73	5.12	3.81	3.45	2.49	4.48	4.34	4.57
<i>Relative Poverty</i>	30.59	28.34	26.16	23.56	21.31	20.04	19.37	20.37
<i>Urban</i>	18.34	16.54	15.07	13.54	12.53	12.51	12.12	12.34
<i>Rural</i>	12.24	11.81	11.09	10.02	8.77	7.53	7.25	8.02
<i>Poverty total</i>	40.62	38.23	33.7	30.89	26.8	28.74	27.80	29.51

<sup>121</sup> Please see: <https://elsalvadorinenglish.com/2023/07/31/world-bank-upgrades-el-salvadors-economic-classification/#:~:text=Based%20on%20this%20scenario%2C%20the,ranges%20from%20%244%2C096%20to%20%2413%2C845.>

<sup>122</sup> World Bank 2022

<sup>123</sup> *ibid*

<sup>124</sup> International Monetary Fund 2023

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> World Food Programme 2023

<sup>128</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>129</sup> Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021, and Government of El Salvador 2022

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(Source: Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021 and Government of El Salvador 2022)

More women than men continued to live in both extreme and relative poverty (Table 2).<sup>130</sup>

Table 2. Percentage of women and men living in poverty 2015-2022

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Extreme Poverty</b>	10.03	9.89	7.54	7.33	5.49	8.7	8.4	9.1
<b>Women</b>	5.26	5.16	3.92	3.9	2.98	4.86	4.5	4.94
<b>Men</b>	4.77	4.73	3.62	3.42	2.51	3.85	3.92	4.20
<b>Relative Poverty</b>	30.59	28.34	26.16	23.56	21.31	20.04	19.37	20.37
<b>Women</b>	16.08	15.03	13.85	12.59	11.5	10.92	10.61	11.10
<b>Men</b>	14.51	13.32	12.31	10.97	9.8	9.12	8.77	9.27
<b>Poverty total</b>	40.62	38.23	33.7	30.89	26.8	28.74	27.80	29.51

(Source: Consulting Team 2021 et al.)

In 2021, the average monthly wage was only \$355 with males receiving an average of \$379 and women receiving \$325.<sup>131</sup>

According to a report in 2023 from the World Food Programme,<sup>132</sup> 27% of families live in multidimensional poverty and experience multiple disadvantages e.g., poor health or malnutrition, poor quality of work, or little schooling. In 2022, UNICEF revealed households with children experiencing multidimensional poverty had risen to 34.7% in 2022 from 33.8% in 2020.<sup>133</sup> This was nearly double that of adult-only households, with greater concentration in rural areas (52.0%).<sup>134</sup> UNICEF also noted<sup>135</sup> how children are particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations which is contributing to the phenomenon of child labour. It is estimated that poverty rates would have risen even further without government mitigation measures, especially during the worst of the COVID pandemic.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021 and Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>131</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>132</sup> World Food Programme 2023

<sup>133</sup> UNICEF 2022

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> UNICEF 2022

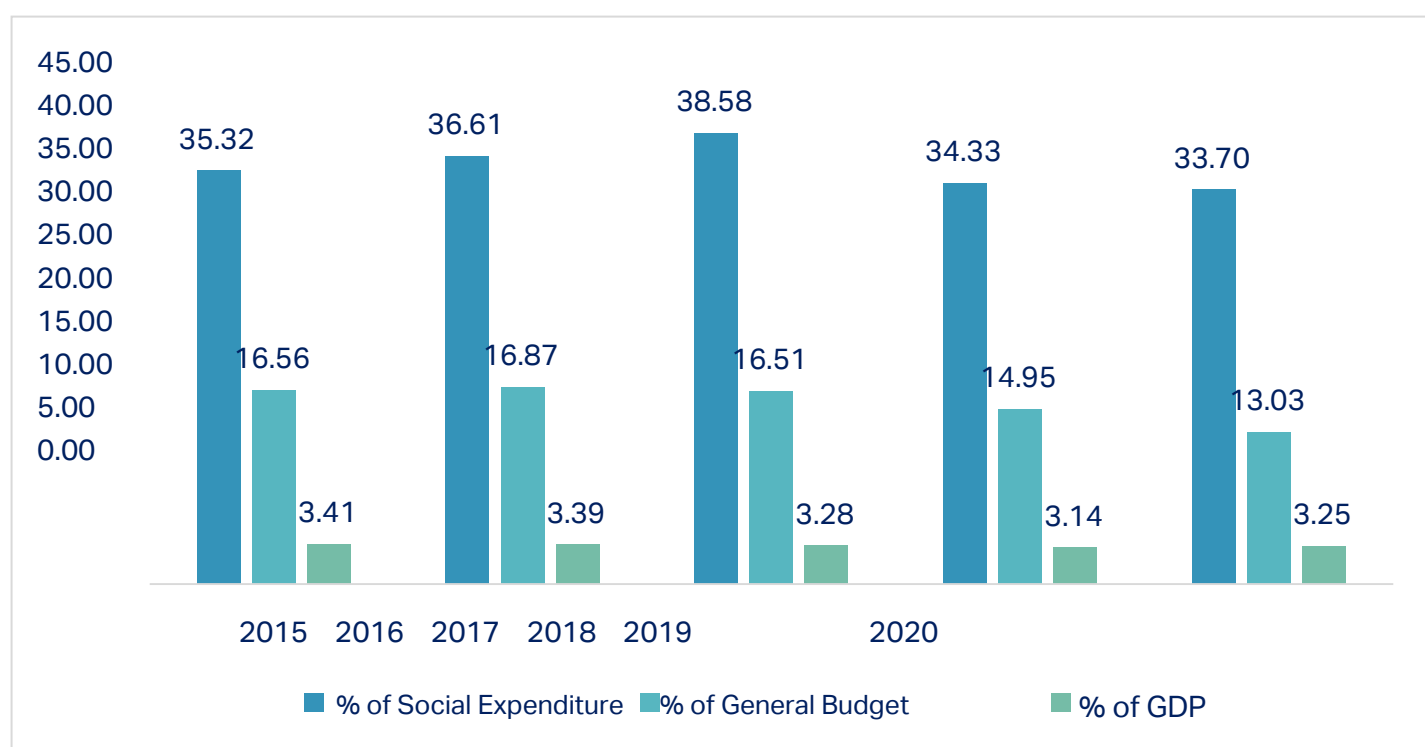
<sup>136</sup> World Bank Group El Salvador 2022.

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In 2022 OCHA found<sup>137</sup> many households were unable to manage resources sufficiently to cover basic needs, and quality of life was placing vulnerable families at further risk. A total of 1.1 million people in El Salvador were classified as being 'in need' based on calculations utilised by OCHA to identify humanitarian needs.<sup>138</sup> The most vulnerable groups included people on the move (internally displaced, refugee, migrants and displaced), children, and women of childbearing age, pregnant or breastfeeding.<sup>139</sup>

A calculation<sup>140</sup> of expenditure on children and adolescents, as a percentage of all public spending between 2015 to 2019, is shown in Figure 11. This indicates 2020 expenditure on children and adolescents was only 33.7% of all spending on social programmes, and 13.03% of the Government of El Salvador's general budget.

Figure 11. Expenditure on children and adolescents as a percentage of all public expenditure 2015 - 2019



(Source: adapted from Consulting Team 2021)

<sup>137</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>138</sup> OCHA 2022b:19

<sup>139</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>140</sup> Consulting Team 2021

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### 4.6 Employment

Between 2015 and 2022, the labour force participation rate remained fairly static ranging between 61.32% and 62.74% (Table 3).<sup>141</sup>

Table 3. Labour market indicators (percentage) 2015-2022

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Labor force participation rate	62.12	62.24	61.93	61.32	62.15	61.39	61.74	62.74
Employment-to-population ratio	57.77	57.89	57.57	57.43	58.21	57.16	57.83	59.57
Labor inactivity rate	37.88	37.76	38.07	40.52	37.85	38.6	38.3	37.3
Underemployment rate	20.12	20.16	25.44	23.11	22.46	23.39	26.10	29.68
Informal employment rate	26.83	26.52	26.33	26.67	27.08	30.39	27.92	26.07
Vacancy rate	7.01	6.98	7.05	6.35	6.34	6.89	6.34	5.05
Youth unemployment rate	11.56	11.76	11.79	11.18	11.12	12.80	7.53	9.44

(Source: Consulting Team 2021 et al.)

Data extracted from the Government of El Salvador's 2021 Household Survey<sup>142</sup> showed the percentage of unemployed females (77%) to be much higher than that of males (23%).

In 2022, 2,997,102 people were economically active of which 42.1% were females and 57.9% males.<sup>143</sup> A total of 64.4% of those in work resided in urban areas and 35.4% in rural communities.<sup>144</sup> Only 62.7% of the population who were considered eligible to work were in some form of employment with slightly lower rates in rural areas.<sup>145</sup> In the same year, the official unemployment rate was 5%.<sup>146</sup> However, of all those recorded as "employed", only 44.8% had a full-time job with an employer paying a regular salary.<sup>147</sup>

According to UNICEF,<sup>148</sup> in 2021, 81,164 children were working of which 71.0% (58,007) were engaged in hazardous work. Although the data in Table 4 indicates an overall decrease in child labour since

<sup>141</sup> Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021 and Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>142</sup> OCHA 2022b

<sup>143</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Government of El Salvador 2023

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> UNICEF 2022

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2015, nevertheless, in 2022 there were still 66,353 children recorded as working including 49,554 in 'dangerous' conditions.<sup>149</sup>

Table 4. Percentage of children in child labour 2015 -2022

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Sex</b>								
<i>Female</i>	37,495	33,000	32,364	30,383	25,875	19,043	20,837	16,588
<i>Male</i>	103,205	98,904	97,793	71,538	67,409	69,257	60,327	49,765
<b>Cluster by age (%)</b>								
<i>5 – 9 years old</i>	3.8	2.8	3.2	3.1	2.3	3.8	3.6	2.1
<i>10 – 13 years old</i>	29.6	27.8	27.0	25.1	26.0	26.2	22.3	22.5
<i>14 - 17 years old</i>	66.6	69.4	69.9	71.9	71.8	70.1	74.1	75.4
<b>Number of working children by conditions</b>								
<i>TOTAL</i>	140,700	131,904	130,157	101,921	93,284	88,300	81,164	66,353
<i>By under of the age minimal</i>	49,443	42,723	41,735	31,310	28,918	27,716	23,157	16,799
<i>Dangerous</i>	91,257	89,181	88,422	70,611	64,366	60,585	58,007	49,554
<i>Worked permitted</i>	26,182	23,780	20,659	19,480	14,856	15,454	14,007	15,704

(Source: Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021 and Government of El Salvador 2022)

### 4.7. Access to services

Information in the Government of El Salvador's 2022 Household Survey<sup>150</sup> indicates almost all the population had access to electric power and sanitation services whilst almost 90% had piped water (Figure 12).<sup>151</sup>

Figure 12. Access to basic services 2022

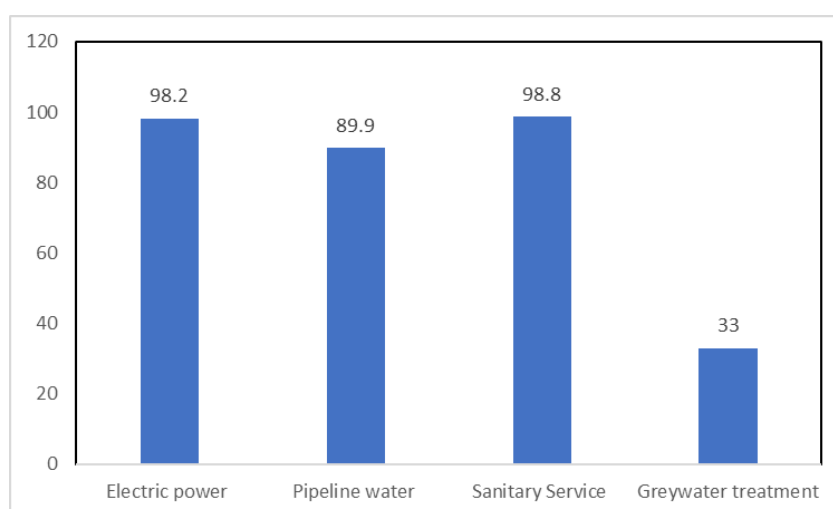
<sup>149</sup> Consulting Team 2021, Government of El Salvador 2020, Government of El Salvador 2021 and Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>150</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>151</sup> As will be seen later in this report, respondents for our research in El Salvador spoke about the lack of access to electricity and water, especially in rural areas.



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Service	2022
Electric power	98.2
Pipeline water	89.9
Sanitation services	98.8
Greywater treatment	33

(Source: Government of El Salvador 2023)

### 4.8. Health

The ten top causes of death El Salvador can be seen in Table 5.<sup>152</sup>

Table 5. The ten top cause of death in El Salvador (2019)

Top 10 causes of deaths per 10000 of the population in 2019 Female		Top 10 causes of deaths per 10000 of the population in 2019 Male	
Ischaemic heart disease	81.6	Interpersonal violence	120
Interpersonal violence	53.8	Kidney disease	106
Kidney disease	44.1	Ischaemic heart disease	100
Lower respiratory infections	38.1	Lower respiratory infections	47
Diabetes mellitus	29.4	Road injury	34
Stroke	24.4	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	25
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	21.4	Stroke	25
Cervix uteri cancer	13.2	HIV/AIDS	21
Stomach cancer	9.9	Alcohol use disorders	21

<sup>152</sup> Please see: <https://data.who.int/countries/222>

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Road injury	9.1	Cirrhosis of the liver	17
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(Source: <https://data.who.int/countries/222>)

According to UNICEF,<sup>153</sup> the under-five mortality rate continues to fall in El Salvador. As of 2023, it was recorded as 12.4 per 1,000 live births.<sup>154</sup> Health data<sup>155</sup> for 2022 shows 15.7% of the population suffered from a 'disease, symptom or injury' with slightly higher incidence in rural than urban areas. Prevalence of disease was 1.8% higher in females than males.<sup>156</sup> In 2022, there were 4.2% more males than females with health insurance<sup>157</sup> although according to information on a Government of El Salvador website, only 25.7% of the population reportedly 'have medical insurance largely through the government social security system.'<sup>158</sup>

In 2019, effective coverage of universal health services in 2019, was only 61.7%.<sup>159</sup> There was an increase of only 0.9% between 2010 and 2019 (Table 6).<sup>160</sup>

Table 6. Universal health coverage in El Salvador (1990 - 2019)

Year	Universal Health Coverage effective coverage index*	Average % change per year
1990	41.6	N/A
2010	56.6	1.5%, 1990-2010 (statistically significant)
2019	61.7	0.9%, 2010-2019
*The Universal Health Coverage (UHC) effective coverage index aims to represent service coverage across population health needs and how much these services could contribute to improved health.		

(Source: The Institute for Health, Metrics and Evaluation 2023)

According to UNICEF,<sup>161</sup> in 2021 the rate of stunting in children was 10.0% in 2021, a reduction from 13.6% in 2015. In the same period, malnutrition in all its forms remained a concern and the percentage of underweight children increased from 2.1% to 2.9%. In 2017, the Government of El Salvador launched a strategy, 'Estrategia Nacional Intersectorial de Prevención del Embarazo en Niñas y Adolescentes',<sup>162</sup> to help prevent pregnancy in girls and adolescents. A report issued in 2021<sup>163</sup> said the aims and objectives of this strategy included promotion of gender parity and inclusion. This was to be achieved through programmes that help prevent sexual violence and pregnancy in young girls,

<sup>153</sup> UNICEF 2023

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*

<sup>155</sup> Government of El Salvador

<sup>156</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>157</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>158</sup> *ibid*

<sup>159</sup> Institute for Health, Metrics and Evaluation 2023

<sup>160</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>161</sup> UNICEF El Salvador 2022

<sup>162</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*.

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through sex education programmes and access to child friendly health services that placed an emphasis on and reproductive health.<sup>164</sup> However, a study published in 2022<sup>165</sup> indicates, of all children born that year, 10.55% were born to mothers who were still children themselves (under the age of 17 years) (Table 7).

Table 7. Total maternal registrations registered January to December 2021, El Salvador

	Range age	Amount	Percentage
Girls	12 to 17 years	5975	10.55%
Women	18 to 30 years	39739	70.17%
Women	31 to 40 years	10180	17.97%
Women	41 to 49 years	742	1.31%
Total		56636	100.00%

(Source: Adapted from: Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022)

In 2017 an OECD report<sup>166</sup> considered sexual violence to be a significant factor in the high rate of adolescent pregnancy whilst at the same time, young people faced 'significant obstacles'<sup>167</sup> accessing adequate health information and services, especially those related to sexual and reproductive health. In 2011, the adolescent fertility rate was 77.3 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years which made El Salvador a country with one of the highest rates of youth fertility in the world.<sup>168</sup>

Abortion is illegal under all circumstances in EL Salvador. Women can face between 2 to 8 years' imprisonment for having an abortion or another condition in which a pregnancy is terminated.<sup>169</sup> Those who conduct abortions can also face sentences of between 6 months to 12 years.<sup>170</sup> Human Rights Watch say many women, 'including women who suffered miscarriages or obstetric emergencies,'<sup>171</sup> have received prison sentences of up to 40 years. As of June 2021, 17 women who said they had suffered obstetric emergencies remained imprisoned.<sup>172</sup>

A 2020 UNICEF report estimated the number of persons with disabilities in El Salvador to have been 463,075, of which 26% (119,944) were children. This included people with physical, mental, and psychosocial disabilities. Human Rights Watch evaluates El Salvador's legislative framework as being inconsistent with international disability rights law. The agency also thinks there are 'insufficient measures to improve physical and communication accessibility' for people with disabilities. Reports

<sup>164</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>165</sup> Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022

<sup>166</sup> OECD 2017

<sup>167</sup> Please see: <https://www.oecd.org/dev/inclusive-societies-development/youth-issues-in-el-salvador.htm>

<sup>168</sup> OECD 2017

<sup>169</sup> Human Rights Watch 2022

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*

also reveal how 'criminal gangs' have attacked women and girls with disabilities 'with high levels of impunity.'

#### 4.9. Education

El Salvador has passed a body of relevant laws and developed policies that guarantee access to education including inclusive education for children with disabilities and equal learning opportunities for girls and boy regardless of their social and cultural background.<sup>173</sup> Certain Government programmes provide financial support for students including provision of school uniforms and school supplies for some children, as well as school meals and milk.<sup>174</sup>

In 2022, 9.7% of the population were illiterate.<sup>175</sup> In 2021, a higher percentage of illiteracy was found in rural areas and amongst the elderly with approximately 46% of the population aged 60 years and older not being able to read or write. There was a higher rate of illiteracy amongst females (11.7%) than males (8.1%).<sup>176</sup>

Between March 2020 and April 2021, the government closed schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during which time approximately 1.4 million students missed out on education although some benefitted from online classes.<sup>177</sup> It is reported that some school children experienced socio-emotional distress<sup>178</sup> as an impact of COVID-19 pandemic and in 2021, a total of 15.6% of students were identified as having 'notable or elevated depression'.<sup>179</sup> Overall, it was estimated almost 97,000 students needed professional psychosocial care.<sup>180</sup>

Between 2019 and 2022, the Government of El Salvador increased spending on education from 3.6% of GDP to 5%.<sup>181</sup> A 2022 report<sup>182</sup> suggested the majority of school age children were in education: 87.1% of children aged 4 to 12 years and 83.3% of children aged 13 to 17 years. Conversely however, these figures suggest approximately 13% of primary schoolchildren and 17% of secondary students were not in full-time education. In 2017, the OECD reported<sup>183</sup> on the challenges facing the country in relation to poor quality education resulting in high drop-out rates of young people leaving them without basic knowledge and skills. Furthermore, an enduring lack of equity in terms of access to quality education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as urban and rural poor,

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<sup>173</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Government of EL Salvador 2022

<sup>176</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> UNICEF 2022:1

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> UNICEF 2022

<sup>182</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>183</sup> OECD 2017

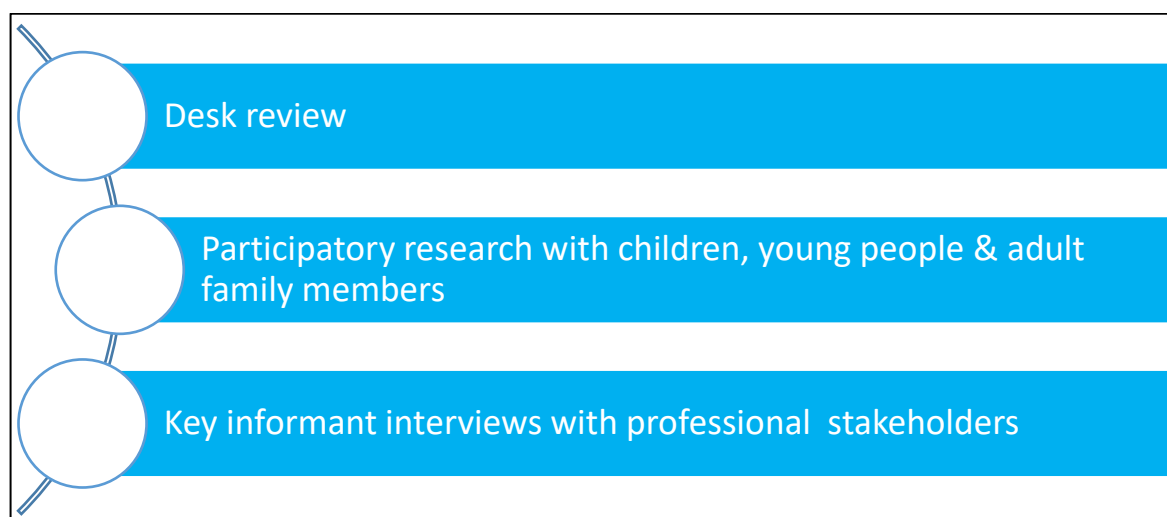
minorities, youth of uneducated parents and indigenous girls was also observed. Of further concern was lack of engagement in school due to children participating in income-generating activities and exposure to gangs and crime.<sup>184</sup>

#### 4.10. Shelter

In 2022, 39.0% of households reportedly lived in poor and overcrowded living conditions with this being more prevalent in rural areas. Over half (52.5%) of all rural households were living in this situation versus almost a third (31%) in urban areas.<sup>185</sup>

## 5. A research framework and methodology

Figure 13: Main components of the research methodology



(Source: Authors own illustration)

### 5.1. Research framework

Our research framework was informed by international child rights conventions as well as socio-ecological models such as that of Bronfenbrenner<sup>186</sup> illustrated in the graphic below (Figure 14). This considers the impact of inter-relating factors on children and families at an individual interpersonal level (microsystem), structural level including family and community level (meso and exo systems), and institutional level (macrosystem). We have added an additional consideration to our research which is the influence of international normative frameworks and other influences within the macrosystem.

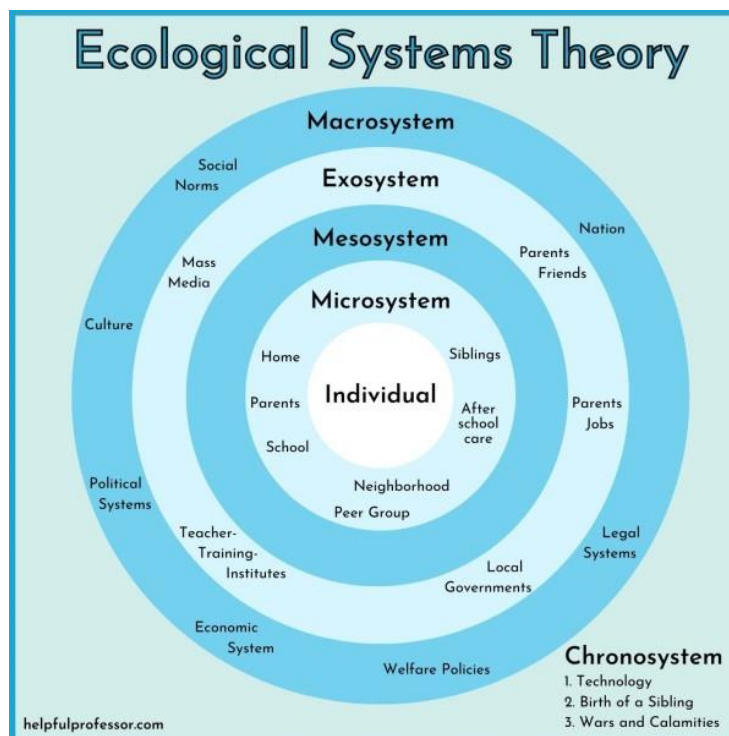
<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Government of El Salvador 2022

<sup>186</sup> Bronfenbrenner 1977; Bronfenbrenner 1986; SOS Children's Villages International 2023

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Figure 14. A graphic illustration of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory



(Source: Drew 2023)

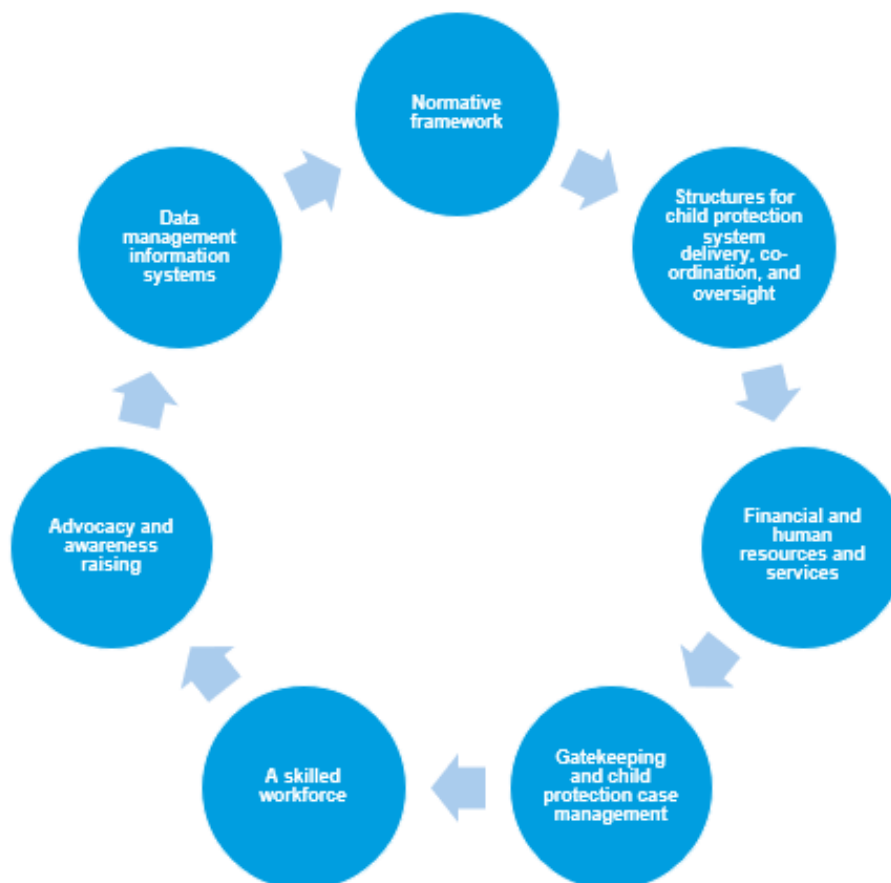
Based on this model, research questions used with respondents remained broad in order to extract information from participants about the range of factors positively and negatively influencing and impacting family life. The research framework also considered findings of previously published literature documenting factors relevant to child-parents separation as well as contextual information in relation to El Salvador.

Furthermore, the research framework considered the necessary components of a child protection system. A well-functioning child protection system also requires a coordinated and holistic approach to investing in, developing, and sustaining, all the necessary components as illustrated in Figure 15. This includes a suitable normative framework and programmes built on rigorous data collection and analysis, as well as suitable structures for the delivery of services that help mitigate the multi-sectoral factors placing children at risk and families in difficulty. It requires a well-resourced and skilled work force, and coordinated, inter-sectoral partnership working between the State, families, communities, NGOs, and the private sector, in order to build a protective environment for children.



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Figure 15. Components of a national child protection system



Utilising an examination of the national child protection system in El Salvador, we also adopted a research focus that sought evidence and understanding of how 'gatekeeping' works in the country including decision-making in the best interest of a child.

### 5.2. Research methodology

#### Research participants

Invitations were issued to potential research participants through the dissemination of age-appropriate Information Sheets. Research participants in El Salvador included:

- 28 children aged 13-15 years old living with their own families (in vulnerable circumstances).<sup>187</sup>
- 27 young people aged 17-20 years old who had left alternative care (care leavers).
- 34 adult members of families living in vulnerable situations.

<sup>187</sup> For the purposes of the research, a definition of 'vulnerable' was extracted from: Bauer & Wiezorek (2016) Vulnerable Families: Reflections on a Difficult Category. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, Vol 4, pp.11-28.

- d. 12 professional stakeholders including social workers, child protection workers, alternative care providers, lawyers, and family support service providers

### **Desk review**

A series of desk reviews were conducted by means of a systematic exploration of academic and other web-based databases and search engines as well as additional reports and other materials. This included a review of the socio-economic and cultural environment, the functioning of the national child protection system, and provision of alternative care. Further desk reviews sought information on participatory research methodology, prevention of family separation, gatekeeping, and family strengthening. The following methods were used to gather qualitative and quantitative data:

### **Research co-design workshops**

In recognition of the importance of children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives, and in recognition of children as 'competent social actors' who should be 'actively involved in shaping their own social worlds', steps were taken to achieve as high a degree of participation as possible during our research. To this end, in order to highlight their voices, and seek their knowledge and ideas, children and young people were not only invited to join qualitative participatory research workshops, but efforts were made to engage them in the design of the research questions and methodology. This included a series of co-design workshops with one group of children aged 13-15 years old living with their families and one group of care leavers aged 17-21 years old.

To ensure the participants involved in the co-design workshops were fully informed about the research and what their participation would mean, they were first invited to an Introduction Meeting (one meeting for each group). During these meetings, the national researcher and a member of the SOS Children's Villages team, informed participants about the research aims and why it was being undertaken. They explained what participation in the co-design workshops would involve and provided the opportunity for participants to ask questions and gain information so they could decide whether or not to engage.

During the co-design workshops children and young people worked alongside researchers to develop a set of research questions and qualitative participatory research methods. The result of the input of children and young people in these research co-design workshops was a set of research questions (below) and participatory research methods that could then be used with other children and young people.

Question 1: What makes children/young people in this family happy when they are at home? (children and young people had drawn a home with a family in it)

Question 2: What makes children/young in this family worried or unhappy when they are at home?

Question 3: What makes the adults in the family feel happy, strong and united when they are at home?

Question 4: What makes the adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?

Question 5: What is needed to help families be happy, strong and united?

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It is important to note that the questions do not ask research participants to provide information about their personal experience, but to represent what happens to children, young people, and other adult family members within their communities and country. Furthermore, this process helped inform the research questions that were used in workshops with adult family members.

The results of the co-design workshops also helped form the content of a set of Qualitative Participatory Research Handbooks that guided the implementation of participatory research workshops with children, young people and adult family members in other countries.

### Research workshops with children and young people

Following the development of the research questions and methodology, a series of participatory research workshops involving two further groups of children and two groups of young people were held in two locations, San Vicente, a small town situated approximately 62 kms from San Salvador, and in Santa Tecla, a district of San Salvador.

The workshop methodology employed a series of creative exercises including the drawing of a house containing a family upon which children and young people placing answers on post-its to the questions regarding what makes children, young people and adult family members worried and unhappy or happy, strong and united (Figure 16).

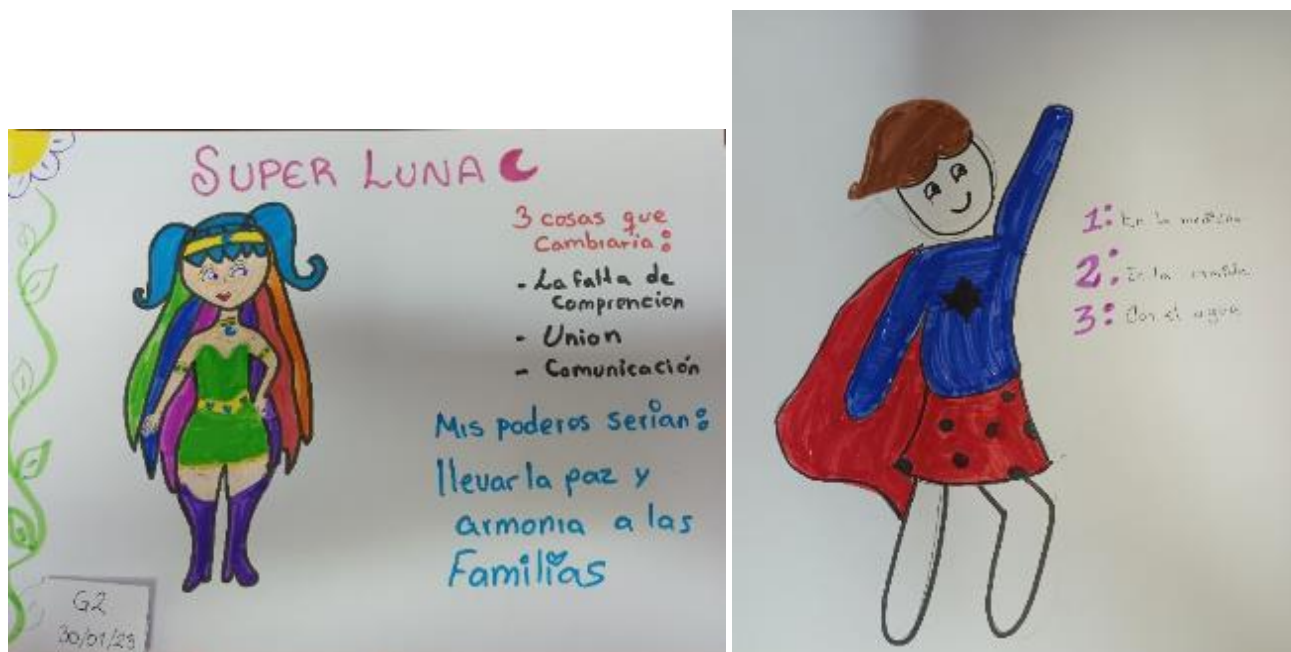
Figure 16. Example of drawings from workshops with children and young people



In order to ask children about their ideas for solutions to the challenges families are facing, they were asked to think of themselves as a superhero and to depict this in drawings (Figure 17). They were then asked to write 3 things they would do with their superpowers to help families.

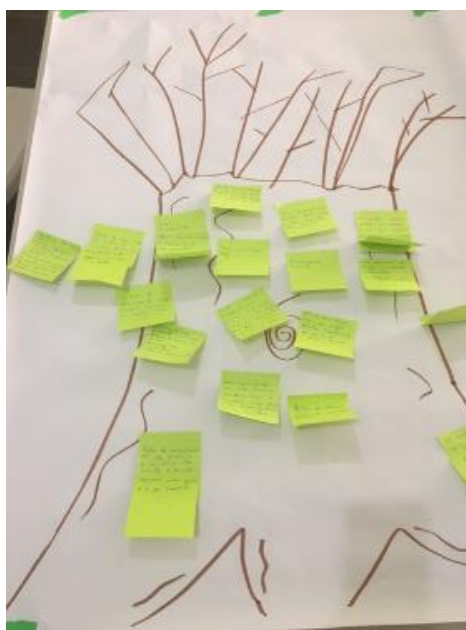
## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

Figure 17. Examples of superheroes drawn by children



A problem and solution tree exercise was used with young people in order to gain and rank their solutions. Young people placed their post-its containing answers regarding what made young people and adult family members worried or unhappy on the trunk of a tree (Figure 18). Their solutions were written on the 'leaves'.

Figure 18. Example of a problem and solutions tree



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Young people were asked to group the solutions into different categories e.g., money, health, education and then to rank them in order of importance. This proved quite challenging for some, and not all groups achieved this latter task. Participants presented their 'trees' to the full group and were offered the opportunity to briefly discuss their solutions.

At the end of each workshop, participants were invited to ask questions or asked if they wanted to discuss topics that had arisen during their time together. Workshops always finished with thanks and an energiser.

### Research workshops with adult family members

A total of two workshops were held with adult family members in San Salvador and two workshops in San Vicente. Similar participatory research exercises were used to those developed by, and for, children and young people including drawings of homes containing a family and problem and solution trees (Figure 19). The research questions for adult family members included:

Question 1: What makes families feel happy, strong and united when they are at home?

Question 2: What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?

Question 4: What is needed to help families remain happy, strong and united?

Figure 19. Example of problem and solution tree





At the end of each workshop, participants were invited to ask questions or if they wished, to discuss topics that had arisen during their time together.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

A total of 12 semi-structured interviews with professional stakeholders (interviewees) were completed. The principal research questions focussed on the reasons children lost parental care and are placed in alternative care. The principal research questions focussed on the reasons children lose parental care and are placed in alternative care. Interviewees included social workers, lawyers, and alternative care providers.

## **5.3. Research process and ethics**

### **Informed participation**

It was important that participation in the research was fully informed and voluntary. All prospective participants were provided with age and respondent appropriate Information Sheets when first invited to be part of the research.

### **Informed consent**

Age and language appropriate consent forms were prepared. At the start of each workshop, the contents of the Information Sheets were discussed and content explained. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. A strong emphasis was placed on participants understanding they were free to withdraw their participation at any time. This process was also repeated at the start of each semi-structured interview.

### **Confidentiality and data protection**

Research participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, unless information that suggested risk of harm to a child was revealed. All data used in reporting has been anonymised, and care taken not to reveal the identity of participants. Any quotations have been attributed by use of generic terms e.g. interviewee. Workshop participants were asked not to share personal stories, name anyone in any discussions, or share participant's information outside of the workshops. National researchers and the translator accompanying the international researcher each signed a third party confidentiality agreement and to adhere to SOS Children's Villages data protection guidelines.

Recordings were made using an encrypted recording device and uploaded to secure password protected folders held only by the International Lead Researcher. Any information received on paper, e.g. a consent form, has been turned into a digital file and the original destroyed. All data has been stored in an electronic format and held securely in password-protected computer files. All personal data will be destroyed within three years of the termination of the research programme.

### **Ethics and child safeguarding**

All elements of the research process were designed and conducted in a manner guided by professional standards and ethical principles. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was sought and granted from universities in all participating countries.



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All efforts were made to ensure participation in the research did not lead to harm, stigma, re-victimisation or discrimination. Careful consideration was given to the sensitive nature of the topic under consideration i.e., events that may cause distress in the lives of participants. In this regard, the study was designed in a way that did not ask workshop participants about their own experience. Through careful observation, researchers did their best to pick up on cues indicating any distress. Ground rules devised by participants developed at the start of each workshop also highlighted issues such as respect, trust, the importance of being able to talk freely and being listened to. All efforts were made to make sure the workshops were safe and welcoming. The physical environment was important with efforts to use light, airy and spacious rooms. Food and other refreshments were supplied, and children and young people were given the opportunity to go out and play during breaks. No other adults except the researchers and a translator were present in the workshops.

The issue of child safeguarding was taken with the utmost seriousness and informed the design of an ethical research process that took all steps possible to ensure the rights and dignity of participants. An SOS Children's Villages social worker, or equivalent, (a 'responsible adult') was present at the same location as the research workshops with children and young people. They were available if any participant wanted to speak with them about an issue concerning them. If a researcher became concerned about the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person during the workshop or, something was revealed that suggested a child or young person was at risk of harm, the 'responsible adult' was informed. In the event of such disclosure, SOS Children's Villages child safeguarding procedures were to be followed. Children and young people were informed of this process in the Information Sheets as well as it being explained to them at the start of each workshop.

An additional room was made available on the same premises as the workshops and designated a quiet and safe space children and young people could use it if they felt they needed time out alone.

### Facilitation of participation and remuneration

Care was taken to balance the available time researchers had to complete the field work with efforts not to disrupt the lives of participants. This included consideration of the times and length of workshops. All out of pocket expenses for participants such as transportation were covered. Children, young people and family members were offered non-monetary remuneration. This was in the form of gift cards and vouchers.

### Reliability and rigour

Careful attention has been given to reliability and rigor throughout the process of generating, recording, analysing and presenting data. This included careful research design and implementation with consideration of appropriate sequencing; triangulation of data; use of varied and standardised methods for collating data, careful consideration of respondent selection; careful transcription; and awareness of researcher and respondent bias.

### Research analysis

All interviews were transcribed and collated into a word document of which in-depth reading was completed. All the information provided on post-it notes by children, young people and adult family members during the research workshops were transposed into word documents. These documents were imported into the NVIVO 11 data analysis programme and through a text query process, used

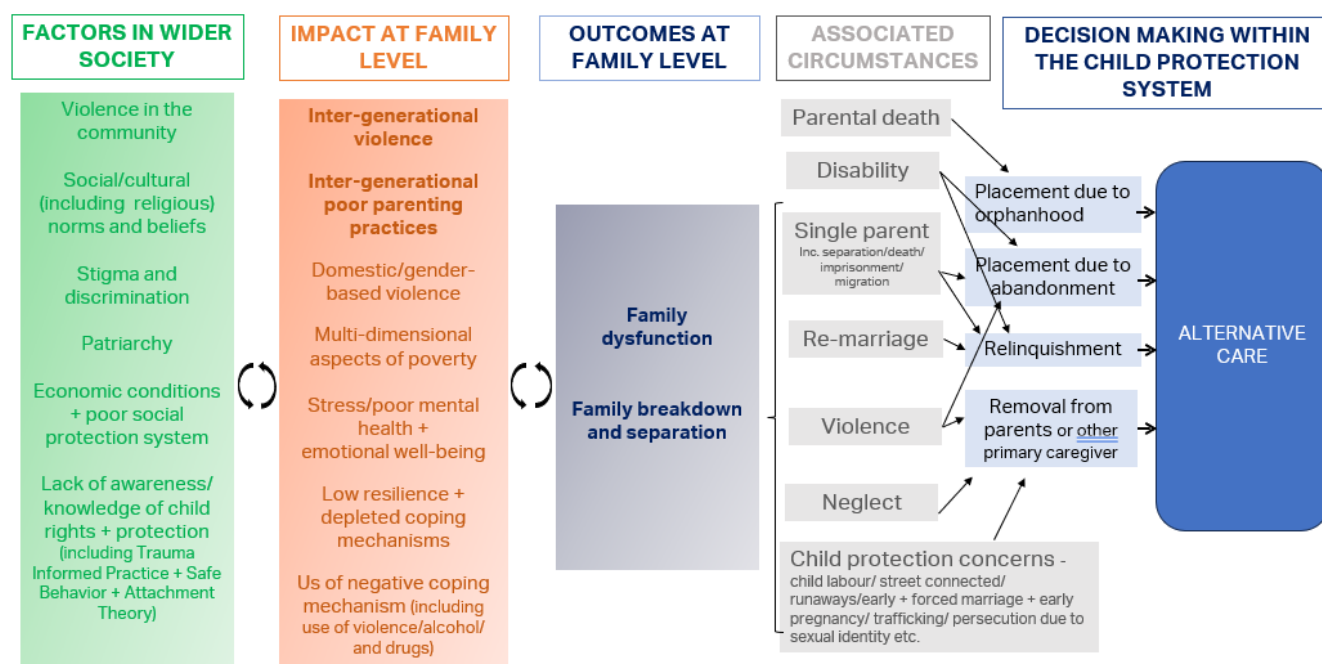
to extract and collate 'instances' of similarities (and variances) to inform emerging and core themes. Linkages were identified in highlighted text and illustrated in word clouds and tree maps. The primary research generated complex and nuanced qualitative data.

## 6. Research Findings

### 6.1. An overview of findings: reasons children are placed in care

Our research had the primary aim of determining the reasons children are placed in alternative care in El Salvador. Following an analysis of the research data, we found a strong correlation between the information provided by children, young people, adult family members, and professional key informants. This chapter provides a summary of the research findings and outlines some of the drivers that may lead to the placement of children into alternative care in El Salvador, as depicted in Figure 20.

Figure 20: Factors leading to the placement of children in alternative care



(Source: Author's own illustration)

## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

Violence against children is described by UNICEF as taking many forms, 'including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and may involve neglect or deprivation.'<sup>188</sup> Analysis of information provided by children, young people, adult family members, and interviewees, complimented by findings of a desk review, suggests the presence of violence in the home, family breakdown and dysfunction,<sup>189</sup> are contributing factors that can lead to child-parents separation in El Salvador and subsequent placement in alternative care. Violence impacts the population as a whole and is a common aspect of family life. Violence manifests itself within the family as all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted on children as well as violence between adults. Often these forms of violence are inter-related. In addition, serious neglect is a reason children are placed in alternative care.

Due to differing factors, children are also living in alternative care because they have been abandoned or they are orphans. Children with disabilities are being separated from their family when their parents are unable, or do not want to, provide the care they need. Children are also being sent into, or are placing themselves in, risky situations which then brings them to the attention of police and child protection services. For example, children who run away from home because of violence and family dysfunction, and become street connected, and those involved in child labour, many of whom are engaged in hazardous work.

Of most concern, is findings that reveal a perpetuation of inter-generational violence and the continuation of adverse childhood experiences that can have a lasting impact on individuals, including the repetition of violence, as well as on parenting ability, across generations. In this manner, it is observed how, in some households, absence of paternal love and/or lack of attachment and bonding between parents and children, may escalate into violence and serious neglect. Participants in our research highlighted the poor unity in families attributed to the 'lack' of love, mutual support, respect, communication, and ability to live together in harmony. Interviewees confirmed their understanding that a parent who themselves lacked a happy, secure, and loving childhood, may not have the understanding and ability to sufficiently care for their children.

An additional factor contributing to violence in the home is a consequence of a society impacted by a machismo culture. This is recognised as a factor in the enduring presence of domestic violence predominantly inflicted on women. As a result, mothers, especially when lacking support networks, are in situations where they must endure abuse, and possibly that of their children, or face the challenges of being a single-headed household. In some cases, this situation can lead to destitution. If remaining within the household, not only do children witness such violence, but may also become at risk to placement in care when the strain is impacting their mother's ability to adequately care for them.

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<sup>188</sup> Please see: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/>

<sup>189</sup> Please see: <https://online.king.edu/news/dysfunctional-families/>

## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

Furthermore, El Salvador has experienced years of civil conflict and gang violence. Living in a society where such violence is witnessed and/or experienced on an ongoing basis is believed to be a factor impinging on stress and instability within families.

We observe how child-parents separation can be directly or indirectly impacted by situations related to poverty, including poor or no access to basic and specialist services. In this manner, we believe, the inability to face the daily challenge of providing food, adequate shelter, paying utility bills, keeping children in school, and being able to access and afford health care for example, are contributing to the tension within households. An inadequate national social protection system that fails to provide adequate support such as unemployment and sickness benefits, additional help for households in which someone has a disability etc. alongside other mechanisms that would help families in vulnerable circumstances cope with crises and shocks, is a further contributing factor. As a result, in some households, facing ongoing challenges exacerbates feelings of tension, distress, and inability to cope. According to our research this in turn can contribute to mental health problems, lead some to negative coping mechanisms such as the use of alcohol and drugs, and the infliction of violence.

These drivers contributing to placement of children in alternative care are discussed in more detail below.

### 6.2 Drivers contributing to placement in alternative care

#### 6.2.1 Violence in the home

Violence manifests itself in all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted on children as well as between adults in the family. As seen in Figures 21 and 22, when children and young people answered the question, what makes children or young people unhappy or worried at home, the words 'maltreatment' and 'violence' were frequently used. Other words that related to such behaviour included 'abusive', 'abuse' and 'fights'. They referred to physical and psychological/emotional violence. Only one child and one young person each wrote about sexual abuse. It is significant that all the pictures of families drawn by children and young people consisted of figures symbolising a mother, a father and children.

Figure 21. Results of workshops with children: What makes children feel unhappy or worried when at home?

## El Salvador

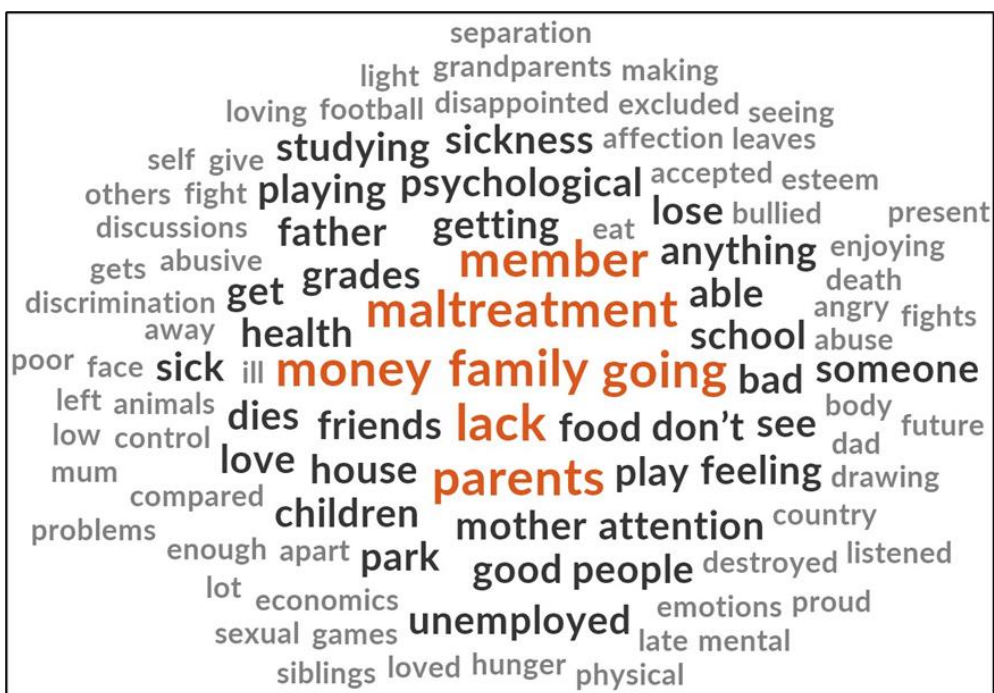


Figure 22. Results of workshops with young people: What makes young people feel unhappy or worried when at home?



Overall, the words relating to violence comprised approximately a third of all the answers provided by children and young people. Words relating to poverty and other experiences in the family home are discussed later in this report.



Below are some further examples of responses relating to violence in the home provided by children and young people (Figure 23).

Figure 23. What makes children and young people worried or unhappy when they are at home (as answered by children and young people)

**What makes children worried or unhappy when they are at home?  
(as answered by children)**

*physical maltreatment*  
*sexual maltreatment*  
*emotional maltreatment*  
*fights between the mother and father*  
*psychological maltreatment*  
*being bullied*  
*watching parents fight*  
*give them love not abusive words*

**What makes young people worried or unhappy when they are at home?  
(as answered by young people)**

*toxicity in the family*  
*neglect and violence*  
*bad relationships and violence*  
*not being protected*  
*do not hit me*  
*do not yell at me*  
*when there are problems and violence between relatives*  
*the fear of suffering from bullying and harassment in the school and family or sexual violence*

Conversely, when asked what makes children and young people happy when they are at home, frequently used words related to love, respect, no fighting or quarrelling, being protected, tolerance, spending time together, peace, and a united family. One young person said, "*it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor what is important is the union and strength of every family.*"

Children and young people made only a few references to different forms of violence when asked 'what makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?' (Figure 24).



## El Salvador

Figure 24. What makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home (as answered by children and young people)

### What makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by children and young people)

*violence*

*toxic behaviour*

*psychological violence*

*fights between partners*

*bad words*

*manipulation*

*lies that poison the family*

*bad words*

*bad things happening*

However, Figure 25 shows results when adult family members were asked, 'what makes families worried or unhappy or worried when they are at home' and illustrates the frequent use of the word 'violence'. The word 'women' was frequently used, especially in relation to domestic violence, a factor discussed in further detail later in this report. Likewise, words such as 'lack' in relation to factors associated with poverty, and other experiences in the family home, are also discussed in another section of this chapter.

Figure 25. 'What makes families worried or unhappy when they are at home?' (as answered by adult family members)

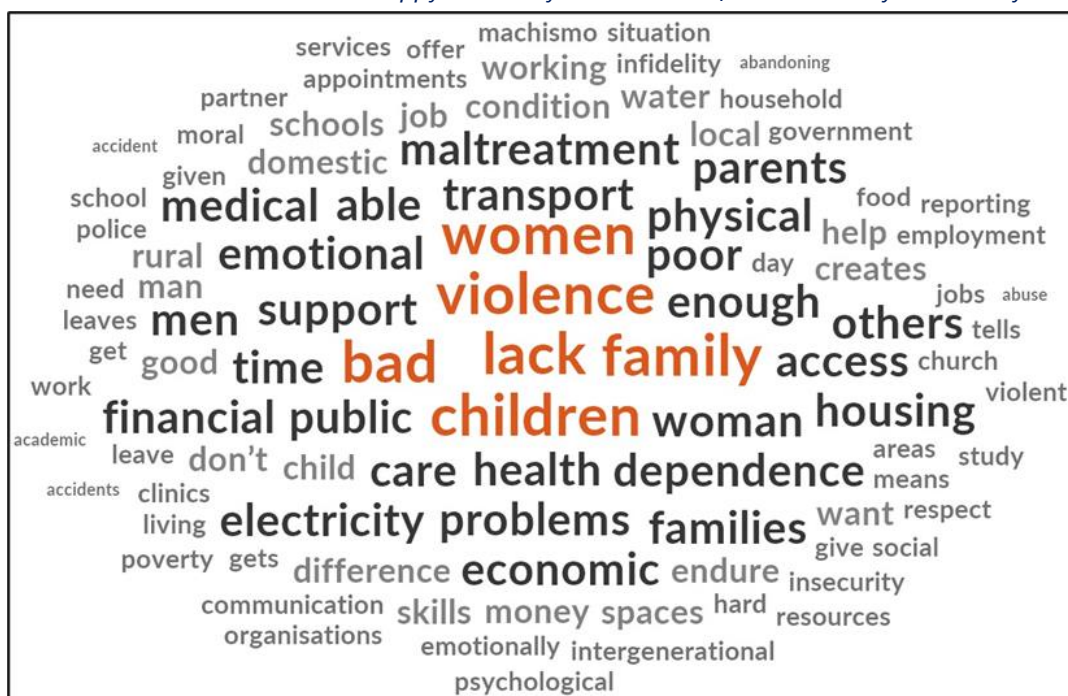


Figure 26 shows a selection of answers provided by adult family members in relation to families being worried or unhappy at home due to abusive behaviour. They refer to violence between adults in the family and towards children and young people.

Figure 26. What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home (as answered by adult family members)

**What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?  
(as answered by adult family members)**

*child abuse*

*violence*

*physical and mental violence*

*women having to endure violence*

*violence*

*fighting and disharmony in the family*

*physical and emotional violence*

*high rates of violence*

*partner violence*

*children begging*

*domestic violence that affects all the family*

*economic maltreatment*

*emotional maltreatment*

*verbal maltreatment*

*violence*

*no one caring about the violence the children are witnessing then they repeat it – it is intergenerational violence and psychological maltreatment*

*violence in the family*

*physical violence and shouting*

*physical violence*

*violent behaviour*

*being raised in families with physical violence and it becomes intergenerational*

Interviewees said violence is a primary reason children are placed in alternative care in El Salvador. They also spoke about the ways violence impacts the lives of children and families.

*"One of the main reasons they are separated from their family is they are maltreated—psychical, sexual abuse and also abandoned."*

*"The principal reason [children are placed in alternative care] is abuse of their rights and they are threatened. There is specific maltreatment - physical and sexual abuse."*

*"They have to be a candidate of violence for us to work with them."*

*"If we have to prioritise the cases that are emergencies and react to those."*

*"If we find cases where there is violence or sexual violence, we should take the child but if it is just poverty or lack of resources, we should not take the child."*

*"It is an endless cycle of violence – through history through revolution and colonization so everyone has seen violence it is inter-generational. It is systematic violence and institutionalized violence – lack of care in gestation, lack of care in the birth, lack of care in the early years of childhood."*

Although reports<sup>190</sup> suggest a decrease in some forms of violence over recent years, including reduction in homicide rates,<sup>191</sup> interviewees believe violence remains pervasive throughout society. It is understood to be embedded in the 'culture' of the nation.<sup>192</sup>

*"There is structural violence in the country – a lot..."*

It is also understood that enforced lock down of households during COVID exacerbated the presence of violence in the home.<sup>193</sup>

## Physical violence

As can be seen from the workshop findings above, children and young people wrote about different forms of violence that is experienced including physical violence. A 2017 report<sup>194</sup> on violence against children in El Salvador found 22.1% of females and 18.7% of males had experienced physical violence before the age of 18 with the first incidence occurring for most of these children (89.6% of females and 92.6% of males) between the ages of 12 and 17 years. For almost 1 in 7 females and 1 in 14 males, the physical violence they experienced in childhood was inflicted by a parent, adult caregiver, or other adult relative. In the 2018 Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations<sup>195</sup> on the corporal punishment. A report published<sup>196</sup> in 2021 said a total of 55% of children who had participated in a survey had experienced some form of violent disciplining.

<sup>190</sup> Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022. Please also see:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/21/countering-el-salvadors-democratic-backsliding>;

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/11/dialogue-el-salvador-experts-committee-against-torture-praise-domestic-violence>;

<sup>191</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017; Rosen et al. 2023; Ipsos 2017

<sup>192</sup> Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017

<sup>195</sup> Please see: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fSLV%2fCO%2f5-6&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fSLV%2fCO%2f5-6&Lang=en)

<sup>196</sup> Please see: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/violence-data/>

## Sexual violence

Children and young people who participated in our research workshops made little mention of sexual violence. However, when asked about reasons children are placed in alternative care, interviewees referred to children who suffered sexual abuse.

*'Most usual is violence – including physical and sometimes sexual abuse – abuse by parents or grandparents, uncles, others or some who are close to the children.'*

*'They are victims of sexual abuse.'*

*'There is sexual abuse both by members of the family and those unknown to them.'*

*'Primarily there is the consideration of violence or neglect...There are also cases of physical abuse or attempted sexual assault or actual sexual assault.'*

A 2017 report<sup>197</sup> on violence against children in El Salvador investigated the presence of sexual violence. Female respondents reported higher incidences of sexual violence before the age of 18 years (13.5%) than males (2.5%). Of those females surveyed, 35.4% had experienced sexual violence before the age of 14 years, and 32.4% when aged between 16 and 17 years old. The study highlights concern of under-reporting and how this could have impacted findings.

## Emotional violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines 'emotional or psychological violence' as including, 'restricting a child's movements, denigration, ridicule, threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment.'<sup>198</sup> The term 'emotional neglect' is also used by several other authors. Ludwig and Rostain for example, define emotional neglect as 'a relationship pattern in which an individual's affectional needs are consistently disregarded, ignored, invalidated, or unappreciated by a significant other'.<sup>199</sup> They explain that parents 'may have trouble understanding their children's needs for love, affection, closeness, and support, or they may feel too overwhelmed or powerless to meet these needs on a consistent basis.'<sup>200</sup>

During our research workshops we gathered responses to the question 'what makes children and young people worried or unhappy at home'. Examples of the answers provided by children and young people included not feeling loved, lacking attention, and feeling excluded (Figure 27).

<sup>197</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017

<sup>198</sup> Please see: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

<sup>199</sup> Ludwig & Rostain 2009

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

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Figure 27. What makes children and young people worried or unhappy when they are at home (as answered by children and young people)

**What makes children and young people worried or unhappy when they are at home?  
(as answered by children and young people)**

*not being enough for people I love*  
*lack of attention*  
*not being loved*  
*having low self esteem*  
*lack of affection*  
*not being listened to*  
*feeling left out by family and friends*  
*feeling excluded at times*  
*not making your parents proud*  
*thinking a lot about the future and not enjoying the present*  
*not being accepted*  
*feeling excluded*  
*being compared to others*  
*not having control over my emotions*  
*that my parents will be angry with me if I don't get good grades*  
*when my parents are disappointed*  
*lack of communication*  
*not having stability*  
*lack of attention*  
*lack of confidence*  
*isolation*  
*not being loved*  
*not getting attention*  
*I don't want material things I want you to understand me*  
*lack of good co-existence*  
*parents not paying attention to them*  
*not having the attention of loved ones*  
*manipulation*  
*the family being apart to lose a family member because of death*  
*that they [parents] may die and leave little children*  
*that our father or mother are not there*

Children and young people placed an emphasis on the time spent together as a family and it is a cause of unhappiness and worry when parents do not provide this opportunity. This and other factors are

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leaving children and young people feeling emotionally neglected and in need of increased opportunities to bond as a family. They also wrote about the worry and unhappiness caused by living without, or losing, one or both parents. Overall, the same issues were reflected in adult family workshops highlighting a particular concern that some caregivers don't want, or don't have time, to spend with their children. One issue being children will become parents themselves but not have the capacity to bond, care for, or protect their own offspring.

Conversely, when asked what makes children happy, children who participated in our workshops wrote about the importance of being 'loved' and feeling part of a 'united' and 'happy and secure' family. They said children feel happy if both parents are present. Spending time together and connecting as a family, as for example, eating and going out together, was mentioned many times signifying the importance children place on these opportunities to bond with each other. Children feel happy when they are listened to and respected. They are also happy when they do well at school. Young people also wrote about the importance of love, respect, tolerance, understanding and peace between family members.

Emotional abuse can have a negative impact on feelings sense of self-worth and emotional well-being and other effects that can be life-long<sup>201</sup> with existence of such practice confirmed in a 2017 report<sup>202</sup> on violence against children in El Salvador. When asked about emotional violence inflicted upon them by parents or other adult caregivers and relatives, a total of 8.1% of females and 2.4% of males respondents aged 13 to 17 years old, said this had happened to them in the past year.<sup>203</sup>

Interviewees also noted issues related to emotional violence. One interviewee said, *"There is physical abuse and psychological abuse. Children are marginalised by their own family they are belittled by them. Another spoke about emotional neglect occurring in high income households and how rich people can also "forget that they need to take care of the children... and a consequence of that is they are effected, and they are never happy, and they have effects like cutting or being depressed"*.

Other interviewees highlighted the lack of communication, support and poor relationships within families and equate such as poor social interaction and little, or no, communication that can contribute to deterioration of family unity. They also understand how this can escalate into violence and compound any psychological impact on children and young people.

*"Children witness violence. This causes trauma."*

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<sup>201</sup> See also: Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022

<sup>202</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017. See also: Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*



*"Psychologically they [children] are in need. So, this is a kind of neglect. And a consequence of that is they are affected, and they are never happy and they have effects like cutting or being depressed. And if the parents don't do anything this is neglect."*

*"Many teenagers have depression. They take poison for rats or pills, and they have been saved and they were seeking attention. But when you talk to them, they are depressed, they have many problems. So, there is a need for programmes to work with children and teenagers on psychology."*

Some interviewees also have a sense that there are parents who do not recognise the emotional and mental health issues impacting their children but instead, consider their behaviour to be "bad" or "delinquent". As a result, they want them placed in alternative care, especially when they are reaching adolescence. It is believed caution is needed in these cases, especially by all professionals working with children and young people, because what might be seen as 'risky' or 'delinquent' behaviour may actually be an issue of psychosocial well-being due to trauma caused for example, by experiencing or witnessing violence, or having suffered severe neglect.<sup>204</sup> A need was identified for greater understanding of this issue and increased knowledge of trauma informed practice by families and professionals including those who make decisions about placement in alternative care, and those providing it.

No data has been found in relation to the number of children or young people having been placed in alternative care in El Salvador with specific protection orders directly associated with their mental health. One residential centre identified during out research that provides accommodation for 20 young males, said 19 of their 20 residents have mental health issues. Some had even been *"hospitalized when they were small children and then transferred to a psychiatric ward"* before entering this facility when reaching adolescence. Other reasons given for their placement alongside mental health concerns include what is considered to be 'risky' behaviour such as substance abuse or needing protection from joining, or after leaving, a gang.

One interviewee raised the issue of parents of young people who exhibited 'risky behaviour' linked with concerns this could lead to their joining a gang. A situation that can result in requests being made to child protection authorities to provide residential services as a protection mechanism. As one interviewee explained, they accept young males in such situations because, *"if they did not join the gangs, they can be under death threats so they have to be either part of the gang or contribute to the gang otherwise they will be killed. A lot of the young people in the centre were threatened and were in danger because they refused to join. They may have collaborated moving food or drugs, but they were forced to be part of the gang."*

<sup>204</sup> Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022.

## Witnessing violence

It is also apparent from the information gathered in our research workshops that children and young people are very aware of, and witness violence that is taking place between other family members. Also experiences that can have a serious and long-lasting impact as confirmed by interviewees.<sup>205</sup>

*'Children witness violence – this causes trauma.*

*"...but at home they might still be witnessing violence and this is a problem."*

*"The parents are under stress because of lack of employment and lack of food and the father tends to get violent with the wife and the mother with the children and the children get used to violence around them."*

Data in a 2017 report<sup>206</sup> on violence against children in El Salvador shows 22.6% of females and 12.0% of male respondents aged between 18 and 24 years old, said they had witnessed physical violence in the home before the age of 18.

## Physical neglect

Interviewees also acknowledge children in El Salvador experience differing degrees of physical neglect, and particularly at the point cases of neglect become a protection concern, consideration being given to placing a child in care. When directly asked about reasons children are placed in care one interview said, *"neglect. This could include material or emotional neglect"* and another confirmed, *"sometimes we bring children in [care] for neglect"*. Interviewees also spoke of children for whom there are concerns regarding their health and hygiene as they consistently attend school unfed and unwashed. Several spoke of children who are left at home alone on a regular basis. An extreme case being a group of siblings who were regularly locked in the house at night whilst their mother went out to work. Unfortunately, one night the house set on fire and the children burned to death.

In our workshops, children and young people wrote about being hungry and *'not having anything to eat'* but did not raise any other concerns regarding physical neglect.

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<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017

## 6.3 Additional factors impacting children's risk of experiencing violence and placement in alternative care

### 6.3.1 Drug and alcohol addiction

Very few workshop participants mentioned drug or alcohol addiction. However, many interviewees consider this a problem in El Salvador. Many correlate use of alcohol and drug abuse with family vulnerability and risk of child-parents separation, especially when it leads to violence and serious neglect.

*"And when they are intoxicated with alcohol we know people don't act reasonably."*

*"Drugs and alcohol are a problem. This falls into the category of violence against children. They [parents] take drugs and alcohol because they have their own trauma. For example, if a parent used to, then the next generation became users of alcohol. It is learned behaviour."*

In 2016 WHO<sup>207</sup> documented 10.2% of the population as being heavy episodic drinkers. The number of people with an alcohol use disorder increased from 179,875 in 1990 to 222,199 in 2019<sup>208</sup>. The number of deaths caused by drug use also increased from a rate of 1.05 per 100,000 of the population in 1990 to 1.76 in 2020<sup>209</sup>.

### 6.3.2 Street-connected children

Street-connected children, including those living and working on the streets, face an increased risk of violence. Children on the streets also attract attention of police and child protection authorities concerned for their safety and welfare. According to the information collected during interviews, becoming street connected is a reason child are placed in alternative care. Several interviewees believe this situation is the consequence of children running from violence in the home.

*"Sometimes we bring children in...because sometimes late at night maybe 12 or 1.00 a.m. the police are working in the streets, and they find a child who is in need so they call the Junta and tell them of the situation. So, we would take the decision to say this is a kind of emergency."*

*"There are a considerable number of children in the streets."*

*"Children who run away from home and go onto the streets – mostly older children 12 and 13 years old."*

<sup>207</sup> Please see: [https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/country-profiles/substances-abuse/slv.pdf?sfvrsn=c68d89d5\\_3&download=true](https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/country-profiles/substances-abuse/slv.pdf?sfvrsn=c68d89d5_3&download=true)

<sup>208</sup> Please see:

<sup>209</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/death-rates-from-drug-use-gbd?tab=table&country=~SLV>

*"There is a situation because of their substance abuse they end up on the streets and then are victims of sexual abuse."*

*"Situations also take into account the fact that children are made to work in the street or beg."*

### 6.3.3 Child labour

Although the topic was not raised by participants in our research workshops, four interviewees spoke about child labour and the risk this places them to separation from their family.

*"Situations also take into account the fact that children are made to work in the street or beg."*

*"They lack social support from the care givers. They are victims of sexual abuse. There is child labour and so they rather run away."*

*"Since the children get left behind there is the phenomenon of spontaneous adoption which the system is not involved in, and the child gets taken by a non-related family and then the children are forced to work – this also happens in extended families as well."*

*"So, they start working in agriculture. They often live below the minimum, below the poverty line."*

According to UNICEF, in 2021, 81,164 children were working of which 71.0% (58,007) were engaged in hazardous work.<sup>210</sup> Being on the streets, and other places of hazardous work, can place children at further risk of harm including involvement in crime, recruitment into gangs, use of drugs and alcohol, and physical and sexual violence and exploitation.

### 6.3.4 Digital violence

Although not mentioned by research participants, the presence and risks of violence and exploitation of children exerted online was given consideration during our desk review when examining the presence and impact of violence in El Salvador. Reports suggest very little information has been gathered in terms of risks to online exploitation being faced by children in the country.<sup>211</sup> A 2022 report<sup>212</sup> on children's rights did call attention however, to children and young people who had been victims of cyberbullying including sexting (sending sexually explicit photographs, messages, and videos in text messages or emails).

In May 2023, an assessment was made of the Government of El Salvador's capacity in relation to digital violence. The study found steps were being taken through policies, such as "Growing

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<sup>210</sup> UNICEF 2022

<sup>211</sup> International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children 2023; Fry et al 2021

<sup>212</sup> Alliance for the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Youth in El Salvador 2022.

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Together", that outlines the State's responsibility to include content on the use of the digital environment in education curricula. However, it was not known if this also includes specific programmes to address risks when online. Gaps were also identified in legislation to protect children from digital violence and a concern that the Cybercrime Unit in El Salvador lacks sufficient technical and technological tools to carry out its investigations.<sup>213</sup>

In conclusion, it is evident that children are at risk of placement in care as a result of violence. The magnitude of the different forms of violence they are experiencing is indicated in Table 8 showing recorded violations between 2017-2019.<sup>214</sup> Physical violence was the most reported form of abuse followed by sexual abuse.

*Table 8. Children and adolescents whose protection rights were violated by type of violation (%), 2016-2019*

Form of violation	2017	2018	2019
Physical	57.24%	57.69%	50.91%
Sexual	22.56%	20.04%	24.23%
Psychological	13.57%	13.69%	16.43%
Emotional	6.06%	8.07%	7.41%
Moral	0.56%	0.56%	0.95%
Cultural*	0.02%	0.03%	0.07%
Total	100%	100%	100%

(Source: Adapted from Consulting Team 2021)

\*No definition was provided for cultural violations

### 6.3.5 Abandonment

For the purposes of this report, abandonment is a situation in which children are left anonymously in a 'public' place by persons unknown e.g., a baby is left in front of a hospital. Of those interviewees who did speak of child abandonment, we sought clarification to ensure they were referring to children whose parentage is unknown.

It was not possible to obtain an accurate number of the children who are truly abandoned and placed in alternative care each year in El Salvador. Data published in 2021<sup>215</sup> indicates almost 25% of all children in alternative care were there for reasons of 'abandonment'. However, the term 'abandonment' is not clearly defined in the report and the author does not provide their source of data, so it has not been possible to verify these findings. In comparison to information provided by interviewees who think the number of children in alternative care whose parentage is unknown is 'small', it is likely this report included other children and not just those who have been abandoned.

<sup>213</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>215</sup> Consulting Team 2021

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Data published in a 2021 Government Household Survey,<sup>216</sup> states 502,700 children were 'abandoned' as they were living in households without either a father, or a mother, or both. Of these a total 65,809 children had recorded as having been 'abandoned' by both parents. As a report produced in 2021<sup>217</sup> shows the total number of children in formal alternative care settings to be 1,367, one assumption must be the vast majority of the 65,809 children reported<sup>218</sup> as being abandoned by both parents, are being cared for in informal kinship care. As one interviewee said:

*"Since the children get left behind there is the phenomenon of spontaneous adoption which the system is not involved in, and the child gets taken by a non-related family..."*

A further interviewee also believes there "are only very few cases" of true abandonment i.e., of children whose parentage is unknown, and information provided by others indicate it is mostly babies who are left in this situation.

*"This is mostly newborn babies. In the street unfortunately. The mother might be depressed or have a problem with alcoholism. There is a lack of support, for example a teenager may have to hide the fact they got pregnant and just leave the baby. They may have been raped so are shunned by their families. The mother might have mental health problems. Sometimes lack of support from the spouse. Sometimes lack of money."*

*"We need to think about baby boxes because animals eat them, or some harm comes to them before they are found."*

*"They are also abandoned in hospitals."*

The reasons interviewees gave for child abandonment included depression and other mental health problems, sexual assault, substance dependency, giving birth to a child with disability, and lack of money. Children are abandoned in hospitals as well as being found in "trash cans and parks." Lack of access to support, especially for children with disabilities was also cited.

*"If the child is disabled so they cannot take care of them. Also, sexual abuse of the mothers so the child is the result"*

*"Once a child with disabilities is born into the family they do not know how to handle it...The other reason is that the people do not have the resources to meet all the needs that this child needs. So, they abandon the children"*

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<sup>216</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>217</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>218</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) et al. 2017



*"[parents] leave them in their house... they just leave the house with the children in and don't go back...families are not able to take care of them, so many cases, when the diagnosis is made, they just abandon their children."*

*"[I] would like to believe that it is mostly because of economic reasons but sometimes it is because the parents also have a disability. So, they are people who were also in risky situation, and so they don't know what to do."*

Sometimes the term abandonment is used interchangeably with that of **relinquishment**. When interviewees were asked specifically about relinquishment, they said the law does not allow parents to relinquish children and they would only be accepted into alternative care in these instances if there was a proven protection concern. They believe the previous practice of parents being able leave their children in alternative care settings without an official process has now ceased in El Salvador.

*"If children are dirty, don't go to school etc. they need help, but our programmes are not based on this. There has to be violence or being a migrant. If this is not the case and they are not having this profile, so you have to think and analyse and see if this is not a problem for us as we do not help families in that way, they are directed to another programme. We only work with victims of violence."*

### 6.3.6 Orphans

For the purposes of our research, we define an orphan as someone whose both parents have died. However, in El Salvador the term 'orphan' is used interchangeably for children who have lost one or both parents.

A 2021 Government of El Salvador report<sup>219</sup> showed the number of children whose both parents had died to be 3,591. In the same year only 14 children were recorded as being in alternative care because they were orphans.<sup>220</sup> The same report<sup>221</sup> said 54,688 fathers and 9,218 mothers had died. This is significant as in El Salvador, as discussed later in this report, single parenthood can be a reason children are placed in alternative care. It has not been possible to source data that specifically shows number of children placed in alternative care disaggregated by death or just one or both parents.

### 6.3.7 Disability

According to a UNICEF report submitted to the UN Economic and Social Council in 2022, the number of people with disabilities in El Salvador was estimated to be 463,075, of which 26% (119,944) were

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<sup>219</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*

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children. The report cites physical, mental, and psychosocial disabilities as the most 'common disabilities' affecting children.

The data<sup>222</sup> found during our desk review indicating reasons children are in alternative care in El Salvador, did not cite disability as a factor. These children may have been included in the category of 'other reasons'. Information gathered during interviewees indicates small numbers of children with disabilities currently in care in El Salvador. It is believed this is because most alternative care providers do not accept them into their facilities. Explanations for this situation included lack of staff ability to provide specialist care.

One interviewee believes a reason children with disabilities are placed in care is because their, *"families are poor, and they cannot meet all the requirements they need or all the care they need. They live in very remote areas. So, the families are not trained or sensitised."* There are also cases *"where the child has a disability, and the partner just leaves. There is stigma connected to having a child with a disability."* It was stressed that *"public information campaigns need to inform people about what a disability is and how to destigmatise people from treating them with disrespect."*

Lack of access to basic and specialist services was also given as a reason families find it difficult to take care of children with disabilities.

*"So historically it is not only the fault of the family but also the lack of support from the government to these kind of families. We have seen a lot of cases of people, family living in the very remote areas and if the child requires something special, they cannot move to receive that care. So, there are a lot of problems and cover for special needs does not reach the very remote areas either."*

*"Many mothers give birth to children with disabilities – including mental disabilities and if the child has mental under development or autism and do not have the money to care for the child properly the child comes into an institution. It is hard for them to cope."*

A grave concern is many children with disabilities are living at home without proper care and support. Some interviewees think they may be at risk of harm.

*"There is also child abuse, and negligence. They force the child to beg to profit from the child."*

*"We have identified some families where they are only using the children to beg."*

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<sup>222</sup> Consulting Team 2021

However, interviewees also acknowledge there are parents who do care about their children with disabilities and are doing their best to look after them, often in challenging circumstances but without much needed support and assistance.

EL Salvador has an inclusive education policy<sup>223</sup> that outlines a strategy to 'gradually eliminate barriers to access and participation' in mainstream education and had a 2014-2019 plan for integrated education. However, the General Education Law (Decree. 917; 2018) defines special education as being offered to people with special education needs in both specialised centres of education as well as mainstream schools. According to UNESCO<sup>224</sup>, a 2014 school census indicated 85% of children and young with disabilities were attending mainstream schools, while the remaining attend special education schools. This does not necessarily equate to the information found during our research as it was suggested many children with disabilities are not attending school. We were told the lack of opportunity for children with disabilities to attend, and be offered appropriate support in, *mainstream schools include such barriers as "infrastructure" and "lack of transportation" as well as poor "attitudes towards them at the regular school"*.

*"They received violence because we do not teach our children about disabilities. If they have a mental disability or a facial disability it is even harder. So, if they have auditory disabilities, it should be mandatory that everyone receive education in sign language, so that the children could communicate even with their peers. There are no braille books. So, they have to go to specialised schools... So regular schools should be adapted so anyone can receive teaching in the school. We should not separate them. So here is no inclusiveness."*

### 6.3.8 Sexual orientation and gender identity

Only one interviewee spoke about sexual orientation when asked about reasons young people become separated from their families, *"there is also an issue of non-acceptance of sexual orientation."* As this could be a reason for young people becoming separated from parents, we think it important to acknowledge reports illuminating the vulnerability of those identifying as LGBTQ+ in EL Salvador and how they remain targets of 'homophobic and transphobic violence by police, gangs, and the general public.'<sup>225</sup> It is thought many flee persecution by migrating to the USA. In 2017, Government authorities acknowledged<sup>226</sup> 692 offences against LGBT and intersex people between January 2015 to June 2019, had been committed by public security officials. According to OCHA,<sup>227</sup> the exclusion and abuse begins in the home whilst also being experienced in the community, and often involves the infliction of physical, economic and sexual violence.

<sup>223</sup> Government of El Salvador 2010.

<sup>224</sup> Please see: <https://education-profiles.org/latin-america-and-the-caribbean/el-salvador/~inclusion>

<sup>225</sup> Human Rights Watch 2023

<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> OCHA 2022b

Human Rights Watch has noted<sup>228</sup> how El Salvador lacks comprehensive civil non-discrimination legislation related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Nor is there any legal gender recognition procedure for transgender people. Reportedly,<sup>229</sup> President Bukele has said that the government-backed constitutional reform will not legally recognize same-sex relationships.

## **7. Factors that contribute to violence against children**

When considering ways to address reasons children are placed in alternative care, and haven taken a socio-ecological model to inform the research framework, our research indicates experiencing violence outside as well as inside the home can impact family life. It is important therefore, to understand why, and how, violence is present in society.

### **7.1 The impact of the civil war and gang violence**

Various historical and current socio-political factors have contributed to the presence of violence in El Salvador. The people of El Salvador experienced the horrors of a 12-year civil war that ended in 1992.<sup>230</sup> The UN reports<sup>231</sup> how 75,000 people were killed, tortured, and forcibly disappeared. Throughout the war, nearly half of the country's population fled from violence and poverty. Furthermore, children were recruited as soldiers by both the military-run government and the guerrilla group Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).<sup>232</sup>



(Source: Centre for Justice and Accountability<sup>233</sup>)

<sup>228</sup> Human Rights Watch 2023

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> Rosen et al. 2023

<sup>231</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/05/el-salvador-pain-continues-measures-must-be-urgent-un-expert-calls-immediate>

<sup>232</sup> Dickson-Gomez 2002

<sup>233</sup> Please see: <https://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>

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An International Committee of the Red Cross investigation<sup>234</sup> found approximately a third of Salvadorans reported a family member to have been killed and 29% had lost contact with a close relative as a result of the hostilities. Fifty-three per cent of the population lived within areas of conflict with approximately 1 in 5 suffering due to property damage or being forced to move. Children were not only accidentally separated from their family, but they also disappeared, were forcibly taken from their families, trafficked, placed in alternative care institutions, and sent for international adoption through legal and illegal channels.<sup>235</sup> It is believed 'no less than 50 orphanages functioned in El Salvador during the period of conflict.'<sup>236</sup> The war left a terrible legacy impacting a whole generation of children and young people who grew up with the presence of violence being an intrinsic part of their everyday life.

The end of the war also saw a proliferation of guns remaining in the community. It is understood this has contributed to the availability of firearms used in the subsequent rise in gang warfare. The manifestation of gang violence has brought more fear and blighted the daily lives of people across El Salvador.

The specific impact of gang violence and living in fear was a matter raised in our adult family workshops and by interviewees, although not by children and young people. Some adults spoke of the fear that was inflicted and the fragmentation of communities. They spoke of their firsthand experience as witnesses to, and being impacted by, the violence.

*"...civil war was a main driver to generate dysfunctional families. The civil war left single mothers and orphans and people were forced to migrate and leave their children. After the war it was especially hard for people as there was little opportunity for employment and lots of poverty. So, there was no opportunity to study either. Then there was the rise of gang members and gang violence, so families were forced to move from one place to another inside the country. That meant men were not able to enter another zone because they would be targeted by a gang, so the men have to go somewhere else to live and so the family were separated."*

For many years, violence inflicted by gangs resulted in high rates of homicide, rape, extortion, kidnapping, and distribution of drugs.<sup>237</sup> UNICEF highlights the way such violence has 'stolen'<sup>238</sup> childhoods whilst other reports show the impact on children living in a society dominated by fear and

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<sup>234</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross 1999

<sup>235</sup> Sprenkels et al. undated

<sup>236</sup> *ibid*:44

<sup>237</sup> Carcach & Artola 2016; See also: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/January/unodc-addresses-the-forced-disappearances-and-torture-of-women--girls-and-youth-in-el-salvador.html>

<sup>238</sup> Please see: <https://www.unicef.org/stories/stolen-childhood-gang-violence-el-salvador>



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reprisal.<sup>239</sup> In 2015, El Salvador was reportedly<sup>240</sup> the most violent country on the American continent with youth mortality rate (207.5 of per 100,000 young people) exceeding the world average. Child homicide rates in EL Salvador increased from 6.86 per 100,000 of the population in 1990 to 14.78 in 2018.<sup>241</sup>

Carach and Artola describe how Salvadorian gangs used murder and enforce the disappearance of people to 'gain sustained social control'<sup>242</sup> of communities. In 2017, OECD reported the situation of insecurity and violence in El Salvador had 'become one of the most worrying problems for the population'<sup>243</sup> with extremely high rates of youth mortality. The report went on to highlight the fact that young people were both the victims and the perpetrators of homicide. Human Rights Watch continues to report<sup>244</sup> on gang violence including exercising control over individuals and neighbourhoods through murder, forcible recruitment of children, abduction, and sexual abuse of women, girls, and those identifying as LGBT. According to Human Rights Watch, March 2022 saw the highest rates of homicide in years as 'seemingly'<sup>245</sup> committed by gangs.

A further indication of the social violence in which children and families have been living is the ongoing disappearance of people. More than 28,000 cases were filed with the Attorney General's Office between January 2005 and August 2021 which, according to Human Rights Watch,<sup>246</sup> is an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 more than disappeared during the 12-year civil war. It is understood that those responsible for these disappearances include gangs and security forces.<sup>247</sup> A US Department report<sup>248</sup> claims disappearances attributed to gangs were still occurring on a regular basis in 2022.

At the time of this research, the Government of El Salvador had launched a programme of mass arrests of gang members. Although some question the way these arrests are being undertaken, many respondents in our research believe it has led to a decrease in fear of, and the violence inflicted by, gangs. Some said they welcomed the recent arrests of gang members because this is the first time their children could safely go out and play.

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<sup>239</sup> Fry et al. 2021

<sup>240</sup> OECD 2017

<sup>241</sup> Please see: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/child-homicide-rate?tab=table&country=~SLV>

<sup>242</sup> Carach and Artola 2016:1

<sup>243</sup> OECD 2017:6

<sup>244</sup> Please see: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/el-salvador>

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Please see: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/el-salvador>

<sup>247</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> Please see: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/el-salvador/>



## 7.2 Violence in Schools

Children's lives are also impacted by violence at school. Our research gathered information about violence in schools inflicted by teachers on students as well as peer to peer violence. Even though prohibited by law, interviewees believe there are teachers who still use corporal punishment.

*"There is violence in the school. Harassment and bullying and power play. Both teachers to pupils and child to child. There are still some teachers who use physical punishment to get the children to obey them even though it is against the law."*

*"[We] need to stop violence in schools."*

Several interviewees called special attention to the stigma, discrimination, and violence children with disabilities experience at school.

*"[they] receive violence because we do not teach our children about disabilities. If they have a mental disability or a facial disability it is even harder."*

*"[children] with disabilities face violence in the school. Even in the same family. They are treated as crazy people..."*

In 2021, the organization 'Together for Girls' produced<sup>249</sup> fact sheets analysing school-based, gender-related, violence in a number of countries including El Salvador where it was reported that 9% of children had experienced physical or sexual violence at schools. However, the study also underlined concerns regarding the accuracy of data due to under-reporting. For example, only 37% of boys who experienced sexual violence in school had told anyone.<sup>250</sup>

## 7.3 Living in a macho society and gender-based violence

Throughout our research, many young people, family members and interviewees referred to elements of living in a macho society and how this relates to violence both in the home and society in general. Macho is defined in the Collins Dictionary<sup>251</sup> as behaviour that is 'denoting or exhibiting pride in characteristics believed to be typically masculine, such as physical strength' or, 'an overly assertive, virile, and domineering man' demonstrated through a sense of power. In addition, UNICEF has defined patriarchy as a 'social system in which men hold the greatest power, leadership roles, privilege, moral authority and access to resources and land, including in the family.'<sup>252</sup> Patriarchy has

<sup>249</sup> Please see: <https://www.end-violence.org/impact/countries/el-salvador>

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> Please see: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/macho>

<sup>252</sup> Please see: <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Genderglossarytermsandconcepts.pdf>

also been described as a system in which 'attributes seen as "feminine" or pertaining to women are undervalued, while attributes regarded as "masculine" or pertaining to men are privileged.'<sup>253</sup>

Information gathered during adult family workshops was pronounced in terms of gender-based and domestic violence. We do recognise this emphasis may have been influenced by the high percentage (approximately 98%) of female participants attending the workshops. Concerns were also raised about children who witness domestic violence and their risk of becoming victims. Figure 25 provides a selection of answers provided by adult family members in relation to domestic violence.

Figure 28. What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home (as answered by adult family members)

**What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?  
(as answered by adult family members)**

*neighbours don't realise there is violence in the family because it is kept private until it gets to the point the man kills the woman*

*your partner tells you that you are stupid then the violence escalates and the woman is killed*

*the woman not reporting at first sign of violence because of social culture  
machismo society*

*domestic violence*

*hard for a woman to leave violent homes as men manipulate them emotionally and gets back at her*

*machoism*

*women are not empowered to say no*

*the family abandoning the woman if she leaves her marriage*

*machismo attitudes creates problems*

*police and social workers wanting to take the woman away but the woman doesn't want to go*

*not enough reporting of domestic violence to the police*

*women having to endure a situation that is not her fault*

*girls being brought up to look after the men*

*women not having the financial means to leave the man especially if her family will not support her*

*when the women is responsible for the household*

*women's dependence on men*

*women's economic dependence*

<sup>253</sup> Please see: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/patriarchy#:~:text=Patriarchy%20is%20a%20system%20of,pertaining%20to%20men%20are%20privileged.>

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Interviewees also recognise the presence of a machismo culture and of domestic violence.

*"But there are women still economically and emotionally dependent on men. Domestic violence and gender-based violence is a problem."*

*"Violence is caused by ...a machismo culture in which relationships are damaged."*

*"Female empowerment is important. Because the machoism in the country a lot of women do not have the strength to report the man about the abuse."*

*"Mothers do not have work and has no one around her to help her. "*

*"The families have difficulties. Some women experience violence by their husbands. They don't work and don't have resources to be independent..."*

*"So, we identify sometimes when there is violence amongst adults..."*

*"Violence and infidelity is a reason for separation."*

Many participants in the adult family workshops spoke of the need for women to escape domestic violence for their protection and that of their children. They also said, if their family and/or community does not accept and help them and their children or, they have no other means of renting a house and providing for their children, they are either trapped in a violent situation or risk becoming destitute. The norm within El Salvador however, of supportive extended family and other social networks, is thought to be eroding.

*"Extended family can play a role. Even the community can provide that help for the family. Some families do not have because of their social cultural background cannot face some situations that their peers can so that is where extended family and community support can come into play. If they have positive support it can prevent abandonment/separation but if it is negative it can have the opposite effect. "*

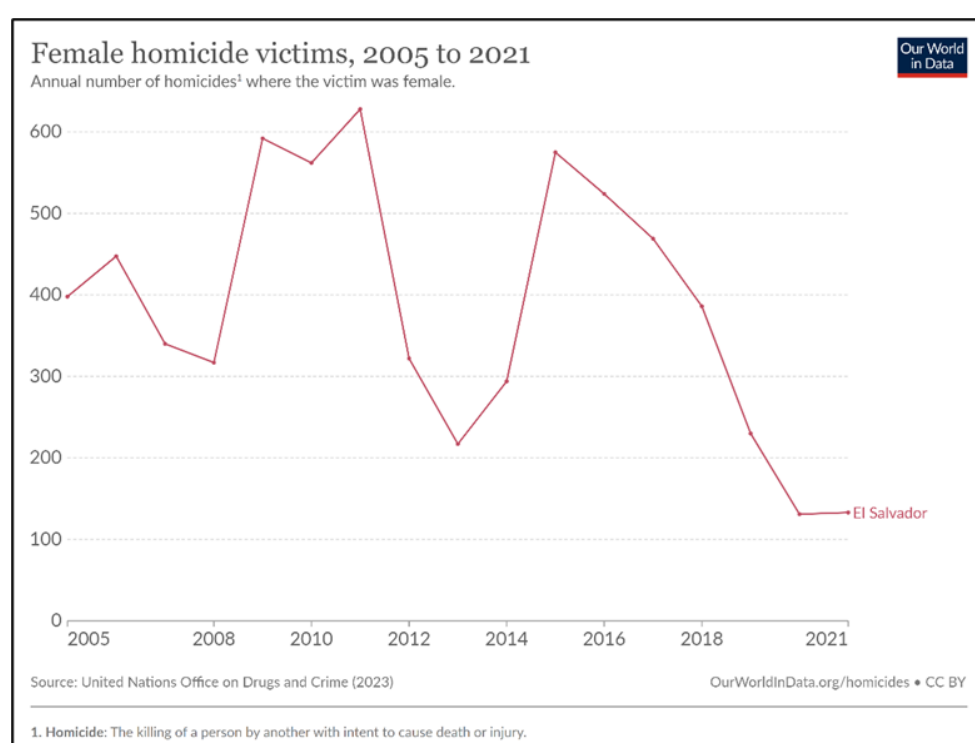
*"Some families cope better than others because many families don't have family network support."*

In 2018, the UN said '67% of women had experienced some type of violence in El Salvador' and estimated the rate of violent death of women as '13.49 per hundred thousand women: one of the

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highest in the world'.<sup>254</sup> It is understood 'persistence of a culture of gender-based discrimination, deep economic inequalities, and impunity' are factors that, 'reproduce and perpetuate patterns of violence.'<sup>255</sup> In 2022, Navarro-Mantos et al. reported 54.3% of women in El Salvador had 'suffered some type of violence (physical, sexual, or psychological) throughout their lives at the hands of a current or former intimate partner.'<sup>256</sup> A current article published online by Time Magazine<sup>257</sup> quotes a figure of 67% of women having suffered intimate partner violence and abuse by family members. One illustration of the impact of such violence is women having to migrate in order to escape fear and persecution and the effects on their mental health: a situation that is even driving some to suicide.<sup>258</sup> Data does indicate however, a recent decline in female homicide victims (Figure 29).<sup>259</sup>

Figure 29. Female homicide victims in El Salvador, 2005 to 2021



(Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/female-homicide-victims?tab=chart&country=~SLV>)

Witnessing and/or being direct victims of domestic abuse can have a life-long impact on children and young people, a situation discussed in further detail below.

<sup>254</sup> Please see: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/04/1431372>

<sup>255</sup> Please see: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/04/1431372>

<sup>256</sup> Navarro-Mantos et al. 2022:8

<sup>257</sup> Please see: <https://time.com/5582894/gender-violence-women-el-salvador/>.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> Please see: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/female-homicide-victims?tab=chart&country=~SLV>

## 8. The inter-generational aspect of family dysfunction and violence

When asked why families reach a situation where separation of children is a consideration, interviewees drew attention to lack of parenting skills, described by some as *"bad parenting practices"*. Approximately a third of interviewees spoke of parents not understanding *"the responsibility of being parents"* and the need for *"training for the parents on early childhood development. For example, it is important for the child to play even if the parents are tired at the end of day."* They believe lack of parenting skills is a significant factor related to deterioration of child-parents relationships which in turn, may ultimately lead to violence against, or serious neglect of, children.

*"The lack of commitment of the parents is a reason."*

*"They do not actually understand their responsibility as parents."*

*"We sometimes identify when there is violence amongst adults, and they forget that they need to take care of the children."*

*"[There is a] need for parents to be better parents – caring parents."*

*"Parents don't understand the responsibility of being parents."*

*"[There is a] need to improve the responsibility/ response of the parents."*

*[Parents] "do not actually understand their responsibility as parents."*

Educational levels were also equated with good parenting.

*"Some parents have better parenting styles than others because they have good sort of education. They might have reached 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade and this helps them to better support the child. In contrast some do not have that education and they get frustrated and stressed and this can lead to violence against children."*

Of even greater significance is the concern that lack of positive parenting is an inter-generational phenomenon with recognition being given to the importance of addressing this deep-rooted issue. Whilst discussing parenting skills and issues of positive bonding and attachment, interviewees pointed to the way negative childhood experiences of parents was now impacting their own ability to parent well. Results from our research workshops certainly confirm situations of ongoing violence within families (please refer to Figures 10 to 15) and concerns related to the emotional and

psychological well-being of children, young people, and adult family members (please refer to Figure 16).

There is an acknowledgement that adverse childhood experiences (ACES),<sup>260</sup> can contribute to behaviour<sup>261</sup> which may be repeated throughout life. In the same manner, it is also recognised how, through 'observation, learning and imitation'<sup>262</sup> of adults, and/or being a recipient of violence, physical neglect, lack of love and affection, children also risk repeating such behaviour<sup>263</sup> which in turn, can result in violence, instability, and family dysfunction continuing from generation to generation in El Salvador. And once again, a situation leading to the continuance of children being placed in alternative care.

*"Young people who have been abused also learn from their abuse and become abusive. People think they are a problem, trouble rather than realising they have complex histories and experiences."*

*"We all carry trauma and if we don't manage it as a parent, we pass it down to our children. Parents might also have suffered abuse or abandonment – physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse."*

*"There is an incapacity of families in terms of emotional and psychological coping mechanisms. They cannot cope and they give up. It is an endless cycle of violence – through history through revolution and colonization so everyone has seen violence it is inter-generational. It is systematic violence and institutionalized violence – lack of care in gestation, lack of care in the birth, lack of care in the early years of childhood. The parents are under stress because of lack of employment and lack of food and the father tends to get violent with the wife and the mother with the children and the children get used to violence around them. In school the teachers are violent with the children and there is peer to peer violence. We ask them to be pacifists, but they have experienced violence their whole lives to they get together and form gangs and there is more violence because that is all they know."*

*"It is determined by different studies but a useful one is about the history of the parents so for example they come from broken families and their parents were substance abusers... It is inter-generational."*

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<sup>260</sup> SOS Children's Villages International and CELCIS, Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde 2021; SOS Children's Villages International 2022

<sup>261</sup> Moylan et al. 2010

<sup>262</sup> Contreras and del Carmen Cano 2016:44

<sup>263</sup> Contreras and del Carmen Cano 2016; Bevan & Higgins 2002



All interviewees were asked a hypothetical question about two families being investigated by the child protection authorities, and why one family might be more proactive than the other in preventing authorities placing their children in alternative care. Emotional bonding between children and parents was identified as an important trait in those families who would resist separation. It is understood that those parents making all efforts to keep their children would most probably have been recipients of positive parenting including care and love in their own childhood. It was *"learned behaviour."*

*"One family might fight to keep their child because they have affection for their children, and they will fight for them and think they will suffer under someone else's care, and some won't have the affection. Some people have not been taught about love and emotional bonds and attachment. It is inter-generational and [they] don't know how to say I love you to a child which is very important. Love is important received through a family that has a supportive family and social network...They can offer support. It has a lot to do with affection."*

*"The experience is inter-generational...One family might have emotional bonds than the other. Maybe because of – so if a mother is a single mother with two girls and she could teach them the little joys, to appreciate the little things they have. To tell them stories. To find joy and happiness in some things."*

*"Poor parenting styles may also be related to the way that they were badly parented. It is inter-generational."*

Guidance issued in the new child rights law in EL Salvador, 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia' (Grow up Together for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents), also refers to 'poor parenting'. It mandates support be offered to families when poor parenting results in 'violation' of children's protection and consideration of placement in alternative care.

## 9. The multiple dimensions of poverty

Our research identified multiple dimensions of poverty, including for many families, a severe lack of financial resources coupled with insufficient access to government services, as being a major factor contributing to worry and unhappiness in families that may lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, an inability to cope, and impact parenting abilities.

The results of our research workshops show children and young people are very aware of, and concerned about, the economic difficulties facing themselves and their family (Figure 30). We noted the comments received about lack of financial means were more prolific amongst children than from

young people. Young people's comments were more weighted towards concerns of violence and lack of care in the family.

Figure 30. What makes children and young people worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by children and young people)

**What makes children worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by children)**

*not having money*  
*no food*  
*sickness*  
*if the children don't have anything to eat*  
*money*  
*people in the family get sick and they have no money*  
*a family member in poor health*  
*there is bad economics*  
*unemployed family member*  
*worry that a family member is unemployed*  
*not having a house*  
*not having food*  
*hunger*  
*lack of money*  
*lack of light*  
*lack of house*  
*lack of water*  
*being ill*  
*that the house gets destroyed*  
*not having good health*  
*that a member of the family has bad health*

**What makes young people worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by young people)**

*being in debt*  
*when there is not enough money*  
*not having food*  
*lack of food*  
*not enough resources*  
*not having anything to eat*

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*being worried about getting sick  
when there is no water when it is needed  
when there is a bad economic situation  
bad employment*

As seen in Figure 31, when children and young people were asked, what makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home, their answers show an understanding of the concerns adult family members are facing in terms of financial challenges and access to essential resources and services.

Figure 31. What makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by children and young people)

**What makes adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by children and young people)**

*not having a job  
not having a place to live  
no money  
not having food  
no money  
no house  
no food  
no electricity  
the food and health  
that they get sick  
lack of employment  
not having a house  
not having a stable job  
not having an income  
bad employment  
nothing to eat  
low wages  
worry if a family member gets sick  
lack of money to buy food*

There is a clear correlation between answers of children, young people, and those of adult family members in relation to the issues of poverty (Figure 32).

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Figure 32. What makes families feel worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by adult family members)

**What makes families worried or unhappy when they are at home? (as answered by adult family members)**

*poor health*  
*lack of medical assistance*  
*lack of stable finances*  
*not having good medical attention*  
*bad housing conditions*  
*not having local access to food that is affordable*  
*not having enough money*  
*lack of jobs and employment opportunities*  
*lack of knowledge and education*  
*poor health*  
*no money*  
*families at least need to be able to feed their children*  
*lack of electricity, water and a house*  
*lack of economic investment in the local area*  
*not being able to send children to school because it is too far*  
*children begging*  
*economic dependence [on men]*  
*poverty*

As indicated in Figure 33, analysis of all the answers provided by children, young people, and adult family members in relation to lack of resources and services, repeatedly used the word 'lack'.

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Figure 33. What makes children, young people and adult family members unhappy or worried (as answered by children, young people and adult family members)



An overall assessment of information gathered during workshops and interviewees highlights concerns about “*lack*” of money compounded by poor, or no, access to both basic and specialist services. Locally available and affordable health services was a particular concern discussed by adult family members in the research workshops. The lack of basic needs such as adequate housing, water, and electricity were also highlighted. Sufficient food is an issue with some hoping for reductions in the cost of basic commodities. Participants would like to see both the quality and improved access to locally available education services for children and adults. Better training and employment opportunities were also mentioned. The lack of specialist support for families in which a member has a disability was raised. Public transportation is important when trying to reach other services such as health care and schools. Access to available and safe transportation is not reaching all communities, especially those in more remote areas.

A disparity was noted in the answers given in workshops between those living in urban and rural settings. More emphasis on lack of basic services and especially access to local schools and health centres, clean water and electricity was emphasised by participants in rural areas. In urban areas the general cost of living was perhaps more of an issue. In rural areas, reaching services may require travelling long distances and as mentioned above, poor public transport is sometimes unavailable and generally considered costly and unsafe. This particularly poses difficulties for people with disabilities.

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A survey undertaken by SOS Children's Villages El Salvador in 2021<sup>264</sup>, considered the socio-economic situation of families that are recipients of SOS family strengthening and alternative care services. Only 36% of respondents said they had access to food whilst 56% had difficulty in obtaining it, and 5% had no access. It is noted that one of the services SOS provides is distribution of food packages which could have influenced the findings. Furthermore, although 83% of families had some form of employment, 64% faced some economic instability due to working in the informal sector, and 17% of families had no sustainable income.<sup>265</sup>

Participants in our adult family workshops indicated access to such services are not as widely available as we have seen reported in some government documents. Participants see free health care, good education, and provision of electricity and clean water as a government responsibility and expect more to be done to improve the situation of families in El Salvador. There is a general feeling that, government is failing families by not providing the necessary social protection and other assistance that would help alleviate the stresses of everyday living and mitigate circumstances that can lead to the separation of children from their parents.

What is important to note is the discussion amongst participants in the workshops for young people and for adult family members that suggest adults want to overcome financial difficulties and take care of their family through their own efforts, as for example, through better employment opportunities.

Further issues identified as contributing to vulnerability of family unity and breakdown include responses to economic hardship. For example, parents who leave children behind when migrating for work, either within the country or across borders. In this respect, when asked why children were placed in alternative care some interviewees referred to migration.

*"Migration for work...usually one of the parents but could be either the father or the mother."*

*"Poverty and this can cause migration and children are left alone so end up in care."*

*"Migration is causing separation. "*

*"Most of the prevention programmes for migration are focused on trying to improve the bonds with parents, with the community, where they live so not to be enticed to migrate."*

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<sup>264</sup> SOS Children's Villages El Salvador 2021

<sup>265</sup> *ibid.*



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Data published in a 2021 Government household survey<sup>266</sup> recorded 8,056 children having been left by both parents due to migration (Table 9). The United Nations<sup>267</sup>, reported the total number of people who had left El Salvador by mid-2020, had reached 1.6 million. Interviewees also mentioned the way gang violence has forced *"families to migrate and the child gets left behind. There are a lot of cases."*

Table 9. Population of 0-17 year olds living without one or both parents according to reason and relative who abandoned them 2021)

Reason	Parent who abandoned	Number	Percentage
Absence by abandonment	Total	502,700	100
	Father	398,537	79.3
	Mother	38,354	7.6
	Both	65,809	13.1
Absence due to migration	Total	70,569	100
	Father	47,111	66.8
	Mother	15,402	21.8
	Both	8,056	11.4
Death	Total	67,497	100
	Father	54,688	81.0
	Mother	9,218	13.7
	Both	3,591	5.3

(Source: Government of El Salvador Household Survey 2021)

## 10. The correlation between poverty, family breakdown, and placement in alternative care

Our research suggests children are at risk of placement in alternative care as a result of family dysfunction and breakdown. As well as violence, issues related to poverty are a contributing factor to this situation. Children, young people, adult family members, and all interviewees, wrote and spoke about lack of financial resources and support services as a major challenge negatively impacting family life and direct links were made by interviewees between the stress caused by poverty, lack of access to necessary support services, and the manifestation of family breakdown and violence in the home. Situations that can ultimately result in child-parents separation and placement in alternative care.

<sup>266</sup> Government of El Salvador 2021

<sup>267</sup> Please see: [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock\\_abs\\_&t=2020&cm49=222](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&cm49=222)

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*"Abuse is abuse. However, poverty can cause stress, and this can raise risk of abuse. Most of the children in the residential centre are from poor families."*

*"The parents are under stress because of lack of employment and lack of food and the father tends to get violent with the wife and the mother with the children and the children get used to violence around them."*

*"It does play a role in dysfunctional families. Poverty is not a reason for separation, but it does impact families. Poverty plays a role in education because they cannot get the child to the school or provide school materials. They often do not have money to get the children to the hospital, so they have to apply herbs they find around. So, the children are exposed by this. Poverty reflects on the environment, so they live in. Places that are dirty, and that affects children's health development. Parents have a lot of stress because they don't have money. Poverty is not the reason but impacts and causes the other reasons [for placement in alternative care]."*

*"Poverty is also a significant problem related to problems in the family."*

*"Parents have a lot of stress because they don't have money. Poverty is not the reason but impacts and causes the other reasons."*

A significant number of interviewees believe stress, caused by different factors including struggling with everyday living and survival, as well as experiencing and witnessing violence, is both the result of and/or factors contributing to poor mental health. In this respect, many interviewees highlighted the need for greater, and improved, access for families to psychosocial and psychological services.

*"The services that should be available first and foremost as a priority given in a massive way to everyone is psychological help. For parents, families, and children"*

*"There are lots of mental health issues. There is chronic stress..."*

*"Most important is emotional therapy centres for parents – when they lose faith in themselves, they leave the ability to care for their children – they need centres to offer them orientation and help them overcome emotional problems."*

A survey undertaken by SOS Children's Villages El Salvador in 2021<sup>268</sup>, involving recipients of SOS Children's Villages family strengthening and alternative care services found poor mental health to be a major factor in the lives of families. A total of 89% of respondents indicated they had emotional or

<sup>268</sup> SOS Children's Villages El Salvador 2021

mental health concerns. This survey took place immediately following the worst period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the report does attribute some signs of stress to that context.

Interviewees for our study were also asked about any direct correlation between the socio-economic backgrounds and placement in alternative care in El Salvador. Everyone who answered this question said they think the majority of children in care come from poor households whilst acknowledging separation can also occur in richer families.

*"Violence happens in both rich and poor families."*

*"Perhaps the person even has a house, two cars and a good job but they don't take care of their children...and we have to react.... "There is the case of families who do have economic stability but still do want their children."*

It is recognised that many people living in poverty do love their children and are doing their best to care for and protect them. Most certainly parents and other caregivers attending the adult family workshops indicated how desperate they feel when they cannot always take care of their children as they would wish. Some family members will fight for their family and feel they must keep the family together regardless.

Interviewees also suggested the stress of coping with everyday life and being able to take care of the family is resulting in anger and frustration, which in turn, is contributing to breakdown of partnerships/marriages and divorce/separation.

### **Divorce/separation and re-marriage/new partnerships**

Family breakdown, separation or absence of a parent has created a significant number of single-headed household in El Salvador, the vast majority of which, are female-headed. In 2022, Navarro-Mantos et al.<sup>269</sup> found 31.1% of Salvadorian households to be female-headed and also 'generally single parent.' Some believe there *"are a lot of single and teenager mothers without a spouse or partner. There are many women who have different children to different men. Many women have children when they are teenagers."*

Discussion during our research workshops highlighted the struggle single-headed households encounter, especially those led by women, and the stress caused by having to provide for and bring up children alone. Female-headed households in particular, face economic challenges, have restricted employment opportunities, and lack access to childcare.

*"...there is a need for child care."*

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<sup>269</sup> Navarro-Mantas et al. 2022

Seventy-four percent of the female-headed households identified in a report published in 2022, were facing at least three factors of greater vulnerability: 'overcrowding, lack of access to drinking water, or informal employment.'<sup>270</sup>

## 11. Decision makers

We believe the decision to place a child in alternative care is particularly influenced by two factors: the circumstances they are living in, and the decision-making of those with responsibility for child safeguarding judgements. Therefore, our research framework included a focus on decision makers, and factors influencing their decisions on safeguarding and determining whether or not to place a child in alternative care.

Most especially we considered decision-making within the context of a national child protection system. To this end, we thought about the way decision-making is guided by a normative framework containing national legislation, policy, and statutory guidance. We recognised how the functioning of child protection services, as well resources with which to undertake responsibilities to children and families, can impact the work of decision makers. In addition, consideration has been given to the capacity of professionals as influenced by their knowledge, understanding, training and experience, as well as the 'gatekeeping' mechanisms and child protection case management, including use of child and family assessments. Availability of data on child protection and alternative care that could help the knowledge and understanding of professionals was also reviewed.

Those holding responsibility for gatekeeping decisions i.e., whether a child can safely remain in parental care, whether it is in the best interest to temporarily remove them, and when it is possible for care-experienced children to return to their parents, is a highly responsible role. Key decision makers in El Salvador include members of the Junta de Protección, police, court social workers, and judiciary.

The information contained in this chapter has been informed by a brief desk review and interviews with professionals working within the child protection system. It is our understanding that improved legislation and policies for child protection, family strengthening, and gatekeeping have, and continue to be developed in El Salvador. However, as much of the legislation and policy has only just been issued, it was not possible to evaluate the efficacy of their implementation. In addition, gaps have been identified in the ability of the child protection workforce along with other professions involved to respond to and support children at risk and their families. This includes insufficient numbers of staff that comprise the Junta de Protección, and the lack of resources necessary for these teams, and other professionals, to effectively undertake their roles and responsibilities. High case numbers are resulting in what some believe to be incomplete assessments of children and families situations and

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<sup>270</sup> *ibid.*

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as a result, incorrect decisions by which unnecessary separation of children from parental care are actioned.

### 11.1. A normative framework for child protection

In line with the UNCRC, a national normative framework, consisting of laws, bylaws and regulations, policies, and statutory guidance, should guarantee children's right to protection from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It should reinforce the primary responsibility of parents for the care and protection of children, obligate the State to support families in this endeavour, and allow for intervention if, and when, necessary to care for and protect a child. A normative framework should provide for the necessary socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions in which children and families can thrive. It also offers a mandate for decision-making and, in this regard, guides professionals in their roles and responsibilities toward children and families as well as to when, and how, they should take certain decisions.

Our review of the normative framework in EL Salvador suggests the development of a body of legislation and policy that reflects a commitment to safeguarding child rights. New child protection legislation, with accompanying policy, was adopted early 2023 just before the commencement of our research. As a result, it has only been possible to assess the written content of the law and accompanying policy, not its application. Reading of the law reveals a comprehensive child rights focus and explanation as to roles and responsibilities of those tasked with its implementation. It is noted that prohibition of corporal punishment in the home has been omitted, but overall, efforts have been made to reflect content of the UNCRC and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. If the law is sufficiently resourced, and as planned, implemented through a multi-sectoral approach, it is hoped 'gatekeeping' practices and prevention of unnecessary separation of children from parental care in El Salvador will be strengthened.

Upon signing or ratifying a UN convention or treaty, as with any other State, El Salvador is mandated to reflect the content in national law. Table 10 contains a number of international conventions and treaties that the Government of El Salvador has signed, ratified, or agreed accession, and are relevant to the protection of children.

Table 10. International Treaties and Conventions ratified by the Government of El Salvador

Treaties and Conventions	Signature	Ratification	Accession
Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons	28 September 1954		
Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery	07 September 1956		

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International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	21 September 1967	30 November 1979	
Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	21 September 1967	06 June 1995	
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	14 November 1980	19 August 1981	
Convention on the Rights of the Child	26 January 1990	10 July 1990	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts	18 September 2000	18 April 2002	
United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime	14 December 2000	18 March 2004	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women	04 April 2001		
Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime Preamble, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime	15 August 2002	18 March 2004	
Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime	15 August 2002	18 Mar 2004	
Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	13 September 2002	14 March 2003	
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	13 September 2002	14 March 2003	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography	13 September 2002	17 May 2004	
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	30 March 2007	14 December 2007	
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination			30 November 1979
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment			17 June 1996
Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour		12 October 2000	
Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour		15 June 1995	
Abolition of Forced Labour Convention		18 November 1958	
Convention relating to the Status of Refugees			28 April 1983
Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees			28 April 1983



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A rapid review of some elements of national legislation in El Salvador, as signified above, identified laws and policies that consider the rights of children. Table 11 illustrates some of the content of the normative framework that particularly affords children protection and care. This list was informed by, and adapted from, a 2021 report<sup>271</sup> on children in alternative care in El Salvador.

*Table 11. A national normative framework for child protection and alternative care in El Salvador*

National Normative Framework	Date
Labour Code	1972
The Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador	1983
Health Code	1988
Law of the Attorney for the Defence of the Rights Humans	1992
Family Procedure Code	1993
Procedure of the Family Code	1994
Juvenile Penal Law	1994
Law Against Domestic Violence	1996
Education Law	1996
Law of the Attorney General's Office of the Republic	2006
Organic Law of the Attorney General's Office General of the Republic (2008)	2008
Special Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (LEPIN)	2009
Creation of a Specialized Chamber and Specialized Courts of the Childhood and Adolescence	2010
Internal Operating Regulations of the Junta de Protección	2011
Law of Equality, Equity and Eradication of Discrimination against Women	2011
Comprehensive Special Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women	2011
Development and Social Protection Law	2014
Special Adoption Law	2016
Mental Health Law	2017
Law on Development and Social Protection (Ley de Desarrollo y Protección Social)	2017
Plan for Development, Protection and Social Inclusion 2017 – 2027	2017
Special Law on Foreign Migration	2019
Grow Up Together' Policy 2020-2030	2020
Grow Up Together Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence (Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia)	2023

Legislation impacting the protection of children's rights, and governance and implementation of the child protection system in El Salvador has notably been subject to significant changes in recent years.

<sup>271</sup> Consulting Team 2021

Below is a short precis of just some of the laws and policies that are particularly relevant to child safeguarding.

### **Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia (2023)**

A new and pivotal child rights law, 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia' (Grow up Together for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Children and Adolescents) came into force in El Salvador in January 2023. This law supersedes the previous child protection law, LEPINA (2010) and aims to guarantee the full enjoyment of all rights for all children. As this is a very new law issued in the same month as the field research, it has not been possible to assess the effectiveness with which it is being practically implemented.

A reading of the law suggests it is comprehensive and overall, adheres to the content of the UN Guidelines in relation to prevention of separation and alternative care<sup>272</sup>. The law includes provisions for the right to protection and requires all efforts to be made to prevent separation of a child from their parents. Poverty should never be the sole reason to separate children from parental care and, if separation is necessary, placement in the extended family is the preferred option, if safe to do so. When this is not possible, the next consideration should be foster care i.e., placement in a family that is not related to the child. According to the law, placement in residential care should only be used if all efforts to use other care settings have been exhausted. The law also lays out emergency protection procedures as well as the responsibility of specialised Judges who practice in special courts for children and adolescents. Children should be provided the opportunity to be listened to and their opinions taken into account when decisions are being made about their care.

Article 8 of the law considers the importance of setting aside appropriate funds for the execution of the law. It is understood the Government will use this Article to lock in, and ring fence, monies specifically set aside for the national child protection system. This means those funds cannot, under any circumstances, be used for other purposes. An additional aim is to require different ministries to work together in a multi-disciplinary manner by allocating funds that must be jointly utilised.

This new law requires the protection and well-being of children to be achieved through the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence. This system is described as a coordinated and articulated set of bodies, entities, or institutions, public and private, with a shared aim to guarantee the rights of all children.<sup>273</sup>

A virtual training platform has been developed providing interpretation of, and guidance on, implementation of the law. Anyone working in a public institution is expected to complete the course.

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<sup>272</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 24 February 2010, A/RES/64/142, Please see: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c3acd162.html>

<sup>273</sup> Government of El Salvador 2003b

There is an expectation that 207,000 personnel including staff of Junta de Protección, social workers in the Specialized Courts for Children and Adolescents, General Attorneys and prosecutors, lawyers, teachers, health workers, policy makers, and those working in an administrative capacity, will complete the course. It is understood judges had already received training at the time of our research in January 2023.

### **Law on Development and Social Protection (Ley de Desarrollo y Protección Social 2017 - 2027)**

Current government legislation and policy includes the 'Law on Development and Social Protection' (Ley de Desarrollo y Protección Social 2017). This law recognises that, in line with the Constitution<sup>274</sup>, the State should undertake actions that achieve, justice, legal security and the common good of all people and uphold an obligation that ensures their enjoyment of freedom, health, culture, economic well-being, and access to social justice. The law is accompanied by a Plan for Development, Protection and Social Inclusion 2017 - 2027. This provides a framework that defines how social programmes should be implemented.<sup>275</sup> As will be noted throughout this report, access to social support programmes and services can be pivotal in prevention of child-family separation.

### **'Grow Up Together' (2020-2030)**

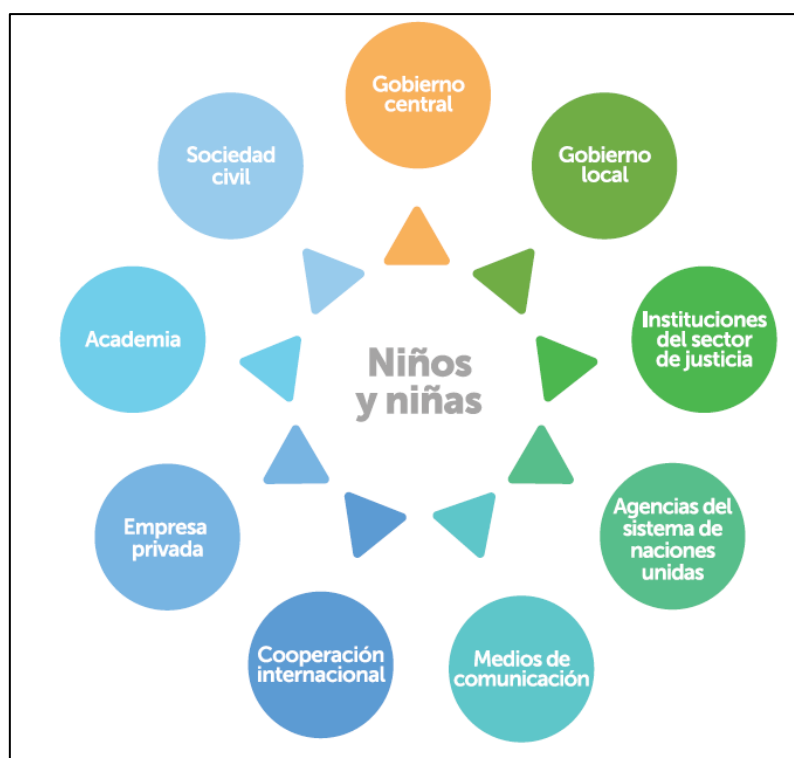
The new child rights law, 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia' is complimented by the Government strategic policy, 'Grow Up Together' (2020-2030). This policy has a stated aim of promoting development and opportunities for children in early childhood (up to the age of 8 years). 'Grow Up Together' guarantees the necessary conditions for care, stimulation, education, health, nutrition, and protection. Furthermore, as with the new child rights law, the policy promotes a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach (Figure 34).

*Figure 34. A multi-sectoral approach to the delivery of policy for early childhood development 'Lets Grow Together'*

<sup>274</sup> For a Spanish and English copy of the Constitution of El Salvador please see: <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/3769>

<sup>275</sup> Consulting Team 2021

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(Source: Crecer Juntos: Política Nacional de Apoyo al Desarrollo Infantil Temprano)<sup>276</sup>

### 11.2. Structures for child protection system delivery, co-ordination, and oversight

#### The National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence

The 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia' requires the protection and well-being of children to be achieved through the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence. This system has been described as a coordinated and articulated set of bodies, entities or institutions, public and private, with a shared aim to guarantee the rights of all children.<sup>277</sup> In recognition of the differing and inter-related issues that can impact a child or young person's life, a multi-sectoral approach to implementation is laid down in the law requiring the following bodies to work together as guarantor's of the child protection system:

- Consejo Nacional de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia
- Grow Together Institute (for early childhood)
- Ministry of Health.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

<sup>276</sup> Please see: [https://crecerjuntos.gob.sv/dist/documents/POLITICA\\_CRECEER\\_JUNTOS\\_2020-2030.pdf](https://crecerjuntos.gob.sv/dist/documents/POLITICA_CRECEER_JUNTOS_2020-2030.pdf)

<sup>277</sup> Government of El Salvador 2003b

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- Ministry of Tax authorities.
- Ministry of Governorate and Territorial Development
- Ministry of Employment and Social Security
- Ministry of Justice and Public Security
- Local Committees on the Rights of the Child and Adolescents (municipal administrative bodies responsible for developing local policies and plans that guarantee the rights of children and adolescents and implementation of programmes).
- Defenders of Childhood and Adolescence (organizations and institutions at a community level)
- Judiciary
- Attorney General of the Republic.
- Attorney for the Defence Human Rights
- Prosecutor General of the Republic.
- Network of Child and Adolescent care organizations

Through this coordinated approach, actions are to be taken to achieve the following aims:

- Analysis of the situation of children and adolescents regarding the compliance with your rights.
- A framework of action to develop and undertaken planning and implementation to be undertaken within different levels of government authorities, including expectations of each municipality
- Systems that ensure positive changes in the target population.
- Mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Sources of financing.
- Timeframes

In relation to decision-making, the function of this body, and the policy it develops, will guide the work of front-line decision makers as well as influence their ability to work in the best interests of children.

### **Consejo Nacional de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia**

Consejo Nacional de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia <sup>278</sup> is the governmental body with specific responsibilities for the oversight of the national child protection system. This body now fuses the functions of a number of previous institutions including the National Council for Children and Adolescents (CONNA) and the Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA). It includes responsibility for formulation and delivery of policies and programmes that support and strengthen families as the natural protective environment in which a child should grow. It also has management responsibility for the Juntas de Protección. These are child protection boards

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<sup>278</sup> Please see: <https://www.conapina.gob.sv/>

that play a key role in child protection case management. In relation to decision-making, the policies and programmes that are developed under this body's management, coordination, and oversight, will directly influence and guide the work of front-line decision makers as well as impacting their ability to work for the best interests of children.

### **Juntas de Protección (Child Protection Boards)**

Juntas de Protección (child protection boards) are structures within the child protection system that play a key role in the decision-making process for children and families. A board comprise a multi-disciplinary team of a social worker, psychologist, and lawyer. The 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia' outlines the roles and responsibilities of the boards to include the receipt and response to reports of suspected child protection violations, undertaking of child and family assessments, and oversight of the process that will either lead to closure of a case, support for families, or recommendations for protection measures including placement of a child in alternative care. The law further lists the differing support measures the boards can consider including:

- The inclusion of the child and their family in joint or separate support programmes
- Orders requiring children to attend school
- Orders of medical, psychological, or psychiatric treatment for the child, a mother or father, or anyone else with guardianship of the child
- Removal of a child from any work they may be engaged in
- The inclusion of the offender in a specialized programme.
- The referral of family members or a child's guardians to a family support programme.

A report issued in 2021<sup>279</sup> provides details of child protection cases that were received by the Juntas de Protección between 2016 and 2019. As seen in Figure 35, the number of cases increased from 8,243 in 2016 to 10,485 in 2019. No explanation was offered in the report as to possible reasons for this increase.

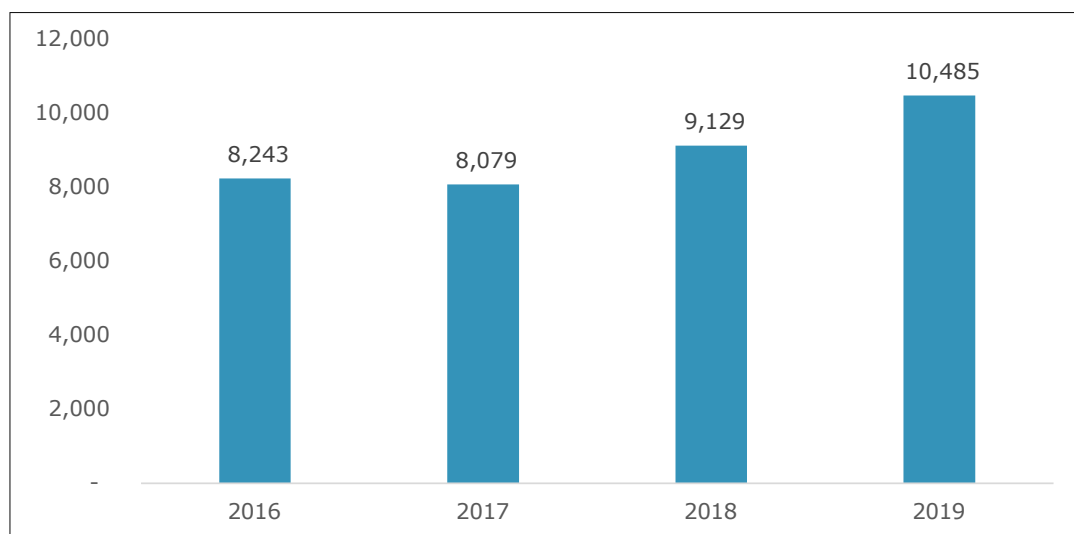
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<sup>279</sup> Consulting Team 2021



## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

Figure 35. Number of child protection cases received by the Juntas de Protección 2016-2019



(Source: Adapted from Consulting Team 2021)

### Provision of alternative care

The provision of alternative care is a component of the national child protection system. The availability and functioning of alternative care can have a pronounced impact on decision makers as for example, the ease of access to, and availability of, care placements, that might influence a child protection worker's decision whether or not to use alternative care as an option for a child.

Table 12 illustrates the forms of alternative care being used in El Salvador in 2019, the number of children in alternative care that year, and the reasons for their placement.<sup>280</sup> The data suggests that of a total 1,367 children in alternative care, the majority were there for reasons of 'personal care and protection' (391) and abandonment (335). These terms are not defined in the report<sup>281</sup> from which this data was extracted.

<sup>280</sup> Consulting Team 2021

<sup>281</sup> *ibid.*

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Table 12. Children and adolescents in alternative care by reason of placement, 2019

Categories	Reception centres	Family-like care	Emergency placement	Kinship care	Support and coordination measures <sup>282</sup>	TOTAL
Personal care and protection <sup>283</sup>	215	41	123	5	7	391
Abandonment	177	108	24	21	5	335
Illegal migration	23	2	32	0	4	61
Negligence or carelessness	60	30	6	4	1	101
Physical maltreatment	42	20	18	0	25	105
Sexual abuse	30	10	11	0	19	70
In a street situation	25	1	5	0	0	31
Problems between family and the child	13	0	0	1	0	14
Other sexual assault	8	7	2	0	14	31
Psychological maltreatment	2	6	3	0	20	31
Child of adolescent mother	23	3	1	0	0	27
Orphanhood	8	5	1	0	0	14
Other reasons	121	6	19	0	10	156
Total	747	239	245	31	105	1367

(Source: Adapted from Consulting Team 2021)

In 2019, there were more children (842) in alternative care aged 12 years and over than 0 to 11-year-olds (535) (Table 13).<sup>284</sup> Most were being cared for in reception centres (residential care settings) with very few in family-like and kinship care. The vast majority of children were in care settings in the central region of El Salvador.

<sup>282</sup> According to one informant, Under the new child protection law support and coordination measures focus on guaranteeing the rights of the child, maintaining access to education, health, etc. either with their family or when separated from them. They are administrative decisions decreed by the competent authorities, within the framework of the Administrative Process for the Restitution of Rights, to guarantee and restore the exercise of the rights of children and adolescents.

<sup>283</sup> According to one informant, personal care and protection refers to social care, accommodation, education, social protection and inclusion, food security, physical health, sustenance, and emotional well-being.

<sup>284</sup> Consulting Team 2021

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Table 13. Children and adolescents in alternative care by age and geographical location, 2019

	Reception centres	Family-like care	Support and coordination measures	Emergency placement	Kinship care
Age Group					
0 - 2 years	83	3	1	22	0
3 - 5 years	44	49	9	19	0
6 - 8 years	52	36	9	18	1
9 - 11 years	79	48	20	37	5
12 - 14 years	152	37	22	64	10
15 - 17 years	222	48	36	85	13
18 years plus	115	18	8	0	2
Geographic zone					
Western	31	48	0	116	3
Central / paracentral	580	174	28	94	20
East	136	17	77	35	8
Total	747	239	105	245	31

(Source: Adapted from Consulting Team 2021)

Efforts to bring about deinstitutionalisation in El Salvador in the form of closure of residential institutions and reduction of the numbers of children in care has been recognised by some authors.

<sup>285</sup> One interviewee also spoke about a previous "wave of deinstitutionalisation of children. We used to have 11,000 children and now we are around 700. The problem is how it was done. They were just returned to their family without working with the family to resolve the original problem that led to the institutionalisation."

However, we have been unable to confirm data that would confirm any reductions in the number of children in institutional care in El Salvador over recent years.

In terms of reunification, our research indicates very few children being returned to parental or extended family once placed in care. One alternative care provider said they do make efforts to reunite children with their families, but this is only a small number of cases each year and approximately 25% of these children return to the institution. Although reunification was not a principal topic of this research, information gathered during the fieldwork suggests many care providers are not focussing on family reunification due to the neglect of relevant authorities and

<sup>285</sup> Sprenkels et al. undated

alternative care providers to instigate and invest in this process. This includes inability, or lack of willingness, to address the initial concerns that led to the child's placement. It is recognised that reintegration is a difficult process that requires sufficient time and resources as well as well-trained staff to facilitate such a reunion.

Adoption was not a focus of this study, but it is of noted concern that, in the absence of any consolidated system of family reunification, children in care can be put forward for adoption after only 6 months after their placement. We have been advised that once adoption procedures have started however, the entire process can take a very long time. Babies and young children are the most likely to be adopted.

### 11.3. Capacity of decision makers and use of child protection case management

Gatekeeping procedures that prevent unnecessary child-parents separation are an essential component of a national child protection system. In this regard, child protection case management guides and facilitates decision-making that is in the best interests of each child and in meeting their individual needs, circumstances and wishes.<sup>286</sup> International guidance also highlights the importance of decision makers from all responsible bodies and organizations sharing the same gatekeeping tools and processes that include the use of comprehensive child and family assessments and the setting of risk thresholds in relation to child safeguarding to inform any decision-making processes<sup>287</sup>.

The issue of 'gatekeeping'<sup>288</sup> in EL Salvador, and how it should be implemented was very topical at the time of our research in early 2023, due to the launch of the new Child rights law, 'Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia'. As described earlier in this report, the law contains a specific section on the Comprehensive National System of Protection of Early Childhood, Children and Adolescence. Principles to be upheld by this system include a priority of keeping children with their parents and/or extended family when safe to do so. The law not only lays down articles that outline the rights of children in this respect, but also provides some detail as to actions to be taken. These actions include the ways in which those with concerns about children can decide to report cases of actual or suspected violations in line with the duty of any concerned person to alert the authorities and use of child protection case management tools. A number of interviewees said the development of child protection case management procedures and tools was ongoing.

Information provided by interviewees suggests that in general, most professionals have a good understanding of 'gatekeeping' as it relates to the importance of preventing unnecessary child- rather than use of other forms of alternative care.

<sup>286</sup> Cantwell et al. 2012; Csaky and Gale 2015

<sup>287</sup> Cantwell et al. 2012

<sup>288</sup> Csaky & Gale 2015

*"Right now, we have a new law. This has an order so the first is to try and keep children with family. If not possible we have to choose to take the children to a centre of protection."*

This understanding on prevention of family separation may in part be due to the fact that at the time of this research, all relevant government officials had been mandated to take a new online course on the new child rights law.

### Reporting children for whom there is a protection concern

The very first people responsible for making decisions about the welfare and protection of children are those who decide whether or not to report a concern about a child either to state authorities or an NGO. Interviewees suggested protection concerns are usually reported to police and Junta de Protección, by an array of people including family members, neighbours, health workers, and teachers amongst others. However, they pointed to a reluctance to report. This is illustrated in examples provided by interviewees when they spoke of teachers who, although suspecting children are being subject to violence at home, are reluctant to report for fear of reprisal from the family, and especially if there is a gang member in the household. It is understood there is a hotline number 199 that children and others can call if they have a concern.<sup>289</sup>

### Child Protection Case Management and the role of social workers and other members of the Junta de Protección

Many interviewees believe there is generally a good understanding by professionals that informed decision-making should be reached through the use of child protection assessments.

*"The junta of protection is three people, social worker, psychologist, and lawyer. Making decisions they see neighbours or go to the local store or two or three houses or knock on the door of neighbours and ask about do you know if there are children in there, do you know about them, what is their age, do you know if they study or work, did you see or hear anything. So, the assessment is the information that is used to make the decision."*

However, when asked about assessments and decision-making, there are mixed perceptions regarding efficacy of the administrative and judicial protection decisions being made. This includes an ability to apply a good standard of decision-making process by members of the Junta de Protección, court social workers, and the judiciary. Some believe most people are working to the best of their ability, especially members of the Junta de Protección, whilst others see room for improvement.

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<sup>289</sup> Please see:

<https://www.conapina.gob.sv/servicios/denuncias/#:~:text=Llamando%20a%20la%20L%C3%ADnea%20de,a.%20m.%20a%2012%3A00%20p.%20m>

## Key Drivers Contributing to Child-parents Separation El Salvador

*"The junta de de protección make the first administrative decision, the social and psychological assessment. They are a good team to take the decision."*

*"Social workers do just part of the job not everything. The Junta de protection make the first administrative decision, the social and psychological assessment. They are a good team to take the decision."*

*"There are many cases that come to the judge that should not come to them. There are a lot of things that can be taken care of at the administrative level, and they should not come to the judge. There is a lot of assessment that should have been taken place so they would not have come to the judge."*

*"There is a lack of assessment looking for options to take before taking the child out of the family."*

*"The junta board of protection don't always make the correct decision."*

One interviewee working for an organization providing alternative care said sometimes, because they think a social worker has, *"not done the proper assessment, they...do some research [and] they find that the family could have taken the children."* Another interviewee, when asked whether assessments and resultant decisions were always the right ones, they answered, *"No, not always. I have cases when I [would have] recommended not to take the children away from the families."*

It is recognised those making initial alternative care placement decisions are impacted by the challenging circumstances they are working under. There is a concern amongst most interviewees that failures in decision-making should not always be attributed to the ability or dedication of individuals themselves, but to the system they are working in. This includes a serious deficit in the number of personnel, high workloads, lack of time to dedicate to assessments and case management, burn out, and restricted services that families can be referred to.

*"This situation is because lack of human resources. Because they are specialists in the area, but they are overworked most of the time. They have to do assessments as fast as they can, and they do not go through the full case. They have to work with hundreds of cases. So, if there was more human resources, they would have the time to process and take more careful decisions."*

*"The junta is made of three persons – social workers, psychologist and lawyer. As far as I know they are constantly trained. Because they have a lot of work it is hard to keep them in training."*



*So, the junta cannot close their doors, they have to keep giving a service, so there is not a lot of time to give them training. The work life balance is already broken and if they need to take more training this also breaks them. Their induction is really fast in general, so they are thrown in the deep end."*

*"This is because the junta team are not enough people. There are way too many cases for so few people. It is a very hard job. There is secondary trauma amongst the junta staff and burn out. They are trained but it is the number of people being involved e.g., three people attending 800 cases. They do not receive enough training that would give them the correct professional qualifications to do the job."*

*Last year they had almost 1,000 cases but they are just three who take the decisions and the law there is a social worker, psychologist, and lawyer. And no more so we always need help. So, they have to prioritise the cases that are emergencies and react to those".*

There are for example, only 16 Juntas de Protección<sup>290</sup> supported by auxiliary social work and administrative staff in El Salvador, including only one Junta for the entire conurbation of San Salvador. Through recent recruitment of additional temporary staff, the Government has made attempts to clear a backlog of cases that accumulated over the years but were never followed through. However, according to one interviewee, some of these cases have been difficult to follow up and, if reported many years ago, the child has now grown into an adult. We were told that the Government now has plans to create more child protection worker positions and to increase ability to use child protection case management tools including application of child protection assessments.

### Role of the judiciary

Judges are important decision makers in El Salvador as they take the final legal decision to place a child in alternative care. We collected very little information from interviewees in reference to competency of the judiciary and good decision-making. One interviewee said they think judges rely heavily on the assessments of the Junta de Protección.

*"The junta make the recommendations and the judge can say yes go with the decisions. The judge can ask for additional assessment – and can make recommendations to refer to other services and can ask that other organizations give information. But the judge cannot order something for the child it has to be the Junta, but the judge can order the board to do something. "*

If not satisfied with reports provided by the Junta de Protección, it is understood judges can and do order further investigation. Interviewees seemed to be slightly confused regarding decisions and

<sup>290</sup> International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children 2023

actions related to finding and offering support services for families and whether this is the responsibility of the judge or the mandate of the Junta de Protección. In addition, a few interviewees think decision-making is impacted by the lack of support services to which a judge can refer families, especially those that might ensure more children could remain in parental care. Interviewees offered no information about the role of social workers who work alongside the judiciary in the Specialized Court for Children and Adolescents except to acknowledge they do have a role. This might suggest they do not see them as relevant decision makers.

In the new child rights law, according to their age and maturity, children have the right to participate in, and express their opinion, during all judicial and administrative procedures in which decisions will directly affect their lives (Articles 81, 263 and 268). This can be done with support or through representation. Our research collected very little information about children's participation in decision-making. However, one concern that was raised is children being "re-victimised" because of the way they are sometimes questioned during court proceedings concerning their care.

### Role of the police

As with the role of the judiciary, very little information was provided by interviewees when asked about the role of police and children at risk apart from their involvement in emergency situations.

*"Also, civil police are part of the system, and the police can bring the child straight to the residential centre without the judge if an emergency."*

*"... so, we have some cases that for example that the girl were beaten by aunts because of abandonment, so they tell the police and they start the process."*

*"...sometimes we bring children in for neglect because sometimes late at night maybe 12 or 1.00 a.m. the police are working in the streets, and they find a child who is in need so they call the Junta and tell them of the situation."*

### The role of UN and non-governmental agencies

Staff of UN bodies and NGOs are decision makers in the sense of the advocacy programmes they develop, and the advice and support they provide to government bodies, as well as the choice of support services they decide to offer children, young people, and families. During our interviews and workshops, we noted how the role of NGOs as service providers seems to be well recognised and appreciated. In this way, the contribution of NGOs in addressing some of the gaps in service provision is recognised as being significant. UN bodies and national and international NGOs in El Salvador also contribute through provision of training and capacity building for both their own staff as well as those working in government services. Furthermore, the UN and NGOs are instrumental in advising and working with the government on the development of legislation, policy and strategic planning. This is

complemented with work to raise awareness of children's rights and to advocate with and on their behalf for positive change.

NGOs are providers of different family strengthening and support programmes which include both direct resource provision and capacity building elements. For example, different programmes are offering financial assistance, health care and material provision such as food and clothing. Programmes on positive parenting and family guidance services are also being made available. Issues of employability and income generation are also addressed. It was not possible in the time we dedicated to fieldwork to assess the impact of these programmes. We suggest this might be the focus of an additional study.

However, references were made to the need for a significant increase in such support across the country. Interviewees identified elements of family support that would be of further benefit included an urgent need for crèche/day care provision for young children, and after school clubs, so that women can go out to work. Increased support in terms of employability would be welcomed through training and skills enhancement programmes as well as work placement schemes. Counselling and psychological/psychosocial services were identified as a much-needed service to be integrated into family support programmes.

Faith-based organizations have, and continue to play, an important role in society in El Salvador. Traditionally, support offered to communities has been provided in the form of spiritual as well as material help. Faith based organizations are also providers of alternative care institutions. Some faith-based organizations and individuals representing the church, are recognised for the role they played during the civil war, and now in response to gang violence, both mediating peace and offering support to effected communities.<sup>291</sup> However, interviewees expressed some criticism of the "church" due to failure in offering "*sufficient support for families in need*" whilst enforcing family values that perpetuate the sanctity of marriage even in the face of unsurmountable family breakdown and the presence of violence.

Non-governmental organizations are also significant providers of alternative care. It has not been possible to ascertain the degree to which some care providers might encourage the placement of children in their facilities for the prime reason of financial gain. One interviewee did refer to a number of organizations that "*are against deinstitutionalisation. The focus is to keep the children because it is a business. They want to keep their jobs. It is self-interest...It is important to change the model.*"

Furthermore, whilst families are experiencing situations of multi-deprivation, there is a view that inter-sectoral approaches to providing support should be improved. A disconnect and lack of coordination between service providers is regarded as impacting families who have to spend time and effort going

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<sup>291</sup> Palm & Colombo 2019; van de Borgh 2021

between providers to seek the assistance they need. In addition, said one interviewee, even *“if services, especially specialist services, do exist, it is hard for some families to find out about services that are available. They don’t know what services exist”* thus requiring improved information dissemination. In particular, there is an identified need to improve coordination and cooperation between NGOs, UN bodies and government agencies around the topic of child rights and child protection.

*“There is a need for a Directory of Service providers – a need to be improved working together and coordination.”*

*“There is a need to work in a more comprehensive and coordinated way to solve all the problems in a family.”*

Overall, representatives of NGOs recognise an ongoing responsibility to support families in light of nationwide gaps in service provision and support for families that are struggling. Even though some believe efforts are being made by the Government of El Salvador to improve conditions for children at risk, NGO representatives also think they will be required to continue their work for well into the future.

#### 11.4. Data collection and management information systems

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children<sup>292</sup> advise States on the ‘development and implementation of coordinated policies’. Such policies should be based on sound information and statistical data. The necessity of accurate and systematic data collection for information on characteristics and trends of child protection and alternative care is crucial for the development and application of appropriate and evidence-based policy, practice, and services.

Interviewees did not identify any specific system of data collection and management information system in relation to child protection and alternative care. However, it is understood that the government is investing in improved data collection and analysis on children. For example, data on child protection can be found on the following government website <https://www.conapina.gob.sv/observatorio/>.

#### 11.5. Training for decision makers

It has not been possible to accurately assess the quality of higher education or additional training opportunities for social workers, judges, policy makers, and others responsible for child protection decision-making in El Salvador. However, opinions provided by interviewees include,

<sup>292</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2010

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*"Not everyone who graduates from university has the actual qualifications and skills to work with children. The childcare component does not come in their university training it comes from the work or they need additional training. In my personal experience I had to learn on the job."*

*They [members of the Junta de Protección] do not receive enough training that would give them the correct professional qualifications to do the job."*

*"There is a need the need to work with the Ministry of Education to bring about sustainable increase in capacity of universities to provide enhanced training for social workers and others."*

*"There are a lot of workshops and things. Even the government is doing a lot of training and organizations like SOS give training. But in the university, I don't know about this."*

*"We have started training the Directors of the 16 Junta and the General Directors of CONIPINA hoping to build capacity and we hope this will have a cascade effect. It requires a lot of best interest of the child analysis, analysis of gender, and a lot of training is needed to make the analysis. The training has been done but there is a constant change over of personnel. So hard to keep up the training."*

The provision of in-service workshops and other capacity building opportunities is appreciated. However, there is a perception that too much 'ad-hoc training' is being offered, with a lack of coordination between agencies, especially in terms of topics. Improvements are also deemed necessary with regards the quality of some of the training that is being provided. Furthermore, it is considered important to offer other professions, including police and teachers, child protection training: "everyone should have the training." A particular need is training in trauma informed practice, "especially when young people have difficult behaviour and to avoid re-traumatisation."

*"An example is a child who has suffered human trafficking. There is a problem with re-victimisation. The judge can re-victimised through the trial. Then she goes back into the community and there is stigma, and she is re-victimised again".*

We recognise only partial information was collected during our research relating to the topic of decision-making, along with analysis of the efficacy of the child protection system and those working within it. It is suggested this topic requires further investigation.

## 12. Solutions to challenges provided by research participants

It was very important to ask children, young people and family members who participated in our research workshops about their ideas regarding solutions to the challenges families are facing.

During the workshops with children, they were asked to draw themselves as superheroes and write the three things they thought most important to change for families using their superpower (examples are shown below as Figure 36). As each child provided their own answer, there was no overall ranking. However, almost half said they would provide resources such as water, houses and money whilst the other half listed factors relating to improving relationships and care within the family.

From the workshops with young people, one group managed to rank their solutions in the order of importance they thought challenges should be addressed. Their answers are seen below in Figure 36. It is noted that issues of family environment are ranked twice (numbers 4 and 7).

Figure 36. Solutions to the challenges facing families in El Salvador



An example of answers provided by young people when asked about solutions, are included in Figure 37

Figure 37. Solutions to the challenges being faced by families (as answered by young people)



**Solutions to the challenges being faced by families (as provided by young people)**

*love*

*values*

*to have a secure environment the is stable and allows for co-existence away from bad influences and risky situations*

*to have a good family environment and a good and stable psychological situation*

*being able to talk about any problems*

*have time to communicate with one another*

*be patient when there are problems*

*practice co-existence*

*to always have time for the children*

*to have specialised places where you can talk with different personnel*

*psychological support and consultations for families*

*psychological help*

*help with finances for vulnerable families*

*help with food*

*there is enough medicine for everyone*

*for the government to provide health centres that are free and everyone has access to them*

*to generate more employment*

*to have employment that is more stable*

*to have adequate hours of work*

*employment fairs*

*not to pay unnecessary taxes*

*the government gives enough help for everyone*

*the government gives equal financial bonuses to everyone*

*the government provides protection on all the busses and there are more police*

*to be able to look for help from different organizations -government and NGO organizations*

*alcoholics anonymous*

*to be able to study*

*abortion*

Figure 38 contains the solutions to challenges being faced by families as provided by adult family members.

Figure 38. Solutions to challenges being faced by families (as provided by adult family members)

**Solutions to the challenges being faced by families  
(as provided by adult family members)**

*guidance support and follow-up towards women in situations dominated by machismo men*  
*psychological and emotional education for parents*  
*activities for young people so that they do not walk in bad steps*  
*build health centres that are close to us*  
*with the help of the government, there is a health centre in the community*  
*put health centres in each location*  
*health centres should prioritise children and adolescents*  
*more talks given by health centres*  
*implement programmes that promote health care*  
*provide water and electricity*  
*that there are laws that regulate the cost of basic services – give subsidies to households*  
*create more markets in the community*  
*have a consumer ombudsperson who watches out*  
*that the mayor's office pays attention to the maintenance of electricity*  
*for the opportunity to apply for a house regardless of age*  
*stop deductions from wages*  
*end corruption in the police force*  
*greater patrolling for a more vigilant community*  
*that laws are more rigorous government support for small municipalities*  
*that the authorities are taking care of families*  
*that NGOs help provide solutions to life*  
*communities have NGOs*  
*regulate the law so that we have an equitable life*  
*provide workshops/training and employment opportunities*  
*create job training and training workshops*  
*government organizations provide training and education for women*  
*that employers give more employment opportunities*  
*give opportunities for young people to get their first job that is dignified*  
*communities have day care for children*  
*companies that provide day care for children*  
*that public transport is in a good condition*  
*new transportation*

It is interesting to note that although many young people and adult family members who participated in the research workshops had written a lot, and spoken about, challenges related to poor relationships and family breakdown as well as violence against women and children, many of their solutions, and particularly those of adult family members, primarily focussed on better living conditions, improved access to services, employment, and other issues related to poverty.

When considering solutions that would help improve family well-being, it is important to also consider answers provided by workshop participants when asked what would make children, young people and adult family members happy. In the main, answers were the antithesis of responses to the question what make children, young people and adult family members unhappy or worried. For example, what makes children happy is overwhelming connected to receiving love, attention, a united family with no fighting, the need for time together as a family, friends, and time for recreation (Figure 39).

Figure 39. What makes children happy when they are at home

**What makes children happy when they are at home? (as answered by children)**

*living in a family*  
*living with my family*  
*love and coexistence*  
*love*  
*love and protection for children*  
*always making children feel safe and loved*  
*give us all love*  
*love from our parents and our family*  
*given them love and care*  
*living with love*  
*to have somewhere to feel protected*  
*being protected*  
*having your mother alive*  
*being united and trusting each other*  
*time for them*  
*unity*  
*respect*  
*help and respect them*  
*being valued*  
*happiness*  
*attention*  
*dedication*

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coexistence inside and outside my home  
good family environment  
being together  
to be a united family even if the circumstances are good or bad  
family meetings  
living together with people in and outside the family  
to be there for them when they need it  
being listened to  
it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor what is important is the union and strength of every family  
good communication  
supporting each other  
and to get along and live healthily  
family meetings  
the family has values  
positive thoughts  
parents respecting their children  
being free of expectations  
being independent  
to have a future  
to be free  
I want to explore  
leave the children to be children  
it makes me happy the security they give me  
playing with my sisters and brothers  
going out with my family  
games  
playing with friends  
playing football  
playing games  
playing  
a good house to live in  
to have a home  
money  
to have everything necessary  
stable economy  
work  
having security everyday  
having food



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES

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*to have food*  
*good health*  
*to have a good education*  
*going to school*  
*studying*

The answers received from young people were similar to those of children in terms of love, unity, being protected and feeling safe, being listened to and respected, time spent together as a family, recreational pursuits being things that make them happy. They also feel happy when there is good health, money, a good house, and stable employment.

Factors that make adult family members happy were almost equally divided between the importance of family unity and good communication, lack of violence, love, respect, being able to care for children, and good familial and social networks, with issues concerning financial stability, unhindered access to services, good living conditions, and stable employment.

When interviewees were asked about solutions, many stressed the need for more investment in different aspects of child protection, including additional well-trained staff, especially for the Junta de Protección. They want to see improved assessments when a child protection case is reported. Training on child protection should be given to different professionals who work with children including police and teachers. Increased access to a national programme of psychosocial and psychological services as a response to mental health issues impacting a large percentage of the population is seen to be important. This is linked with an improved understanding of trauma-informed practice and training on this topic for those working with children. Many called for more family strengthening and support programmes, and projects that would halt the ongoing cycle of inter-generational family violence. Some felt the latter should be addressed through programmes in the school curriculum. Issues of advocacy and public awareness that could offer additional protection to children with disabilities were raised alongside improved social protection programmes and additional help for families facing financial instability. This should include better training for, and access to, employment, and childcare so that more women could enter the workforce.

### 13. Conclusions and recommendations

Our research framework, including our analysis of findings, has been guided by the UNCRC and the 2019 United Nations General Assembly Resolution, 'The promotion and protection of the rights of children' as well as the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. Conclusions drawn from the research are therefore addressed in reference to children's rights. Although children's rights are indivisible, and all are essential to the well-being of children, we have chosen to report on a small

number of rights thought most applicable to the findings of the research and prevention of child-parents separation.

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, clearly defines children in alternative care as those being no longer in the care of a parent/s. Alternative care is recognised in the UN Guidelines as both informal and formal care. The difference being the former is a private arrangement that has not been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or other accredited body. Traditionally, alternative care includes a variety of settings including kinship care, foster care, other forms of family-based placements, as well as residential care, either in a small group setting or in large institutions. In addition, it includes supervised independent living arrangements.

We have taken the preamble of the UNCRC into consideration and the principle that denotes, 'the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding'. We recognise the manner in which the 2019 United Nations General Assembly resolution on the 'Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child' calls on States to recognise the importance of children being raised in a 'family environment'. Furthermore, the resolution calls on the State to offer all the support necessary and recognises that,

financial and material poverty, or conditions directly and uniquely imputable to such poverty, should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from the care of his or her parents or primary caregivers and legal guardians, for receiving a child into alternative care or for preventing his or her reintegration, but should be seen as a signal for the need to provide appropriate support to their family, benefiting the child directly.

It is the responsibility of States Parties to address drivers of separation and do everything possible so that children can remain with their parents in a safe and caring environment. This requires a society that is free from violence. It means combatting stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation that individuals and families face on the basis of ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and birth status etc. It is incumbent on governments to develop a strong economy and diminish factors related to poverty, including enforcement of legislation that prohibits child labour and other forms of exploitation. It requires access for all to basic and specialist services such as education and health as well as essential utilities, employment, and adequate shelter. A social protection system should provide for individuals and families when needed with such support as unemployment, sickness and disability benefits, pensions and other forms of social safety nets. This approach is grounded not only in the fundamental spirit of the CRC but also in many specific CRC provisions, such as a right to health (Article 24), education (Article 28), support for the role of parents (Article 18), conditions for separating



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a child from parents (Article 9), right to social security (Article 25), rights for children with disabilities (Article 23), and protection from discrimination (Article 2).

Our research has not included an in-depth analysis of all these different aspects of government responsibility but has highlighted some of the gaps in provision. Within the framework of international guidance, our conclusions and recommendations have been particularly informed by the information children, young people with alternative care experience, and adult family members provided during our quest to explore:

- What are the key challenges facing families that create conditions in which child-parents separation and placement in alternative care is more likely to occur?
- Who are the children already in alternative care?
- What are some of the gaps in multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches and service delivery that could help prevent child-parents separation?
- What are the ideas of children, young people, family members, and other key stakeholders, about the current support to families and how could they be improved?

These findings have been triangulated with knowledge and understanding provided by a range of professionals holding responsibility to protect children and support families, as well as information gathered during a desk review.

The participatory research methodology used during research workshops obscured individual responses although observation allowed for understanding of participation in discussions. Participants of workshops with adult family members were predominantly female and thus may have provided a bias in terms of the information we gathered.

Finally, we recognise that responsibilities to address drivers of child-parents separation and prevention of placement of children in alternative care is primarily that of the Government of El Salvador through the provision of national and local socio-economic and cultural programmes and services. This is a significant responsibility, requiring changes to the normative framework, a strong economy, programmes of poverty alleviation and social protection, the safety and security of all citizens, and systems and delivery of a range of services including those of health and education. Our research has not included an in-depth analysis of all these different aspects of government responsibility but has considered some of the gaps in provision. We also recognise that UN and other international bodies play a significant role in service provision alongside national and international NGO, CBOs and private enterprises, and these differing roles and responsibilities should be a consideration when reading the conclusions below.

### 13.1 Protection

Articles of the CRC that afford children the right to protection include, protection from violence, abuse and neglect (Article 19 and Article 37(a)), from sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34) and, from sale, trafficking and abduction (Article 11, Article 35, Article 36, Article 39).

In particular, Article 19 requires:

States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

A conclusion of our research is violence is a driver related to children's placement in alternative care in El Salvador. Children and young people, along with other research participants, identified violence within families, and their communities, and the need to stop such violations. This situation is confirmed by previously published data illustrating physical, sexual and emotional violence as reasons children in EL Salvador have already been placed in care. Children and young people said they want to be protected, loved, and cared for, and to live in a violence free and stable home environment. This requires consideration of, and responses to, different aspects of violence that are placing children at risk of harm.

There is also a concern regarding the inter-generational aspect of violence. Previous research tells us how 'observation, learning and imitation'<sup>293</sup> of poor role models, including parents and other adults, and/or being a victim<sup>294</sup> of traumatic experiences may not only have a serious and long-lasting impact on a child's mental health and well-being, but can also result in risky and violent behaviour later in life.<sup>295</sup>

Children and young people said they want to be protected, loved, and cared for, and to live in a violence free and stable home environment. They want parents to keep them safe. However, stress and anxiety caused by breakdown of relationships within the home as well as pressures due to socio-economic circumstances at household, community and national levels are effecting the coping mechanisms and resilience of family members. This in turn is leading to anger, frustration and distress resulting in family dysfunction and for some children, being subject to violence in the home. Corporal punishment has not yet been banned in the home in El Salvador.

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<sup>293</sup> Conteras & del Carmen Cano 2016:44

<sup>294</sup> Bevan & Higgins 2002; Conteras & del Carmen Cano 2016; SOS Children's Villages International and CELCIS, Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde (2021)

<sup>295</sup> SOS Children's Villages International and CELCIS, Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde 2021

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Inter-generational violence is a particular issue. Our concern is that with each generation in which there are families in El Salvador repeatedly experiencing and witnessing violence, and lacking strong attachment and positive parenting skills, issues related to family dysfunction, breakdown, and separation, will be continue. This in turn means the ongoing risk of placement of children in alternative care.

Although we see issues related to poverty and other stressors contributing to family breakdown and the presence of violence, nevertheless, there are families living in dire circumstances who are supportive and caring of one another and create a safe environment for children. This illustrates how strong loving relationships can help families stand up to the impact of poverty and other pressure on households and contribute to a violence-free household.

Violence against girls and women is of great concern in El Salvador and strongly attributed to a culture of male dominance. Domestic violence, which is predominantly experienced by women in EL Salvador, is a factor contributing to risks of children either being separated from parents when it results in breakdown of marriages and partnerships, as well as the possibility they become direct victims of that violence thus prompting child protection authorities to respond and remove children from parental care. Victims of domestic violence are facing desperate situations particularly when they have no support network and/or nowhere to go that is safe for themselves and their children. This is resulting in women either remaining with their children in violent circumstances, or becoming single-headed households with all the pressures and challenges this can bring. It is understood there is currently only one domestic crisis centre in El Salvador.

Although workshop participants spoke of the determination of many women living in situations of domestic violence to keep their children safe and well looked after, they also spoke of the challenges including the impact on women's well-being and mental health. There are concerns this diminishes their ability to support and care for children with the fear this may even deteriorate into violence against them. Some of the women in our workshops said they had never had the opportunity to tell anyone before about the fear they are/have been living with and the suffering they endured. They said it was a relief to be able to speak with others with the same experience and to share their concerns and worries.

It should not be overlooked that men are also struggling within the family home, especially as societal expectations place a heavy responsibility on them to adequately provide for their families. They are also impacted by violence in the home and the community, and in need of mental health and psychosocial programmes. One respondent suggested the culture of El Salvador does not expect men to show their emotions and this may be impacting relationships between themselves and their children. For example, instead of being able to express their feelings and communicate well, they are using violence as a form of disciplining.

## Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for investment in violence prevention programmes for adults and for children to help break the inter-generational cycle of violent behaviour. These programmes should be systematically applied in a repeated and sustainable manner. To this end, provision of violence prevention programmes that reach children at an early age could be built into the school curriculum and comprise not just one-off 'civic' lessons, but continuous learning that promote positive messages and behaviour throughout school life. Violence prevention could also be built into family strengthening programmes that work with all members of the family together.
- Violence prevention programmes should include efforts to combat factors that contribute to the presence of abuse and exploitation including discrimination, stigmatisation, and lack of equality. They should incorporate clear messages that promote tolerance and understanding. Issues of gender equity, discrimination against persons with disabilities or from different religious, ethnic, or other specific backgrounds, acceptance of those identifying as LGBTQI+ are examples of topics such programmes should include.
- To help inform policies and programmes that promote safe and united families, professionals would benefit from a better understanding of the factors that are contributing to violence in the home in their country.
- In order to help break the cycle of inter-generational aspects of poor parenting ability, professionals would benefit from a better understanding of such topics as attachment theory – including the impact of separation from loved ones that children face when placed in alternative care - the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed practice. These topics should also be incorporated into programmes for parents and other caregivers as prevention of violence also requires sustained actions working closely with families to bring about an understanding of the harm being created when they use violence and finding ways to address such abusive situations.
- Article 2 of the UNCRC guarantees children protection from discrimination. Violence prevention programmes should include efforts to combat factors that contribute to the presence of abuse and exploitation including discrimination, stigmatisation, and lack of equality. They should incorporate clear messages that promote tolerance and understanding. In this manner, issues of gender equity, discrimination against persons with disabilities, acceptance of those identifying as LGBTQI+ etc. are topics prevention of violence programmes should include.
- Women and girls living in situations of domestic violence need someone to turn to for example, access to counselling and psychosocial services provided within a caring and safe environment. When rejected by extended family and the wider community, and with nowhere else

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to go, crisis shelter centres for women and their children could offer immediate protection and help prevent situations from deteriorating to the stage where children may be separated and placed in alternative care.

- Men should be actively involved in family strengthening and other programmes that help them understand the importance and maintaining of strong and caring family relationships. This should include awareness on issues of gender parity and prevention of domestic violence.
- Efforts to increase the awareness of child rights amongst the general public as well as the harm to children when they lack love, affection and are victims of violence - including impact of separation from parental care - can help strengthen the protective environment in the home and community. Messages might also include information about risk of violence and exploitation children face if spending time on the streets, engaged in child labour, being exposed to drugs and alcohol, and the possibility of recruitment or harm by gangs.
- Efforts to ensure prohibition of corporal punishment into law would not only lead to less violence against children but also send a significant message that children should not be harmed.

### 13.2 Adequate standard of living and well-being

Article 27 of the UNCRC requires States Parties to recognise the right of every child to a 'standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.' The Article also calls on State Parties to take appropriate measures to support and assist parents with their responsibility toward children and 'shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.' Other articles within the UNCRC also include a right to health (Article 24), education (Article 28 & 29) and survival and development (Article 6).

Article 1 of the UNGA 2019 Resolution, 'the Promotion and protection of the rights of children' urges States to,

improve the situation of children living in poverty, in particular extreme poverty, deprived of adequate food and nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, with limited or no access to basic physical and mental health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection, taking into account that, while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being, it is particularly threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of society, and exposed to conditions that lead to increased violence

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We have observed how issues related to poverty are a driver contributing to children's placement in alternative care in El Salvador. Children are growing up in families and environments where the standard of living is inadequate. The word "lack" was used many times by children, young people, adult family members, and interviewees, especially in relation to resources and services that contribute to, and help households maintain, an adequate standard of living. This is particularly concerning when the findings of our research imply there is a correlation between the challenges facing families due to the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and the way resultant stress can contribute family breakdown. Daily struggles and inability to provide for the family are resulting in parents experiencing heightened feelings of insecurity, tension, and despair. These feelings are contributing to poor mental health and diminishing resilience and coping mechanisms. One impact being an inability to maintain harmonious, unified, and supportive family relationships leading to disruption and violence in the home. In this way, poverty is also a contributing factor to child-parents separation and placement in alternative care.

Poverty is also an inter-generational as well as a multi-dimensional issue with measurements of poverty taking into account not only financial means, but other factors that contribute to well-being.<sup>296</sup> In this respect, concerns raised by children, young people and family members signalled many areas of their lives in which improvements and support is needed. This includes addressing the worries parents have about inability to feed their children, and issues of poor nutrition. For some, poor health coupled with costs of medicines and restricted access to local health services are stresses impacting family life. Long term sickness can also have serious consequences for the household economy especially if the person who is sick is the main provider of household income, and as social security payments that would provide a safety net are not available.

The unsatisfactory situation of living in inadequate housing, including cramped conditions and poorly built houses, is coupled with lack of stability for many living in rented accommodation. Poor, or no, provision of services such as water and electricity is also affecting the quality of home life. Being unable to keep children in full-time education, especially after 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, is a particular worry for some parents and children. So too are anxieties related to employment, both in terms of insufficient work opportunities and little possibility of training and skill enhancement, especially for women. These concerns are coupled with uncertainties regarding job stability, especially in the informal sector, and poor remuneration that prohibits parents providing their families with even basic needs. Furthermore, this situation is compounded by absence of adequate support services and a social protection system, including social security payments, that would provide a safety net when needed.

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<sup>296</sup> Please see: [https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure#:~:text=The%20Multidimensional%20Poverty%20Measure%20\(MPM,the%20%242.15%20international%20poverty%20line;https://ophi.org.uk/video-poverty-in-el-salvador-from-the-perspective-of-the-protagonists/](https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure#:~:text=The%20Multidimensional%20Poverty%20Measure%20(MPM,the%20%242.15%20international%20poverty%20line;https://ophi.org.uk/video-poverty-in-el-salvador-from-the-perspective-of-the-protagonists/)



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One result of the ongoing challenges are feelings of distress, anger, poor mental health, and for some, an inability to cope. This is even leading to violence against children in some households. However, it is also known that there are families living in very difficult circumstances who are supportive and caring of one another and create a safe environment for children. This illustrates how strong loving relationships are an important factor in helping families stand up to the impact of poverty and other shocks experienced by households. This in turn can contribute to a violence-free household.

It is clear not one agency can respond to all the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty leading families into crisis. However, the child protection sector, as do other sectors, very often works in a silo (and indeed, alternative care is often seen as a separate issue/sector to child protection). Gaps were identified by interviewees in terms of coordination and service delivery between Government and non-governmental bodies and agencies, UN entities, academics, faith-based leaders, the private sector, and donors, including those responsible for education, health, security, social protection and social welfare, justice, and child protection. The most effective inter-agency coordination appears to focus on humanitarian crises.

Although parents and other caregivers see government being responsible for delivery of, and ensuring easy access to, all necessary basic and specialised services, and welcoming assistance of NGOs, it is clear from responses during our workshops, that people also see it as their duty to find ways to become self-sufficient when at all possible. Barriers to achieving this include stable and well remunerated employment. This is linked with the need for youth and adult training and education, especially for women and those who lack reading and writing skills. Illiteracy is not only precluding people from employment, but also impacting their confidence. Confidence that is needed when facing everyday challenges in the home and community, when standing up to such violations as gender discrimination and domestic violence and raising children well. Furthermore, lack of affordable or free childcare is a particular barrier preventing women finding work. This is not just provision for younger children, but also for children after the school day.

Research participants spoke of the importance of family and community networks especially in times of crisis however, there they also highlighted the breakdown in such support networks, especially at community level, following years of division due to civil war and gang violence.

### Recommendations

- Addressing issues related to poverty is a structural issue that needs a strong and stable government. It is beyond the remit of this report to provide detailed recommendations as to government efforts to strengthen the country economically, politically, and socially. However, different actors can instigate advocacy for change and information sharing that would help government policy makers, and others, gain a clearer understanding of efforts needed to prevent placement of children in alternative care. Especially information that takes into account the multi-

dimensional aspects of poverty and the impact on families. This requires awareness raising that informs the establishment of an evidence-based multi-sectoral and family-centred approach to the design, development, and delivery of support to families with the understanding it is often more than one pathway or issue that contributes to family breakdown. One specific focus of such advocacy should include the development and availability of fully functioning of social protection systems that reach all those in need of social safety nets.

- Helping families address the many challenges they are facing requires closer multi-sectoral cooperation and improved coordination between Government and non-governmental bodies and agencies, UN entities, academics, faith-based leaders, the private sector, and donors, including those responsible for education, health, security, social protection and social welfare, justice, and child protection. There should be a concerted effort together, and within each organization, body or department, to assesses and recognise where each can most effectively contribute: whether it be direct service provision, advocacy to effect change, signposting so that families know how and where to receive the support they need, fundraising, or even leading/supporting such coordinated response. Organizations should also look at the breadth of their outreach to ensure they are reaching vulnerable families including those residing in rural areas.
- Families need informed and coordinated access to service provision in a way that will address all the inter-related challenges they face. This should be available universally to address the concern that support often comes too late and so that vulnerability of families might be prevented. To this end consideration should be given to providing families with signposting to basic and specialist services as well as ensuring joined-up provision in a way that overcomes barriers of access e.g. access to all support coordinated in one location rather than family members having to move from agency to agency to agency to resolve their problems. In some countries for example, this is sometimes called a 'one-stop shop'.
- Helping families undertake the responsibility in providing for their families might include increasing access to income-generation schemes and help with obtaining stable, well remunerated employment. This should be linked with the need for more easily available and free capacity building and training, as well as adult education programmes, especially those related to improved literacy for women. This should be undertaken by organizations that have the specialism to implement such programmes.
- The need for additional support for women in particular, whose lack of education, training, and literacy is not only precluding them from the job market, but also impacting their confidence. Confidence that is needed when facing everyday challenges in the home and community as well as standing up to such concerns as gender discrimination, domestic violence, preventing violence against their children and other circumstances that might lead to separation from them.

- Article 18 of the UNCRC requires States to 'take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.' Affordable or free day care for children would help women in particular, find their way into the work force. It could also provide respite for those struggling with household responsibilities, being overwhelmed by challenges in everyday life, and requiring help alleviating pressure building up within families. This includes day care for infants as well as after-school provision.
- Opportunities to build better support and social networking within communities would be seen as a positive action. In this respect, resilience and existing coping mechanisms should be recognised, built on, and ways to bring families and communities together should be encouraged. Examples provided by respondents during the research include the provision of community centres and shared social and educational activities. Strengthening family networks is also important.

### 13.3 Support in parenting

The preamble to the UNCRC states that the 'family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community'. This requires States to provide parents, and other primary caregivers, with the support needed so that children have the best protection and opportunities in life.

Children and young people feel happy when they have parents that love, respect and understand them. When asked why families reach a situation where placement of children in care is a consideration, interviewees drew attention to disharmony and dysfunction in the family due to what they consider as poor parenting skills. They see poor parenting skills as a significant factor related to deterioration of child-parent relationships which in turn, may ultimately lead to violence against, or serious neglect of, children.

Interviewees also identified how a lack of positive parenting skills is not only impacted by socio-economic circumstances as described above but can be an inter-generational phenomenon. Findings in our research indicate the negative experience some parents had during their own childhood is impacting their own ability to parent, as well as having a detrimental effect on other aspects of their life. One outcome being an inability to maintain harmonious, unified, supportive relationships in the home leading to family breakdown, and even the manifestation of violence.

### Recommendations

- As with previous recommendations, actions are needed that will break any cycle of inter-generational concerns including those related to parenting skills. This requires consideration of parenting programmes that take a holistic and family-centred approach and incorporate such topics as attachment theory, the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed practice.
- It is important that professionals working with families are in receipt of knowledge and understanding so as to prevent automatic dismissal of parents as 'bad parents', especially of those impacted by poverty. It requires a deeper understanding of the different factors impacting parenting ability, family dynamics, what is necessary to maintain harmonious, unified, supportive relationships in the home, and ways to build on existing resilience and coping mechanisms.
- Service providers should consider the locations where they work with children and families and ensure they are delivering support where it is most needed as for example, in rural communities.

#### 13.4 Disability

Children with disabilities have the right to enjoy 'a full and decent life in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community (Article 23 of the UNCRC). Also contained within Article 23 of the UNCRC is provision of special care and assistance to ensure children with disabilities have, 'access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities'.

It has not been possible to find official data that specifies the current number of children with disabilities in alternative care in El Salvador, however, informants have signified this is a small number. One reason is the small number of places in alternative care available to children with disabilities. Interviewees also raised concerns about the protection of children with disabilities living with their families and the need for more vigilance regarding the support they require. This is not about additional provision of residential care but ensuring families have all the support they need. They believe support to those with disabilities must consider issues of inclusion as well as access to specialised services that can protect and support children at home and help prevent placement in alternative care.

All the issues covered in this conclusions chapter apply equally to children with disabilities. There are, however, some risks that are heightened in the case of children with disabilities in El Salvador, including those of abandonment. Contributing factors are stigma and discrimination, poor provision of specialist health and other necessary services, and insufficient practical and emotional support for families. Families in which parents are disabled are also believed to be vulnerable to family separation.

Attending school should not only offer a child education, but also a place of security. The national law of El Salvador mandates access to education for children with disabilities, either in local schools with specialist support or, in special schools. Information gathered during our research as to why children with disabilities are not in local schools include violence and discrimination, lack of transportation, and teachers who continue to resist their inclusion in their classes. Overall, although interviewees spoke of the importance of inclusion, they also see a need for specialist service such as those offering families respite and addressing lack of transportation and poor infrastructure that preclude children with disabilities from reaching services.

## Recommendations

- Family support programmes should ensure the inclusion of families that have members with disabilities. They should be built on an understanding and consideration of the issues facing families, and the resources to guarantee inclusion of children and adults with disabilities. This should consider issues of inclusion as well as specialist services tailored to individual family needs and priorities.
- Violence prevention programmes, as previously mentioned, should inherently incorporate protection of children with disabilities.
- Awareness raising programmes should promote an understanding and acceptance of disability, both within families and amongst the general public. This includes programmes that support and work with parents and promote increased awareness of special needs their children may have, as well as their child's right to care and protection. In this way, helping to build closer bonds within a family, may provide a valuable contribution in preventing violations of children with disabilities. Public information campaigns should speak about fair and respectful treatment of people with disabilities, the harm of stigmatisation, and topics that would help prevent violence and exclusion against persons with disabilities. Advocacy programmes by and with people with disabilities are important and help bring a specific focus to improving services, opportunities, and support.
- Promotion of inclusion in local schools will require not just building skills and understanding of teachers, but also providing resources, such as books in braille, and overcoming physical barriers when accessing buildings and transport to school.

## 13.5 Play and leisure

Article 31 of the UNCRC directs States to the right of children to rest and leisure and encourages access to cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. This right is highlighted in this report, not just because of the importance this brings to children's development, but also the opportunity recreational pursuits can play in strengthening family life.

Children most emphatically wrote about the importance of time for recreation, both with parents, other family members, and friends. A sentiment repeated by young people and family members who highlighted the importance of spending time as a family, including eating and undertaking recreational activities together. Time spent together is seen as being particularly important in the way it contributes to family unity and provides respite from the stresses they may be facing. There may, however, be parents who, despite working hard to provide for the family, do not recognise the benefits of time playing or pursuing other joint activities with their children and how this can help forge closer bonds.

## Recommendations

- Time spent together is seen as being particularly important in the way it contributes to family unity and provides respite from the stresses they may be facing. Activities that address this important aspect of unity and spending time together would add value to parenting and family strengthening programmes. This would also include raising awareness amongst parents and professionals as to the important benefits of time spent as a family and how this can help forge closer bonds.

### 13.6 Capacity of professional decision makers and the efficacy of the national child protection system

Article 1 of the 2019 UNGA resolution on the 'Promotion and the protection of children's rights', calls on States to ensure,

adequate and systematic training in the rights of the child, including by encouraging States to take the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children into account for professional groups working with and for children, including with children without parental care, including specialized judges, law enforcement officials, lawyers, social workers, medical doctors, care professionals, health professionals and teachers, and coordination among various governmental bodies involved in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child

International guidance relating to decision-making and 'gatekeeping'<sup>297</sup> is outlined in a number of international documents including the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care<sup>298</sup> and accompanying Handbook<sup>299</sup>. This guidance promotes the use of case management tools that allow for rigorous multi-sectoral and participatory assessments upon which careful and well-considered decisions can be taken. These decisions should always be in the best interest of the child.

<sup>297</sup> For further explanation of the term 'gatekeeping' please see: Csaky & Gale 2015

<sup>298</sup> United Nations General Assembly 2009

<sup>299</sup> Cantwell et al. 2012



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Decision-making by professionals is not only influenced by such factors as personal understanding, beliefs, training, and experience, but also the strength of the national child protection system they work in and the statutory and other guidance they receive. Decision-making, although ideally objective and undertaken within a structure of national legislation, policy, and statutory guidance, can also be subjective with personal social and cultural beliefs becoming influencing factors.

Efforts by the Government of El Salvador to improve legislation and statutory guidance as well as building capacity of those responsible for the protection of children through such efforts as online training, has been recognised. It is also understood that there are plans to increase resources within the national child protection system and further promote prevention of violence and child-parents separation. This includes increasing numbers of well-trained professionals, especially those working in the Junta de Protección, and the financing of resources necessary for them to undertake their work.

In terms of achieving a strong focus on prevention of child-parents separation, interviewees working in the child protection system called attention to the lack of family support services they are able to refer families to. This is both government and non-governmental support for families with basic necessities such as food, clothing, housing and help accessing employment, as well as much needed specialist services such as mental health and counselling programmes.

Many believe the important task of completing child and family assessments, that can lead to decisions to place a child in alternative care, is not always done well. Recognition is given however to the limitations impacting this process such as insufficient numbers of staff, especially in the Junta de Protección, not enough time, and lack of other resources such as transportation to visit cases and undertake assessments. This is not only leading to incomplete assessments but inability to even respond to all reports of child protection concerns that are received by the authorities.

Many recognise the process of completing rigorous assessments, that include the meaningful participation and listening to the views of children, is an essential element in ensuring the right decisions are made including prevention of any unnecessary separation from parental care. They understand this is an important way of identifying the exact support families may need that will help them remain together. However, this duty requires upskilling of some child protection staff particularly in undertaking assessments that include the full and meaningful participation of children.

It has not been possible to assess the quality or quantity of training different government and NGO personnel have received in the use of child protection case management, including the assessment of risks a child might be facing, and the application of other statutory guidance and legislation. An assessment of the quality of social work training in higher education institutions is also missing from our research along with any review of standards of in-service capacity building programmes. Some

interviewees identified the need for better coordination amongst NGO training providers and efforts to avoid repetition of training whilst addressing gaps in capacity building.

### Recommendations

- To inform the development of future training and capacity building, it is recommended that an assessment of the quality of social work training in higher education institutions is undertaken along with a review of provision and standards of in-service capacity building. This should be coupled with a study of current skills, knowledge, and capacities of all those responsible for making decisions about protection and care of children including social workers, police, judiciary, health, and education workers etc.
- Detailed statutory guidance on multi-sectoral and participatory assessments, decision-making and case planning, along with accompanying training, should provide decision makers, including members of the Junta de Protección, other social workers, police, and members of the judiciary, with the necessary skills and a clear understanding of risk thresholds and a framework that guides their decision-making.
- Certain topics that those with responsibility for child protection would benefit from include more intensive training on issues of violence prevention, trauma-informed practice, understanding of attachment theory and ACEs, as well as decision-making that is in the best interest of the child. Again, this training should be made available to those working in different professions that can, and should, play a role in child protection and child welfare.
- Steps should be taken to address such issues as professional burn-out of social workers and making sure they are fully supported in their work, i.e., caring for the carers.

### 13.7 Data management systems

Legislation, policy, statutory guidance, planning and programme delivery, should be informed by evidence. The 2019 UNGA Resolution, highlights this by calling on States to,

‘improve data collection, information management and reporting systems relating to children in Improving data collection, information management and reporting systems related to children without parental care in all settings and situations in order to close existing data gaps and develop global and national baselines.’

In the first instance, the Resolution is referring to data related to children in alternative care, including the reasons for placement. It is further necessary to continue to collate evidence that includes consideration of the following:

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- What are the main drivers that lead to placement of children in alternative care, and how are these influenced by various factors, e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances, and access to services etc.
- How are children at risk of separation officially identified and recognised (e.g. in official data).
- Which child protection, social protection, and other services are available to the families of children at risk of placement in alternative care and what are the gaps.
- What are the ideas and proposals of children, young people, adult family members, and other key stakeholders, about responses to the issue of child-parents separation and how they could be improved.

The Government of El Salvador has recently developed a data management information system on child protection. Published data can be found at the following Government website: <https://www.conapina.gob.sv/observatorio/>. An informant has also advised that additional information can be requested of the Government. It is unclear whether this additional information would include more detailed data on the exact reasons children are being placed in care. Such information would greatly assist in more accurate programming of services that contribute to the prevention of children's placement in alternative.

### Recommendation

- Data management systems that record information on the reasons children have been placed in alternative care would greatly contribute to accurate planning of policies and programmes for family strengthening and prevention of unnecessary placement of children in alternative care.

### 13.8 Participation

Article 12 (1) of the UNCRC requires,

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In recognition of the importance of children's right to participate in decisions affecting their lives, and indeed for anyone to play an integral role in deciding on things that impact their life, it is necessary to facilitate a careful and supportive process that allows for full and meaningful participation in different decision-making situations.

Our research suggests the vast majority of children in El Salvador are not participating in any way during the process of completing protection or other assessments of their situation or in decisions being made about their lives, including placement in alternative care.

## Recommendations

- Children should be supported in a way that allows their full and meaningful participation in any decision-making processes that will affect them, including their placement in alternative care.
- All children should be acknowledged as active citizens and afforded equal opportunity to contribute to their society. In this respect, policy makers and programme designers and implementers may need help understanding that children are experts in their own lives. This will require challenging any negative assumptions regarding children's capacities to engage and participate and providing them with opportunities that allow them to build and demonstrate such capability.

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