



Venezuela 2020 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office for the U.S. Embassy in Caracas. OSAC encourages travelers to [use this report](#) to gain baseline knowledge of security conditions in Venezuela. For more in-depth information, review OSAC's [Venezuela country page](#) for original OSAC reporting, consular messages, and contact information, some of which may be available only to private-sector representatives with an OSAC password.

Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Venezuela at Level 4, indicating travelers should not travel to the country due to crime, civil unrest, poor health infrastructure, kidnapping, and arbitrary arrest and detention of U.S. citizens. Review OSAC's report, [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#).

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Caracas as being a **CRITICAL**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests.

Venezuela has one of the highest number of violent deaths in the region and in the world. Last year closed with an estimated 16,506 murders and a rate of 60.3 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, well above any other country in Latin America. This rate is the result of three types of violence: Criminals committed 6,588 homicides, at a rate of 24 victims per 100,000 inhabitants; 5,286 deaths were caused by resistance to the government, mostly homicides committed by state security forces by excessive use of force/extrajudicial execution, with a rate of 19 victims per 100,000 inhabitants; and 4,632 deaths were of undetermined cause, officially registered as death inquiries, but mostly homicides at an estimated rate of 17 victims per 100,000 inhabitants.

Although the figures show a decrease in the number and rate of violent deaths from 2018, this does not mean that the security conditions have improved. Rather, the decrease is due to several equally negative factors. The number of people going out in public is down due to the decline in the number of things to do or buy/sell; the country experienced an incredible devaluation of its currency in 2019; and millions of Venezuelans emigrated to other countries because they no longer saw a viable way to live in Venezuela. These factors limited the opportunities for criminals to benefit from engaging in predatory crimes, with some news reports indicating criminals have been leaving the country as well.

There were major changes to the different categories of crime during 2019. In the first half of the year, most Venezuelans did not have access to cash, so the number of street crimes such as theft fell significantly. Criminals started breaking into homes to steal items such as jewelry, electronics, and other appliances, and foreign currency. During the second half of 2019, as the economy was "dollarizing" and people could pay for items and services with foreign currency, thieves returned to robbing people outside of their homes. Heavily armed criminals have used grenades and assault rifles to commit crimes at banks, shopping malls, public transportation stations, and universities.



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Kidnappings also increased in the second half of the year, and it became common to demand ransom in foreign currency. By the end of 2019, there was an increase in the number of predatory crimes again as well as extortion by criminal elements and government officials. There are numerous reports of increased corruption throughout the country, including the appearance of police or military checkpoints where officers will ask travelers for a bribe; the need to bribe government officials to renew a passport; or the need to pay a bribe to turn on the electrical service in your home.

Due to security concerns and continued activity of elements associated with dissident groups of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and leftist guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN), along with the presence of fuel smugglers and other organized criminal groups, U.S. Embassy employees did not travel within 50 miles of the 1,000-mile Venezuelan-Colombian border without prior authorization (before the embassy suspended operations). Because of safety and security concerns, the following neighborhoods of Caracas were off-limits to U.S. employees of the Embassy unless they had special permission:

In the western part of Libertador municipality: El Retiro, 23 de Enero, Blandin, La Vega, La Rinconada, Las Mayas, Tazon, Oropeza Castillo, Lomas de Urdaneta, Propatria, Casalta, Lomas de Propatria, Carapita, Antimano, Tacagua, Ruiz Pineda, Caricuao, La Quebradita, El Atlantico, Sarria, La Candelaria, San Martin, Coche, El Valle and La Yaguara.

In the Eastern part of Sucre municipality: Barrio Piritu, Barrio La Rubia, Barrio Altavista, Petare, Caucaguita, La Dolorita, Paulo Sexto, and El Llanito.

In Baruta municipality: Las Minas, Santa Cruz del Este, Ojo de Agua, La Naya, and Las Minitas.

Popular tourist attractions, such as the Avila National Park in Caracas, are associated with violent crime. Travel in groups of five or more, and provide family or friends with your itineraries prior to departure.

Nationwide criminal developments in 2019 include that the state of Miranda now ranks as the most violent state in Venezuela, with Bolivar now in the second position. The violence in Guarico state has increased so dramatically that it is now among the five most violent states in the country. Review OSAC's report, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#).

Cybersecurity Issues

Be aware of the widespread theft of credit card data. Most ATMs do not accept U.S.-issued debit or credit cards, and malfunctions are common. Use only those located in well-lighted, public places. Criminals often hack ATM data and use it to make unauthorized withdrawals from users' accounts. Criminals target ATMs to rob people making withdrawals. Many ATMs do not have cash. Review OSAC's reports, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#) and [Taking Credit](#).

Review OSAC's reports, [Cybersecurity Basics](#), [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#), [Traveling with Mobile Devices: Trends & Best Practices](#), and [Satellite Phones: Critical or Contraband?](#)



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Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Review OSAC's reports, [Road Safety Abroad](#), [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#), and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#); and read the State Department's webpage on [driving and road safety abroad](#).

Driving regulations in Venezuela are similar to those in the United States, although drivers seldom obey them. It is common practice to ignore traffic lights, especially after dark. Motorcyclists frequently weave in and out of lanes, passing on the right and the left, and driving into the oncoming lane to get around traffic congestion. Traffic in Caracas is heavy at most times of the day, as an abundance of vehicles running on heavily subsidized gasoline (ten gallons cost less than 25 U.S. cents), continue to fill the aging infrastructure of the capital city beyond capacity.

Venezuelan traffic law mandates that individuals involved in a traffic accident not move their vehicle from the roadway until the traffic police arrive on the scene. Due to the lack of availability, police can sometimes take several hours to arrive. Those involved in an accident sometimes negotiate a settlement among themselves, or simply leave the scene, rather than wait for the police to arrive. If you are involved in an accident, remain at the scene unless you feel your life may be in danger.

Checkpoints are common on Venezuelan roads, especially during inter-city trips. Officers from local police or Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) generally staff the checkpoints. Stopping at checkpoints is mandatory; prepare to show vehicle registration paperwork, along with proof of insurance and an identity document (*cedula* or passport). Police or guardsmen may search vehicles stopped at checkpoints. Be aware of criminal attacks in tunnels, and avoid obstacles in the road.

Public Transportation Conditions

Do not use public transportation such as city buses and the metro (subway) in Caracas, even though they are plentiful and inexpensive, due to high levels of criminal activity.

Do not use "libre" taxis or any taxis hailed on the street. Taxi drivers in Caracas have overcharged, robbed, injured, and even kidnapped passengers. Use only radio-dispatched taxis or taxis from reputable hotels. Call a 24-hour radio-dispatched taxi service from a public phone or ask hotel, restaurant, or airline staff to contact a licensed taxi company.



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Aviation/Airport Conditions

The U.S. Department of Transportation has [suspended](#) all nonstop flights between the United States and Venezuela, after the Department of Homeland Security concluded that conditions in Venezuela threaten the safety and security of passengers, aircraft, and crew traveling to or from the country.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has issued a notice prohibiting all flight operations in the territory and airspace of Venezuela at altitudes below FL 260 by all U.S. air carriers and commercial operators. The FAA had previously assessed the government of Venezuela's Civil Aviation Authority as compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of Venezuela's air carrier operations. However, the FAA notice, released based on the current situation, takes precedence.

Transit to and from Maiquetía Simón Bolívar International Airport (CCS) is risky. The Embassy had mandated that all U.S. employees travel in an armored vehicle to and from CCS. The airport road is especially dangerous, with numerous reports of robberies and murders in the areas around the terminal (e.g. on the street, in parking lots). Avoid using airport taxis; taxi drivers and their accomplices have robbed or kidnapped several passengers, even when transferring between terminals. There have also been occasional instances of armed individuals robbing airport shuttles operated by local major hotels. For all these reasons, the Embassy required its U.S. direct-hire employees to travel to and from the airport in an armored vehicle. Private travelers should prearrange airport pickup or drop-off with reputable companies. When arriving on an incoming flight, set up a meeting place inside the terminal where you can connect safely with the driver. Arrive and depart during daylight hours when possible.

Criminal activity at CCS is significant. Arriving and departing travelers alike are sometimes victims of personal property thefts and muggings. The Embassy has previously received credible reports that individuals in official uniforms or bearing realistic (or real) credentials have been involved in the facilitation and perpetration of these crimes. For this reason, be wary of all strangers, even those who represent themselves as airport officials. Do not pack valuable items or documents in checked bags; instead, store such items in carry-on luggage. The Embassy has also received occasional reports of airport officials (or individuals representing themselves as airport officials) attempting to extort money from travelers as part of the check-in or boarding process for departing flights.

Drug traffickers use CCS as a transit point. CICPC and ONA frequently arrest travelers attempting to smuggle illegal drugs out of the country. For this reason, among others, do not accept packages from anyone, and always keep your luggage with you.

Review OSAC's report, [Security In Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Maritime Security Concerns

Exercise a heightened level of caution in Venezuelan waters. Incidents of piracy off the coast of Venezuela remain a concern. Anchoring offshore is not safe. Marinas, including those in Puerto la Cruz and Margarita Island (Porlamar), provide only minimal security.



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Terrorism Threat

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Caracas as being a **MEDIUM**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. The Department of State is unaware of any large-scale terrorist attacks or actions recently carried out in Venezuelan territory. Venezuela maintains a permissive environment that has allowed for support of activities that benefited known terrorist groups. While individuals linked to FARC, ELN, and Hizb'allah supporters and sympathizers were all present in Venezuela, U.S. interests have not been targets of these groups in Venezuela.

Several Cuban-inspired leftist guerrilla groups emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, but they no longer pose a significant security threat and exist in name only. Venezuela has approximately one million residents of Arab descent; a small proportion of that population is collaborating with Middle Eastern extremist groups. Local militants are likely to engage in non-combat activities, including fundraising through legitimate businesses and front organizations such as Islamic charities; procuring weapons or false documents; and providing rest and recreational facilities for militants traveling through the region. Speculation over the level of government support for such groups arises occasionally. However, local militants are not likely to have had the intent to carry out any attacks in Venezuela.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Caracas as being a **CRITICAL**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Civil disruptions are common in Venezuela in general, and particularly in Caracas. Demonstrations tend to occur at or near university campuses or gathering places such as public squares and plazas. In Caracas, the occasional unscheduled march through a busy thoroughfare causes major traffic disruptions and can bring traffic to a near standstill. Candidates for political office call supporters to marches and public gatherings during national and municipal elections. Venezuela experiences protests and work stoppages by unions across both the public and private sectors. Use extreme caution and avoid large gatherings and demonstrations wherever they occur.

In 2019, Venezuela experienced a marked increase in civil unrest and spontaneous protests because of the lack of food and/or basic services, including the lack of electricity/public transportation, poor working conditions, and increased criminality.

One major area of concern is the continued prominence of pro-government gang-militias known as *colectivos*. These gangs (e.g. "La Piedrita," Los Tupamaros," and "Alexis Vive") self-identify as socialist, anti-capitalist, "anti-imperialist," and Chavista. They are armed and have expressed a willingness to use weapons to "defend Chavismo," a radical left-wing ideology based on the personality of former President Hugo Chavez; it is not always clear what they identify as the threats facing Chavismo, or how they would seek to defeat the threats. In recent elections, media outlets reported incidents where pro-Chavista gangsters on motorcycles (known by the Spanish word in Venezuela for motorcyclist, *motorizado*) would surround voting centers in opposition-leaning neighborhoods to intimidate voters. Clashes between these groups and local law enforcement are rare.



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Tensions have increased not just in the form of anti-Maduro protests, but also by people demanding better public services, including water, electricity, medicine, and food. These are likely to increase as Venezuelans look for a way to survive under the Maduro regime.

Civil Unrest

Unrest linked to the opposition is likely to emerge again, especially as Maduro refuses to hand over power despite the opposition-controlled National Assembly declaring opposition leader Juan Guaidó as president. Violence in the context of political protests has mainly involved government security forces and civilian government sympathizers against peaceful opposition demonstrators, and is unlikely to become widespread. Significant attacks or acts of vandalism for political reasons affecting private-sector assets and government-owned infrastructure will continue to be rare. While opposition protests are highly likely to continue for some time, they will remain relatively small in scale and easily controlled by the armed forces.

Protests for food and basic public services have become common, and looting of raw material and equipment has become the biggest risk to organizations with assets on the ground in Venezuela. According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflicts (OVCS), a local NGO that monitors strikes, protests, and unrest noted that there were a record 16,739 protests across the country during 2019.

The demands for a political change, decent wages, respect for collective contracts, access to medicine and food, and the guarantee of better public services are the main demands of Venezuelans, who challenged the mechanisms of state repression against the demonstrations and regularly hold rallies, street closings, stops, and marches across the country.

Most of the protests (58%) involved the demand for economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. Protests involving demands for civil and political rights went from 11% of total activity in 2018 to 42% in 2019. There were 5,375 protests for basic services and 4,756 worker actions demanding wage improvements.

The state of Miranda had the highest number of protests (1,355) in 2019. The Capital District (1,290), Mérida (1,255), Táchira (1,128), and Bolívar (1,054) rounded out the top five. Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

Incidents of looting remain a key risk for companies with assets on the ground. Lootings are likely to worsen as electricity and water rationing increases on the back of nationwide power outages such as the one that lasted a week in March 2019.

Labor unrest is initially mainly concentrated in heavy industries or labor-intensive areas, such as agriculture and mining, where government control is synonymous with Chavismo, but union troubles have become a permanent problem for the private sector across all industries in recent years. Unions have also become increasingly involved in the theft of raw material and equipment inside companies. Unions also use the threat of reporting employers to the authorities as leverage for salary and benefit negotiations.



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Religious and Ethnic Violence

There are sporadic reports of violence against Venezuela's small indigenous population. Indigenous groups allege violent encounters with security forces during the year. Indigenous groups regularly report violent conflicts with miners and cattle ranchers over land rights. There were reports in 2019 of harassment, attacks, and forced evictions against indigenous persons living in areas included as part of former regime mining concessions.

There are reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including anti-Semitism. Jewish community leaders expressed concern about anti-Semitic statements made by high-level regime-aligned officials and anti-Semitic pieces in pro-regime media outlets. Regime-owned or -associated media and supporters of the former regime promote Zionist conspiracy theories. The community leaders noted many anti-Semitic incidents occurred in 2019.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Venezuela is prone to earthquakes and landslides. Several small seismic readings registered throughout Venezuela in 2019. The most significant recent incident was a 7.3-magnitude earthquake that shook the northern coast in August 2018. Its epicenter was in the Yaguaraparo area in Sucre state, but shaking occurred throughout the region, including parts of Colombia, Brazil, Trinidad & Tobago, Grenada, Guyana, Barbados, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, and Suriname. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning for a radius of 300 kilometers around the epicenter of the quake, but none materialized.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Caracas is the economic and commercial center of Venezuela, as well as its most populous city. As such, the city sees its share of industrial and transportation-related accidents. Although vehicle accidents involving the transportation of hazardous chemicals are rare, when they occur, roadways can close for significant periods for cleanup activity. Because of the mountainous terrain, tunnels are an essential way to navigate the city of Caracas.

In general, Venezuelan infrastructure suffers from years of neglect, and is deteriorating across the country. Bridges occasionally collapse, and roads sometimes crumble or wash away, creating major traffic disturbances in the affected region. The country experiences regular power outages and potable water is frequently not available for long periods.



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Economic Concerns

Venezuela regularly ranks in international studies as one of the most corrupt countries in Latin America, and the world. In 2020, anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International rated Venezuela 173rd out of 180 countries in its [Corruption Perception Index](#), rating Venezuela less corrupt than only Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, and Somalia. Corruption takes many forms, from motorists bribing traffic police to allegations of bribes and kickbacks in the allocation of government contracts. Corruption appears to have reached record levels in recent years, with government institutions becoming increasingly criminal in nature, including activities such as rampant corruption in the state-controlled food distribution, active black market dollar trading, gasoline smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal gold mining, and other activities. All anti-corruption campaigns launched by Maduro have served as cynical maneuvering with political ends to give a rotating roster of loyalists a chance to profit from pervasive corruption rather than genuine reform efforts. The customs system, the administration of foreign exchange, and other government entities are notoriously corrupt.

Business dealings with government officials are not ideal. Low wages make it difficult to attract quality personnel. Other problems include the politicization of many government institutions, and an increasing criminalization of institutions, as bureaucrats demand bribes in foreign currency for performing basic services. According to the World Bank's [Doing Business 2020](#) report, Venezuela ranks the worst of 32 countries in the region when assessed on overall business environment, and bureaucratic steps required to start a business. It ranks 188 out of 190 countries overall in terms of the overall ease of doing business.

The World Economic Forum's [2019 Global Competitiveness Report](#) ranked Venezuela 133 out of 141 countries, and 141st (worst in the world) in intellectual property protection. Venezuela remained on the Priority Watch List in the U.S. Trade Representative's 2019 Special 301 Report. Key concerns cited in the report relate to questions about the consistency of domestic laws and international obligations resulting from the 2008 reinstatement of the 1955 Industrial Property Law; the status of trademarks registered under the Andean Community law prior to Venezuela's withdrawal from the Andean Community; and lack of enforcement against counterfeiting and piracy, both physical and online.

A lack of adequate resources for the Venezuelan copyright and trademark enforcement police (COMANPI) and for the special prosecutor's office hinders Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) protection. Because of a shortage of personnel, limited budget, and inadequate storage facilities for seized goods, COMANPI has had to work with the Bolivarian National Guard and private industry to enforce copyright laws. COMANPI can only act based on a complaint by a copyright holder; it cannot carry out an arrest or seizure on its own initiative. In the past, the Venezuelan government's tax authority (SENIAT) has been more successful at enforcing IPR laws. It has acted against some businesses importing or selling pirated goods based on presumed tax evasion. While such actions on the part of SENIAT have decreased over the past few years, SENIAT does continue to act against pirated goods.

Copyright piracy and trademark counterfeiting remain widespread, however, including piracy over the Internet. Pirated software, music, and movies are readily available throughout the country.



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According to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserves in the world. Venezuela is more dependent on oil than ever before, as it accounts for more than 95% of the country's exports. A decline in oil revenue has made it increasingly hard for the government to continue to manage the country, which means Maduro may only be able to give more modest rewards to loyalists. Since 2017, the state-owned oil company PDVSA has been in the hands of members of the National Guard, with the lack of experience/knowledge of the oil industry increasing the decline in oil output.

Oil output remains near historic lows, and very little foreign trade is available for companies to produce or import goods, leading to limited availability of food and consumer staples, as well as high prices for the goods that are available. The U.S. continues to tighten oil sanctions given the lack of political change. In response, the regime has cemented commercial and political ties with Cuba, China, and Russia. The business climate has deteriorated, and foreign organizations continue to downsize or leave.

The Venezuelan economy will likely contract by 39% this year, according to estimates from Oxford Economics given a precipitous decline in oil output. Crude production has fallen more than 70% since December 2014 to below 700,000 barrels of oil a day, according to OPEC data. Under these conditions, the Maduro regime lacks the capacity to service its debt to bondholders in any sustainable way. Maduro will also continue to prioritize settling outstanding debts with Russia and China, its main political supporters and commercial partners. Russian oil company Rosneft reported that Venezuela had continued to pay its debt to the company, which is now USD 800m, down from USD 1.1b in the second quarter of 2019.

Labor-related risks continue to impair the business environment. There is a deficit of skilled workers, particularly technicians, and many skilled workers have emigrated over the past four years. In fact, hundreds of thousands have fled the country in the last two years, with many workers abandoning their posts without notice because inflation makes their salaries almost worthless and many do not even have the spending power to travel to work.

The pro-government National Union of Workers (UNT) is the main umbrella union. Pro-government unions dominate the public sector, with many workers pressured into membership. Allegations frequently surface that the Labor Ministry encourages pro-government unions in the private sector to challenge labor contracts, or even demand the nationalization of companies.

Personal Identity Concerns

The law criminalizes physical, sexual, and psychological violence in the home or community and at work. The law also establishes women's bureaus at local police headquarters and tribunals specializing in gender-based violence, and two-thirds of states have specialized courts. The Public Ministry's Women's Defense Department employs a team of lawyers, psychiatrists, and other experts who deal exclusively with cases of femicide, gender-related violence, and other crimes against women. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [female travelers](#).



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The constitution prohibits discrimination based on “sex or social condition,” but it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Credible NGOs reported incidents of bias-motivated violence against LGBTI+ persons. Reported incidents were most prevalent against transgender individuals. Local police and private security forces have allegedly prevented LGBTI+ persons from entering malls, public parks, and recreational areas. NGOs reported the Maduro regime systematically denied legal recognition to transgender and intersex persons by preventing them from obtaining identity documents required for accessing education, employment, housing, and health care. This vulnerability often led transgender and intersex persons to become victims of human trafficking or prostitution. There are no legal restrictions on same-sex sexual relations or the organization of LGBTI+ events in Venezuela. Review the State Department’s webpage on security for [LGBTI+ travelers](#).

Religious groups are required to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and to receive a letter of acceptance from the government-controlled community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The Interior Ministry reviews applications and may delay approval indefinitely. Review OSAC’s report, [Freedom to Practice](#), and the State Department’s webpage on security for [faith-based travelers](#).

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical and mental disabilities, but the government does not make a significant effort to implement the law, inform the public of it, or combat societal prejudice against persons with disabilities. The law requires that all newly constructed or renovated public parks and buildings provide access, but persons with disabilities have minimal access to public transportation, and ramps are almost nonexistent. Public transportation workers often are unwilling to transport persons with physical disabilities, forcing them to find taxis, which were often out of their financial reach and frequently not equipped to support patrons with disabilities. Venezuela does not have national standards for accessibility. Most buildings lack accommodations for those with disabilities. Review the State Department’s webpage on security for [travelers with disabilities](#).

Drug-related Crimes

Drug trafficking is a serious problem in Venezuela, and Venezuelan authorities treat it as such. Convicted traffickers receive lengthy prison sentences of between eight to ten years. Lack of international counternarcotic cooperation in Venezuela, along with a shift in trafficking patterns in the region has made Venezuela one of the biggest drug-transit countries in the region.

The continued presence of the ELN and FARC in the border region between Venezuela and Colombia, and in Bolivar state, continues to be a serious concern. Along with kidnapping and smuggling operations, the ELN and FARC each uses the drug trade and gold mining to finance its operations. Groups not affiliated with the FARC or ELN also engage in drug trafficking and other illicit activities.

There is also evidence of involvement in the drug trade by some high-level Venezuelan government and military officials. Although the press reports on drug seizures, large quantities of illicit drugs continue to flow through Venezuela to markets in the United States and Europe.



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Kidnapping Threat

There is a significant risk of kidnapping in Venezuela, especially in the border region between Venezuela and Colombia where elements associated with FARC and the ELN operate with impunity. The State Department recently added a [kidnapping risk indicator](#) to Venezuela's Travel Advisory.

Colombian guerrilla groups have historically engaged in occasional kidnapping activity in Venezuelan territory. The ELN has reportedly held victims captive on the Venezuelan side of the border in recent years, though in most cases the abduction itself has taken place in Colombia. Other Colombian armed groups occasionally carry out kidnappings in Venezuelan border areas. Such groups are likely to transport their victims over the border and are more likely than criminal gangs to hold them captive for several weeks or months.

Kidnapping remains a problem in municipalities near the border with Colombia, particularly in the states of Táchira and Zulia. Since the termination of peace talks between the ELN and the Colombian government, the ELN and other guerrilla groups will likely continue to engage in kidnap for ransom. In the context of spiraling inflation, kidnappers will primarily target wealthy local nationals and expatriates with access to foreign currency. kidnappers will primarily target wealthy local nationals and expatriates with access to foreign currency.

Kidnapping-for-ransom levels began to rise in Venezuela after the fall in oil prices in 2014 with the onset of the financial crisis. Since 2016, Control Risks has recorded a moderate reduction in incidents, amid a deteriorating economic environment, as the Bolívar (Venezuela's national currency) has depreciated to the extent that any substantial cash ransom payment is nearly impossible to transport and the cost of keeping victims captive is too expensive for many criminals. However, rates remain elevated compared with other countries in the region, and further incidents are likely occurring but going unreported due to a lack of trust in the authorities.

Most kidnapping incidents occur in Caracas. However, kidnapping gangs also operate in nearby states such as Miranda, Carabobo, and Aragua, and sporadic cases occur further afield.

It is also against this backdrop that gangs have more or less abandoned traditional express kidnapping, which involves the abduction of an individual who they force, under threat of injury or death, to withdraw funds from ATMs. Low limits on ATMs issuing local currency mean that criminals are more likely to force their victims to hand over cash or valuables from their homes.

Most kidnappings involve criminal gangs of varying capabilities, some of which have links with law-enforcement agencies. A large proportion of the gangs that target the capital and Miranda state operate from or have links with gangs in high-crime Caracas neighborhoods such as Cota 905, El Cementerio, La Vega, and El Valle. Kidnappers are often well armed, with many even carrying grenades, which they use to force victims out of vehicles.

Review OSAC's report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#)



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Other Issues

In Venezuela, it is illegal to take pictures of sensitive buildings, including the presidential palace, military bases, government buildings, and airports. Review OSAC's report, [Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography](#).

Read the State Department's webpage on [customs and import restrictions](#) for information on what you cannot take into or out of other countries.

Police Response

The emergency line in Venezuela is **911**. Operators speak Spanish. Download the State Department's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

Police attempt to patrol most of Caracas but are unable to provide the coverage necessary to deter violent crime, especially at night, and in the poorer areas of the city. While investigative police follow-up is intermittent and they rarely catch perpetrators of crimes, officers will generally respond to ongoing emergencies. Police response is generally slow to crime scenes and traffic accidents; they often do not arrive until many hours after the initial call.

Venezuelan regime officials have previously proposed increasing the budget for the military and local police to combat the rapidly rising crime rate. Corruption, inadequate police training and equipment, insufficient central government funding, and rapidly deteriorating economic conditions dramatically reduce the effectiveness of the security forces. Media reports often identify police abuse and police involvement in crimes, including illegal and arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and excessive use of force. The extrajudicial actions of the police coincide with an increase in the lethality of the police action and a lack of professionalism. Deaths of people at the hands of the police or military authorities under the argument that they resisted authority increased in a remarkable and worrying way.

The judicial system is notoriously corrupt and inefficient. Civil cases take years to process, and criminal cases take much longer. Politics has largely compromised the judicial system, since former president Hugo Chávez put judges into the Supreme Court friendly to his government. Corruption is a major problem under the current administration as well, made worse by fact that Maduro has refused to undertake reforms that would alleviate deep-rooted problems such as corruption – because the regime uses corruption as a mechanism to reward and control its own allies in government. The judicial branch is beholden to the regime and so is the virtually the entire membership of the Supreme Court.



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Police and Security Agencies

The Bolivarian National Police (PNB) answers to the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, and is responsible for general crime prevention and patrolling around government buildings and diplomatic facilities. Although it technically is a national police force, outside of Caracas the PNB currently only operates in a few cities across six states: Anzoátegui, Aragua, Carabobo, Lara, Táchira, and Zulia. Where it operates, the PNB is the first responder for major demonstrations and riots, as well as being responsible for traffic safety and patrolling major roads and highways. The government plans to increase the size of the PNB so that it can operate across the country, but there is no clear timeline for the proposed expansion.

The Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) is part of the Venezuelan armed forces and reports to the Defense Ministry. GNB provides support for drug investigations and anti-drug operations while also providing security at Venezuela's borders, ports, and airports. It has also been engaged in political repression, preventing National Assembly deputies from accessing the Federal Legislative Palace to meet.

The Scientific, Penal, and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC) is part of the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace. As Venezuela's main national investigative body, CICPC is roughly equivalent to the FBI. It is responsible for investigating most crimes (e.g. property crimes, violent crimes, fraud, and kidnapping). CICPC has specialized units, similar to SWAT, responsible for dangerous arrests and hostage situations. It also serves as Venezuela's representative to INTERPOL.

The Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) investigates crimes against the government and provides protective details for government officials. SEBIN has specialized tactical units, as well as an explosive ordnance disposal capability. SEBIN and DGCIM (the military counterintelligence agency) also serves as the Venezuelan government's civilian intelligence and counterintelligence agencies.

The National Anti-drug Office (ONA) reports to the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, and provides counternarcotic intelligence and analysis support to various other Venezuelan law enforcement agencies. It also supports drug rehabilitation centers and coordinates the government's anti-drug campaign.

Limited reports of harassment of U.S. citizens by Venezuelan airport authorities and some segments of the police do occur. Report any incident to the American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá at ACSBogota@state.gov.

Medical Emergencies

The medical infrastructure has deteriorated in Venezuela and, as public facilities fail, private clinics have become severely overtaxed and crowded. Seeing a physician can be a trying experience, often requiring a several-hour wait. The government strictly controls medical supplies; medicines and medical equipment availability at local facilities is unpredictable at best and completely absent at worst.



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There are many U.S.-trained and/or English-speaking physicians available in Venezuela. Unfortunately, their staffs often do not speak English. Private clinics/hospitals are the only recommended facilities. Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the Embassy's [Medical Assistance page](#).

Strongly consider supplemental insurance to cover medical evacuation (medevac). Serious medical conditions will require medevac to the United States. Ensure you have sufficient quantities of all medications for the duration of your stay. Always carry your prescription medication in original packaging with a doctor's prescription.

Tap water in Venezuela is not potable. Use bottled water for drinking and brushing teeth. Avoid fruit you cannot peel, and all raw vegetables. Review OSAC's report, [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#)

Venezuelan authorities have reported confirmed cases of measles in nine states: Bolivar, Capital District, Miranda, Monagas, Delta Amacuro, Apure, Anzoátegui, and Vargas. Immunization levels among the local population have deteriorated seriously, and all travelers should ensure that they have received full series of all childhood immunizations before arrival in Venezuela. Children who will be staying for prolonged periods should have all immunizations up to date, as availability of immunizations in Venezuela is sporadic. The CDC recommends that travelers to Venezuela have the following up-to-date vaccinations at least four weeks before traveling to Venezuela: measles/mumps/rubella (MMR); diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT); polio; hepatitis A; hepatitis B; typhoid; rabies; and yellow fever (for travelers over nine months of age).

Mosquito control measures have also deteriorated, and malaria cases have returned to areas that had not had cases for many years. Check with CDC or other sources for the need for malaria prophylaxis in the areas you are visiting. Other mosquito borne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue, and Zika virus are highly prevalent. Purchase CDC-recommended topical repellants before arrival in Venezuela.

The following parasitic diseases are present: Chagas; Malaria; Leishmaniasis; and Schistosomiasis.

Venezuela requires a yellow fever vaccination certificate for travelers arriving from Brazil. All travelers should consider yellow fever vaccination except those only visiting the following regions: Aragua, Carabobo, Miranda, Vargas, Yaracuy, Distrito Federal (including Caracas), the city of Valencia, and high-altitude areas. A single vaccination is now sufficient to confer sustained life-long immunity against the disease; administer it at least ten days in advance of travel for full effect.

Consider Hepatitis A and B vaccines prior to travel.

Consider the typhoid fever vaccine, administered via injection (in one dose) or orally (four doses). The vaccine is only 50-80% effective, so travelers to areas with a risk of exposure to typhoid fever, a bacterial disease, should also take hygienic precautions (e.g. drink only bottled water, avoid undercooked foods, wash hands regularly, etc.). Children can receive the shot beginning at two years of age (six for the oral vaccine).



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Consider rabies vaccination for travel to remote areas and if you will be at high risk of exposure (e.g. undertaking activities that will bring you into contact with dogs, cats, bats, or other mammals). Post exposure prophylaxis is also available, and should be sought as soon as possible following contact with an animal suspected of being infected (e.g. bites and scratches).

There is currently no malaria vaccine. However, various antimalarial prophylactics are available by prescription and can reduce risk of infection by up to 90%. Medications depend on the risk level and the strains of the virus present in the destination. Take antimalarial tablets throughout the trip and for as long as four weeks following the trip to maintain effect.

The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Venezuela](#).

Review OSAC's reports, [The Healthy Way](#), [Traveling with Medication](#), [Shaken: The Don'ts of Alcohol Abroad](#), [Health 101: How to Prepare for Travel](#), and [Fire Safety Abroad](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

The Caracas Country Council meets regularly. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's [Latin America team](#) with any questions or for information on joining.

U.S. Embassy Contact Information

The U.S. Embassy in Caracas suspended operations in March 2019 and cannot provide protection or consular services to U.S. citizens in Venezuela.

U.S. citizens in Venezuela in need of assistance, or those concerned about a U.S. citizen in Venezuela, should email ACSBogota@state.gov or VenezuelaEmergencyUSC@state.gov; or call 1-888-407-4747 (from the U.S. & Canada) or +1-202-501-4444 (from Overseas).

Helpful Information

Before you travel, consider the following resources:

- [OSAC Risk Matrix](#)
- [OSAC Travelers Toolkit](#)
- [State Department Traveler's Checklist](#)
- [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#)
- [Venezuela](#) Country Information Sheet



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