



Switzerland 2020 OSAC Crime & Safety Report: Bern



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Bern. OSAC encourages travelers to [use this report](#) to gain baseline knowledge of security conditions in Switzerland. For more in-depth information, review OSAC's [Switzerland 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 Switzerland at Level 1, indicating travelers should exercise normal precautions. 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 Bern as being a **LOW**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Non-violent petty crime, vehicle thefts (includes cars, bicycles, and motorcycles), and burglaries remain the primary concerns throughout Switzerland. Instances of violent crime are relatively low compared to cities of similar size and demographics in neighboring countries. Drug-related offenses are common but generally do not involve violence. The highest rates of reported crime occur primarily in cities with high tourist traffic.

Bern is a relatively safe city, but criminal activity can occur day or night. Most crimes are non-violent and involve petty theft, pickpocketing, or burglary. In 2019, there were 16,153 thefts, including pickpocketing, were reported in Bern, a 10% increase from 14,685 reported cases in 2018. Remain alert in public areas for pickpocketing and petty theft, which are the most common crimes against U.S. travelers in Switzerland. Areas with high incidents of petty theft and pick pocketing include:

- Bern's old town tourist area in the city center;
- Large shopping areas (such as the Westside Shopping Mall);
- Bundesplatz and Barenplatz (open markets);
- Train stations;
- Bern-Belp International Airport (BRN), including the bus terminal at the airport;
- Grocery markets;
- Public transportation stops (trams, trains, buses); and
- Hotel lobbies and restaurants.

Statistics show residential break-ins and pickpocketing as the most frequently reported crimes. Instances of pickpocketing remains stable with 1,388 cases reported in 2019. Review OSAC's report, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#).

Statistics show a 10% increase in violent crime in 2019. However, Switzerland has a lower crime rate than the U.S. in both violent and non-violent crime. In 2019, the Canton of Bern recorded three homicides, down from seven in 2018. There was an increase both in reported assaults (3,264) and rape (73) throughout the Canton of Bern.

Switzerland still faces the challenges of organized crime. According to police publications, Switzerland is home to active organized crime elements from:

- Italy, conducting money laundering;
- Southeast Europe (e.g. Serbia, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo), conducting drug trafficking, money laundering, trafficking of migrants, extortion, and property crimes;
- Russia, conducting money laundering, property crimes, and thefts;
- China, conducting extortion, human trafficking, blackmail, credit card fraud, drug trafficking, weapons, prostitution, and illegal gambling; and
- West and North Africa, conducting document fraud, drug trafficking, and fraud schemes.

In general, travel in groups, carry only enough money/credit cards to make a purchase, maintain copies of credits cards and identity documents in a safe location, and remain aware of your surroundings. Review OSAC's reports, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#) and [Taking Credit](#).

Cybersecurity Issues

The Swiss Government has not released formal statistics on cybercrime since 2015, but newsletters and other information on cyber trends are available through the [Reporting and Analysis Center for Information Assurance \(MELANI\)](#).

Hacking and data breaches continue to be a concern in Switzerland, as cyberattacks continue to become more sophisticated and increase worldwide. Cybercriminals use spam and phishing e-mails to compromise victim's online accounts and steal personal information. E-mails containing e-banking malware are also common. Variations of the malware can also capture keyboard entries and network traffic in order to steal usernames and passwords.

Cyber actors target business accounts for information on payment methods and outstanding invoices. Criminals use the information to send fake invoices demanding payment to a designated account. Criminals also perpetrate fraud through false advertisements, online auctions, classified advertising websites, and fictitious real estate offerings. Cyber actors also target businesses to gain unauthorized access to business networks and proprietary information.

Cybercrime incidents have become increasingly professional; the grammar and spelling in phishing attempts and fraudulent e-mails are of a higher standard than they once were, and the layout and design are of a better quality. This makes it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between genuine and fake content. Review OSAC's reports, [Cybersecurity Basics](#).

Switzerland has very stringent laws protecting personal privacy. However, travelers should always use good security practices when communicating on mobile devices or other electronic media. Protect devices and personal information to avoid potential exploitation. Review OSAC's report, [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#) and [Traveling with Mobile Devices: Trends & Best Practices](#).

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Switzerland offers a well-maintained network of roads. Switzerland has four official languages; travelers should prepare for the signage to change languages throughout the country. Swiss highways are toll roads; drivers must purchase a *vignette* sticker (for 40 Swiss Francs), which drivers affix to the inside of the windshield, to use the highway system. Vignettes are available for purchase at gas stations, post offices, or any manned vehicle border crossing.

The minimum driving age is 18. Authorities enforce traffic laws strictly; police can impose on-the-spot fines, which, for grievous violations, can reach up to 10% of the driver's annual salary. Drivers must keep headlights on at all times. Vehicles must carry third-party liability insurance. All occupants must wear safety belts. Trams, police vehicles, ambulances, fire trucks, and buses always have the right of way, and pedestrians have the right-of-way at striped crosswalks.

Local police have the right to perform on-the-spot breathalyzer tests; the BAC limit is .05 grams/liter (approximately one beer). Police will levy a fine on drivers who have a BAC between .50-.79 g/l, and could take them to jail; police could fine and arrest drivers with BAC higher than .80 g/l, as well as confiscating their Swiss driver's license for a minimum of three months.

Comply with imposed safety restrictions (e.g. maintaining proper distance between vehicles and proper speed). The maximum speed limit (if not posted) is 120 km/h on highways, 80 km/h on open road, 50 km/h in town, and 30 km/h in residential areas.

Due to limited resources, police prioritize response to incidents that involve injuries.

As a training tool, visitors can test their knowledge of Swiss regulations for drivers and cyclists [online](#).

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](#).

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation throughout Switzerland is safe and reliable. Be aware of pick-pockets and do not leave bags unattended. Most reported thefts occur on public buses, trams and trains, and at major railway stations. The SBB IC trains running from Bern to Zurich and Bern to Geneva are frequent targets for luggage and electronic device thefts.

Travelers must purchase train, bus or tram tickets and validate them by punching them in validating machines prior to boarding (machines can be found near the entrance of train stations or tram and bus stops). Tickets cannot be bought on the train, bus, or tram. Failure to follow this procedure may result in an on-the-spot fine by an inspector. If the violator does not pay the fine on the spot, it will automatically double.

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

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Security measures are on par with U.S. airports. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) assessed the government of Switzerland's Civil Aviation Authority as compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of Switzerland's air carrier operations.

Terrorism Threat

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

Extremists have viewed Switzerland as a place for planning, funding, and logistical support for terrorist operations, but not as a target for attacks. Recent events across Europe, however, highlight a new paradigm of terrorist planning and attack execution. The Schengen Agreement, to which Switzerland is party, allows free movement between member countries; this can make tracking cross-border movements of potential terrorists more difficult. Swiss authorities work well with neighboring countries to investigate and thwart potential attacks.

In 2015, the Swiss Federal Council adopted a counter-terrorism strategy with the main objectives of preventing attacks in Switzerland, preventing the export of terrorism from Switzerland, and preventing Switzerland from use as a breeding ground for terrorism. In 2017, Switzerland adopted a [National Action Plan](#) (NAP) to combat radicalization and violent extremism. The NAP expands police authorities and implements new measures to investigate those suspected of extremist activities. The 2019 Swiss Federal Intelligence Service [annual security report](#) is also available.

In 2018, Moroccan authorities arrested two Swiss citizens with origins in Geneva for having been involved into the murders of two Scandinavian tourists in Morocco.

Since September 2016, police have reported 28 suspicious cases, none of which resulted in a Federal (FedPol) "real" Investigations.

Anti-U.S. Sentiment

While there is no widespread anti-U.S. sentiment in Switzerland, the global call for self-radicalization, whether disseminated on extremist forums or via social media, continues.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Bern as being a **LOW**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Protests do occur in Switzerland, but authorities monitor protest activities. Urban areas regularly experience demonstrations, mostly on global trade and political issues, and some occasionally sparked by U.S. foreign policy. Protests held during the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) occasionally draw protestors from across Europe. Although there have been protests near the U.S. Embassy, the majority of demonstrations occur in close proximity to the *Bundeshaus* (Parliament), which is less than a kilometer away.

Other known locations for demonstrations in the Bern area include the Bundesplatz, Israeli Embassy, Iranian Embassy, Indian Embassy, Turkish Embassy, and the Old City area.

Historically, demonstrations have been peaceful, with protesters registering for police permits. Protesters have blocked traffic; spray-painted areas with graffiti, and on rare occasions, clashed with police. Political extremist or anarchist groups sometimes instigate civil unrest. Right-wing activists have targeted refugees, asylum seekers, and foreigners, while left-wing activists (who historically have demonstrated a greater propensity toward violence in Switzerland) usually target organizations involved with globalization and law enforcement. Swiss police have at their disposal tear gas and water cannons, which they rarely use. Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Relative to its small size, a significant number of refugees have also come to Switzerland. However, the number of refugees applying for asylum in Switzerland has decreased over the two years. To date, there have been no specific reports of major crimes or violence associated with refugees in Switzerland.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Switzerland is a leader in response to natural and man-made disasters. In the event of a natural disaster, the commune or the canton takes charge and manages assistance from fire, police, sanitary, and other civil-protection authorities. In case of extreme weather or serious earthquakes, the national alarm center is responsible for sending the alerts of the Swiss Meteorological Office or the Swiss Seismological Service to the affected cantons, the military, the Federal Police, and all other concerned parties. Resources are limited, however, and if multiple locations succumb to a disaster, a single canton would request assistance from neighboring cantons. Earthquakes and floods have occurred in the Valais and Fribourg cantons. Download the "[AlertSwiss](#)" app for real-time information.

Switzerland is a popular destination for outdoor sports enthusiasts, including skiing, hiking, and mountain climbing. Alpine hazards such as avalanches and snowdrifts, landslides and flooding, glacial crevasses, falling rocks, sun exposure, and sudden weather changes are common year-round. Although safety standards are excellent, be aware that public safety warnings are not comparable to those found in the United States. While hiking paths and ski slopes are clearly marked, not all possibly hazardous situations will have clear warning signs. Use common sense and caution when enjoying the outdoors. Stay on designated paths or slopes, follow the advice given by local authorities and guides, take note of weather forecasts and conditions, stay in a team of at least two when participating in mountain activities, and inform someone of your plans and anticipated time of return.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Switzerland has a highly developed telecommunications infrastructure with extensive domestic and international services. The country has one of the highest broadband penetration rates in Europe. Although it is not a member of the EU, Switzerland follows the EU's telecom framework and regulations.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Theft

Switzerland is a major international financial center vulnerable to the layering and integration stages of money laundering. Despite significant legislation and reporting requirements, secrecy rules persist and nonresidents may conduct business through offshore entities and various intermediaries. In recent years, Switzerland has responded to increasing pressure from neighboring countries and trading partners to reform its banking secrecy laws, by agreeing to conform to OECD regulations on administrative assistance in tax matters, including tax evasion. The Swiss Government has also renegotiated its double taxation agreements with numerous countries, including the U.S., to incorporate OECD standards.

Personal Identity Concerns

Extremists, including skinheads, who express hostility toward foreigners, ethnic and religious minorities, and immigrants continue to be active based on media and police reports.

Violence against women remains a serious problem. The law penalizes domestic violence and stalking. A court may order an abusive spouse to leave the family home temporarily. A 2019 study commissioned by Amnesty International Switzerland found that 12% of Swiss women had been forced into nonconsensual sexual intercourse, while 59% experienced sexual harassment in the form of unwanted physical contact. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [female travelers](#).

The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, nationality laws, and access to government services based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. According to media, there were multiple reports of societal violence or discrimination based on opposition to LGBTI+ status. The umbrella organization for gay men, Pink Cross, stated that violence against LGBTI+ individuals remains a significant problem, and that the organization's helpline received on average four calls per week regarding violent attacks against LGBTI+ persons in 2019. In May several men trashed an awareness-raising stand to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia; and in June, three men attacked and physically injured a gay couple following Zurich's Pride Parade. In September, five men beat up two young men kissing in public in Zurich, leaving them with broken teeth and several facial hematomas. Authorities arrested one perpetrator involved in destroying the awareness stand, while investigations continued in the other two cases.

Pink Cross and the NGO Transgender Network reported that bullying in the work place remains a problem for LGBTI+ persons. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [LGBTI+ travelers](#).

The 2018 Anti-Semitism Report, produced jointly by the SIG/FSCI and the Foundation against Racism and Anti-Semitism (GRE), cited 577 anti-Semitic incidents, including 535 cases of anti-Semitic online hate speech, in the German-speaking part of the country in 2018. The report documented one incident of assault against Jews involving a man following a group of Orthodox Jewish men, threatening them with a knife, and yelling anti-Semitic insults. In 2018, the Geneva-based Intercommunity Center for Coordination against Anti-Semitism and Defamation reported 174 anti-Semitic incidents, including approximately 111 cases of online anti-Semitic hate speech, including insults and Holocaust denials on social media sites such as YouTube, in the French-speaking region. The report noted a resurgence of right-wing extremist activities and anti-Semitic incidents. The report also observed a continued rise in anti-Semitic incidents online from right-wing, left-wing, and Islamic groups, 21% of which were motivated by the myth of a global Jewish conspiracy controlling the world. The report further mentioned the growing trivialization of the Holocaust under the guise of "childish jokes." Review OSAC's report, [Freedom to Practice](#), and the State Department's webpage on security for [faith-based travelers](#).

Many sidewalks are narrow and uneven, and cobblestone streets can make access difficult, but most major tourist areas have better facilities. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [travelers with disabilities](#).

Drug-related Crime

Switzerland is a transit country for and consumer of South American cocaine, Southwest Asian heroin, and Western European synthetic drugs, with domestic cannabis cultivation and limited ecstasy production.

Since 2011, individuals in Switzerland can legally purchase and consume cannabis containing up to 1% tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) - the component that produces the psychotropic effect of being high. Despite the lower levels of THC, locally procured cannabis contains higher levels of cannabidiol (CBD) that may produce other side effects. If police suspect that the cannabis does not comply with local drug laws, they can require a laboratory test for THC levels and issue fines for illegal possession if it is above 1%. Legal cannabis is available for sale in shops licensed to sell the product. Cannabis sold on the street is likely illegal and may result in the arrest of anyone who possesses it.

A market for marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and synthetic drugs exists within the Canton of Bern. Drug-related crimes decreased by 1% in Bern to 12,043 cases, the majority of which were possession-related incidents.

Kidnapping Threat

Since 2010, police have developed a rapid and comprehensive alarm system, using electronic road signs, text alerts, and radio/television airtime in cases that involve a suspected kidnapping or threat to the life of a minor. This system functions much like the Amber Alert System in the United States.

The cantons, which have almost autonomous authority in such cases, are normally cooperative and responsive. Challenges have sometimes arisen when cantonal courts and child welfare agencies ruled in support of the Swiss parent in parental abduction cases.

Canton of Bern reported 42 false imprisonment/abduction cases in 2019, an increase from 25 in 2018. Review OSAC's report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#).

Police Response

The police emergency line in Switzerland is **117**. Police are highly professional, but their response to requests for assistance may be delayed due to the limited availability of bilingual police officers or based on the severity of the incident (e.g. severe injuries, weapons involved).

The federal police maintain internal security. The army is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities. Police report to the Federal Department of Justice and Police, while the army reports to the Federal Department of Defense, Civil Protection, and Sport. For local first responders, refer to the U.S. Embassy Bern's [Emergency Assistance page](#). Download the State Department's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

Medical Emergencies

The medical emergency line in Switzerland is **144**. If you suspect a heart attack, explicitly request cardiac assistance. Ambulance crews can include a cardiologist or stroke unit as needed and available. Outside of a major metropolitan center, it may take more time for first responders and medical professionals to stabilize a patient and provide life-saving assistance. Additional information regarding hospitals/clinics is available [online](#). Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the [U.S. Embassy website](#).

The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends purchasing international health insurance before traveling internationally. Review the State Department's webpage on [insurance overseas](#). Mountain rescues can be extremely expensive. Maintain sufficient insurance coverage that includes coverage for mountain search and rescue. The non-profit foundation Swiss Air Rescue Organization ([REGA](#)) offers a membership that waives the costs of rescue missions; many Swiss citizens are members; U.S. citizens are able to join as well.

Tick-borne encephalitis (TBE) is common. Travelers planning high-risk activities (camping, adventure travel) should take precautions. A vaccine for TBE exists but is unavailable in the United States. For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, visit the CDC page on [Switzerland](#).

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

OSAC Country Council Information

The Switzerland Country Council is active and alternates meetings between Bern and Geneva. Contact OSAC's [Europe team](#) for more information or to join.

U.S. Embassy Contact Information

U.S. Embassy Bern offers a full range of consular services to U.S. nationals in Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

U.S. Embassy Bern, Sulgeneckstrasse 19, Bern 3007

Regular hours: 0830 – 1230 and 1330 – 1730, Monday – Friday.

Regional Security Officer: +49 (0) 31 357-7296

Duty Officer: +49 (0) 79 709-2715

Emergency situations after business hours or during the weekend: +49 (0) 31 357-7777

Consular issues: +49 (0) 31 357-7011

Website: <http://ch.usembassy.gov/>

Other U.S. Diplomatic Posts In Switzerland

[Consular Agency Geneva](#), Rue François-Versonnex 7, CH-1207 Geneva.

[Consular Agency Zurich](#), Dufourstrasse 101, 3rd floor, 8008 Zurich.

[U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva](#), Route de Pregny 11, CH-1292 Geneva. +41 (0) 22 749 41 11.

[Virtual Presence Post Liechtenstein](#)

Helpful Information

Before you travel, consider the following resources:

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