



Dominican Republic 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses the Dominican Republic at Level 2, indicating that travelers should exercise increased caution due to crime.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

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Review OSAC's [Dominican Republic-specific 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.

Crime Threats

There is considerable risk from crime in Santo Domingo. Crime continues to be the number one safety concern in the Dominican Republic both for Dominicans and for the U.S. Embassy.

The most common type of crime is the drive-by robbery performed by one or two assailants (usually male) on a motorcycle, scooter, or even a bicycle. The assailant will drive up to their potential victim and grab anything in arm's reach. Often they will stop; one of the assailants will then disembark and point a handgun at the victim, demanding valuables. Although armed assaults are more likely to occur at night or when traveling by foot, they can also occur during the day while the victim is in a vehicle stopped at a traffic light. The wide availability of weapons, the use of drugs, and the weak criminal justice system all contribute to the high level of criminality in the country. Purse-snatchers and briefcase thieves work hotel bars and restaurants, waiting for unknowing guests to place these items on chairs or underneath tables.

During the holiday season (November-January) and particularly during carnival (February), the overall level of crime, specifically thefts and robberies, tends to rise.

Crime is generally not violent, if the victim cooperates. However, an assailant will not hesitate to use violence if the victim resists, which can result in serious consequences. In 2018, homicides in the Dominican Republic continued to decrease, dropping to 1,353 compared to 1,561 in 2017 and 1,616 in 2016. Even with the decrease, the murder rate remains approximately 12.5/100,000, which places it among the most murderous 10-15% of countries in the world. An overwhelming majority of homicides were committed during the commission of a robbery.

The 2018 crime statistics from the Dominican National Police list the cities where the majority of reported criminal acts occurred by category. Preliminary crime statistics from January to November 2018 revealed that the five highest-ranking provinces for homicide in the year were Bahoruco (23 per 100,000), Peravia (21 per 100,000), La Romana (20 per 100,000), Barahona (18 per 100,000), and La Altagracia (18 per 100,000). The top five provinces for reported robberies were the Greater Santo Domingo, National District, Santiago, La Romana, and La Altagracia. The 2018 crime statistics from the Attorneys General's office show the highest incidents of sexual assaults occurred in the provinces of Santo Domingo Este with 1,440 reported cases, Santiago with 673, National District with 525, La Vega with 397, San Cristobal with 373 and Higuey with 315.

The Dominican Republic is also facing challenges with organized crime, which involves a variety of activities, including drug trafficking and money laundering. This situation is worse due to a lack of law enforcement resources, poorly paid and trained police officers, and rampant corruption.

Fraud schemes, particularly credit card fraud, continue. ATM card skimming is rampant, though most take place at ATMs not located inside banks, malls, and hotels. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#).

The fraud scheme most attributed to the Dominican Republic, called the "Grandparents Scam," is when someone pretending to be a police officer or a representative from the U.S. Embassy calls an elderly relative of a U.S. citizen claiming to have arrested a young relative. They sound credible and pressure the elderly relative to wire money for "bond," "damages," or "legal fees." someone claiming to be a U.S. Embassy representative will answer the callback number they leave. Due to a high number of U.S. tourists, the Dominican Republic the country in which the purported incident is said to be occurring. Based on U.S. Embassy investigations, the callers often are not based in the Dominican Republic, nor does the wired money end up in the Dominican Republic. The U.S. Embassy regularly receives calls from U.S.-based victims of this scam.

Cybersecurity Issues

The threat from transnational cyber criminals is of increasing concern to host government authorities.

Other Areas of Concern

If driving between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, or traveling to the border region, consult the [OSAC Crime & Safety Report](#) and [Country Specific Information](#) for Haiti, and the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince [website](#) for information about travel conditions. The border areas between Haiti and the Dominican Republic are often regions where nationalistic tensions can result in violence; Dominican authorities delay some U.S. citizens at checkpoints while reviewing their passports and questioning their purpose of travel. Bring such situations to the attention of the U.S. Embassy. Additionally, border crossings are frequently subject to sudden closure.

As gasoline prices remain at a premium, many people convert their vehicles to propane gas, which is a cheaper fuel. The nozzles of the tanks that hold propane tanks ruptured easily in an accident, and the tanks themselves sometimes secure improperly to the vehicle. If a collision occurs involving a vehicle using propane gas, the result is often a massive explosion, which is often fatal or severely injures the occupants of the vehicles and bystanders.

Transportation-Safety Situation

For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Security in Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Take the proper safety precautions when driving in the Dominican Republic and familiarize yourself with the local traffic laws and customs. Local law requires that police take a driver into custody when an accident results in serious injury/death, even if the driver is insured and appears not to have been at fault; only the driver will be taken into custody. The minimum detention period is 48 hours; however, detentions could last until a judicial decision is reached (often weeks or months) or until the injured party signs a waiver (usually as the result of a settlement). Visitors may consider hiring a driver during their stay. Obtain licensed drivers familiar with local road conditions through local car rental and travel agencies.

For those planning to self-drive, offensive and defensive driving skills are a necessity. Although traffic laws are similar to those in the U.S., a lack of adequate traffic controls and enforcement result in hostile driving conditions and frequent car accidents. Drivers are commonly aggressive and erratic, often failing to yield the right of way or engaging in road rage. Local laws require the use of seat belts, the use of hands-free cellular devices while driving, and the use of helmets by motorcyclists, although in practice these are rarely enforced. Police conduct random stops of vehicles in order to check documentation. Police can delay or fine individuals found to violate the law, or ask them to pay a "fee" on the spot. For more information on self-driving, review OSAC's Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Pedestrians tend to step out into traffic without regard to corners, crosswalks, or traffic signals. The lack of street lighting is notable, and contributes to pedestrian and vehicular deaths. Pedestrians do not have the right of way, so walking along or crossing busy streets can be very dangerous, even in crosswalks, at intersections with signals, or areas of traffic police presence.

Although the Dominican Republic criminalizes driving under the influence of alcohol, there is no maximum blood alcohol content specified in the law. Therefore, in practice, enforcement is non-existent. Traffic accidents related to driving under the influence often result in serious injury/death. This is especially the case during weekends and holidays, and when commercial vehicles are involved.

According to the 2018 World Health Organization (WHO) Global Status report on Road Safety, the Dominican Republic has the 13th-most dangerous roads in the world, with 29.4 deaths in traffic accidents for every 100,000 residents each year. It ranks the third highest in Latin America.

Travel at night on intercity highways and in rural areas can be highly dangerous and is not advised due to animals on the road, poor road conditions, and vehicles being driven at either very slow or excessive speeds, often with malfunctioning headlights or taillights. Rolling blackouts within the urban and rural areas increase the danger of night travel. Streetlights outside of major urban areas are uncommon.

Public Transportation Conditions

For intercity travel, consider one of the more reputable tourist bus companies such as Caribe Tours or Metro. For travel within the city, use hotel, call-ahead, or smartphone-app based taxi services. For safety reasons, avoid using public transportation, such as route taxis (*carros públicos*) and urban buses (*guaguas*).

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration assesses through its International Aviation Safety Program that the Dominican Republic meets International Civil Aviation standards. The last reported commercial aviation incident occurred in 1996. The only airline operating flights to and from the Dominican Republic that the U.S. government prohibits its employees from using is Insel Air, based in Aruba.

Terrorism Threat

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is minimal risk from terrorism in Santo Domingo. There are no known organized domestic terrorist groups. Santo Domingo experienced its first incident of domestic terrorism in 2014, when a male ignited an incendiary device on a crowded subway car, killing one person and injuring dozens. The Dominican Republic is an integral part of the Caribbean, with several international airports; as such, it is a likely transit point for extremists from within the region, Africa, and Europe.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is minimal risk from political violence in Santo Domingo. Politically motivated protests, demonstrations, and general strikes occur periodically, particularly during general election years. Previous political demonstrations have turned violent, with participants rioting and erecting roadblocks.

Civil unrest has become a common occurrence in the last several years due to the lack of adequate electricity, water resources, and the public opinion from certain groups that the government is not actively protecting the national patrimony. Demonstrations and strikes have occurred outside of Santo Domingo without advance notice, and have turned violent.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Occasionally, inter-ethnic disputes may arise due more to socio-economic pressures than an outright ethnic conflict or clash of religious ideologies.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

The Dominican Republic is located in the center of the Antillean archipelago that places the island in the pathway of severe weather, including hurricanes, tropical storms, tropical depressions, and other natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, floods, droughts). Many buildings do not comply with U.S. hurricane and seismic codes.

The largest reoccurring natural disaster threat is hurricanes, along with resultant landslides and flooding in low lying and coastal areas susceptible to the influence of tidal surge. The Atlantic hurricane season runs from June 1-November 30.

The Dominican Republic lies on several fault lines running through the Caribbean. Of particular note is the "Submarine Fault" between the easternmost part of the Dominican Republic and Guadeloupe.

Critical Infrastructure

The potential exists for industrial accidents involving large infrastructure and industrial facilities containing hazardous materials, especially after a natural disaster.

Pollution of lakes and rivers is also a major environmental problem. After storms, pollution from rivers sweeps to sea and impacts nearby beaches.

Four of the country's five international airports are located only slightly above sea level, subjecting them to closure due to flooding in a moderate storm surge.

Other critical infrastructure concerns are the existence of a weak and non-redundant electrical grid, satellite communications subject to weather-related disruption, urban and inter-city road networks insufficient to carry the daily vehicle load and subject to city-crippling traffic jams.

Personal Identity Concerns

There are no legal restrictions on same-sex sexual relations or the organization of LGBTI events in the Dominican Republic.

Dominican law provides for physical access for persons with disabilities to all new public and private buildings, but the authorities do not enforce this provision consistently. Sidewalks are generally in disrepair and pose a hazard to all pedestrians.

Drug-related Crimes

Although the country is not a center of drug production, the Dominican Republic continues to be a transit zone for drugs entering the U.S. and Europe. Drugs frequently channel from Mexico and South America, either by aircraft or through maritime platforms. While cocaine is the most significant drug threat, hashish, heroin, and designer drugs are also readily available.

By law, the possession of any quantity of marijuana (even with a U.S. prescription), cocaine, hallucinogens, barbiturates, amphetamines, or other narcotic drugs is a punishable offense. The law categorizes each offender according to the quantity of the drugs found in his/her possession, and must stand trial in a Court of First Instance. The judicial process may last several years. During the pre-trial period, a defendant remains incarcerated in most cases. The severity of this law was purposeful, to keep the country safe from criminal activities commonly associated with the trafficking, cultivation, and manufacture of narcotics. The Dominican Republic has empowered police and military forces to undertake vigorous efforts to combat the threat from narcotic drugs.

Kidnapping Threat

There is minimal risk from kidnapping in Santo Domingo. U.S. citizens of Dominican descent are occasionally targets of kidnapping for ransom, in which criminals demand families in the U.S. pay a large sum of money to secure the release of the abducted individual. Victims of reported cases include businesspersons, family members, and common citizens. Some victims have reported being abducted by men in police uniforms or similar clothing, and were told that their identity needed to be verified. Kidnappers take victims to an undisclosed location and hold them from a few hours to a couple of days. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#).

Police Response

Corruption and official misconduct remains a serious concern. Police Internal Affairs works to prevent, investigate, monitor, control, and recommend corrective actions for any improper conduct. Although Internal Affairs investigations result in the termination of hundreds of police officers per year, these investigations are regularly under-resourced and unable to make a significant dent in the level of police corruption.

Anyone entering the Dominican Republic, regardless of nationality, is subject to the provisions of Law 50-88. Accordingly, U.S. citizens are subject to punishment under the strict anti-drug measures.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

If arrested or harassed, contact the U.S. Embassy's American Citizens Services section at (809) 567-7775.

Crime Victim Assistance

A prompt police response to reported incidents is normally limited due to local traffic conditions and available resources. However, the Santo Domingo National District has a **911** call center that has dramatically improved response times for police, ambulances, and fire fighters. The system has since expanded to include Santiago, with coverage extending to Puerto Plata, Sosua, La Vega, Moca, and Cabarete. Additional expansion is likely.

The Dominican Republic has a specialized military police force, known as "CESTUR," to assist tourists and to provide first responder-type assistance to tourists. If a visitor is a victim of a crime, CESTUR will help them to get to a police station, file a police report, and seek further assistance. U.S. citizen victims of a crime should contact American Citizens Services as soon as possible at (809) 567-7775.

Police/Security Agencies

The Constitution separates the powers of the National Police and the military. This constitutional provision specifically identifies the military responsibility to maintain the country's sovereignty, leaving the National Police to handle the country's internal security and the protection of its citizens (to include residents, visitors, and diplomats). In 2014, certain functions, such as the tourist police (CESTUR), the border authorities (CESFRONT), and the airport security authorities (CESAC), returned to the military. The National Police remain the main internal security force and the only agency authorized to conduct investigations.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in Santo Domingo is adequate for basic medical needs. Appointments are generally easy to obtain and can be scheduled for the same week. Patients must pay for services at the time of the appointment (or when the ambulance arrives). Ambulance response times range from 10-30 minutes (with the lower end being for private ambulances and the higher end for 911 calls). Available private ambulance services in Santo Domingo include Movimed (809) 532-0000 and Pro Med (809) 948-7200.

Avoid purchasing any prescription medicine from small pharmacies due to the high prevalence of counterfeit drugs. Only use large pharmacy chains.

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

For medical assistance, refer to the Embassy's [Medical Assistance page](#).

Insurance Guidance

Dominican providers do not accept U.S. insurance plans, with the exception of Tricare; they will also not file claims for U.S. patients. Check ensure your medical insurance provides coverage overseas, and consider purchasing supplemental travel insurance. Most health care providers only accept cash payments; these must be made up front, prior to treatment and/or before discharge.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

With an active presence of mosquitos that transmit dengue fever, Zika virus, and chikungunya, the CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for the [Dominican Republic](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

The Country Council in Santo Domingo is active, meeting quarterly. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's [Western Hemisphere Team](#) with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

57 Avenida República de Colombia, Arroyo Hondo, Santo Domingo

Hours of Operation: 0800-1645 Monday-Friday

Embassy Contact Numbers

Main telephone number: (809) 567-7775 (24 hours/day).

Marine Post One: (809) 368-7777

U.S. citizens traveling to the Dominican Republic should register with the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) to ensure they receive pertinent security updates and notices.

Additional Resource: [Dominican Republic](#) Country Information Shee