



Belize 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Belmopan, Belize.

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

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The U.S. Embassy in Belmopan does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms appearing in this report. The American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit cannot recommend a particular individual or location and assumes no responsibility for the quality of service provided.

Review OSAC's [Belize-specific](#) webpage for proprietary analytic reports, consular messages, and contact information.

Crime Threats

There is considerable risk from crime in Belmopan. There is no indication that criminals actively target U.S. citizens in Belize. Tourists and expatriates residing in Belize are more susceptible to incidents of crime due to perceived wealth, particularly when not exhibiting robust personal security practices and situational awareness. Major crimes continue to shift from being concentrated in the high-population area of Belize City to districts in the north, west, and south of Belize, as reported in 2018. A number of violent crimes, including multiple murders, thefts, and home invasions affected long-time expatriates residing in rural communities in 2018.

Confrontational crimes, such as armed robbery and theft, have increased in tourist areas and remote areas alike. Murder, sexual assault, and armed robberies occurred in areas frequented by tourists and expatriates in 2018. Those who practice good personal security are less likely to be impacted. Criminal acts, including extremely violent acts, occur in all areas of Belize.

Notable murders of U.S. citizens occurred in 2018, including the widely publicized murders of U.S. citizens on Ambergris Caye in May, Hopkins in August, and Corozal in October. The police are actively investigating; however, all murders in recent years remain unsolved.

Incidents of pickpocketing, burglary, and hotel room theft are the most common types of non-violent crimes committed against U.S. citizens; these occur throughout Belize. Domestic violence is prevalent. Non-confrontational petty thieves are particularly active in tourist areas and on public transportation. Reports of theft from lodging are common; keep doors locked, even when at home, and secure valuables in locked containers or provided safes. Cooperate if confronted by an intruder.

Break-ins and vandalism of automobiles do occur. Car alarms are a necessary precaution in deterring vehicle thefts and break-ins. Theft of easily pilfered items and sound systems is common.

Corruption, human smuggling/trafficking, the drug trade, money laundering (institutional and trade-based), and local criminal gang activity remain significant criminal problems exacerbated by the low conviction rate. Criminal organizations and individuals often operate beyond the ability of the police to disrupt them.

There is some evidence to suggest that Salvadoran and Guatemalan-based transnational criminal organizations provide logistical support to international drug and human trafficking organizations, and use Belize as a transit country along smuggling routes. Gang tags from 18th Street (*Barrio 18*) and MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha*) have been reported in multiple districts. In 2018, Police reported arrests of individuals with possible gang ties, although there is no indication that formal gang cliques have been established in Belize.

Belize is a source, transit, and destination country for those subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. No human trafficking cases were reported in 2018. Cases from previous years remain pending. Limited resources are available to victims.

	Murders		
	2016	2017	2018
Belize	70	82	94
Cayo	34	28	19
Orange Walk	11	9	8
Stann Creek	11	12	13
Corozal	7	8	5
Toledo	5	3	4
Total	138	142	143

Due to the small population and high per capita murder rate, Belize consistently ranks among the top 10 countries in the world for homicides, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Belize averages approximately 40 homicides per 100,000 residents. The official murder total in 2018 countrywide was 143, with an additional seven cases potentially classifiable as murders pending the conclusion of investigations. The highest murder total on record in Belize is 145, which occurred in 2012. In previous years, the increase was likely due to the displacement of crime from the central hub of criminal gang activity in south Belize City. The murder total in the

Belize District increased by 12 in 2018.

The Belize District, which includes Belize City, continues to have the highest number of murders due in large part to dozens of street gangs that operate in the city. Belmopan, a tiny capital with a population of approximately 16,000 residents and home to several diplomatic missions, including the U.S. Embassy, recorded 16 murders in 2018, five more than 2017. Murders in Belize mostly involve guns (66%), knives (17%), and machetes (8%). Firearm offenses come with strict penalties and can result in lengthy jail sentences.

Fraud related to credit/debit cards occurs in areas frequented by tourists, particularly Belize City and San Pedro. Skimming is most likely to occur in restaurants, bars, and hotels, when the victim's card is out of view. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#).

There have been numerous reports of fraud committed against expatriates and Belizeans attempting to purchase land. Corrupt officials are reportedly involved in fraudulent land title transfers. Consult with a reputable Belizean attorney when purchasing property. Many expatriates have reported being the victim of scams in which land is purchased that was not available, was legally owned by other parties, or was subsequently resold without their knowledge. Due to media coverage implicating high-level complicity in land fraud, the government has renewed efforts to address property disputes by converting physical records to electronic records.

Several high-profile investigations have linked Belizean officials in the alleged sale of illegal Belizean identity documents including passports.

Other Areas of Concern

Minimize travel to the south side of Belize City to official business only, and avoid personal trips due to gang activity. The Belizean government has designated certain areas as crime-ridden, enabling law enforcement and security authorities to conduct random searches without a warrant.

Several tourist areas along the western border with Guatemala have active military patrols due to security incidents. Some excursions to view ruins on the western border with Guatemala require a military patrol.

Transportation-Safety Situation

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

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions are improving, but are still poor; they range from short stretches of newly paved roads in Belize City to decades-old pavement on major highways. Roads in rural areas/villages are typically dirt or loose gravel; road conditions worsen during the rainy season. The primary highways – Philip SW Goldson Highway (northern), George Price Highway (western), Hummingbird, and Southern highways – are generally in better condition (paved) than most roads. The combination of inconsistent paving, bridges with low guard rails, and slick roadways due to rain have been contributing factors in several fatal accidents. Traffic fatalities remain a very real danger.

The major highways are the only reliable avenues to transit the country, aside from airplanes operated by two Belizean commercial carriers. Pedestrians, bicyclists, cars, and buses use the same roads. Stray dogs and wildlife also wander freely in close proximity to the many small villages that line the major highways.

Driving can be extremely hazardous after dusk and during rainstorms.

Defensive driving is critical to navigate the road systems. Local drivers may use turn signals to signify different vehicle movements. For example, a left turn signal may be a signal for your car to pass on the left, or it could indicate a left turn by the vehicle. Always maximize follow distances to ensure an appropriate reactionary gap. Drivers must pull over to the right shoulder of the road and wait until both lanes are clear before turning left on major highways.

Due to the absence of stoplights and vehicular police patrols, speed bumps control speeds, especially in/around small villages, schools, and population centers. Speed bumps can be a significant hazard, as they tend to be very large and are often unmarked; always be aware of them, especially during dusk, dawn, and night driving, as vehicles may slam on their brakes to avoid hitting an unmarked bump.

Most parking is on the street. If left overnight, ensure you park in an area that is well illuminated, with security guards (larger hotels have security guards), and within view of your destination. For more information on self-driving, review OSAC's Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

The police regularly operate checkpoints, especially in/around Belize City and Belmopan, and occasionally along the major highways leading west and south. The police may ask for a form of identification; vehicles must stop at these checkpoints and cooperate fully. Reports of false checkpoints or extortion have been reported but are uncommon.

Public Transportation Conditions

Taxi stands and plazas are located throughout major cities and villages. Identify taxis by their green license plates. Only hail taxis from reputable establishments. Make it clear to the driver that you do not wish to pick up additional passengers. Many vehicles imported into Belize are salvaged from neighboring countries that may not have operational security features such as airbags.

Buses often operate under poor conditions and lack adequate maintenance. Bus drivers often exceed the speed limits, pull over without warning for passengers, and pass where it is unsafe.

Buses and cars often do not yield to pedestrians. Do not walk or exercise after dark, especially if you are a woman. Make a note of emergency telephone numbers and locations you may need; program numbers for police, fire, your hotel, and the U.S. Embassy into your phone.

Other Travel Conditions

Water taxis are an inexpensive and reliable method to travel from Belize City to the cayes (e.g. Caye Caulker, San Pedro). Water taxis are generally safe, but ensure that there are adequate life vests on board.

Individuals wishing to travel via personally-owned vehicles through the interior of Mexico and other Central American countries should exercise caution and seek country specific information.

Terrorism Threat

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is minimal risk from terrorism in Belmopan. In 2017, police in the Philippines killed an individual identified as a Belizean citizen with suspected ties to the Ansar Al-Khilafah Philippines (AKP) terrorist group.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is minimal risk from civil unrest in Belmopan. Political violence is rare. Lawful protests/demonstrations do occur, but are generally peaceful and orderly. The Belizean government requires a permit that must be requested at least 24 hours prior to a planned protest. Even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can escalate into violence. Avoid areas of demonstrations, and exercise caution if in the vicinity of any large gatherings, protests, or demonstrations.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

The most frequent natural disasters to affect Belize are hurricanes and tropical storms. Hurricane season in the western Caribbean is June 1-November 30; however, September-October is when tropical storms generally affect Belize. In 2016, Belize suffered a direct hit by Category 1 Hurricane Earl, resulting in power outages throughout 65% of the country, extensive flooding, and the blockage of major highways. The eye of the hurricane crossed Belmopan, causing serious damage across the Cayo district.

The National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) analyzed Belize's vulnerability to hurricanes and established an evacuation plan, although response capabilities are limited even for a Category 1 storm. Hurricane shelters exist along the coast, but the high number of potential victims would exhaust emergency food/water stockpiles quickly.

Because Belize is tropical and has regular rainfall, clogged drainage and waterways often lead to flooding of roadways, even during the dry season. Severe storms cut off vehicular movement in many coastal and inland areas as the low bridges flood.

There is a significant risk of forest fires during the dry season (December-May).

Earthquakes and tsunami warnings have occurred in Belize. Few earthquakes have their epicenter in Belize, but major earthquakes on fault lines outside of Belize can be felt in the country, typically in the south.

Much of Belize is protected rainforest, and there is the threat of attack by indigenous animals. Rivers contain crocodiles, and isolated attacks have been reported. For more information, review OSAC's Report [When Wildlife Attacks](#).

There are significant safety concerns for tourists who engage in underwater activities. While engaging in diving, snorkeling, cave tubing etc., assume that safety procedures and standards are not up to U.S. standards; carefully consider safety procedures prior to engaging in "at your own risk" activities that can involve long hikes, climbs, and dive sites that are not within cell phone range. Keep portable first aid kits and satellite phones available. Several U.S. citizens died while diving or snorkeling in Belize in 2018; inconsistent and overall lax safety standards may have been a factor in some of these incidents, along with age, pre-existing health conditions, swimming capability, inexperience of the divers, and/or poor weather conditions.

Personal Identity Concerns

While Belize is generally a friendly, accommodating society, females should be particularly attentive to risks associated with being in public alone or in the company of only one other female.

There is significant hostile sentiment toward the LGBT community. LGBT issues are frequently highlighted in the press, and can spur passionate discussions at community forums and on social media. There have been instances of violence reported against LGBT individuals. Courts struck down a law criminalizing same-sex sexual activity in 2016. Despite all of this, Belize remains a popular location for LGBT travelers from other countries, and Pride festivities have occurred without major security incident.

Drug-related Crimes

Due to Belize's location along popular trafficking routes, the transit of drugs (including cocaine and precursor chemicals for methamphetamine) has risen.

In 2017, the Misuse of Drugs Act (MODA) decriminalized the possession of marijuana in quantities of 10g or less in a private domicile with the owner's permission. Smoking in public locations, including parks, is still illegal, as is the importation and purchase of marijuana; violators are subject to substantial penalties, including lengthy jail time.

Kidnapping Threat

While kidnapping is rare in Belize, kidnapping incidents in 2014 and 2016 involved U.S. citizens.

Police Response

The police have limited access to equipment, resources, and training. As a result of lengthy responses to requests for assistance by the citizenry, media reports of human rights violations by police officers, and cases of perceived corruption, the police do not enjoy the full confidence and cooperation of the general population. Crime is likely underreported and often resolved by confrontation, due to absence of an immediate police response. Investigative units generally have the will to respond; however, availability of transportation and lack of professional training in investigative techniques remain obstacles. Equipment shortages (e.g. radios, vehicles) limit their ability to deter or respond to crimes expeditiously. Other impediments to effective law enforcement are unsupportive laws, general distrust, and the limited cooperation between the police, prosecutors, and corrections officials. The conviction rate remains low. When criminal acts happen in remote areas, there is little protection or assistance available for victims.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Reports of police harassment and extortion attempts of U.S. citizen tourists are rare but do occur, and should be reported.

- In 2016, Western tourists reported being offered drugs and were "set-up" for arrest and payment of a cash fine.
- In 2017, three police officers detained and robbed a U.S. citizen tourist in San Pedro. Two of the officers were suspended.

Crime Victim Assistance

If you are the victim of a crime, contact the local police first to obtain a Belize police report (tel: 911 or +501-822-2222). The police and emergency telephone lines may be busy, and contacting police can be difficult. In 2018, U.S. citizens reported difficulties in receiving police reports due to a lengthy and time-consuming reporting structure, which may contribute to underreporting of thefts in tourist areas. You can contact the U.S. Embassy in Belmopan at +501-822-4011 for assistance in communicating with police.

Emergency assistance for U.S. citizens is available from the U.S. Embassy. Contact the U.S. Embassy Consular Section in the event of an arrest, medical emergency, death, violent crime, or other emergency. During regular business hours (Monday-Friday 0800-1200 and 1300 to 1700), U.S. citizens with emergencies may visit the Embassy Consular Section or call (501) 822-4011. U.S. citizens with an after-hours emergency should call the duty officer at (501) 610-5030.

Police/Security Agencies

Belize Police Department (BPD) headquarters are located in Belmopan; contact BPD at +501-802-1404,+501-822-0202, or +501-828-4684 or see the BPD [webpage](#).

The National Crimes Investigations Branch (NCIB), under the Commissioner of Police, is the lead investigative agency for serious crimes. Reach NCIB at +501-802-3818.

Belize City Police Station is responsible for the Eastern District of Belize, including Belize City, and can be reached at +501-207-2222.

San Pedro Police Station is responsible for San Pedro and can be reached at +501-206-2022.

Other police:

Belize City: +501-207-2222

Belmopan: +501-802-1404,+501-822-0202,+501-828-4684

Benque Viejo: +501-803-2038

Caye Caulker: +501-206-0179

Corozal: +501-402-0022

Dangriga: +501-522-2022

Independence: +501-523-2022

Orange Walk: +501-322-2022

Punta Gorda: +501-722-2022

San Ignacio: +501-804-2022

San Pedro: +501-206-2022

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in Belize can be costly and inadequate by U.S. standards. There are nine hospitals and numerous medical clinics throughout the country. While certain hospitals are equipped to treat certain medical emergencies, clinics treat only outpatient cases and are not staffed to handle emergencies. Belize City is the center for medical care, with the three major hospitals best equipped to handle serious medical problems: Belize Medical Associates, Belize Health Care Partners, and Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital (KMHM). Medical facilities outside Belize City are not adequate to handle serious medical conditions, and often fail to meet basic U.S. standards. Emergency medical care and search-and-rescue capabilities are extremely limited, particularly on the Cayes and in remote areas.

Arrive prepared with any legally prescribed drugs you may need during your visit, and ensure that those medications are legally permitted to enter Belize. There are reasonably well-stocked pharmacies in most major towns and tourist destinations; prescriptions are usually not required. Counterfeit medication is found throughout Belize. For more information, refer to OSAC's Report, [Traveling with Medications](#).

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

The U.S. Embassy has compiled an [Emergency and Medical Listing](#) of licensed medical providers in Belize.

Available Air Ambulance Services

If an air ambulance is required, the Embassy provides a [Listing of Air Ambulance Companies](#) servicing Belize.

For those traveling the more remote areas of Belize or to the offshore cayes, emergency transportation to adequate medical facilities may be unavailable. Astrum Helicopters provides MEDEVAC flights in coordination with the Belize Emergency Response Team (BERT). For emergency response and transportation, BERT and Belmopan Emergency Services (BES) are Belize's only qualified providers.

Astrum Helicopters
Mile 3.5 George Price Highway
Belize City, Belize
Office: +501-222-5100
Tel: +501-610-4381
Fax: +501-222-5105
www.astrumhelicopters.com

Belmopan Emergency Services (BES)
19 Cardinal Avenue
Belmopan, Belize
Tel: +501- (631-7783)
Tel: +501-802-0355
Cell: +501-602-3325
Email: besservice@yahoo.com
Insurance Guidance

Belize Emergency Response Team
(BERT)
P.O. Box 1370
1675 Sunrise Avenue
Coral Grove Area
Belize City, Belize
Tel: +501-223-3292
Cell: +501-610-3890
Tel: (Spanish Lookout) +501-600-0911
Fax: +501-223-0549
Email: info@bertbelize.org
Email: bertbelizeambulance@gmail.com

Those who experience serious or life-threatening medical problems and require evacuation to the United States may require an air ambulance service. Check with your insurance company to verify you have sufficient coverage before traveling, and consider supplemental medical evacuation (medevac) insurance. The U.S. Embassy does not pay medical bills.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The Zika virus was identified in Belize in 2016.

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

OSAC Country Council Information

There is no Country Council in Belmopan. 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

U.S. Embassy Belmopan, 4 Floral Park Road, Belmopan
Hours of Operation: Monday-Friday, 0800-1200 and 1300-1700; [closed](#) on U.S. and Belizean holidays.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Main Embassy Number: +501-822-4011
After-hours emergency: +501-610-5030
Website: <https://bz.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

U.S. citizens are encouraged to register with the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) or contact the American Citizens Service Office located in the Consular Section.

Additional Resources

[Belize](#) Country Information Sheet