This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy Branch Office in Cartagena, Colombia.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Colombia at Level 2, indicating travelers should exercise increased caution due to crime and terrorism. Do not travel to Arauca, Cauca (except Popayan), Chocó (except Nuquí), Nariño, and Norte de Santander (except Cucuta) departments due to crime and terrorism. Reconsider travel to Antioquia (north of Medellin), Caquetá, Casanare, Cesar (outside of Valledupar), Cordoba (outside of Montería), Guainía, Guaviare, Meta, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca (outside of Cali and Palmira area), Vaupes, and Vichada departments due to crime and terrorism.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The U.S. Embassy Branch Office in Cartagena does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms appearing in this report. The American Citizens' Services unit (ACS) cannot recommend a particular individual or location, and assumes no responsibility for the quality of service provided.

Review OSAC's [Colombia-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.

Note: Following the November 2016 peace accord with the FARC, attacks committed by this group as an organization stopped almost entirely. The FARC remains a Foreign Terrorist Organization under the Immigration and Nationality Act. Colombian government classifies so-called FARC "dissidents" not participating in the peace accord as criminals. While the ideological motivations of such groups and ongoing connections with demobilized FARC are unclear, we have included acts of violence by FARC dissidents in this report.

Crime Threats

There is a moderate risk from crime in Cartagena. Cartagena shares many of the same crime problems that plague large cities around the world. The perception of wealth is a primary reason why criminals target foreigners. On a daily basis, the most prevalent threat to foreign travelers is street crime. The most common types of crime include, but are not limited to, mugging, assault, cell phone theft, credit card fraud, and burglary. Criminals are quick to resort to violence, and commonly use knives and firearms. Most criminals carry one or more weapons; it is not uncommon for a criminal to seriously injure or kill a victim resisting a robbery.

Thefts and assaults occur frequently on public buses in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) terrorist groups and organized crime elements known as Bandas Criminales (BACRIM) have attacked public and private buses. Terrorists, criminals, and demonstrators sometimes burn buses.

Overall, throughout Colombia in 2018, three U.S. citizens died in homicides. Homicides in Cartagena decreased from 276 in 2017 to 230 in 2018.

Taxi-related crimes commonly involve a lone passenger hailing a cab from the street. After the passenger enters, the driver will stop, and armed robbers will enter the vehicle, sometimes taking the victim to ATMs over several hours to take out as much cash as possible. In 2013, a DEA agent died during this type of robbery. A U.S. citizen in Medellin died in 2015 in a similar robbery.

Crime levels in the major tourist areas of Cartagena, including the historical center (El Centro, San Diego), and the neighborhoods of Getsemani, Bocagrande, El Laguito, and Castillogrande are considerably lower; crime in these locations rarely turns violent, but petty theft, scams, and similar crimes remain common in these areas.

Vehicle break-in, theft, and carjacking are a risk. Avoid traveling alone, especially at night.

Extortion is a significant security concern. The FARC, ELN, and criminal groups extort all types of commercial entities in their areas of operation. Criminals may use violence, including bombings, if extortion demands are unmet.

Criminals carry out a variety of street scams to rob people.

- Individuals may pose as police officers by presenting false police identification. They will ask to inspect a victim's money to verify that it is not counterfeit. They will issue the victim an "official receipt" for their "counterfeit" money and instruct the victim to proceed to a police station to reclaim legitimate currency. When they submit the "official receipt" to the police, they find out their money was not counterfeit, and they were scammed.
- Criminals use gambling games on the street to set up victims.

One common and particularly dangerous method that criminals use in order to rob a victim is drugging. The most common drug used has been scopolamine, which can render a victim impaired or unconscious for 24+ hours, and in large doses can cause brain damage and death. Unofficial estimates put the number of annual scopolamine incidents in Colombia at approximately 50,000. It is often administered by liquid or powder into foods and beverages. Many incidents occur in nightclubs and bars, where young, attractive women target seemingly wealthy men. Avoid accepting food/beverages offered by strangers or new acquaintances, and never leave food/beverages unattended. Victims of scopolamine or other drugs should seek immediate medical attention. For more information, review OSAC's Reports Shaken: The Don'ts of Alcohol Abroad and Scopolamine Incidents on the Rise in Colombia.

Cybersecurity Issues

Contacts from the public and private sectors indicate that cyber threats remain a significant security concern in Colombia. Politically motivated incidents have included a breach of President Juan Manual Santos' email account and the illegal monitoring of Colombia's peace negotiations with the FARC, both revealed in 2014. Authorities also report an increasing number of financially motivated attacks, as Colombia extends internet access and Colombians increasingly depend on the internet. In 2015, according to official records of Colombia's cybercrime police unit, 64% of cases were financially motivated. Total cybercrime complaints increased 40% to 7,118 in 2015. Approximately 60% of affected users were private citizens, 20% were financial sector companies, and 20% were companies from the telecommunications, transport, and industry sectors. According to an Intel security study, 15% of crime against businesses in Colombia is associated with cybercrime, generating losses of approximately US$600 million. To develop its institutional framework and capacity to address cyber threats, Colombia prepared an updated cybersecurity policy (CONPES 3701) in consultation with the Organization of American States, the Organization

for Economic Cooperation and Development, and other partners. This policy includes a national strategy and a set of priority goals to minimize risk levels.

Other Areas of Concern

U.S. government employees and their families must ask for permission to travel throughout much of Colombia. They must fly to most major cities rather than traveling overland. Strongly consider following these precautions. U.S. government employees and their families may not travel by road outside of urban areas at night.

Transportation-Safety Situation

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

Road Safety and Road Conditions

In general, road conditions in the major cities are adequate, but not good, for vehicle travel. Traffic in Cartagena is congested, and road conditions are often poor, contributing to traffic accidents and creating opportunities for criminals to rob vehicles. In rural areas, roads can be substandard and dangerous (e.g. no emergency lanes, poor lighting). Landslides frequently close roads. Accident response in rural areas is slow.

In Cartagena, the Colombian National Police (CNP) has a presence on major roads, including at well-marked fixed checkpoints. The government deploys extra security to facilitate road travel throughout the country during holidays. Outside of these periods and in rural areas, terrorists and criminals can make road travel dangerous. In areas where the government does not have a strong presence, terrorist and criminal groups have set up roadblocks to rob and kidnap travelers.

Traffic laws, including speed limits, are often not obeyed/enforced, creating chaotic and dangerous conditions for drivers and pedestrians. The penalties for drunk driving are severe and very expensive. Police will deploy sobriety checkpoints, especially in urban areas, and can require sobriety tests during traffic stops. Texting while driving is illegal. Seat belts are mandatory for front-seat passengers in a private vehicle.

In case of a vehicle accident, Colombian law requires that the vehicles remain in place and all parties remain at the scene until the police arrive and complete a preliminary investigation. In addition, criminals may stage traffic accidents and attract a crowd that could turn hostile. Drivers who feel threatened should leave the scene should immediately contact their insurance company and the police. In an accident involving an injury, the police will require a sobriety or blood-alcohol test, and may take the driver to the police station.

Criminals, sometime masquerading as vendors, may reach into cars at intersections to steal items and may tear off car parts (e.g. side mirrors, antennas, windshield wipers).

Drivers are required to have local insurance. For more information on self-driving, please review OSAC's Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Public Transportation Conditions

Taxis are available, but passengers must exercise caution. Do not flag down taxis on the street or accept rides from strangers. Call taxis via phone or app, or take one from a taxi stand. Airports, hotels, and some restaurants/shopping centers have taxi stands; they can also call taxis for customers. When calling a taxi is by phone or app, the passenger will receive the number of the taxi and a two-digit code, usually the last two digits of the passenger's phone, to give the driver. Smart phone applications (e.g. EasyTaxi, Tappsi) are popular and provide the passenger with information to verify the taxi. For more information on ride sharing, review OSAC's Report [Safety and Security in the Share Economy](#).

Major accidents involving intercity buses are common, sometimes resulting in death or serious injury. U.S. government employees and their families may not use inter- or intracity bus transportation.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The Federal Aviation Authority's International Aviation Safety Assessment (IASA) program rates Colombia as Category 1, meets International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards.

Terrorism Threat

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is moderate risk from terrorism in Cartagena. Colombia has endured a decades-long conflict that had pitted the government against two leftist terrorist organizations (FARC and ELN), and armed criminal groups that evolved from demobilized right-wing paramilitary organizations. Importantly, the Colombian government signed a peace accord with the FARC in 2016 after more than four years of negotiations. The Colombian Congress approved the accord, paving the way for implementation. In 2016 and 2017, FARC members moved to concentration zones to complete

Former President Santos aspired to reach a separate peace accord with the ELN before the end of his term in August 2018, but his government and ELN were unable to reach an agreement. The Duque administration initially expressed its intention to continue peace negotiations with the ELN, with the demand that the group ceases all kidnappings and armed actions before it takes part in any negotiations. In early January 2019, the ELN attacked a private helicopter and kidnapped the crew in Hacari (Norte de Santander), further deteriorating relations between the Duque administration and the group. Later the same month, the ELN then claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack perpetrated against the national police academy in Bogotá, killing at least 22 people and wounding 87 others. Following the attack--Colombia's worst in 15 years--President Duque ended peace talks, reinstated a capture order requesting the Cuban government hand over ELN peace negotiators to Colombian authorities. The decision effectively represents the end of negotiations with the group, which will likely worsen security conditions in parts of Colombia.

Illegal armed groups in Colombia are well-organized criminal enterprises that have carried out kidnappings, extortion, assassinations, bombings, and other terrorist activities throughout the country. Throughout Colombia's long conflict with the FARC and ELN, over 250,000 Colombians have died, with 6 million forcibly displaced from their homes. Given the situation in Venezuela, criminal or terrorist elements may seek to exploit uncertainty and increased media attention on the Colombia-Venezuela border. Travelers should expect increased police presence in border regions.

U.S.-Colombian counterterrorism cooperation remains strong. In terms of military pressure, the Colombian government continues significant military operations against ELN insurgents. The military and police have also intensified operations against major organized crime groups around the country.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is moderate risk from civil unrest in Cartagena. In 2018, there were numerous demonstrations throughout the country, with most occurring in Bogotá. Universities have active leftist student organizations that frequently stage protests, sometimes with an anti-U.S. message. Protests center on social and economic reforms and usually involve unions or student groups. Protestors will often march on major roads, disrupting traffic. These protests can turn violent, as protestors may use Molotov cocktails and homemade improvised explosive devices (IEDs), called *papas explosivas* (pamphlet bombs), against the police. The police often respond with tear gas. Due to the peace accord with the FARC, 2017 saw a dramatic reduction in nationwide levels of violence, which continued in 2018.

Specific to Cartagena in 2018, demonstrations were typically peaceful and directed at the local government to address public concerns with major utilities, transit systems, and wages. This year also saw an increase in student demonstrations for education benefits. Demonstrators often block traffic on major roads to gain attention, but police are usually able to clear the roads within a matter of hours. There were no demonstrations in Cartagena in 2018 with an anti-U.S. message.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Colombia's antidiscrimination law specifically prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, or social status. However, crimes (including homicide) have targeted victims based on their gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. The armed conflict disproportionately affects native ethnic minorities, mostly because of the locations in which they live.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Natural disasters include earthquakes and volcanic activity.

Many parts of Colombia suffer from severe drought conditions, and large-scale fires are common. In other areas, heavy rainfall causes landslides that block roads, damage infrastructure, and can leave travelers stranded for 24+ hours. Within Cartagena, the rainy season brings heavy flooding along the coastal city streets, with ocean and rainwater creating deep pools that drain hours after the rain stops. Drainage systems are in poor condition and cause traffic congestion and vehicle engine damage due to driving through the flooded roads

Critical Infrastructure

The Colombian government continues to advance its ambitious Fourth Generation (4G) program, a US$17 billion effort to modernize outdated primary road infrastructure. The aging primary road network means that travel between large cities such as Bogotá and Barranquilla can take up to three days.

The ELN attacks oil pipelines, power stations, and roads with explosives. In January 2018, after the government ceasefire with the ELN expired, the ELN conducted several attacks on oil pipelines and military bases.

Economic Concerns

While the Government of Colombia has made progress on some dimensions of IPR in recent years, including the development of its National Intellectual Property Administrative System, key challenges remain. Online piracy continues to grow, particularly via mobile devices. Authorities with relevant jurisdiction, including the National Police and the Attorney General, have yet to conduct meaningful and sustained investigations and prosecutions against the operators of significant large pirate websites and mobile applications based in Colombia. Colombia has also not been able to reduce significantly the large number of pirated and counterfeit hard goods crossing the border for sale at San Andresitos markets in Bogotá and other urban centers, on the street, and at other distribution hubs around the country. The United States has encouraged Colombia to increase efforts to address online and mobile piracy, and to focus on disrupting organized trafficking in illicit goods.

Internet access in Colombia has been growing steadily, and with it internet-based piracy. According to the Superintendency of Industry and Commerce (SIC), trade secret theft is a minor problem and charges are typically mentioned tangentially and accompanied by other unfair competition charges such as deception, confusion, clientele diversion, or intentional disruption of normal operations. Only one case involving trade secret theft has been to court, in 2011.

Personal Identity Concerns

The anti-discrimination law specifically prohibits discrimination based on race gender, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, or social status. The Attorney General's Office and NGOs report some attacks, including homicides, in which prejudice regarding race, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity was a factor. Ethnically motivated crimes, including homicide, have occurred.

Drug-related Crimes

Approximately 75% of the U.S. citizen prisoners in Colombia are in prison for narcotics-related offenses. U.S. citizens should not agree to carry packages for anyone without knowing the person well and being certain of the contents of the package.

Kidnapping Threat

Although Colombian government efforts have dramatically reduced the number of kidnappings over the last ten years, the threat of kidnapping remains a concern. From 2002-2016, official statistics show that the number of kidnappings dropped more than 90%. Kidnappings can be spontaneous; criminals/insurgents have kidnapped persons at roadblocks on the outskirts of major cities. Foreigners are potential targets due to their perceived wealth. Kidnappers may also target U.S. citizens because of their potential political significance for terrorist groups. However, most kidnappings now fall into the category of "express" or "*paseo millionario*," in which criminals hold victims until they can no longer withdraw cash from ATM. Criminal taxi drivers often abduct victims after them on the street. Express kidnappings may last up to 48 hours.

The Embassy is aware of four kidnappings of U.S. citizens (perpetrated by criminal elements and FARC dissidents) in two separate incidents, in 2017. There were no reported kidnappings of U.S. citizens in 2018.

The police and army have effective anti-kidnapping/anti-extortion units called GAULAs around the country. Any victim of kidnapping/extortion, or who knows of a victim, should call the police immediately at 165. For more information, review OSAC's Report, Kidnapping: The Basics.

Police Response

The Colombian National Police (CNP) is a professional organization recognized around the world for its success. However, the force is often overworked and occasionally lacks resources to deter crime. Response to alarms or emergency calls to disrupt burglaries or crimes in progress can be 15 minutes or longer.

Police patrol on foot and in vehicles, and are posted at *Centros de Atención Inmediata* (CAI), police substations manned by several officers. You will also find police and military presence at important facilities and along major routes. The Embassy's American Citizen Services (ACS) section has documented some poor CNP responses to crimes against U.S. citizens—specifically, failure to facilitate filing of police reports.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

The CNP is a professional force; however, corruption continues. For example, an officer may request a bribe during a routine traffic stop. If you feel you are the victim of police harassment or corruption, report it immediately to the police emergency number and to the Embassy's American Citizen Services section. The police complaint line, called *Tranparencia Institucional*, is at 166.

Crime Victim Assistance

The emergency services number is 123.

Report the loss/theft of a U.S. passport immediately to the local police and the Embassy in Bogotá. If you are a victim of a crime, in addition reporting it to the local police, contact the Embassy. For American Citizen Services (ACS), assistance call the Embassy at (1) 275-2000. ACS also monitors email messages sent to ACSBogota@state.gov from 0800 to 1700. In the event of emergency, ACS can verify a U.S. citizen's previous passport issuance and issue emergency passports on the same day in the vast majority of cases.

Police/Security Agencies

The CNP is a nationwide service responsible for enforcing Colombian laws. In urban areas, police are posted at neighborhood substations known as *Centros de Atencion Inmediata* (CAI). Contact the police at the following numbers:

- General Emergencies: 123
- Anti-kidnapping / Anti-extortion (GAULA): 165
- Complaints about the police: 166
- Women's issues: 155
- Road Safety and Transit: #767
- Antiterrorism: 018000-919621

Medical Emergencies

Medical care is adequate in major cities, but varies in quality elsewhere. Public hospitals are well below U.S. standards. Traffic frequently delays ambulance service; consider alternative options in a medical emergency.

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

For medical assistance, refer to the Embassy's Medical Assistance page.

Available Air Ambulance Services

- Europ Assistance
- Global Response Center: +1-877-710-4082 or +1-240-330-1523, ops@eausa.com (Operations Platform)
- International SOS Assistance, Inc. (ISOS): +1-800-523-6586 or +1-215-942-8226, phlopsmed@internationalsos.com
- REVA: +1-800-752-4195 or +1-954-730-9300, operations@flyreva.com

Insurance Guidance

Confirm that your medical insurance provides coverage in Colombia, including treatment of complications from elective procedures or medical evacuation if necessary. Consider purchasing additional travel medical insurance, especially if your medical insurance does not provide coverage in Colombia or requires you to pay for foreign medical care out of pocket and seek reimbursement later. Uninsured travelers without financial resources may need to seek treatment in public hospitals, where the standard of care is below U.S. standards. For more information, refer to OSAC's Report, Medical Evacuation: A Primer.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for Colombia.

OSAC Country Council Information

There is an active Country Council in Cartagena that meets quarterly. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's Latin America Team with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Branch Office Location and Contact Information

Embassy Branch Office Address and Hours of Operation

Calle 24 Bis No. 48-50, Bogotá, D.C. (main entrance, working hours only) -or- Carrera 45 No. 24B-27, Bogotá, D.C. (back entrance, 24 hrs)

Monday-Friday, 0800-1700 (closed on U.S. and Colombian holidays)

Embassy Branch Office Contact Numbers

The general Embassy telephone number is (57) (1) 275-2000 during working hours.
Website: https://co.usembassy.gov/embassy/bogota/

Embassy Branch Office Guidance

American visitors should register with the Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) and should check the Embassy Bogotá website routinely for messages regarding travel or security issues.

Additional Resource: Colombia Country Information Sheet