



Panamá 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Panama City, Panamá.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Panamá at Level 1, indicating travelers should exercise normal precautions.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

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

Review OSAC's [Panamá-specific](#) webpage for proprietary analytic reports, Consular Messages, and contact information.

Crime Threats

There is considerable risk from crime in Panamá. Practicing common sense security habits is essential. Panamá remains relatively safe when compared to other Central American countries, yet crime rates are high, including shootings, rapes, armed robberies, muggings, and thefts. The provinces with the largest cities also had the highest overall crime rates: Panamá, Colón, Herrera, and Chiriquí. According to statistics from the Panamanian National Police (*Policía Nacional de Panamá*, PNP), overall homicide numbers rose slightly from 424 in 2017 to 440 in 2018. Reports of assault rose from 3,380 to 3,670 in 2018; sexual assault rose from 4,681 to 4,959 in 2018; robbery decreased from 9,683 to 8,939 in 2018; and theft decreased from 17,365 to 14,233. It is important to note that crime reporting is typically lower in some rural provinces.

Residential burglary remains a problem for occupied and unoccupied dwellings. These burglaries tend to happen when it is less likely for the resident to be home, as thieves generally focus on stealing property and tend to avoid violent confrontations. Contributing factors to residential burglaries are inadequate perimeter walls, a lack of alarms or the use of alarms, minimal lighting, non-existent/weak grilles, and poorly paid/trained guards. Although the overall crime trend is downward, residential burglary stands out as an issue that affects even relatively affluent areas.

While reports of thefts are considerably lower over the last year, theft from vehicles remains a consistent problem through the country, especially in metropolitan areas. Most thefts from vehicles are crimes of opportunity, targeting vehicles with visible high-value items, bags, and/or purses left in plain view. When driving/parking, either take valuables with you or ensure they are out of sight.

Other Areas of Concern

Several high-crime areas have the potential to be relatively more dangerous. These are lower-income areas and/or areas of increased gang activity with a lower police presence.

- The high crime areas in/around Panamá City: El Chorrillo, San Miguel, Santa Ana, Cabo Verde, Curundu, Veracruz Beach, Santa Librada, Rio Abajo, San Miguelito, Juan Diaz, Pedregal, and Panamá Viejo.
- Colón is a high-crime area with increased gang activity; use extreme caution when traveling in this area. In January 2018, police and protesters clashed with gang members taking advantage of the situation to loot and attack authorities. Criminal elements burned a police mobile command post, and the Embassy restricted travel for personnel to the area, with the Consular section issuing a [Security Alert](#).
- The Mosquito Coast (Caribbean side) and the Darién region (Colombian border) are particularly hazardous due to their remoteness and the presence of criminal organizations.
 - The “Mosquito Coast” is an extremely remote and inaccessible area along the north coast, bounded by Boca de Rio Chiriquí to the west and Coclé Del Norte to the east and stretching inward for five kilometers. Access to the region is almost exclusively by boat/aircraft. The area may also have a few unimproved roads/paths that are not marked on maps. This may be particularly true in the mining area along the Petaquilla River. Transnational criminal organizations use sections of this coastline for illicit activities.
 - The area of the Darién encompasses the Darién National Park and some privately owned nature reserves and tourist resorts. The general remoteness contributes to potential hazards. Due to scarcity of roads, most travel is by river/footpath. This, combined with spotty medical infrastructure, makes travel there potentially hazardous. In addition, transnational criminal organizations involved in drug and human trafficking operate in the area.

Transportation-Safety Situation

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

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Traffic moves on the right, as in the U.S. Panamanian law requires the use of seat belts. Driving can be hazardous and difficult due to heavy traffic, undisciplined driving habits, poorly maintained streets, and a shortage of effective signs/signals. [@TraficoCPanama](#) is a reliable source for traffic information on Twitter. Use caution when driving at night, as it is particularly hazardous on the old Panama City-Colon highway. Defensive driving is fundamental. For more information on self-driving, review OSAC’s Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Flooding during the rainy season (April-December) can make city streets impassible and may wash out roads in the interior. In addition, roads in rural areas are often in poorly condition and lack illumination. These roads are generally less traveled, and the availability of emergency roadside assistance is very limited.

Carry identification with you, and be prepared for unannounced checkpoints, especially at night. Police periodically conduct vehicle checkpoints at key intersections in cities in an effort to raise their visibility and hamper criminal movements through high-crime areas.

Public Transportation Conditions

Use public transportation with caution. While there are reports of thefts and pickpocketing, new metro buses with bigger windows and better lighting have reduced instances of violent crime.

Use caution when taking taxis. Use only licensed, registered taxis. Check that the number on the side of the taxi matches the number of the license plate. Ensuring the car is a registered taxi is a quick way to help prevent incidents. In addition, use established taxi stands when possible.

Never get into a taxi that already has a passenger, and instruct the driver not to pick up any additional fares. Many hotels have tourist taxis that are not yellow, and only pick up passengers in front of well-known hotels and airports. Never let a helpful stranger direct you to a particular taxi or taxi stand, and always negotiate the fare before getting in to ensure a fixed price.

Ride-sharing services are well developed and seemingly ubiquitous in Panama City. As a transportation option, these new smartphone-based services may offer many advantages over traditional taxis. For example, they use a linked credit card as the primary form of payment, the fare calculation is transparent, and the receipt is electronic. Despite these advantages, practice common-sense safety precautions whenever using any hired transport. For more information on ride sharing, review OSAC's Report [Safety and Security in the Share Economy](#).

Panamá has an established metro rail system, but not all of the stations are operational; trains will not stop at a station until construction is complete. The metro, though equipped with state-of-the-art security features, traverses and stops in some of the highest crime areas of the city. Confined spaces provide excellent environments for pickpockets and other criminal activities. The PNP has established a Metro Police Unit responsible for the security of the trains and platforms.

Terrorism Threat

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is minimal risk from terrorism in Panamá. However, the State Department's periodic Worldwide Caution emphasizes the threat of terrorist actions and violence against U.S. citizens and interests abroad.

In 2017, authorities arrested operatives of the terrorist group Hizb'allah in the United States. The investigation discovered that Hizb'allah had previously conducted pre-operational surveillance of the U.S. Embassy in Panama City and the Panama Canal. Panamá's strategic location as a gateway between Central and South America make it an ideal transshipment area.

Panamá was the first Latin American country to join the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, and the terrorist group has mentioned Panamá in ISIS propaganda and threats.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Civil Unrest

There is moderate risk from civil unrest in Panamá. Protests are relatively common. Demonstrations often focus on domestic issues (e.g. students' rights, labor disputes) or, on rare occasions, manifestations of anti-U.S. sentiment by small, but vociferous, groups. While most demonstrations are non-violent, it is a good security practice to avoid them. The PNP have used tear gas and/or other riot control measures in response to demonstrations, particularly when they block roadways. Demonstrations and marches can and do occur around the country, to include in Colón and Chiriquí, and along the Pan-American Highway.

Protests outside of the city have caused road closures on major thoroughfares that can last for several hours. During these extended road closures, the security situation can be tense, and the potential exists for violence between authorities and protestors. Consult local news and police for the most recent information on possible road closures.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Indigenous communities protest against mining and dam construction projects in the interior. The Ngobe-Bugle people have mobilized several times to close the Pan-American Highway in protest of a dam project at Cerro Blanco. These protests have caused major travel disruptions and violent confrontations with the police.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Earthquakes occur infrequently in Panamá. The central corridor of Panamá is at a lower seismic risk than Colombia and Costa Rica; however, there are several fault lines running through the country, and there have been three recent earthquakes, as recently as January 2019.

During the rainy season, torrential rains, particularly in October-December, cause mudslides, road closures, and flooding. Strong winds and rains caused by tropical depressions have also felled trees, caused landslides, power outages, and several fatalities.

Critical Infrastructure

Industrial and transportation accidents are a concern, particularly for truck traffic on the highways. Panamá does not have a large manufacturing center, but occasional accidents have led to temporary evacuations due to spills of industrial strength chemicals.

The Panama Canal Authority has requirements in place to mitigate potential accidents and practices emergency response procedures regularly.

Economic Concerns

Because of the insular nature of the business community, it is not uncommon for proprietary information to become public. Panamá has an adequate, effective domestic legal framework to protect and enforce intellectual property rights, though there are occasional complaints of violations, especially in the Colón Free Zone.

Personal Identity Concerns

Same-sex sexual activity is legal in Panama. Pride festivities occur regularly with high-level attendance and no security issues.

Privacy Concerns

Privacy concerns include the vulnerability of cyber infrastructure that contains personally identifiable information.

Drug-related Crimes

Panamá reported seizing approximately 75 metric tons of drugs in 2018, along with \$11 million in drug related monies. By far, the drug seized most by quantity was cocaine.

Kidnapping Threat

There were only nine registered kidnapping cases in Panamá for 2018. Most of these were drug-related, according to police sources. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#).

Police Response

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Incidents of police harassing foreigners for bribes are uncommon. If one does occur, the best course of action is to refuse to pay any bribe (unless threatened with the use of force), and if the request persists, ask to speak with a supervisor. Report such extortion attempts to [ACS](#).

Crime Victim Assistance

The PNP have a special Tourism Police Unit to deal with crimes against tourists and foreigners, as well as sub-stations in all major regions in Panamá, and numerous offices in Panama City. PNP performance and responsiveness to incidents involving U.S. citizens has been good, if not always timely. The main police number is 104; however, telephone operators may not speak English, and most police officers speak very little English. In most cases, one may get a better response by calling the local police substation directly.

Victims of crime should report to the local Judicial Investigative Directorate (DIJ) office to lodge an official complaint (*denuncia*), even if time has passed, as criminals often repeat the same crime within the same general location; reporting allows better crime tracking and response. Be sure to file a *denuncia* when a U.S. passport is lost/stolen.

Police/Security Agencies

In addition to the PNP, other law enforcement/security entities include the National Institutional Protection Service (SPI), the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), and the National Air/Naval Service (SENAN). The U.S. Embassy maintains strong relationships with Panamanian security services and provides an extensive amount of capacity building and operational training.

Medical Emergencies

In a life-threatening emergency, go directly to the nearest hospital emergency room or call an ambulance. Panama City has excellent trauma hospitals; however, most other communities have lesser services, facilities, and/or clinics. Ambulance service outside the urban centers is non-existent. For medical emergencies call 911, and for fire emergencies call 103.

Contact Information for Available Medical Services

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

Insurance Guidance

Travelers with medical conditions should obtain medical evacuation (medevac) insurance. Patients must pay for medical services with cash at the time of the service; however, some hospitals accept U.S. insurance cards with a deposit payment. Most hospitals will accept international credit cards.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Panamá is one of several countries in Latin America where there is an ongoing transmission risk for Zika. The CDC has issued a [travel alert \(Level 2-Practice Enhanced Precautions\)](#) for travel to Panamá. The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Panamá](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

Panama City has an active Country Council, meeting quarterly. Interested private-sector security managers should contact OSAC's [Western Hemisphere team](#) with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

The Embassy is located on Ave. Demetrio Lakas, in the Clayton neighborhood of Panama City.

Operating Hours: Monday-Thursday, 0830-1700, and Friday, 0830-1200

Embassy Contact Numbers

Switchboard: 317-5000

U.S. Marine Guard Post One: 317-5200 (for non-Consular after-hours emergencies)

Website: <https://PA.usembassy.gov>

Embassy Guidance

The Regional Security Office is available to assist you with any security-related matter.

The Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy suggests registration in the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) if you plan to be in Panamá for an extended time or if you are traveling extensively. The Consular Section also provides notifications and warnings to those in country.

Additional Resource: [Panamá](#) Country Information Sheet