



Mexico 2011 Crime and Safety Report_Mexico City

Riots/Civil Unrest; Crime; Terrorism

Western Hemisphere > Mexico > Mexico City

2/24/2011

Mexico 2011 OSAC Crime and Safety Report: Mexico City

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

Mexico City continued to witness a significant level of violent crimes reported in the year 2010. While crime varies widely depending upon location in the city, the U.S. Department of State's critical crime threat level for Mexico City is warranted. Armed robberies, taxicab express kidnappings, car thefts, carjackings, credit card fraud, and various forms of kidnapping are daily concerns. In the categories of murder, rape and robbery, Mexico's Distrito Federal experiences three to four times the incidence of these crimes than does New York City, greater Los Angeles, or Washington, D.C.

There is no evidence to indicate that street level criminals are specifically targeting U.S. citizens. Criminals select victims based on an appearance of vulnerability, perceived wealth, and/or a lack of awareness. Within the embassy community, Mexican employees fall victim to crime more frequently than do their American employee colleagues, which is attributable to the differing demographics between upscale expatriate neighborhoods and the rest of the city in general.

Ostentatious displays of wealth are magnets for thieves in Mexico City. Wearing expensive jewelry, watches, and displays of large amounts of cash draw unwanted attention. Jewelry and expensive watches can be sold easily in vast illegal markets. Stolen cellular phones in Mexico can be resold easily as well. While Mexico City employs strict gun-control laws,

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thieves, and robbers are usually armed with knives or handguns.

Security Companies

There are numerous private security companies available in Mexico City and throughout the country. The Regional Security Office (RSO) at U.S. Embassy Mexico City does not endorse any specific private security company, but OSAC can provide a list of names of some of the larger companies used by OSAC constituents, if requested. For information on security providers, please contact OSAC's Regional Coordinator for the Western Hemisphere.

Road Safety

The best crime defense for any visitor in Mexico City is to avoid the use of "Libre" taxi cabs, which commonly pick up fares on the street after being hailed by customers. "Libre" taxis are poorly regulated and often criminally-linked. "Sitio", or radio dispatched base station taxis, are safer, reliable, and worth the added expense. Currently all taxis in Mexico City are issued registration numbers beginning with the letter "A", so "Sitio" and "Libre" taxis are virtually indistinguishable. Passengers who use "Libre" taxis are often robbed by two or three armed individuals who enter the taxi a few minutes into the trip, having been called or signaled by the driver. Also, "Libre" taxis are often connected to express kidnappings, abductions where the victim is turned around in a matter of hours for a small ransom or shuttled to a series of ATMs and forced to withdraw funds. Because 24-hour withdrawal limits are now the industry standard on ATM cards, express kidnapping victims are typically held for 24 to 48 hours to maximize withdrawal amounts. Due to the danger involved in utilizing "Libre" taxis and the increased difficulty in determining the difference between the different types of taxis, the best practice is to avoid hailing taxis on the street entirely. Instead, visitors should call or have the merchant you are visiting call a radio dispatched "Sitio" taxi. Twenty-four hour radio taxi service is available at 5516-6020 and 3626-9800 to 30.

Transportation crime varies by category. Sitio taxis in Mexico City are most often metered and registered by the government. Sitio taxis from Benito Juarez International Airport are paid in advance in the terminal (at the Sitio stands) and are well regulated. City buses are somewhat crowded and can pose problems because pickpockets typically work the crowded, busiest routes. Tourist buses are generally safe within the greater Mexico City area; however, travel

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on the highways can be precarious, especially at night. If possible, travelers should avoid travel at night and use inter-city toll highways whenever possible. Toll roads are called "Cuotas" in Mexico and are indicated by the capital letter "D" printed below the highway route number on area maps. It is also advisable to plan routes ahead of time and to notify family or friends of the itinerary. Areas of greatest concern with regard to crime in Mexico City include the following: Colonia del Valle within delegacion Benito Juarez, Colonia Centro within delegacion Cuauhtemoc, and areas within delegacion Iztapalapa. No neighborhood in Mexico City, upscale or otherwise, is free from violent or petty crime.

Prior to road travel, ensure that your vehicle is in good operating condition, paying particular attention to the engine, tires, brakes, head and tail lights, spare tire and jack, horn, and fluid levels. Particularly on long trips to remote areas, try to travel in tandem with other vehicles and advise someone of your travel plans, including anticipated arrival and departure times and contact numbers.

The following items are recommended for extended road trips:

- Cellular telephone with charger (although some areas between cities lack coverage);
- An extra spare tire;
- Portable gas can of gasoline with funnel;
- Potable water;
- Non-perishable food items;
- First Aid kit;
- Camping gear (sleeping bag, blanket, stove, etc);
- Fire extinguisher;
- Jumper cables;
- Flares/reflectors;
- Collapsible shovel;
- Emergency tool kit with:

- Flashlight with additional batteries;
- Battery operated radio;

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- Extra fan belt/drive belt;
- Extra fuses, spark plugs, and light bulbs;
- Duplicate ignition key;
- Screw driver (regular and Phillips head);
- Socket wrench set;
- Pliers;
- Wire;
- Electrical tape.

Political Violence

International terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

While there do not appear to be any Middle Eastern terrorist groups currently active in Mexico, lax immigration controls, the ease in which fake Mexican travel documents can be obtained, and Mexico's geographic location could potentially make the country an attractive transit point for potential transnational terrorists.

Civil Unrest

The Mexican state of Chiapas experiences occasional political unrest, most frequently in conjunction with local land disputes. Incidents are particularly prevalent in the mountain highlands north of San Cristobal de Las Casas, the Municipality of Ocosingo, and the entire southeastern jungle portion of the State east of Comitán. State and federal officials are reluctant to intervene to protect property rights in local land disputes between Mexicans, as well as foreign landholders to include Americans. Chiapas has been the principal site of political turmoil where local indigenous groups who support the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) are in conflict with local public institutions.

American interests in Mexico City are generally not targets of political violence. Peaceful demonstrations, small and large, protesting various U.S. policies and the war in Iraq occur

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regularly at the U.S. Embassy. Other public protests tied to political and social activist groups occur regularly throughout Mexico City, often snarling traffic during peak commute hours on and near Paseo de La Reforma, the city's primary avenue in the vicinity of the U.S. Embassy.

Post-Specific Concerns

Earthquakes

In 1985, Mexico City was hit by one of the most devastating earthquakes in the history of the Americas. The earthquake measured 8.1 on the Richter scale. According to official government statistics, at least 9,000 people were killed, 30,000 injured, and 100,000 left homeless. The earthquake destroyed 412 buildings and seriously damaged over 3,000. Although the government expects another significant earthquake may occur at any time, building regulations and response planning do not guarantee that there would not be significant damage, injuries, or loss of life again.

Kidnappings

Kidnapping for ransom is an established criminal activity in Mexico. The numbers of kidnapping incidents are impossible to determine because it is estimated that more than 90 percent of cases are not reported to authorities. In most cases, the ransom is paid, and the victim is set free. Victims typically do not notify police authorities because the popular belief is that the police may be involved in the crime or are unable to resolve the situation. Affluent residents in Mexico City often have bodyguards and armored vehicles for their families to protect them against kidnapping.

Express kidnappings are a common type of abduction and are based on the 24-hour withdrawal limit placed on ATM cards industry-wide. The victim is generally held for 24 to 48 hours and is forced to withdraw funds from a series of ATMs. Official Americans have also suffered this type of crime, but anecdotally many Mexican employees of the embassy either have been victimized themselves or personally know a victim. The term "express kidnapping" is also still applied to the kidnapping of random victims that are held for brief periods, where only small ransom amounts are demanded. A typical scenario may last for several hours and

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be settled for the peso-equivalent of a few thousand dollars.

Another kidnapping tactic used is the telephonic kidnapping threat which is also known as a virtual kidnapping. Although the calls vary in style, the methodology is invariably the same. The virtual kidnapping call includes a crying/pleading voice immediately after the call is answered and before the "kidnapper" gets on the phone. In this manner, they hope to confuse the victim and get them to give away important information. For example, if the crying voice sounds like your child in any way, and you call out that child's name, the caller now knows the name of the child that could potentially be a kidnap victim and will use this knowledge against you. The voice of the "victim" will usually be crying and/or hysterical. This makes it difficult to identify and increases the likelihood that the telephone target/victim will believe it is in fact his/her loved one. Criminals will try to use fear, tact, and timing against possible victims. For example, they plan their calls to coincide with times when it will be difficult to contact the child or another adult immediately (e.g., when a child is either on the way to or from school). All calls demand money for the release of the loved one and stipulate no police involvement. Often times, the callers will give statements to suggest surveillance such as, "we saw you at the school with your camioneta (SUV)." A vague statement, but it implies the kidnappers have been watching the family. One of the most important things for one to be aware of is the details of one's family's travel and location (where are they supposed to be, who are they supposed to be with, etc.). In addition, it is equally important that one ensures good communication (land-line and cell phone numbers) with all family members.

Narco-trafficking

Mexico is well-known for its illegal drug trade and the violence and corruption the industry fosters. Mexico is the primary conduit for the transport of illegal drugs into the United States. Drug-related violence in Mexico City is, for the most part, confined to those involved in the drug trade. Along Mexico's northern border cities with the U.S., the violence is far greater and has injured and killed innocent bystanders. Mexican security forces and police have not been effective in maintaining security in these cities along the U.S. Mexican border. Many have been corrupted and are working for the drug cartels as enforcers, bodyguards, and mules. Increasingly, U.S. support for the government's assault on cartels is becoming well known.

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This could result in traffickers perceiving U.S. Government representation in the country as "the enemy".

Police Response

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Police corruption and police involvement in criminal activity is common in Mexico. Consequently, citizens are often indifferent to police authority, adding to a perceived sense of lawlessness in Mexico City. The general perception is that the majority of crime victims do not report crimes against them due to fear of reprisals by the police, the belief that police are corrupt, or the feeling that nothing would come from such reports. Mexico City police are widely considered to be underpaid, poorly trained, and corrupt. From senior police in league with narco-traffickers and/or organized crime elements down to the routine bribes paid daily by motorists, Mexican police enjoy little respect from the general population. Reporting crime is an archaic, exhausting process in Mexico and is widely believed to be a waste of time except for the most serious of crimes, or where a police report is required for insurance purposes.

Travelers may contact the Consular section or the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City for assistance in dealing with the Mexican police. U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with the police if stopped or questioned. If involved in a traffic accident or victimized by crime, one may be required to accompany the investigating officer to the local police station to file a complaint or respond to questions. Should a police report be required for an insurance claim, a nominal fee will be charged. The Mexican police emergency telephone number is 066, whether they arrive in a timely fashion, or at all, is questionable.

Medical Emergencies

A number of health related considerations are present in Mexico. One should take normal tourist precautions with regard to drinking water or eating fresh fruits, vegetables and salads. Some people react negatively to the city's pollution and high altitude, so individuals should take time to adjust slowly and avoid vigorous activity until they are acclimated to the environment. Travelers to Mexico City may require some time to adjust to the altitude (7300

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ft.), which can adversely affect blood pressure, digestion, sleep, and energy level. Individuals with sickle cell trait should consult with the appropriate medical unit or their personal physician before commencing with travel to Mexico City. Short-term assignments carry an added risk because of the lack of time to acclimatize. Dehydration, stress, or illnesses compound the basic risks associated with high altitude. For more information, travelers should contact their health unit or personal physician.

Health insurance is also an important consideration. Travelers should ensure that they have adequate health coverage while in Mexico.

Hospital Contact Information

Useful information on medical emergencies abroad, including overseas insurance programs, is provided in the Department of States Bureau of Consular Affairs brochure, "Medical Information for Americans Traveling Abroad," available via the Bureau of Consular Affairs home page at <http://www.travel.state.gov>

ABC Hospital

Calle Sur 136 no. 116

Las Americas Tacubaya

Mexico, D.F.

Telephone - 5230-8161/62/63/64

Hospital Espanol

Av. Ejercito Nacional 613

Grandada

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Mexico, D.F.

Telephone - 5255-9600/9659/9660/9645

Additional Health Information

CDC International Traveler's hotline - 24 hour info available at 888-232-6348 or 800-232-4636 or <http://www.cdc.gov>

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Protecting Your Vehicle

Headlights and tail lights: The headlights and tail lights are held in place by easily accessible screws. Install grilles around the lights, or simply tap out the heads of the screws holding the lights in place.

Spare tire: If your tire is mounted on the outside of the vehicle, secure it in place with a chain and padlock, or similar device. If this is not possible, remove the spare tire and keep it at home, reinstalling it only for extended trips outside the city.

Items inside the vehicle: Theft of the vehicle's operating computer is a common crime, as is the theft of car sound systems. The installation of a car alarm is strongly recommended. Also, if you purchase a car radio, look for models that can be removed from the dash and locked in the trunk. Also, keep your vehicle sterile, storing anything that would entice a thief out of plain view.

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Locking hubs: Replace one lug nut on each wheel with a specially keyed bolt that locks or can only be removed with a special attachment to the tire iron.

Emblems: Should be secured with rivets.

Parking: Avoid leaving your vehicle on the street. Park inside a residential compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location of your visit. If this is not possible, leave your car at home and take a sitio taxi. When parking within a shopping facility lot, be sure to park as close as possible to the store entrance, and away from dumpsters, bushes or large vehicles. Be sure to lock your doors, close windows, and hide shopping bags and gifts in the trunk, out of sight.

Car Alarm: As previously mentioned, installation of a car alarm is a necessary precaution in deterring vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents.

Protecting Yourself

Avoid wearing jewelry, especially watches that are, or appear, expensive. Carry a clutch purse or a neck purse instead of a shoulder bag. Only carry those credit cards and documents necessary during your visit. Make copies of what you carry so if robbed, they can be cancelled quickly.

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Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended.

When hiring domestic help, vet them to the greatest extent possible. Ensure that they are trained not to volunteer information to strangers or to allow access of workers without prior authorization.

Personal Security Practices

Maintain a low profile: Do not advertise the fact that you are American. Dress casually, keep valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself with your actions.

Vary your routine: Be unpredictable in your movements, vary your routes from home to the office, as well as your departure and arrival times.

Be alert to possible surveillance: Note any individual who appears out of place along your routes to regularly scheduled activities, such as going from home to office.

Avoid sitting outside at restaurants. Instead, try to find a seat in an area not clearly visible from the street.

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Be alert to your surroundings: Minimize valuables and do not carry large sums of money while in crowded, urban areas. Be aware of popular scams and robbery tactics used to distract your attention.

Cloning or Counterfeiting ATM or Credit Cards

The cloning or counterfeiting of ATM cards and credit cards occurs in Mexico, and travelers are advised to check their account activity on-line at least weekly while in Mexico to detect fraudulent charges early. All ATMs are not the same, and travelers are encouraged to plan their cash needs in advance using only reputable ATMs in secure areas.

Here are some things that you can do to lessen the chances that you will become a victim of ATM or credit card fraud:

Closely monitor anyone who handles your card. To protect against skimming, closely watch anyone that you give your card to for processing, such as a waiter, clerk, attendant, etc. If at all possible, do not let them out of your sight. If a clerk makes a hard copy, retrieve the carbons.

Keep low-limit credit cards. Keeping a low limit on your credit cards restricts the amount of money that thieves can steal. Although not exactly a prevention tactic, it will help if you fall victim.

Sign all credit cards. Sign all credit cards immediately upon your receipt of them. You can also write "Check ID" so that the clerk, if they actually read the back, will ask for ID for verification during a transaction.

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Cancel credit cards that you do not use. It is important to cancel all credit cards that you do not use and to monitor the ones that you do use.

Be aware of your surroundings. The first step to prevent skimming is to understand what is going on around you. When at an ATM, cover the key pad when entering your pin. Prior to inserting your ATM card, check the ATM card reader to make sure that it looks appropriate and is not altered.

Take your receipts. Do not leave receipts at ATMs, teller windows, gasoline pumps, or with a clerk.

Protect your PIN. Some people make it easy for criminals by writing the PIN to their Credit or ATM card on something that they keep in their wallet, or even worse, writing the PIN on back of the card itself. Commit the PIN to memory as it is very obvious that a thief having the card and the PIN is not going to work out well for you.

Further Information

For more information please contact the Regional Security Office at U.S. Embassy Mexico City or OSAC's Regional Coordinator for the Western Hemisphere.

Mexico country code: 52
Mexico City area code: 55

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U.S. Embassy Mexico City
Paseo de la Reforma, 305
Mexico, D.F. 06500
Telephone - 5080-2000 (24/7 switchboard operator)

Embassy Operator 5080-2000
Regional Security Officer 5080-2400
Medical Unit 5080-2800
Consular Affairs 5080-2160
Political/Economic Section 5080-2052
Marine Post One 5080-2000 x4900

Police Emergency: 066

OSAC Country Council

There is an active OSAC Country Council in Mexico City. The Mexico City Country Council meets regularly and has an active membership of over 90 organizations. For information on the Mexico City Country Council please contact Ms. Janet Salgado at 5080-2000, ext. 4918.

For more information, contact the Regional Security Office at U.S. Embassy Mexico City or OSAC's Country Council and Outreach Coordinator for the Western Hemisphere

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