



Mexico 2012 OSAC Crime and Safety Report: Mexico City

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Threats; Surveillance; Narcoterrorism; Stolen items; Insurgencies; Riots/Civil Unrest; Oil & Energy; NGO; Earthquakes; Volcanoes; Information Security; Improvised Explosive Device; Financial Security; Employee Health Safety; Assault; Bribery; Burglary; Carjacking; Drug Trafficking; Extortion; Fraud; Kidnapping; Murder; Narco-Terrorism; Theft; VBIEDs

Western Hemisphere > Mexico > Mexico City

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The State Department divides its roles and responsibilities in Mexico between 10 Consular districts spread across the country (one for the Embassy and each of the nine consulates). This Crime and Safety Report focuses on the Embassy's district that is comprised of the Mexican Federal District of Mexico City, the southern tip of Tamaulipas State and the following 13 states: Chiapas, Estado de Mexico, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Michoacan, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Queretaro, Tabasco, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz. For more information regarding the security environment in other areas of Mexico, please reference the OSAC Crime and Safety Reports from the following Consular Districts: Tijuana, Nogales, Hermosillo, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Merida.

Crime Threats

Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) continue to produce unprecedented levels of violence throughout parts of the country. However, there is no single countrywide security situation. Millions of Americans safely live, work, and take vacations in Mexico every year. In general, the northern half of the country is considered a higher threat area, primarily due to TCO conflicts and competition for drug trafficking routes to the United States. However, the TCO-related violence has been moving south along the coasts to states such as Guerrero and Veracruz. In its efforts to combat the TCO-related violence, the government of Mexico has deployed security forces to various parts of the country. The Embassy strictly controls U.S. government employees' travel to several parts of the Embassy's district, including Tamaulipas and the majority of the states of Michoacan and Guerrero.

Mexico is experiencing a combination of conditions that collectively degrade the security environment in certain areas. While the government of Mexico is having success in capturing



many of its most wanted criminals, the TCOs are losing their leaders and becoming much less organized and disciplined. Various TCOs have splintered or broken down into smaller gangs. TCOs are branching out into illicit business activities, and the associated violence is spreading in certain areas. In general, the violence generated by TCOs is limited to violence between rival TCOs and violence between TCOs and security forces. Nevertheless, visitors to Mexico should use strong personal security practices and recognize that crime can occur any place and anytime.

While crime varies widely within Mexico depending upon location, the Department of State crime threat rating for Mexico City is CRITICAL. Armed robberies, express kidnappings, car thefts, carjackings, credit card fraud, and various forms of street crime are daily concerns. The low rate of convictions of criminals contributes to the high crime rate. There is no indication that criminals are specifically targeting tourists or foreigners; however, this does NOT mean that they avoid committing crimes against foreigners or tourists in the wrong place at the wrong time. Criminals select victims based on an appearance of vulnerability, prosperity, or a lack of awareness. 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, expensive watches, and cellular phones can be sold easily in vast illegal markets. Although Mexico employs strict gun-control laws, criminals usually are armed with knives or handguns when carrying out street crime.

Road Safety

The Mexican government has deployed federal police and military personnel throughout the country as part of its efforts to combat the TCOs. U.S. citizens traveling on roads and highways may encounter government checkpoints, which are often staffed by military personnel. You are advised to cooperate with personnel at government checkpoints and mobile military patrols. TCOs have erected their own unauthorized checkpoints and killed or abducted motorists who have failed to stop at them. When approaching a checkpoint, regardless of whether it is legal or illegal, cooperate and avoid any actions that may be perceived to be suspicious or aggressive. In February 2011, TCO members shot and killed one U.S. government employee, and wounded another, who were driving on an intercity highway.

While violent incidents have occurred at all hours of the day and night on both modern toll ("cuotas") highways and on secondary roads, they have occurred most frequently at night and on isolated roads. To reduce risk, you are strongly urged to travel only during daylight hours, to avoid isolated roads, and to use toll roads whenever possible.



Visitors should travel by intercity bus only during daylight hours and only by first-class conveyance whenever possible. Although there have been several reports of bus hijackings and robberies on toll roads, buses on toll roads have experienced a lower rate of incidents than buses (second- and third-class) that travel the less secure "free" highways. In late December 2011, several vehicles, including three ordinary passenger buses, were attacked with gunfire in northern Veracruz State, resulting in several deaths, including three American citizens.

City buses may be crowded and can pose problems, as pickpockets work the most crowded, busiest routes. Tourist buses are generally safe within Mexico City proper. Metro (subway) robberies are frequent in Mexico City, especially during crowded rush hours. If riding the metro or city bus system, passengers should take care to protect their belongings and valuables.

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 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); maps and a GPS; a spare tire; first aid kit; fire extinguisher; jumper cables; flares/reflectors; and an emergency tool kit.

Political Violence

Historical Perspective

Although Mexican drug trafficking organizations have existed for decades, they became more powerful as control shifted away from Colombian cartels in the 1990s.

Violence between rival Mexican TCOs increased dramatically over the last decade as they fought each other and the Mexican government for regional control of popular trafficking routes. The Mexican government has spent the last five years aggressively confronting TCOs and the violence and corruption associated with them. The government attributes nearly 50,000 deaths to narco-related violence over the last five years.

Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime



Organized crime has become commonplace for many areas. One common practice is for gangs to charge 'protection fees' or add their own tax to products and services with the threat of violence for those who fail to pay. Some TCOs will mandate that individuals or even whole companies work for them as lookouts or couriers. Still others will threaten municipal and state administrators into accepting corrupt practices. Beheadings, torture, and other gruesome displays of violence have become daily occurrences. Numerous journalists and bloggers have been killed over the past few years for reporting on such incidents. In fact, Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for reporters, according to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

Car bombs targeting police authorities and journalists (and sometimes news stations) started occurring in northern Mexico in 2010. In January 2011, a TCO car bomb exploded in the state of Hidalgo. It was the first to occur in the Embassy's district. The bomb fatally wounded a police investigator and injured three others. While the devices successfully deployed have been relatively small, they did show some degree of competency on the part of the bomb-makers. However, should these groups continue to deploy IEDs, the imprecise nature of the tactic does increase the risk of civilians being killed or injured.

In 2011, there were a number of incidents involving package bombs in and around Mexico City. Explosive devices were delivered to banks, stores, colleges, hospitals, a church, a government building, and the Chilean and Italian Embassies. Animal rights groups in conjunction with anarchists groups have claimed responsibility for several of these devices. The two bombs left at the Chilean Embassy in January 2011 were attributed to a Chilean political activist group. The majority of these devices have been "victim operated," meaning that they did not have a timer or remote trigger and simply waited for an unsuspecting person to open the package and detonate the bomb.

There have also been several explosive devices planted at ATMs in Mexico City. These have mostly occurred during early morning hours. They have included Santander, Banamex, and Scotia Bank. If you see a suspicious bag or device in or around an ATM, stop what you are doing, leave the area immediately, and report the suspicious package to the authorities.

International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

The government remained vigilant against domestic and international terrorist threats. It increased law enforcement and counterterrorism cooperation with the United States and other neighbors and took steps to enhance control of its northern and southern borders. No known international terrorist organization had an operational presence in Mexico, and no terrorist group targeted U.S. citizens in or from Mexican territory. In 2011, the U.S. and Mexican



governments disrupted an incident in which a terrorist group tried to build ties to a TCO. The Mexican government continued to strengthen law enforcement institutions and to disrupt and dismantle the TCOs responsible for most violence. Those criminal groups sometimes used terrorist-like tactics to attack each other and security forces, but there was no evidence that the criminal organizations had political or territorial motivations aside from seeking to maintain the impunity with which they conduct their criminal activities.

Civil Unrest

American interests in Mexico City are generally not targets of political violence. Peaceful demonstrations of all sizes, gather regularly near the U.S. Embassy to protest Mexican government policies, labor and social issues, and U.S policies. Other public protests tied to political, social, and labor issues occur regularly throughout Mexico City, and often affect traffic during peak commute hours on and near Paseo de La Reforma, the city's primary avenue near the U.S. Embassy.

Most demonstrations are peaceful; however, even demonstrations intended to be peaceful may turn confrontational and escalate into violence. Demonstrators may block traffic on roads, including major arteries, or take control of toll booths on highways. U.S. citizens are urged to avoid areas of demonstrations and to exercise caution if near any protests.

The state of Chiapas--particularly 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--experiences occasional political unrest, most frequently in conjunction with local land disputes. Chiapas has been the principal site of political turmoil, with local indigenous groups who support the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in conflict with local public institutions.

The Mexican Constitution prohibits political activities by foreigners; such actions may result in detention and/or deportation. Travelers should avoid political demonstrations and other activities that might be deemed political by the Mexican authorities.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

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. Some 412 buildings were destroyed and over 3,000 seriously damaged. The government expects that another significant earthquake may occur at any time, and building regulations and response planning do not guarantee that there would not be significant damage, injuries, and loss of life again. In December 2011, Mexico City was shaken by an earthquake that measured 6.5 on the Richter scale and had an epicenter in the state of Guerrero. Although there was no substantial damage, it was a strong reminder of the threat of natural disaster.

Volcanoes, both active and dormant, are scattered throughout central Mexico. One of the country's largest volcanoes, Popocatepetl, on the southeastern corner of Mexico City, has had several low level eruptions within the last year and is smoldering (as of January 2012). Travelers to Mexico City should be aware that the government recommends staying at least 12 kilometers away from the mountain and has closed it to climbers and hikers. The clouds of ash associated with volcanic activity can limit air travel and make evacuation by air difficult.

From June to November, the Embassy's consular district may experience strong winds and rains as a result of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico or along the Pacific Coast. The coastal states tend to receive the brunt of the effects from these storms; however, hurricanes and tropical storms have been known to cause flooding and disruption of utility services throughout the district. Travelers are advised to keep abreast of developing weather conditions during the hurricane season and to avoid the paths of storms when possible. It is always prudent to leave a detailed itinerary, including local contact information and expected date of return, with a friend or family member.

Industrial and Transportation Accidents

Bus and traffic accidents are a daily occurrence in the region and especially in Mexico City. Recently, a string of multiple car pile-ups have been highlighted in local media reports. These disrupt traffic and lead to prolonged traffic jams.

Mexico's national oil company, PEMEX, has discovered hundreds of cases of illegal tapping of its oil and natural gas infrastructure. Illegal tapping has led to oil spills, fires, and explosions. One such incident in December 2010 resulted in the deaths of 28 people, injured 52, and damaged 115 houses near San Martin Texmelucan, Puebla.

Kidnappings

Kidnapping for ransom is an established criminal activity. The numbers of kidnapping incidents are impossible to determine because most of the cases are not reported to



authorities. In most cases, the ransom is paid and victim set free. The usual practice is not to notify police authorities, as 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 modus operandi for express kidnappings in Mexico City is as follows: passengers using “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. The passenger is held for a number of hours and released after a small ransom is paid or after being shuttled to a series of ATMs and forced to withdraw funds. Since 24-hour withdrawal limits are now the industry standard on ATM cards, express kidnapping victims are being held for 24 to 48 hours to maximize withdrawal amounts. A few official U.S. government employees have 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 applied to the kidnapping of random victims held for brief periods where only small ransom amounts are demanded. A typical scenario may last for several hours and be settled for the peso-equivalent of a few thousand dollars.

Another related tactic utilized by criminals is a type of telephone extortion known as a “virtual kidnapping.” Although these types of calls vary in style, the methodology is invariably the same: the virtual kidnapping callers mention that they have kidnapped a loved one and often include 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, 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 increase the likelihood that you will believe it is your loved one. The criminals will try to use fear, tact, and timing against you. 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 children are either on their way to or from school). Or, the scammers will obtain two cell phones of two family members. They will call both victims at the same time and claim to have kidnapped the other relative. They will use fear and the threat of harm to keep both victims on the line while they press them to pay a “ransom”. Once the kidnappers are satisfied they have obtained as much money as they can, they end the call, leaving both family members poorer and confused.



Other variations on this scam use callers who claim to be lawyers or Mexican police looking to help get one of your family members out of jail (or some other bad situation). They pressure you to pay them to waive charges or payoff alleged corrupt officials in order to free your loved one and avoid a long and expensive judicial process.

Often times the callers will make statements to suggest surveillance such as: "we saw you at the school with your truck." While very vague, it implies they have been watching your family and using fear and everyday routines against you to reinforce the threat of the kidnapping.

Drug and Narco-terrorism

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 that feed the United States' demand. In general, drug-related violence happens to those involved in the drug trade, but Mexico's continued success in capturing TCO leaders and interdicting illicit shipments have led many TCOs to diversify their operations into other illegal sources of revenue. This accounts for increases in kidnapping, robbery, and extortion.

Mexico's limited military and law enforcement resources require constant redeployment from conflict zone to conflict zone to address the ever-evolving security situation. The government diligently continues to attack not only TCOs, but also internal corruption within federal, state, and municipal ranks. The government has taken significant steps to restructure and rebuild federal, state, and local police forces and transform their legal system to the accusatorial model. Mexican media reported that in 2011 approximately 12,359 individuals were killed in TCO-related violence.

Police Response

Where to Turn for Assistance if you Become a Victim of a Crime and Local Police Telephone Numbers

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.



Police emergency: 066 (similar to 911 in the U.S.)

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

In some instances, U.S. citizens have become victims of harassment, mistreatment, and extortion by alleged Mexican law enforcement and other officials. Authorities have cooperated in investigating such cases, but one must have the officer's name, badge number, and patrol car number to pursue a complaint effectively. Please note this information if you ever have a problem with police or other officials.

In addition, tourists should be wary of persons representing themselves as police officers or other officials. When in doubt, ask for identification. Be aware that offering a bribe to a public official to avoid a ticket or other penalty is a crime in Mexico.

Medical Emergencies

Travelers are recommended to have adequate health insurance coverage while in Mexico. For international treatment and medical insurance: AEA International, (206) 340-6000.

Contact Information for Local Hospitals and Clinics

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>

Hospitals

ABC HOSPITAL (OBSERVATORIO)
Sur 136 No. 116 Col. Las Américas,
01120 México, D.F.
Telephone: 5230-8000

ABC HOSPITAL (SANTA FE)
Av. Carlos Graef Fernández 154 (enter from Av. Vasco de Quiroga), Col. Tlaxala Santa Fe,
Cuajimalpa, 05300 México, D.F.
Telephone: 1103-1600; Emergencies: 1103-1666 (Spanish)



HOSPITAL ESPANOL

613 Av Ejército Nacional (Miguel Hidalgo)
11520 México, D.F.

Telephone: 5255-9600

Dr. Miguel Alvarez Mata – Embassy Medical Advisor – telephone: 2489-0572

HOSPITAL ANGELES DE LAS LOMAS

AV, VIALIDAD DE LA BARRANCA S/N (VALLE DE LAS PALMAS)

Huixquilucan, Edo. De México

Telephone: 5246-5000, Emergencies: 5246-5092, 5246-5093

CDC Guidance

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

Mexico has health concerns. One should take normal tourist precautions with regard to drinking water, eating fresh fruits, vegetables, and salads.

Some employees react to the pollution and high altitude; so take things slowly at first. Travelers to Mexico City may require some time to adjust to the altitude (7300 ft.), which can adversely affect blood pressure, digestion, sleep, and energy level. Short-term (TDY) assignments carry an added risk because of the lack of time to acclimate. Dehydration, stress, or illnesses compound the basic risks of high altitude.

Individuals with sickle cell trait should consult with the appropriate medical unit or their personal physician before commencing with travel.

Mexico's first cases of Avian (H1N1) flu virus occurred in 2009. By the end of the year, thousands of people had died worldwide. Over the past couple years, the virus has accounted for some deaths but has settled down to more typical seasonal flu patterns. Travelers to the country and especially young children and the elderly are recommended to have an annual flu shot to help mitigate this risk.

Air Ambulance Services

Air ambulance service (recommended for severe injuries or illnesses best treated in the U.S):
AEA International, (800) 752-4195.



Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

One simple way to lessen one's chances of becoming a victim of street crime in Mexico City is to avoid the use of "Libre" taxi cabs. These taxis are poorly regulated and often criminally-linked enterprises, which pick-up fares on the street after being hailed by customers. "Sitio" or radio dispatched base station taxis are far safer, more reliable, and are worth the added expense. These types of taxis cannot be hailed off the street, and must be ordered by phone or met at a designated taxi stand. 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 in the street entirely. Instead, 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. "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.

To reduce the likelihood of receiving a virtual kidnapping call: Answer the phone with "hello" and make the other person ask for you by name; know the details of your family's travel and location (where they are supposed to be, who they are supposed to be with, etc.), and contact information (land-line and cell phone numbers); never provide personal information to someone who calls or approaches you; and do not post personal information on social networking sites.

Exercise caution when utilizing credit or debit cards in ATM machines or dubious locales. There have been reports of instances in which U.S. citizens have had their card numbers "skimmed" and the money in their debit accounts stolen or their credit cards fraudulently charged. ("Skimming" is the theft of credit card information by an employee of a legitimate merchant or bank, manually copying down numbers or using a magnetic stripe reader, or using a camera and skimmer installed in an ATM machine.) In addition to skimming, the risk of physical theft of credit or debit cards also exists. To prevent such theft, the Embassy recommends that travelers keep close track of their personal belongings and that they only carry what they need. If travelers choose to use credit cards, they should regularly check their account status to ensure its integrity. Try to use ATMs in bank branches during business hours.

Areas to be Avoided



According to the Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal and the Secretaria Publica del Distrito Federal, the following neighborhoods routinely have the highest number of crimes reported:

- El Centro
- Colonia Del Valle
- Colonia Narvate
- Colonia Doctores
- Colonia Roma
- Colonia Agricola Oriental
- Colonia Juarez
- Colonia Guerrero
- Colonia Maria La Ribera
- Colonia Obrera

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.

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. Avoid wearing jewelry, especially watches that are or appear expensive. Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended. Only carry those credit cards and documents necessary during your visit. Make copies of what you carry so if robbed the can be cancelled quickly. 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.

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.

Secure your vehicle. If your tire is mounted on the outside of the vehicle, secure it in place with chain and padlock, or similar device. Theft of the vehicle's operating computer is a common crime, as is the theft of car sound systems. Installation of a car alarm is a recommended precaution in deterring vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents. 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. Replace two lug nuts on each wheel with specially keyed bolts that lock or can only be



removed with a special attachment to the tire iron. Try to 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.

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. A list of private security companies can be provided upon request by contacting OSAC's Regional Coordinator for the Western Hemisphere. The government of Mexico also provides a list of private security companies at: <http://siesp.ssp.gob.mx/Transparencia/wConsultasGeneral.aspx>

Further Information

Mexico country code: 52
Mexico City area code: 55

Police Emergency: 066 (similar to 911 in the U.S.)
Fire Department: 068
Ambulance: 065 (Red Cross)

Embassy Contact Information

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

OSAC Country Council



The Department of State supports an active OSAC Country Council, with a membership of 90 companies. For information on OSAC and future OSAC Mexico City events, contact Ms. Janet Salgado at 5080-2000, ext. 4918. For more information, contact the Regional Security Office at U.S. Embassy Mexico City.