



## Haiti 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Transportation Security; Surveillance; Stolen items; Travel Health and Safety; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Floods; Hurricanes; Landslides and mudslides; Elections; Carjacking; Burglary; Drug Trafficking; Kidnapping; Theft

Western Hemisphere > Haiti > Port-au-Prince

3/11/2012

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

#### Crime Threats

The United States government (USG) rates Haiti as CRITICAL in the threat categories of crime and political violence. Haiti is unique in the Caribbean for its relative lack of tourism, scarcity of foreign investment, and inferior infrastructure. As a result, traditional tourist-oriented crimes such as pick pocketing and purse snatching are less reported than in neighboring Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and other countries in the region. The most frequently reported crimes against Americans in Port-au-Prince are carjackings, kidnappings, and robberies. Home invasions also remain a concern in some parts of Port-au-Prince.

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince and the surrounding areas. Nearly 5,000 prisoners escaped from the national penitentiary during the earthquake. It is estimated that only 25 percent of these fugitives have been rearrested; this explains in part the increase in crime. Kidnappings rose in the latter half of 2010 after the prison escapees had time to regroup. The kidnappers resorted to home-invasion kidnappings

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in the middle- and upper-class neighborhoods of Pelerin, Laboule, Thomassin, and Kenscoff, situated on the mountainside south of Petionville.

Kidnapping and other crimes increase during holiday seasons and before school sessions begin due to the belief that people are in possession of more cash for gifts and school fees.

Cite Soleil continues to be an area of concern for security forces in Haiti despite the successful efforts of the Haitian National Police (HNP) and United Nations security forces to eradicate criminal control of this area.

The prevalence of guns remains a key security concern, as disarmament efforts, such as the UN's Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program and the government of Haiti's Commission for National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (CNDDR) program, has yielded only modest results over the past few years. Robbery-related shootings continued during 2011, and there are frequent reports of random gunfire throughout Port-au-Prince. Anyone visiting or residing in Port-au-Prince for more than a few days is likely to hear gunfire at some point during their stay. There has been an increase in reports of crimes being committed by persons carrying/brandishing firearms. Knives or similar weapons also remain popular among criminal elements.

Armed and/or strong-arm robberies against motorists and pedestrians remains a concern; however, reports of simple non-violent robberies against foreigners over the past year remain relatively low. It is unknown if this accurately reflects actual incidents or is a result of a lack of reporting due to lack of faith in the system or inherent frustration in filing one on the first place.

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Residential theft (burglaries/home invasions) trends over the past couple of years have suggested a decline in traditional criminal burglary and a rise in robbery/kidnappings. In Port-au-Prince particularly, almost all home invasions were conducted for the dual purpose of kidnapping and robbery. Burglars have little fear of resistance from residential occupants and do not appear to consider whether a residence is occupied when committing their crimes. Certain elements are not reluctant to use violence to get across a point or when confronted; however, the vast majority will simply brandish a firearm/weapon, fire it randomly, tie up their victim/s, and get away with the foreign currency or vehicle. Neither type of criminal, violent or passive, seems overly concerned with police response, as they know none will be dispatched quickly. Throughout 2011, as with other crimes, there was a continuation of home invasions in the more affluent areas of upper Port-au-Prince. There were several reported incidents involving armed men forcing entry into homes in the middle of the night. Criminals have placed heavy emphasis on performing home-invasion kidnappings in the middle-class neighborhoods of Vivy Mitchell, Pelerin, Laboule, Thomassin, and Kenscoff, situated on the mountainside south of Petionville.

Vehicle thefts remain a serious problem in many areas; however, they continue to be more commonly committed in conjunction with kidnappings/carjackings. The trend from the past couple of years has been the theft by force of a vehicle or motorcycle, which is then used in a kidnapping and later abandoned.

The local transport known as "tap taps" are the primary form of public transportation for most Haitians. The use of tap taps by Westerners is dangerous, as robberies and accidents are common. Embassy policy prohibits the use of any public transportation in Haiti for U.S. government employees.

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The Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy recommends against walking or jogging on any street in Port-au-Prince. Visitors are warned not to venture out after dusk unless they are in a vehicle and moving to another protected area. Burglaries/home invasions occur frequently in Port-au-Prince. While nighttime burglaries remain the norm, there are frequent reports of daytime attempts, probing, and actual burglaries. Criminals are known to overwhelm/assault household staff and tie them up while looting high value items and cash during the day. The same tactics apply at night but with more potential for violence, as the residents are normally home, and criminals press for more currency and valuables during their looting. Reports of events lasting over several hours are not uncommon. Of particular concern is the ability of some criminals to bypass residential security features, such as perimeter walls, guards, and alarm systems.

Instances of "smash and grabs" and attempted carjackings continue, especially in downtown traffic and at night. Situational awareness remains the key to avoiding these incidents or extracting oneself from them. Visitors who are victims of crime are targeted by criminal elements not because they are Americans but because they are perceived as being wealthy. Foreign currency, electronics, vehicles, and weapons are items most sought after by criminal elements.

## Road Safety

Road safety remains a significant threat to the average visitor to Haiti. There has been a marked deterioration of the infrastructure since the January 2010 earthquake. Travel at night outside of main cities is ill-advised due to a significant reduction in vision, resulting in an increased chance of not seeing pedestrians, broken down vehicles, and oncoming traffic.

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Driving in Haiti requires extreme caution, particularly in the evening hours. Road conditions inside and outside the major cities are extremely poor. Very few roads in Haiti are paved, and the ones that are paved generally are in a state of disrepair. A majority of the roads outside of the main cities are either topped with gravel or are poorly maintained dirt roads. There are a few road improvement projects underway, and roadways remain hazardous. Traffic rules and courtesies are not observed or enforced, and traffic within Port-au-Prince is often gridlocked. Embassy policy strictly prohibits U.S. government employees from driving at night outside of Port-au-Prince.

Piles of trash in the streets and missing manhole covers continue to add to the threats to traffic that include gaping ditches and pot holes, wayward and oblivious pedestrians, and small animals. Street lighting is sporadic and of poor quality in Port-au-Prince and relatively non-existent outside cities. Street signs are also lacking in certain areas, adding confusion to the casual traveler.

Driving in Port-au-Prince requires particular caution and fulltime attention. Vendors have taken over the sidewalks and in some cases much of the roadway, so the only way for a pedestrian to pass down any given street is by walking in the street. The congestion that was previously found in the downtown area is now more prevalent in the rest of the city, as displaced persons from the earthquake have relocated throughout the eastern suburbs, including Petionville.

In rural or mountainous areas, drivers should expect a lack of adequate guard rails, few traffic signs and road markings, and little to no vehicle or road lighting. Drivers should use caution when driving around bends, as it is common for vehicles coming from the other direction to pass slower vehicles or otherwise drive in the middle of the road, even around blind turns.

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People traveling outside of Port-au-Prince should do so during daylight hours, if possible, and in tandem with other vehicles due to both the security situation and road conditions. While carjackings and armed robberies are not uncommon in many urban areas, they are less common in the countryside.

Drivers should be conscious that accidents can draw angry and potentially violent crowds quickly. Anyone involved in an accident resulting in the formation of a mob should proceed directly to a safe place (e.g. police station) to resolve the situation. Remaining at the scene of an accident can be a risk to one's safety.

Drivers should also take note of added safety risks during the rainy season (April through November), when roadways can become impassable quickly, thus creating a hazardous condition for the traveler. It is not uncommon for water in the roads to reach the doors of an average SUV. The mountainous areas pose even greater challenges to road travel due to weather conditions frequently involving rain and fog. The narrow, unpaved roads are also blocked by muddy surface conditions.

In addition to the above recommendations, it is important to note that general vigilance should be used at all times on all roads in Haiti, as there is no area that should be considered immune from crime.

## **Political Violence**

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## Historical Perspective

While most people in Haiti are friendly and peaceful, travelers to Haiti are reminded of the potential for spontaneous protests and public demonstrations, which can occur at any time, especially in Port-au-Prince, and may result in violence. American citizens are advised to take common sense precautions and avoid any event where crowds may congregate.

Americans traveling in Haiti should also take special care and attention to ensure they do not become stranded in remote regions or accidentally enter certain areas deemed unsafe, especially within Port-au-Prince.

## Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime

The USG rates Haiti as LOW in the threat category of indigenous terrorism. There have been no terrorist acts specifically targeting American interests or citizens in Haiti.

Organized crime appears more frequently in the form of small, organized, criminal gang activity, such as that of kidnapping gangs, than in the form of large-scale racketeering. Drug trafficking organizations are present in Haiti and actively work to make Haiti a known transshipment country.

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## International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

USG rates Haiti as MEDIUM in the threat category of transnational terrorism. There have been no terrorist acts specifically targeting American interests or U.S. citizens in Haiti.

## Civil Unrest

Demonstrations are held frequently in Port-au-Prince and other outlying areas for various reasons, to include dissatisfaction in infrastructure and utilities to disapproval of Haitian government entities or UN presence. Any demonstration is capable of turning violent, and innocent bystanders or travelers can easily be caught up in a clash between demonstrators and the police, rock throwing, and tire burning road blocks. Travelers are advised to avoid all demonstrations and be prepared to seek alternate routes should one be encountered.

Violent political protests occur regularly in downtown Port-au-Prince around the National Palace, the Champ de Mars, and the State University campuses, along with sporadic incidents scattered throughout the city. These protests have been frequent, averaging multiple incidents per week since mid-2009. The demonstrations have been motivated by a variety of political and social movements, ranging from minimum wage to school curriculum to the presence of UN forces in the country to cholera response to Haitian presidential elections. They share a common trend in that the protestors are quick to barricade streets and regularly stone the windows of passing motorists' vehicles.

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The most recent noteworthy protests include the cholera protests in Cap Haitian that crippled Haiti's second largest city for multiple days in November 2010 and the early-December 2010 presidential elections riots, which stymied movement in Port-au-Prince and Les Cayes (Haiti's third-largest city) for three days.

## Post-Specific Concerns

### Environmental Hazards

Haiti, like most Caribbean countries, can be affected by hurricanes and storms. Hurricane season runs from approximately June 1 to November 30. Driving during these times has additional risks. Due to severe deforestation of the mountains, even modest rains can cause flash flooding and other life threatening hazards.

During 2008, Haiti was affected by four tropical storms and hurricanes that resulted in severe flooding and washed out roads in many areas. Approximately 800 deaths were reported in conjunction with these storms, primarily in Gonaives in the Artibonite Department, and along the southern shores. The storms were estimated by the World Bank to have caused over US\$1 billion in infrastructural damage.

A 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti near Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010. Much of the physical infrastructure of Port-au-Prince was destroyed, and it will take years for Haiti to recover from the catastrophic damage. Services such as lodging, health care, and other basic

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services have been greatly reduced but are making small comebacks in certain sectors.

## Industrial and Transportation Accidents

The Economic section of the U.S. Embassy may be contacted concerning issues regarding industrial and transportation safety (509-2229-8000). Before using smaller airlines, one is advised to research recent history. Those that have a shoddy appearance are very likely to be remiss on safety standards.

## Kidnappings

U.S. citizens traveling to and residing in Haiti are reminded that greater Port-au-Prince remains a leading venue for criminal kidnappings of Americans. Kidnapping of American citizens should be reported to the Haitian National Police (see below) and the American Citizens Services (ACS) section of the U.S. Embassy (509-2229-8000). As the lead U.S. law enforcement agency in Haiti, the Diplomatic Security Service/Regional Security Office plays an active role in all kidnappings of American citizens and coordinates closely with Federal Bureau of Investigation entities.

Most kidnappings continue to be criminal rather than political, and the kidnappers make no distinctions of nationality, race, gender, or age. The breakdown in reported kidnapping victims from the last few years is spread fairly evenly among men, women, and children. All persons who are perceived to have wealth or some family connections with assets, either in Haiti or abroad, are vulnerable. While most cases were resolved through the payment of ransom,

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many kidnappings include physical or sexual assaults. Depending on the motive, gang, and/or knowledge of the kidnapers by the victim, some incidents do result in death of the victim.

While total instances of kidnappings dropped substantially since their high in 2005 and 2006, the patterns are less predictable, and areas of victimization are more widespread. A short-term decrease in reported incidents, falling from 266 in 2008 to 73 in 2009 was offset by a rise again in 2010, with a total of 121 kidnappings, or approximately one every three days. The U.S. Embassy's Consular Section reports that 12 Americans were kidnapped in Haiti in 2011.

## Drug and Narco-terrorism

Haiti is a major transshipment point for South American narcotics en route to the United States; however, the threat of narco-terrorism is not a major issue in Haiti.

## Police Response

A comparative analysis of figures from various police/security entities operating throughout Haiti reflects a continuation of the trend in which incidents of crimes are inaccurately or under-reported. The under-reporting is due to a lack of sufficient police presence and response capability and/or lack of faith in any action by the police to investigate. In a country of approximately 10 million people, the Haitian National Police (HNP) has about 8,500 officers, approximately two-thirds of whom are deployed in the greater Port-au-Prince metropolitan area (Port-au-Prince has approximately two million residents). Due to this

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deficiency, many communities simply do not have means to report crimes, though most experts agree that there is not much crime to report in provincial towns and rural areas. In addition, when crimes are reported, they are not adequately documented in any sort of standardized reporting format.

More local Port-au-Prince residents are defending themselves and property by upgrading their property and security systems, employing 24/7 and/or additional guards and/or obtaining firearms for personal protection. There is no HNP vehicle patrol, and they have a very limited response capability. The HNP has minimal deterrent effect on criminals, who can operate freely without fear of the mostly unarmed uniformed or traffic police. If the police are needed to interrupt a crime in progress or to investigate a criminal act that has already taken place, the victim normally must drive to the local police station and pick up an available police officer. The investigation of a crime is limited by lacking HNP resources.

An already depleted police force was greatly affected by the January 2010 earthquake, as many of their police stations were destroyed.

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

If you are the victim of a crime, first get to a safe location and seek medical attention, if needed. Then, notify local authorities and the U.S. Embassy Port-au-Prince. You should immediately report the incident to the nearest police station. If it is an emergency and the police are not in the vicinity, police can be contacted by calling 114. Calling a phone number from a cell phone to a landline in Haiti is sometimes problematic.

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The Haitian National Police Information and Operations Center can be contacted at 509-3835-1111.

You can reach the Embassy by telephone at 509-2229-8000. Consular officials cannot investigate crimes, provide legal advice or represent you in court, serve as official interpreters or translators, or pay legal, medical, or other fees for you. For more information about services available to victims of crime, please see the U.S. State Department website.

In addition, victims of crimes may be eligible for assistance or compensation from state crime victims' assistance programs, which vary from state to state. Please click here for information about each state's program.

In addition, information about sexual assault crisis hotline information, counseling services, and other services for crime victims is available here.

#### How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

In all instances, visitors should be respectful and comply with police direction. United States citizens who feel they were harassed are encouraged to call American Citizen Services (ACS) at the U.S. Embassy (509-2229-8000).

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If you are arrested:

Request to speak with the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince immediately (tel. 509-2229-8000). This number is manned 24 hours/day, and you can be put in contact with local authorities or with the Embassy staff. If you cannot reach the Embassy, try to contact someone locally who can.

### **Medical Emergencies**

CDC International Traveler's hotline - (404) 332-4559, <http://www.cdc.gov>.

For international treatment and medical insurance: AEA International, (206) 340-6000.

### **Contact Information for Local Hospitals and Clinics**

Medical services are far below U.S. standards and can be difficult to obtain. Emergency medical care is not always readily available; most hospitals do not have an emergency department staffed 24 hours/day. There are a handful of hospitals available, all of which are

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suitable in medical emergencies only.

Medical evacuation is required for most major medical care. It is strongly recommended that those visiting Port-au-Prince carry medical evacuation insurance. The Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and whether it will cover emergency expenses such as medical evacuation. U.S. medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, health care providers do not accept U.S. medical insurance. Medical professionals require a cash payment up front and will provide a receipt that can be provided to a U.S. insurance company. U.S. Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States. However, many travel agents and private companies offer insurance plans that will cover health care expenses incurred overseas, including emergency services such as medical evacuations. Useful information on medical emergencies abroad, including overseas insurance programs, is provided in the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs brochure, "Medical Information for Americans Traveling Abroad," available via the Bureau of Consular Affairs home page.

## Air Ambulance Services

There are several air ambulance companies based in the United States that service Haiti - National Air Ambulance (Ft.Lauderdale, FL) 1-800-327-3710, Air Ambulance Networks 1-800-327-1966, and Air Ambulance Professionals 1-800-752-4195.

## Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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For background information on Haiti or for information on how to avoid becoming a victim of crime please refer to the State Department's "Country Background Notes," "Consular Information Sheet," and "Travel Warning Information" located on the State Department website at <http://www.state.gov>

Driving at night outside of Port-au-Prince is not recommended. There have been reports of attacks on stopped vehicles on the Route National #1, Route National #9, and other areas of Port-au-Prince. Avoid driving at night outside the low-density suburban areas. Rural and suburban areas alike are ill-lit and pose additional safety hazards due to pedestrians and animals crossing the roads. Due to the sharp economic decline, many vehicles are not well maintained and often lack headlights. Incidents of accidents/collisions involving drunk drivers are also on the rise.

Keep automobile doors locked at all times and the windows up. While stopped in urban traffic, scan the side and rearview mirrors to identify potential trouble. While idling at a light or stop sign, leave adequate room to maneuver between your vehicle and the one in front. Both when driving and when the vehicle is unoccupied, secure all items out of view by either placing them in the trunk or under the seat. In the case of vehicular robberies (i.e. "smash and grabs") and attempted carjackings, a group of street criminals (hidden in the grass or in ditches) often wait for vehicles to stop in traffic or at traffic lights. They then rush the vehicle and attempt to open the doors of their target's vehicle. If all doors are locked and the driver fails to take immediate action, the group will attempt to break a window to access the vehicle and violently gain control. Occurrences of these incidents increase at night and occur frequently in heavy mid-day traffic from which it is difficult to escape. The road from the Port-au-Prince International Airport is particularly targeted.

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Protests and demonstrations occur frequently in the downtown Port-au-Prince area. As a result, U.S. Embassy personnel are only authorized to travel to this area during daylight hours and in armored vehicles. Avoid all political rallies or demonstrations.

Always remain aware of your surroundings and the activity around you. A typical mugging in Port-au-Prince involves a group of young males who surround and overwhelm their victim in a public area. An alert individual can often see this developing and initiate an appropriate evasive action.

Traveling in groups of 3-4 persons is highly recommended, especially at night.

Be alert to distractions. Purse-snatchers will often work in teams of two with one man acting as a diversion. One man may engage the target in conversation and bump him/her on the street while the other grabs hand-carried valuables or boldly snatches jewelry from the victim in plain sight of security guards before fleeing.

Do not display or carry unnecessary valuables in public. Cell phones, electronic items, and foreign currency are of particular interest to local thieves. Do not carry a cell phone on the waist or in other visible areas. Do not display large amounts of money.

Do not resist if robbed or carjacked.

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Full-time guards with adequate wall, gate, grillwork, and alarm security features remain the best deterrent. Many residents of Port-au-Prince utilize guards, alarms, grillwork, electrical fencing, barbed wire, dogs, and/or personally-owned firearms to combat residential crime.

### Areas to Avoid

Cite Soleil, Carrefour, Martissant, and the Croix Des Boquets areas are considered to be of high risk to U.S. Embassy personnel. As a result, Embassy employees are only authorized to travel to these areas in armored vehicles and under armed escort.

Roads around Cite Soleil, primarily Route National #1 and #9, are safer than in years past but should still be considered dangerous areas, and travel should be avoided. Care should also be used when traveling around Carrefour, particularly along Route National#2 through Martissant, as well as travel in the vicinity of Cite Militaire, and along La Saline Boulevard (Port Road) due to continuing concerns of criminal activity and proximity to known gang areas.

### Further Information

### Embassy Contact Numbers

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Embassy Switchboard: 509.2229.8000

Regional Security Office: 509.2229.8061

Consular Section: 509.2229.8000

Marine Security Guard: 509.2229.8122

American citizens are strongly encouraged to register at the American Citizens Services section at the Consulate, located at Tabarre #41, Tabarre, Haiti, or online at <http://travel.state.gov>.

## **OSAC Country Council**

There is an active OSAC Country Council in Haiti. All U.S. private sector organizations active in Haiti are encouraged to attend meetings. For more information, please contact the Regional Security Office at U.S. Embassy Port-au-Prince or visit <http://www.osac.gov>.

Regional Security Office

509.2229.8061

DS\_RSO\_Port-Au-Prince@State.Gov

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