



Travel Warning: El Salvador

Crime; Travel Health and Safety

Western Hemisphere > El Salvador; Western Hemisphere > El Salvador > San Salvador

4/25/2014

Tens of thousands of U.S. citizens safely visit El Salvador each year for study, tourism, business, and volunteer work. There is no information to suggest that U.S. citizens are specifically targeted by criminals; however, crime and violence are serious problems throughout the country. Although Salvadoran police statistics show a decrease in annual homicides during 2012 and 2013, the homicide rate has been rising steadily since August 2013. From mid-February through April 2014, El Salvador has experienced an average of almost 10 people killed per day - the highest homicide rate since 2011. Since January 2010, 31 U.S. citizens have been murdered in El Salvador including a 9-year-old child in December 2013. During the same time period, 335 U.S. citizens reported having their passports stolen, while many others were victims of violent crimes.

Typical crimes in El Salvador include extortion, mugging, highway assault, home invasion, and car theft. Recently, there have also been more cases reported in which criminals observe and follow customers making withdrawals at ATMs and banks, then rob them on the road or at a residence. Some victims unwittingly wander into gang-controlled territory and are killed, normally at night. Assaults against police officers have risen, and public shootouts are not uncommon. Armed robberies of climbers and hikers in El Salvador's national parks are regular occurrences, and the Embassy strongly recommends engaging the services of a local guide certified by the national or local tourist authority when hiking in back country areas - even within the national parks. The National Civilian Police (PNC) has a special tourist police force (POLITUR) to provide security and assistance to visitors. It has officers located in 19 tourist destinations.

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A majority of serious crimes are never solved; only 6 of the 31 murders committed against U.S. citizens since January 2010 have resulted in convictions. The Government of El Salvador lacks sufficient resources to properly investigate and prosecute cases and to deter violent crime. El Salvador's current criminal conviction rate is five percent. While several of the PNC's investigative units have shown great promise, routine street-level patrol techniques, anti-gang, and crime suppression efforts are limited. Equipment shortages (particularly radios, vehicles, and fuel) further limit their ability to deter or respond to crimes effectively.

El Salvador, a country of roughly 6 million people, has, according to Government of El Salvador statistics, thousands of known gang members from several gangs including Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Eighteenth Street (M18), and gang members are quick to engage in violence or use deadly force if resisted. These *¿maras¿* concentrate on narcotics and arms trafficking, murder for hire, carjacking, extortion, and violent street crime. In 2013, the number of people reported as missing in El Salvador increased by 93 percent. Authorities believe a significant number of disappearances are related to gang activity, since many of the missing were in gangs or were friends or family members of gang members. Police sources claim that the families of gang members often face the same risks of being killed or disappearing as the gang members themselves.

Extortion is a particularly serious and very common crime in El Salvador. Some extortion attempts are no more than random cold calls that originate from imprisoned gang members using cellular telephones, and the subsequent threats against the victim are made through social engineering and/or through information obtained about the victim's family. U.S. citizens who are visiting El Salvador for extended periods are at higher risk for extortion demands.

Hitting its peak a few years ago, extortion rates have dropped in the last two years. However, recent reports show an increase in the level of violence associated with extortion cases.

Many extortions are not reported by victims for fear of reprisal and lack of faith in the ability of

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the government to protect the victims.

U.S. citizens should remain alert to their surroundings, especially when entering or exiting their homes or hotels, cars, garages, schools, and workplaces. Whenever possible, travel in groups of two or more persons. U.S. Embassy security officials advise all U.S. government personnel not to walk, run, or cycle in the unguarded streets and parks of El Salvador, even in groups, and recommend exercising only in gyms and fitness centers. Avoid wearing expensive jewelry, and do not carry large sums of money or display cash, ATM/credit cards, or other valuables. Avoid walking at night in most areas of El Salvador, and do not walk alone near beaches, historic ruins, or trails. Incidents of crime along roads, including carjacking, are common in El Salvador. Motorists should avoid traveling at night and always drive with their doors locked to deter potential robberies at traffic lights and on congested downtown streets.

Travel on public transportation, especially buses, both within and outside the capital, is risky and not recommended. The Embassy advises official visitors and personnel to avoid using mini-buses and regular buses and to use only radio-dispatched taxis or those stationed in front of major hotels.

The location and timing of criminal activity is unpredictable. We recommend that all travelers exercise caution when traveling anywhere in El Salvador. However, certain areas of the country demonstrate higher levels of criminal activity than others. Salvadoran "departments" (a geographic designation similar to U.S. states) with homicide rates higher than the national average include:

Cuscatlan

La Libertad

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La Paz

La Union

Santa Ana

San Miguel

San Salvador

Sonsonate

Usulután

In addition, of the 262 municipalities in El Salvador, the following are experiencing chronic, high levels of reported criminal activity:

Apopa

Conchagua

Ilobasco

Ilopango

La Libertad

La Unión/Tamarindo Beaches

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Lourdes-Colon

Mejicanos

San Martin

San Miguel

San Salvador

Santa Ana

Sonsonate

Soyopango

Usulután

Zacatecoluca

For more detailed information regarding personal security, please see the State Department's Country Specific Information for El Salvador. U.S. citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Bureau of Consular Affairs website, where the Worldwide Caution, Travel Warnings, and Travel Alerts can be found. Follow us on Twitter and the Bureau of Consular Affairs page on Facebook as well.

U.S. citizens living or traveling in El Salvador are strongly encouraged to sign up for the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to obtain updated information on travel and security within El Salvador. Travelers may also obtain up-to-date information on

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security conditions by calling 888-407-4747 toll-free in the United States or on a regular toll line at 202-501-4444.

The U.S. Embassy is located on Final Boulevard Santa Elena Sur, Urbanización Santa Elena, Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad, and can be reached at:

Telephone: 503-2501-2999

Fax: 503-2278-5522 / 503-2278-6020

Email: ACSSanSal@state.gov

Website: sansalvador.usembassy.gov

Facebook: www.facebook.com/embajadaamericanaelsalvador

Twitter: twitter.com/USCitSV

For after-hours emergencies, please call 503-2501-2253

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