Venezuela 2015 Crime and Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Narco-Terrorism; Left-wing; Stolen items; Riots/Civil Unrest; Oil & Energy; Earthquakes; Landslides and mudslides; Employee Health Safety; Disease Outbreak; Aviation; Theft; Murder; Kidnapping; Burglary; Carjacking; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Drug Trafficking; Bribery

Western Hemisphere > Venezuela; Western Hemisphere > Venezuela > Caracas

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Factors attributed to the country’s pervasive criminality include: poorly paid, poorly trained, under-equipped, and often corrupt police force; an inefficient and politicized judicial system; a system of violent and largely overcrowded prisons that are under the control of prison gang leaders; and country-wide availability of millions of illegal weapons. Despite recent government efforts to curb firearms, Venezuela is the most weaponized place in the world. In a country of 29 million people, there is roughly one gun for every two people. There is no evidence to indicate criminals are specifically targeting U.S. citizens.

Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats
Pickpockets and grab artists operate throughout the greater Caracas metropolitan area but are especially active at bus/metro terminals and in the historic downtown city center, in the area of Plaza Simón Bolívar, the Capitolio, the Sabana Grande neighborhood, and Parque Los Caobos.

Violent crime is the greatest threat in Caracas, affecting local Venezuelans and foreigners. Caracas is notorious for the brazenness of high-profile violent crimes (murder, robbery, kidnapping) committed across the city at all hours of the day and night. Mexican NGO Citizen Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal) listed Caracas as the second most violent city in the world (up from third place in 2013). The majority of Caracas’ crime and violence remains attributed to mobile street gangs and organized crime groups. In a rating of the 50 most violent cities on Earth, five Venezuelan cities were listed per 100,000 inhabitants; Caracas (#2) rate of 134 per 100,000; Barquisimeto (#10) rate of 65 per 100,000; Ciudad Guyana (#17) rate of 54 per 100,000; Maracaibo (#42) rate of 35 per 100,000; and Valencia (#50) rate of 30 per 100,000.

The poorest areas, known as “barrios”, frequently provide safe havens and bases of operations for criminal gangs. It was once thought that violent crimes only occurred in barrios, but in 2014 even relatively affluent residential Caracas neighborhoods in Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo (where many government leaders, professionals, businesspeople, and foreign diplomats reside) saw regular incidents of kidnapping, home invasion, and armed robbery. In May 2014, an armed home invasion occurred at the residence of a U.S. diplomat in which the occupants were tied up and the residence ransacked by three armed men. Though neither of the occupants was injured, the Embassy determined that it was no longer safe to lease an apartment in the building and relocated the occupants to another complex, due to another home invasion several months prior. A majority of violent crimes occur in barrios, but criminal “ownership” of these neighborhoods often prevents police from entering. The freedom with which many gangs operate is due to a lack of police presence within the barrio. In many areas, police presence is only observed after an incident has occurred. High level of vehicle...
ownership and the continuing negligible cost of fuel permit criminals the mobility to operate more widely in affluent areas so that wealthier victims can be targeted.

Venezuela remained one of the deadliest countries in the world for 2014. Although the government claims that the murder rate has declined from 2013 statistics, such claims are widely assessed to be unreliable. Reliable official statistics are hard to come by, but since 2005, the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (VVO) NGO has tracked violence. In its annual report (published December 30, 2014), VVO stated that Venezuela had over 24,980 homicides in 2014, a rate of 82 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and up slightly from 2013. In Caracas, the rate is higher, with a Security Justice and Peace report reflecting a rate of 5,200 victims, or 134 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

After homicide, the crimes of greatest concern in Caracas are kidnapping and robbery (carjacking, street robbery, and home invasions). Kidnappings and robberies often become homicides, as victims who resist are routinely killed. According to the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace, 105 cars were stolen per day nationwide in 2014. Caracas accounts for 40-45% of the total number of complaints that occurred nationwide. Additionally, the highest rate of carjacking and thefts of cars is in Caracas, with 46-50 cases per day on average. In September 2014, an Embassy locally employed staff member was robbed of his motorcycle while traveling from his residence to the Embassy. Carjackings are most likely to occur during evening and nighttime hours and increasingly involve newer SUVs, especially with four-wheel drive. Carjacking victims have included business executives and foreign diplomats in Caracas. Robberies, particularly street robberies, occur throughout Caracas at any time. Armed criminals target pedestrians (standing or walking along the side of a road) and motorists (parked or stopped in traffic) alike. Often criminals operate from a motorcycle, pulling up alongside their victim while brandishing a firearm and demanding valuables. Robberies (and scams) continue to occur at ATMs throughout Venezuela. Robberies at banks and ATMs are more common during the holiday season. Home invasions dramatically increased in Caracas in 2014. Home invaders primarily use two tactics:
1. an individual or small group targets a house or apartment, convincing the doorman (“vigilante”), maid, and/or resident that they are there to perform some service. Once inside the home, the criminals brandish weapons, threaten the occupants, and steal valuables. This tactic sometimes involves an insider who tips the criminals off to the presence of valuables and/or helps them to scam their way into the home.

2. this involves larger groups of heavily-armed criminals forcing their way into a house or apartment. This approach can be carried out by threatening the doorman, accosting the victim as s/he waits to enter the building, or “piggy backing” behind the victim (following close behind as the victim drives into his/her protected garage or parking area).

Home invasions are occasionally accompanied by gratuitous violence. Victims appear to be selected because of their perceived wealth, from the home/neighborhood or the car they drive. Home invasions have involved U.S. diplomats and have occurred in the buildings where diplomats live.

Areas of Concern

Because of continued FARC and ELN activity along with the presence of fuel smugglers and other organized criminal groups along the 1,000-mile Venezuela-Colombia border, Embassy employees are prohibited from traveling within 50 miles of the border without prior Chief of Mission authorization.

Because of safety and security concerns, the following neighborhoods of Caracas are off-limits to American employees of the Embassy unless they have special permission:

• In the western part of Libertador municipality: El Retiro, 23 de Enero, Blandin, La Vega, La Rinconada, Las Mayas, Tazon, Oropeza Castillo, Lomas de Urdaneta, Propatria, Casalta,
Lomas de Propatria, Carapita, Antimano, Tacagua, Ruiz Pineda, Caricuao, La Quebradita, El Atlantico, Sarria, La Candelaria, San Martin, Coche, El Valle and La Yaguara.

- In the eastern part of Sucre municipality: Barrio Piritu, Barrio La Rubia, Barrio Altavista, Petare, Caucaguita, La Dolorita, Paulo Sexto, and El Llanito.

- In Baruta municipality: Las Minas, Santa Cruz del Este, Ojo de Agua, La Naya, and Las Minitas.

These neighborhoods are some of the highest crime areas of the city, and law enforcement is known to patrol these areas with less frequency.

The Embassy also mandates that all American employees travel in an armored vehicle to/from Maquetía „Simón Bolívar“ International Airport. The Embassy judges the airport road especially dangerous after receiving numerous reports of robberies and murders in the areas around the terminal.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Traffic in Caracas is heavy most of the day, as an abundance of vehicles, running on heavily-subsidized gasoline (10 gallons cost less than U.S.$0.02), continue to strain the aging infrastructure. Such overuse produces wear-and-tear on roads and freeways that authorities are slow to fix. So, road damage is often marked by passersby with a pile of rocks over a...
A pothole or a stick protruding from an uncovered manhole.

Driving regulations are similar to those in the U.S., although drivers frequently do not obey them. Defensive driving is an absolute necessity. It is common, especially after dark, to ignore red traffic lights. Motorcyclists frequently weave in and out of lanes, passing on the right and the left, and driving into the oncoming lane to get around traffic congestion. Motorcyclists also frequently drive between the lanes on the freeway, especially when the cars around them are stopped in traffic. Traffic fatalities remain common, given the poor state of the roads and local aggressive driving habits. Traffic accidents involving motorcycles are extremely common due to the reckless manner in which they are operated and due to a lack of safety equipment. Groups of motorcyclists may congregate at the scene of an accident involving another motorcyclist. Depending on the severity of the incident, these instances have the potential to escalate into a dangerous situation for the occupants of the other vehicle involved, even if they were not at fault.

Venezuelan traffic law mandates that individuals involved in a traffic accident not move their vehicle from the roadway until the traffic police arrive. Due to the lack of availability, police can sometimes take several hours to arrive, and those involved in the accident have been known to negotiate a settlement among themselves, or leave the scene, rather than wait for the police to arrive. Nonetheless, it is strongly recommended that people involved in an accident remain at the scene unless they feel their lives may be in danger.

Checkpoints are common, especially during inter-city trips. They are generally operated by local police or the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB). Stopping at checkpoints is mandatory, and drivers should be prepared to show vehicle registration paperwork, proof of insurance, and an identity document (“cedula” or passport). Authorities may search vehicles at checkpoints.

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Because roads are poorly maintained and roadside assistance in inter-city areas is extremely limited, travelers should ensure that their vehicle is in good working, paying special attention to the engine, brakes, tires, head/tail lights, horn, and fluid levels. Additionally, those planning an extended road trip should travel with a cellular phone (and charger), drinking water, non-perishable food, tools, a first-aid kit, jumper cables, a spare tire (with jack), flares/road reflectors, and a flashlight. Gas stations are occasionally without fuel or closed. Drivers should plan ahead and not let the fuel tank to fall below ½ full. Drivers may consider bringing extra fuel but should investigate the safest way to transport extra fuel. For the above reasons, plus increased criminal activity after dark, the Embassy strongly recommends against inter-city travel after dark.

Check your vehicle interior and exterior for irregularities and abnormalities before getting into your vehicle. When stopped in traffic, leave space between your vehicle and the vehicle in front of you to allow you to maneuver in an emergency situation. When driving at night, use well-traveled, well-illuminated streets. Plan your route before you leave. If possible, drivers should avoid parking on the street. Where possible, drivers should park inside a residential compound, attended parking lot, or use valet parking. Otherwise, drivers should park as close to their destination as possible. Keeping your vehicle within your line of sight should deter potential car thieves. The less time spent walking from a car to the destination, the less opportunity criminals will have. When you leave your vehicle, ensure that all valuables are out of sight. This is true even when parked in ostensibly secure locations, as thieves have entered protected parking garages and broken into parked vehicles.

Public Transportation
Transit to and from the Maiquetía airport is risky. Use of airport taxis is strongly discouraged, as a number of travelers have been robbed or kidnapped by taxi drivers and their accomplices. Travelers have been robbed when taking a taxi from the international terminal to the domestic terminal and vice versa. Private travelers are encouraged to pre-arrange airport pickup or drop-off with reputable companies.

Only use legitimate radio-dispatched taxis at designated taxi stands or have your hotel call a reputable taxi company directly. Most mall (centro commercial) taxis have also generally been reliable. Do not hail a taxi on the street.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Pursuant to U.S. law, the Transportation and Security Administration (TSA) is required to conduct technical security visits to all international airports from which U.S. and foreign airlines provide direct service to the U.S., just as many foreign governments conduct similar technical security visits at U.S. airports. With host-government collaboration, TSA reviews airport operations using standards established by the International Civil Aviation Organization. In August 2014, TSA visited the airports in Caracas and Maracaibo and the Barcelona airport in November. During this visit, TSA representatives noted some concerns and forwarded them to the appropriate government office in Venezuela. During November 2014, TSA returned to the Caracas airports and determined that great improvements had been made. As part of the recommendations, passengers flying directly from Venezuela to the U.S. are required to pass through an additional security screening immediately before boarding the airplane.

The most recent emergency landing drill was held in 2013 at Maiquetía Airport (the main airport serving Caracas). During this drill, many problems were observed that included crew
member lack of knowledge on the usage of emergency slides to the inability of the nearest hospital to provide mass casualty assistance.

Though the government continues to announce its desire to improve civil aviation, the sector remains deficient in many ways. The average age of its domestic fleet is 25 years, and there have been several aviation accidents in recent years. The majority of these accidents have resulted from equipment failures due to poor maintenance and unavailability of spare parts. Many flights are either delayed or cancelled due to failures of these aircraft, thereby leaving passengers stranded for hours, if not days. In October 2014, passengers aboard a Conviasa flight were stranded in Madrid, Spain, for three days due to aircraft equipment failure. Conviasa is a government-owned and -operated airline. The European Union prohibits Conviasa from flying to Madrid due to safety concerns. The government announced the goal of reducing the average age of the domestic fleet to 10 years, but a lack of available hard currency makes it difficult for airlines to purchase new planes.

Criminal activity at the Maiquetía “Simón Bolívar” International Airport is significant. Travelers are victims of personal property thefts and muggings. The Embassy has received credible reports that individuals in official uniforms or bearing realistic (or real) credentials have been involved in the facilitation and perpetration of crimes. Travelers should be wary of all strangers, even those who represent themselves as airport officials. Travelers are also urged not to pack valuable items or documents in their checked bags, storing such items instead in their carry-on luggage. The Embassy has received occasional reports of airport officials (or individuals representing themselves as airport officials) attempting to extort money from travelers as part of the check-in or boarding process for departing flights. There have been instances of airport shuttles operated by local major hotels being robbed by armed individuals. When arriving on an incoming flight, travelers should also set up a meeting place inside the terminal where they can safely connect with their driver. The Embassy encourages travelers to arrive and depart during daylight hours when possible. The Embassy requires American employees to travel to/from the airport in an armored vehicle.
Drug traffickers use the Maiquetía airport as a transit point, and CICPC and ONA frequently arrest travelers attempting to smuggle illegal drugs. Travelers should not accept packages from anyone and should keep their luggage with them at all times.

Other Travel Conditions

Venezuelans travel in large numbers before, during, and immediately after major civil and religious holidays (including Carnival, Easter, Christmas, and New Year’s Day). Roads are more congested, and travelers should anticipate increased delays.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

One major area of concern is the continued prominence of pro-government gang-militias known as “collectivos.” These collectivos ( “La Piedrita”, Los Tupamaros,” and “Alexis Vive”) self-identify as socialist, anti-capitalist, “anti-imperialist”, and chavista. They are well-armed and have expressed a willingness to use their arms to “defend Chavismo,” although it is not always clear what they identify as threats facing Chavismo, or how they would seek to defeat those threats. In past elections, media outlets reported incidents where pro-Chavista gangsters on motorcycles (“motorizado”) surrounded voting centers in opposition-leaning neighborhoods to intimidate voters. In October 2014, a major gun battle erupted between “collectivos” and police officials in Caracas when police attempted to arrest a principle leader of the group. The gun battle resulted in the death of one of the prominent leaders; the “collectivos” called for the arrest of the police for improper arrest procedures. In addition, the
“collectivos” took two police officers hostages. Due to the overwhelming pressure from the “collectivos,” the government conceded to their demands and arrested six police officials on murder charges. The influence of this group toward the actions of the government remains high and effective.

Political Violence Rating: High

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The Embassy is unaware of any large-scale terrorist attacks or actions recently carried out in Venezuela.

The continued operation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) along the Venezuelan-Colombian border remains the greatest regional terrorist threats. Both groups have been designated by the U.S. Secretary of State as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and media reporting indicates both use the Venezuelan side as a safe haven. They both operate with near impunity in the region and are known to be involved in criminal enterprises, including kidnapping, drug trafficking, and murder-for-hire.

Venezuela has been accused of harboring members of the Basque terrorist group Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA). In October 2010, the Spanish government requested the extradition of a Venezuelan citizen in connection with a Spanish investigation into links between ETA and FARC. The Venezuelan government denied that ETA members had been receiving training in
Venezuela and refused to extradite the suspect.

According to the State Department's annual country report on terrorism, as recently as 2011, individuals linked to Lebanon-based terrorist organization Hezbollah were conducting fundraising operations on Margarita Island. Venezuela and the U.S. have not exchanged financial intelligence information since 2009, which has made tracking terrorist financial operations difficult.

Terrorism Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

Civil disruptions are common, particularly in Caracas. Demonstrations tend to occur at/near university campuses or other gathering places (public squares and plazas). In Caracas, the occasional unscheduled march through a busy thoroughfare causes major traffic disruptions and can bring the city to a near standstill. Candidates for political offices also called supporters to marches and public gatherings during the most recent national and municipal elections. Travelers are advised to take extreme caution and avoid large gatherings and demonstrations wherever they occur.

Venezuela experiences public and private sector union protests and work stoppages. Sporadic union protests, many of which have been violent, have disrupted operations at some companies, including auto assembly plants, since 2009 and forced the temporary shutdown of
various oil drilling operations and oil service companies.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Approximately 92 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. There are occasional reports of violence against indigenous populations, but they are sporadic and unsurprising.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Venezuela is prone to earthquakes and landslides.

Though small seismic readings have been registered throughout Venezuela, the most significant was in September 2009, when an earthquake near Caracas (6.3 Richter) injured 14 people and damaged many buildings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the buildings in Caracas lack reinforcements to withstand a serious earthquake. Also, an earthquake would likely cause widespread damage to the poorly maintained infrastructure. A medium- to large-scale earthquake would likely overwhelm local emergency response services.
To prepare for an earthquake, the Embassy recommends residents:

- Develop an earthquake safety action plan, identifying places that can provide the highest amount of protection, an escape route, and off-premises meeting place.
- Teach family members how to shut off water, gas, and electricity.
- Prepare an emergency supply kit (a three-day supply of drinking water and non-perishable food, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, a battery-operated radio, and batteries).
- Secure heavy objects to walls with brackets and/or safety straps.
- Secure picture frames, bulletin boards, and mirrors to the wall using closed-eye screws.
- Anchor large appliances to walls using safety cables or straps.
- Tack down glassware, heirlooms, and figurines with putty.
- Install latches on kitchen cabinet doors.

During an earthquake:

- If you are indoors, stay indoors. Do not go outside unless the building you are in is determined to be unsafe. At the first sign, drop and take cover under a sturdy piece of furniture, underneath a door frame, or against a sturdy inside wall, away from windows, shelves, furniture, or other objects that may fall. Stay on the floor and cover and protect your head/neck with your arms. Stay inside until the shaking has stopped and you are sure it is safe to exit.
• If you are in a high-rise building, stay away from the windows and the outside walls. Do not use elevators, instead exit using the stairs.

• If you are outdoors, move to the nearest open area, as far as possible from buildings, electrical lines, walls, and trees.

• If you are driving, pull over to the side of the road and stop. If you are on an elevated/raised road (e.g. a bridge or an overpass), get to solid ground. Do not stop under an overpass or near electrical lines. Stay inside your vehicle until the shaking has stopped.

• If you are in a crowded public place, do not rush for the doors. Instead, crouch up against a wall or under a sturdy piece of furniture and protect your head/neck with your arms.

• If you are in a mountainous area, or near unstable slopes or cliffs, be alert for falling rocks or other debris. Earthquakes often trigger landslides.

After an earthquake:

• Monitor local radio/television for emergency instructions.

• Expect aftershocks, which can occur as soon as a minute or as late as a month after an earthquake. Aftershocks are also sometimes more powerful than the earthquake.

• Get outside if your building is unsafe. Aftershocks can cause additional damage, occasionally collapsing already unstable buildings.

• Be aware that fire alarms and sprinkler systems often activate during an earthquake, even when there is no fire. Check for and extinguish small fires. In the case of a larger fire, exit the building using the stairs. Fire is the most common hazard following an earthquake. Check for fire hazards, and use flashlights instead of candles or lanterns.
• Clean up spilled chemicals, gasoline, or other flammables when it is safe. Where such a cleanup would be unsafe, evacuate the building using the nearest stairs.

• Open closets and cabinets cautiously, as contents may have shifted and could fall, causing further damage/injury.

• Check your telephones. Cellular telephone infrastructure may be damaged and will likely be experiencing greatly increased call volume in the subsequent hours that may make it difficult to send/receive calls. Fixed-line telephones may still function.

• Look for damaged utilities. Avoid loose/dangling electrical power lines, smell for any signs of a gas leak, and report all problems to the proper authorities. Where possible, turn off any utilities that may be damaged.

• Look for injured victims and administer first aid.

Landslides are common during major rainstorms. In December 1999, one of the deadliest landslides in Venezuelan history occurred in Vargas state (near Maiquetía “Simón Bolívar” International Airport). It is estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 victims were buried under tons of earth. Although there has not been a major landslide tragedy since then, landslides continue to kill in Venezuela, and the unrestricted and uncontrolled nature of development in some parts of the country seems likely to exacerbate the risk.

The following are some warning signs of a possible landslide:

• Changes occur in your landscape such as patterns of storm-water drainage on slopes (especially the places where runoff water converges), land movement, small slides, flows, or progressively leaning trees.
• Doors/windows stick or jam for the first time.

• New cracks appear in plaster, tile, brick, or foundations.

• Outside walls, walks, or stairs begin pulling away from the building.

• Slowly developing, widening cracks appear on the ground or on paved areas.

• Underground utility lines break.

• Bulging ground appears at the base of a slope.

• Water breaks through the ground surface in new locations.

• Fences, retaining walls, utility poles, or trees tilt or move.

• A faint rumbling sound that increases in volume often indicates that a landslide is approaching.

• The ground slopes downward and may begin shifting in that direction under your feet.

• Unusual sounds, such as trees cracking or boulders knocking together (which might indicate moving debris).

Once a landslide has begun:

• Move away from the path of a landslide/flow as quickly as possible. The danger from a mudflow increases near stream channels and with prolonged heavy rains. Mudflows can move faster than you can walk or run. Look upstream before crossing a bridge and do not cross the bridge if a mudflow is approaching.
• If you are near a stream or channel, be alert for any sudden increase or decrease in water flow and notice whether the water changes from clear to muddy. Such changes may mean there is debris flow activity upstream, so be prepared to move quickly.

• Curl into a tight ball and protect your head if escape is not possible.

After a landslide:

• Stay away from the slide area. There is frequently danger of additional slides.

• Monitor local radio/television for emergency instructions.

• Watch for flooding, which may occur after a landslide/debris flow. Floods sometimes follow landslides and debris flows because they may both be started by the same event.

• Check for injured/trapped persons near the slide, without entering the direct slide area. Direct any rescuers to their locations.

• Look for/report broken utility lines and damaged road/railways to authorities. Reporting potential hazards will get the utilities turned off as quickly as possible, preventing further hazard and injury.

• Check the building foundation and surrounding land for damage to help you assess safety.

• Replant damaged ground as soon as possible since erosion can lead to flash flooding and additional landslides.

More information about earthquakes, landslides, and other natural disasters can be found at www.ready.gov.
Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Caracas is the economic and commercial center of Venezuela and its most populous city. As such, Caracas sees its share of industrial and transportation-related accidents. Although vehicle accidents involving the transportation of hazardous chemicals are rare, when they occur, roadways can be shut down for significant periods while cleanup takes place. Because of the mountainous terrain, tunnels are an essential way to navigate Caracas. When accidents occur in tunnels, traffic can be blocked or severely restricted for hours. In general, Venezuelan infrastructure has suffered years of neglect and is deteriorating across the country. Bridges occasionally collapse, and roads sometimes crumble or are washed away, creating major traffic disturbances in the affected region.

In August 2012, an explosion occurred at one of Venezuela’s main oil refineries in Falcón state, killing at least 48 people. It took emergency services almost three days to control the resulting fires.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

reinstatement of the 1955 Industrial Property Law; the status of trademarks that were registered under the Andean Community law prior to Venezuela's withdrawal from the Andean Community; and lack of enforcement against physical and online counterfeiting and piracy. IPR protection remains hindered by the lack of adequate resources for the Venezuelan copyright and trademark enforcement police (COMANPI) and for the special IPR prosecutor's office. Because of a shortage of personnel, limited budget, and inadequate storage facilities for seized goods, COMANPI has had to work with the Bolivarian National Guard and private industry to enforce copyright laws. COMANPI can only act based on a complaint by a copyright holder; it cannot carry out an arrest or seizure on its own initiative. The government's tax authority (SENIAT) has been more successful at enforcing IPR laws. It has taken action against some businesses importing or selling pirated goods based on presumed tax evasion. While SENIAT actions have decreased over the past few years, SENIAT does continue to take action against pirated goods. Copyright piracy and trademark counterfeiting remain widespread, however, including piracy over the Internet. Pirated software, music, and movies are also readily available.

The Embassy is unaware of any confirmed cases of industrial espionage.

Privacy Concerns

The Constitution provides for the inviolability of the home and personal privacy, but in some cases government authorities infringe on citizens’ privacy rights by searching homes without judicial authorization, seizing properties without due process, or interfering in personal communications.
Drug-related Crimes

The ELN and FARC use the drug trade to finance their operations. The lack of international counternarcotic cooperation in Venezuela, along with a shift in trafficking patterns in the region, has made Venezuela one of the biggest drug-transit countries in the region. There is also evidence of involvement in the drug trade by high-level government officials. In July 2014, Hugo Carvajal, a former chief of military intelligence, was detained by Aruban officials for his involvement in drug trafficking. After threats from the Venezuelan government, Aruban officials released Carvajal and designated him “persona non grata.” That same month, a former judge and former head of Interpol in Venezuela was indicted on drug trafficking charges in a Miami federal court. Although the press regularly reports seizures by law enforcement, large quantities of illicit drugs continue to flow through Venezuela to markets in the U.S. and Europe. On September 11, 2013, French authorities seized 1.3 tons of cocaine on an Air France flight originating in Caracas. A result of this seizure forced Air France to temporarily cancel its flights to/from Venezuela pending an internal investigation.

Kidnapping Threat

Kidnapping remains a major criminal industry in Venezuela. Kidnappings in Caracas happen primarily during the night but are not uncommon during the day. The government officially does not track kidnappings, but it is believed that kidnapping cases remained constant in 2014 compared to 2013. Criminologists report that 80+ percent of kidnappings go unreported for fear of retaliation by kidnappers. Investigations by the Criminal, Penal, and Scientific Investigation Bureau (“CICPC”) have identified multiple, heavily-armed criminal gangs specializing in express kidnappings in the wealthier neighborhoods of Caracas. CICPC’s specialized unit aimed at combating kidnapping has had limited success but has so far failed to reduce the number of kidnapping incidents significantly. Kidnappers operate with little fear
of arrest, prosecution, or incarceration. In addition, in early 2015, 13 CICPC officers were arrested as part of a larger kidnaping ring.

A majority of kidnappings are “express kidnappings,” which usually last less than 48 hours (sometimes as short as two hours). Victims have been driven around and forced to withdraw cash from multiple ATMs until the accounts balances were zero or the card was locked by the bank. However, changes in Venezuelan law and banking practices have restricted daily withdrawal amounts, making the old practice less lucrative. In recent years, it has become more common for kidnappers to hold their victims for several hours, giving the victim’s family and friends time to gather a ransom payment. Paying ransom is against Venezuelan law.

Kidnappings frequently occur in front of victims’ homes, while they are leaving hotels, when using unauthorized taxis from Maiquetía “Simón Bolívar” International Airport, and when walking in wealthier areas with limited vehicle and foot traffic.

The Embassy has had reports of “virtual kidnappings” and “inside kidnappings.” “Virtual kidnappings” occur when family/friends are persuaded to a pay a ransom by scammers using information about a “victim” whom they have supposedly kidnapped. “Inside kidnappings” occur when an insider, usually a domestic employee, is paid or promised a share of the proceeds to provide keys or information to facilitate a kidnapping.

Police Response
Police attempt to patrol most of Caracas, but are unable to provide the coverage necessary to deter violent crime, especially at night, and in the poorer areas. While investigative follow-up is intermittent and perpetrators of crimes are rarely caught, the police will generally respond to ongoing emergency situations. Police response is generally slow to crime scenes or traffic accidents.

Corruption, inadequate police training and equipment, and insufficient central government funding, particularly for police forces in states and municipalities governed by opposition officials (which includes the state of Miranda) reduce their effectiveness. Media reports often identify police abuse and police involvement in crimes, including illegal and arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and excessive use of force. It is believed that complaints against police corruption and crimes have dramatically increased in 2014. Although ineffective policing is often cited as a primary factor behind the high numbers of violent crimes in Venezuela, police themselves are frequently victims. Criminals often kill police officers simply for their firearm. Open-source reports state that in Caracas alone, 132 security officers (police and soldiers) were murdered in 2014, and nearly half were killed for their weapon, vehicle, or other items of value.

In November 2014, President Nicolas Maduro proposed increasing the budget for the military and local police to combat the rapidly rising crime rate. Critics of Maduro’s budget remain wary that he can deliver on his promise to better fund the military and police especially in a time when the economy undergoes rapid inflation and an inability to secure foreign currency in order to import goods. It is unknown how much of the 2014-2015 budget was spent on obtaining military equipment, but it is believed that the government reallocated funds to ensure that it maintained and secured support from the military by providing them the latest technology and increasing their salaries.
How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Harassment of U.S. citizens by airport authorities and some segments of the police are limited, but it does occur. Any incident should be reported to American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit at the U.S. Embassy. The ACS Unit can be reached by telephone at +58 (212) 907-8365 or by e-mail at ACSVenezuela@state.gov.

Crime Victim Assistance

If you are a crime victim, contact local police using the designated emergency response number: 911. These calls will not be answered by English speakers; Venezuela’s national language is Spanish.

Police/Security Agencies

The Bolivarian National Police (PNB) answers to the Ministry of Popular Power for Interior, Justice and Peace and is responsible for general crime prevention and patrolling around government buildings and diplomatic facilities. Although a national police force, outside of Caracas the PNB only operates in a few cities across six states: Anzoátegui, Aragua, Carabobo, Lara, Táchira, and Zulia. Where the PNB operates, it is the first responder for major demonstrations/riots and is responsible for traffic safety and patrolling major roads and highways in the country. The government plans to increase the size of the PNB so that it can operate all across the country, but there is no clear timeline for the proposed expansion.
The Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) is part of the armed forces and reports to the Ministry of Popular Power for Defense. They provide support for drug investigations and anti-drug operations while also providing security at borders, ports, and airports.

Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC) is part of the Ministry Interior, Justice and Peace. As Venezuela’s main national investigative body, CICPC is roughly equivalent to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. It is responsible for investigating most crimes. CICPC has specialized units, similar to SWAT, responsible for dangerous arrests and hostage situations. It also serves as Venezuela’s representative to INTERPOL.

SEBIN (Bolivarian National Intelligence Service or Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional) serves as a counter-intelligence or “political” police force, investigating crimes against the government and providing protective details for government officials. SEBIN has specialized tactical units and an explosive ordnance disposal capability. SEBIN also serves as the government’s civilian intelligence and counterintelligence agency.

The National Antidrug Office (ONA) reports to the Ministry of Popular Power for Interior, Justice and Peace and provides counter-narcotics intelligence and analysis support to law enforcement agencies. It supports drug rehabilitation centers and coordinates the government’s anti-drug campaign.
Medical Emergencies

There are many U.S.-trained and/or English-speaking physicians available. Their staffs often do not speak English. The medical infrastructure is quickly deteriorating, and as public facilities fail, private clinics have become severely overtaxed and crowded. Getting to see a physician can be a trying experience and often requires a minimum of several hours. Medical supplies are strictly controlled by the government; medicines and medical equipment availability at local facilities is unpredictable.

Rescarven
Tel: +58 (212) 610-0000

Ayuda24
Tel: +58 (212) 731-0930; +58 (414) 183-9519; +58 (416) 805-0150; or +58 (412) 024-2845
ventas@ayuda24.com
http://www.ayuda24serviciodeambulancia.com/

Salud Baruta
Tel: +58 (212) 944-2357 and 171
Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Private clinics/hospitals are the only facilities recommended to be used by U.S. government personnel.

Urológico San Roman
Calle Chivacoa, Sección San Roman
Las Mercedes
Tel: +58 (212) 999-0111 and 992-2222
www.urologico.com

Centro Medico Docente La Trinidad
Av. Intercomunal La Trinidad
Tel: +58 (212) 949-6411
El Hatillo
http://www.cmdlt.edu.ve/
Policlinica Las Mercedes
Av. Ppal. De Las Mercedes Con Cl. Monterrey, Caracas,
Tel: +58 (212) 993-2911

Clinica El Avila
Av. San Juan Bosco and 6ta. Transversa
Altamira
Tel: +58 (212) 276-1111 and 276-1052
www.clinicaelavila.com

Instituto Medico La Floresta
Av. Principal de la Floresta and Calle Santa Ana
La Floresta
Tel: +58 (212) 209-6222
www.clinicalafloresta.com
Hospital de Clinicas Caracas
Av. Panteon and Av. Alameda
San Bernardino
Tel: +58 (212) 508-6111
www.clinicaracas.com

Centro Medico de Caracas
Av. Eraso, Plaza el Estanque
San Bernardino
Tel: +58 (212) 555-9111
www.centromedicodecaracas.com.ve

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

AeroMed
Av. Libertador, Edf. 75 Ofic. PH-2B
La Campiña
Tel: +58 (212) 761-6998
http://www.aeromed.com.ve/

Aero ambulancias Silva
Av. Venezuela, Edf. EXA, PB Local 17
Tel: +58 (212) 953-1195
www.aeroambulanciassilva.com.ve

Life Flight
Av. Orionoco and Calle Mucuchies Centro Medico
Tel: +58 (212) 992-3665
lifeflight@cantv.net

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The CDC’s maintains a webpage with health information for travelers to Venezuela:

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

The CDC recommends that travelers ensure they have the following up-to-date vaccinations at least four weeks before traveling: Measles/Mumps/Rubella (MMR); Diphtheria/Pertussis/Tetanus (DPT); Polio; Hepatitis A and B; Typhoid; Rabies; and Yellow Fever (only for travelers over nine months of age, not recommended for travel to states of Aragua, Carabobo, Miranda, Vargas, Yaracuy, Distrito Federal, Falcón, Lara, Margarita Island. See CDC’s website for more information).

Travelers should also be aware that dengue fever and malaria are endemic in some parts. In 2014, there were also outbreaks of dengue fever throughout Venezuela. All are transmitted through mosquito bites. Travelers to malarial regions will want to procure antimalarial drugs before arriving. There are no vaccines for the dengue or chikungunya viruses. In the case of dengue, malaria, and chikungunya, the most effective protective measures are those that prevent mosquito bites. See the CDC’s website for a map of affected areas, and for more information on both illnesses.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Do your best to maintain a low profile, avoiding activities or actions that would unnecessarily draw attention to you. Where possible, vary daily departure times and routes used to get to and from work. Avoid setting a regular pattern that can be used against you. Keep friends and
colleagues apprised of your daily plans, and ensure they have a way of reaching you in an emergency. Do not carry/wear valuable items that will attract the attention of thieves. Keep valuables (such as MP3 players, cellular phones, Iphone, Ipad, etc.) out of sight, especially when traveling around Caracas. Do not physically resist any robbery attempt. While this is a personal decision, statistics show that victims who resist are more likely to be injured or even killed by their attackers.

ATM inside hotels and banks are considered safer, though ATM users should always be aware of their surroundings when withdrawing money. The same holds true when withdrawing money from inside a bank via a teller. There have been reported incidents involving victims who had been robbed, and sometimes killed, after making large withdrawals from banks. This suggests close surveillance of banks and/or possibly complicit bank employees. Use extreme caution when using international credit cards, except in an emergency situation. Credit card fraud has been reported even at respected local restaurants and major hotel chains in Caracas.

The Embassy recommends that all family members, domestic staff, and doormen be instructed not to open doors or accept deliveries from unknown or unexpected strangers. The Embassy also recommends that all houses and apartments have a working alarm system and solid external doors installed with a deadbolt-type lock. Keep the doors and windows closed and locked at all times in both your residence and your vehicle. If your residence has a garage gate, remain on the main street as it opens. This prevents you from potentially being pinned between the gate and a vehicle from the rear.

Make sure your entire family is aware of security threats and is prepared to act appropriately in case of an emergency. Remain alert to what is going on around you whenever you are out in public. Avoid suspicious individuals who may be looking for potential victims. If possible,
seek a safer location, like a nearby store or bank. If there are no safe locations nearby, cross the street and alter your route.

**U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information**

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Calle F and Calle Suapure

Urbanización Colinas de Valle Arriba

Baruta, Miranda, Venezuela

The Embassy is open Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., except for Venezuelan and American holidays.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Regional Security Office (RSO): +58 (212) 907-8403

Embassy Operator: +58 (212) 975-6411

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ACS: +58 (212) 907-8365

Marine Post One: +58 (212) 907-8400

The after-hours Embassy Duty Officer can be reached by calling Marine Post One.

Website: http://caracas.usembassy.gov/

**OSAC Country Council Information**

Venezuela has an active OSAC Country Council that meets on a monthly basis. To reach the OSAC Western Hemisphere team, please email OSACWHA@state.gov.