Colombia 2015 Crime and Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Left-wing; Right-wing; Stolen items; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Theft; Assault; Financial Security; Fraud; Burglary; Carjacking; Drug Trafficking; Extortion; Volcanoes; Kidnapping; Bribery; Counterfeiting

Western Hemisphere > Colombia; Western Hemisphere > Colombia > Bogota; Western Hemisphere > Colombia > Cali; Western Hemisphere > Colombia > Cartagena; Western Hemisphere > Colombia > Medellin

4/20/2015

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Bogotá and other large cities in Colombia share many of the same problems that plague large cities around the world. The perception of wealth is a primary reason why criminals target Americans and other foreign nationals. On a daily basis, the most prevalent threat to Americans is street crime. The most common types of crime include, but are not limited to, muggings, assaults, cell phone theft, credit card fraud, and burglaries. Criminals are quick to resort to violence and commonly use knives and firearms. Crime can turn violent quickly, and most criminals carry one or more weapons; it is not uncommon for a victim to be seriously injured or killed when resisting a robbery.
Thefts and assaults occur frequently on public buses in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, public and private buses have been attacked by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) terrorist group and organized crime elements known locally as Bandas Criminales (BACRIM). Buses are sometimes burned by terrorists, criminals, and demonstrators.

Taxi-related crimes commonly involve a cab hailed from the street by a lone passenger. After the passenger enters, the driver will stop, and armed robbers will enter the vehicle, sometimes taking the victim to ATMs over several hours to take out as much cash as possible. In 2013, a DEA agent was killed during this type of robbery.

Vehicle thefts and carjackings are a risk.

One common and particularly dangerous method that criminals use in order to rob a victim is through the use of a variety of drugs. The most common has been the use of scopolamine, which can render a victim unconscious for 24+ hours, and in large doses, it can cause respiratory failure and death. Unofficial estimates put the number of annual scopolamine incidents in Colombia at approximately 50,000. It is most often administered by liquid or powder into foods and beverages. The majority of these incidents occur in night clubs and bars, and usually men, perceived to be wealthy, are targeted by young, attractive women.

Extortion is a significant security concern. The FARC, ELN, and criminal groups extort all types of commercial entities in their areas of operation. Violence, including bombings, may be used if extortion demands are not met.
Areas of Concern

Americans serving at the U.S. diplomatic mission to Colombia and their families must ask for permission to travel throughout most of Colombia. They are required to fly to most major cities. All Americans in Colombia are urged to follow these precautions.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

The general information provided below concerning Colombian road conditions is for general reference only and may not be accurate in all locations or circumstances.

In general, road conditions in the major cities are adequate, but not good, for vehicle travel. Traffic in Bogotá is exceptionally congested and presents many opportunities for drivers and passengers to be robbed. In rural areas, roads can be substandard and dangerous. Poor road conditions and mudslides frequently result in road closures, especially in rural areas. Accident response in rural areas will be slow.
In Bogotá, the Colombian National Police (CNP) and military have a large presence on the major roads, especially during rush hour traffic. The government has instituted extra security to promote road travel throughout the country during holidays. Outside of these periods and in rural areas, terrorist/insurgent groups (FARC) and common criminals can make travel on rural roads dangerous. In regions where the government has not established full authority, insurgent/criminal groups are known to set up roadblocks to rob and kidnap travelers.

Traffic laws, including speed limits, are often not obeyed/enforced, creating chaotic and dangerous conditions for drivers and pedestrians in major cities. The penalties for drunk driving are severe and very expensive. Texting and driving is illegal. Seat belts are mandatory for front-seat passengers in a private vehicle. Car seats are not mandatory for children, but a child under 10 may not ride in the front seat.

In case of a vehicle accident, Colombian law requires that the vehicles remain in place and all parties remain at the scene until the police arrive and complete their preliminary investigation. However, traffic accidents can be staged by criminals and can attract a crowd that could turn hostile. Drivers who feel threatened and leave the scene should immediately contact their insurance company and the police.

Drivers and passengers should always be aware of their surroundings, lock doors, roll-up windows, and keep valuables and packages out of sight. Criminals, sometime masquerading as vendors, frequently reach into cars at intersections to steal jewelry from a passenger or take a bag that is unattended. Briefcases, bags, and other belongings should always be placed in the vehicle’s locked trunk. Due to the possibility of being caught in a traffic jam, gasoline tanks should always be kept above half full. Car keys should be separated from house keys. Vehicles should be parked in designated parking lots and parking garages with valuables out of sight.
Americans serving at the U.S. diplomatic mission to Colombia and their families are also not permitted to travel by road outside of urban areas at night.

Public Transportation Conditions

Taxis are available, but passengers need to exercise caution. Do not flag down taxis on the street or accept rides from strangers. Taxis should be called via phone or web app or taken from a taxi stand. Airports, hotels, and some restaurants/shopping centers have taxi stands or will call taxis for customers. When a taxi is called by phone, the passenger will be given the number of the taxi and a two digit code, usually the last two digits of the passenger’s phone, to give the driver. Smart phone applications (Uber, Tapsi) have proven useful and provide the passenger with information to verify the taxi that is sent.

Major accidents involving inter-city buses are a regular occurrence, sometimes resulting in deaths or serious injury. Americans serving at the U.S. diplomatic mission to Colombia and their families may not use inter- or intra-city bus transportation.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Political Violence Rating: High
Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Colombia is in the midst of a decades-long conflict, pitting the government against two leftist terrorist organizations (the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN)), and organized crime groups (BACRIMs) that evolved from demobilized right-wing paramilitary organizations. The U.S. government has officially designated the FARC and ELN as “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” (FTOs) due to continued armed attacks against U.S. interests. The FARC, ELN, and BACRIM are well organized criminal enterprises that regularly carry out kidnappings, extortion, assassinations, bombings and other terrorist activities throughout Colombia. These organizations are violent and operate in areas where there is a weak presence of host country security personnel, and they receive operational support from independent criminal organizations throughout the country. The internal conflict has caused the deaths of thousands of civilians over 60 years, according to the UN High Commission. Over two million people have been internally displaced over the past 15 years, forcing them into urban areas to escape the violence.

Terrorism Rating: High

Civil Unrest

In 2014, there were numerous demonstrations throughout the country but centered in Bogotá. Universities have active leftist student organizations that frequently stage protests, often with an anti-American message. Protests center on social and economic reforms and are usually...
led by transportation unions or student groups. Protester will often march on major roads, blocking traffic and disrupting normal operations. These protests can turn violent, as protestors are known to use Molotov cocktails and homemade improvised explosive devices, called “papas explosivas” (potato bombs), against the police.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Natural disasters include earthquakes and volcanic activity. Heavy rainfall also causes landslides that block roads, damage infrastructure, and can leave travelers stranded for 24+ hours.

Good emergency preparation includes setting aside emergency supplies and having a plan for what to do during and after a disaster. Your planning should take into account that help may not be available for 72+ hours.

Stockpiling supplies is useful not only for earthquake preparation but for any situation in which municipal services (power, water) are temporarily interrupted. Employees and their dependents are encouraged to have the following items on hand: flashlights with spare batteries, a portable commercial radio with spare batteries, fire extinguishers, food, and water. Have important documents (current passport for each family member, driver’s license, credit cards, checkbooks, country of residence identification papers, vaccinations records, inventory
of household effects for insurance purposes, and sufficient cash for family expenses for a reasonable amount of time) centrally located in the event of an evacuation.

During an earthquake, you should shelter in place next to/under substantial furniture but away from glass and objects that may fall over. Do not leave a building until the shaking stops to avoid being hit by falling glass or façade. If outside, stay in an open area, away from trees, power lines, bridges, and overpasses. Be prepared for aftershocks.

Kidnapping Threat

Although the numbers of kidnappings have fallen dramatically over the last 10 years, the threat of kidnappings remains a concern. Between 2002-2014, official statistics reported that the number of kidnappings had dropped more than 90 percent. Kidnappings can be spontaneous, and criminals/insurgents have kidnapped persons at random roadblocks on the outskirts of major cities. Foreigners are potential targets for kidnappers due to their perceived wealth. Americans may also be targeted because of their potential political significance for terrorist groups. Most kidnappings now fall into the category of “express” or “paseo millonario,” which is when victims are robbed of their belongings and taken to ATMs until they can no longer withdraw cash. Victims are often abducted after hailing taxis on the street. Express kidnappings typically last up to 48 hours.

Police Response
The Colombian National Police (CNP) is a professional, national organization and is recognized around the world for its success. However, the force is often overworked and occasionally lacks resources to deter crime. Response to alarms or emergency calls to disrupt burglaries or crimes in progress can be 15 minutes or longer. Police and military personnel are posted at important facilities and along major routes. Police patrol in vehicles and are posted at Centros de Atencion Inmediata (CAI), which are small police substations manned by several officers.

The police and army have effective anti-kidnapping/anti-extortion units called GAULAs around the country.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

The Colombian National Police (CNP) has greatly improved their level of professionalism in recent years; however, corruption continues to exist. It is not uncommon for an officer to request a bribe during a routine traffic stop. If you feel you are the victim of police harassment or corruption, report it immediately to the police emergency number and to American Citizen Services.

Crime Victim Assistance

The 911 equivalent emergency numbers for Cundinamarca Department, including Bogotá, is 123. To call the police directly in all other areas of Colombia dial 112.
Anyone who has been the victim of kidnapping/extortion or knows of a victim should immediately call the police.

The loss/theft of a U.S. passport should be reported immediately to the local police and the Embassy in Bogotá. If you are a victim of a crime, in addition reporting it to the local police, you should contact the Embassy. For American Citizen Services (ACS), assistance call the Embassy at (1) 275-2000. ACS also monitors email messages sent to ACSBogota@state.gov from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care is adequate in major cities but varies in quality elsewhere. Public hospitals are well below U.S. standards.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Bogotá

Santa Fe Hospital (24 hours) Tel: (57) (1) 603-0303
Clinica de Country, Emergency Room Tel: 343-6600 Ext. 1105

City Emergency Medical Service (24 hours), Tel: 123

Prevention and Medical Emergencies, Tel: 310-7087

Accidents and Transit, Tel: 123

Red Cross Ambulance (24 hours), Tel: 437-6369, 310-260-2323

SETELMEC (24 hours), Tel: 634-9457/58

Cali

City Ambulance Service, Tel: (2) 123 or (2) 132

Clinica Fundacion Valle de Lili (24 hours), Tel: (2) 331-9090/7474 Ext. 3276

Clinica de Occidente (24 hours), Tel: (2) 660-3000 and (2) 608-3200

Cartagena

Hospital Bocagrande, Tel: (5) 650-2800 Ext. 113, 665-5270

Hospital Naval de Cartagena, Tel: (5) 665-1073/7073/5360/61/62/63/64

07 (5) 655-5360 and 07 (5) 655-8405
Medellin
City Ambulance Service, (4) 123
Clinica las Americas (24 hours), Tel: (4) 342-1010 Ext. 1170
Emergency (4) 342-2262
Clinica Soma (24 hours), (4) 567-8400 Option #4, (4) 576-8480/8555

Barranquilla
City Ambulance Service, Tel: (5) 132
Police, Tel: (5) 123
Cruz Roja, Tel: (5) 358-8514
Defensa Civil, Tel: (5) 144
Clinica del Caribe, (24 hours) Tel: (5) 3564861/340100
Dr. Freddy Farah, Tel: (5) 358-6590, (5) 356-4291, Cell: 315-721 6246, Cra. 51 B #52-41

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance
Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

Criminals carry out a variety of street scams in order to rob people. For example, individuals may pose as police officers by presenting false police identification. They will ask to inspect a victim’s money to verify that it is not counterfeit. They will issue the victim an “official receipt” for their “counterfeit” money and instruct the victim to proceed to a police station to reclaim legitimate currency. When they submit the “official receipt” to the police, they find out that their money was not counterfeit and that they were scammed.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Following strict personal security practices is a necessity for Americans visiting and working in Colombia. The U.S. Embassy recommends that U.S. citizens adhere to the following to minimize being victimized:

• Avoid going into bars or nightclubs alone

• Never leave food or drinks unattended

• Do not accept food or drinks from strangers

• Do not leave bars, restaurants, or nightclubs with strangers

Americans should practice good personal security at all times and especially maintain a low profile. Travelers should carry few items of value that display obvious signs of wealth. You should not wear flashy or expensive jewelry, carry large purses/bulky wallets, or use ATMs in the open (on the street). You should only carry items with you that are needed, and wallets and identification should be carried in a front pant pocket. If you are confronted by an armed assailant who intends to rob you and you are not in fear of your life or serious bodily harm, you should cooperate with the criminal.

You should avoid traveling alone, especially at night.

In public, never leave a personal items unattended or a purse/bag hanging on the back of a chair, where it easily can be stolen. Also, cell phones left on tables are an easy target for criminals. At restaurants do not sit along the perimeter fence or wall of the outside dining area. Instead, try to find a seat in an area not clearly visible from the street.

Vary your routine and be unpredictable in your movements, vary your routes from home to the office and your departure/arrival times. Be alert to possible surveillance. Note and avoid any
individual who appears out of place along your routes.

To avoid becoming a victim of scopolamine, one should never accept food/beverages offered by strangers or new acquaintances, nor leave food/beverages unattended. Victims of scopolamine or other drugs should seek immediate medical attention at the Santa Fe Hospital located at Calle 119, No. 9-10, Tel: 603-0303.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Calle 24 Bis No. 48-50
Bogotá, D.C. Colombia

Embassy Contact Numbers

The general Embassy telephone number is (57) (1) 275-2000.

The Regional Security Office (RSO) can be reached at (57) (1) 275-2903/2458 during regular business hours.
The RSO Duty Agent, in emergencies, can be contacted seven days a week and 24-hours a day through the Marine Security Guard at Post 1, Tel: (57) (1) 275-2701.

Website: www.botoga.usembassy.gov

Embassy Guidance

It is also essential to check the U.S. Embassy Bogotá website routinely for messages concerning U.S. citizens regarding travel and other security notices.

OSAC Country Council Information

For information on the Country Councils in Colombia, please contact the RSO or:

Bogotá: Janet Van Deren, OSAC Bogota Country Council, Tel: (57) (1) 610-6500
Medellín: Carlos Enrique Restrepo, AmCham, Tel: (574) 268-74-91
Cartagena: Diana De Lequeria, AmCham, Tel: (575) 655-77-24
Barranquilla: Vicky Ibáñez, AmCham, Tel: (575) 360-67-10
Cali: Ana Lucia Jaramillo, AmCham, Tel: (572) 667-29-93

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