



Chile 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Fraud; Burglary; Carjacking; Financial Security; Assault; Arson; Improvised Explosive Device; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Volcanoes

Western Hemisphere > Chile; Western Hemisphere > Chile > Santiago

3/15/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

The security environment in Chile is moderately safe, with comparatively less violent crime than in other Latin American countries. Pickpocketing, telephonic scams, vehicle thefts, and residential break-ins are the most common crimes against tourists and resident Americans. Violent crime also occurs, most often in the form of carjackings, home invasions, and muggings; express and traditional kidnappings and random shootings are almost non-existent.

Petty crime and residential burglaries (home invasions) dramatically increased in the metropolitan Santiago area in 2015. The largest increases occurred in the eastern sector of the city. According to Carabinero (local police) statistics reported in a January 2016 news

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story, the affluent community of Lo Barnechea, where many expatriates live due to the proximity to the international schools, “robbery with violence” (assaults) rose 52 percent. Home invasions rose 10.5 percent. Two other communities where many expatriates live and tourists stay are Vitacura and Las Condes. These communities saw a rise in “robbery with intimidation” of 38 percent and 32.5 percent, respectively. The use of violence in residential break-ins also increased in 2015. When residents are home, bats, homemade knives, and increasingly firearms are being used by burglars to intimidate. One tactic involves binding the feet and hands of residents and placing them in a closet while the burglars take valuables. Apartments with 24-hour concierges are less likely to be burglarized.

It is common for Chileans to return home from work after 2000 hours and to leave Santiago on weekends, so most break-ins occur when residences are often empty. Summer vacation for students and many Chilean employees commences on/about December 18 and lasts through early March, so this is the peak residential break-in season. The U.S. Embassy also observed a spike in residential break-ins in 2015 during the month leading up to the Chilean holiday celebrations during the week of September 18.

Non-violent pickpocketing is more common in Santiago than in other areas of the country, although it may happen anywhere. In downtown Santiago, the risk of being a victim of pickpocketing increases on weekends and after dark. Purse snatching and pickpocketing are most prevalent in crowded, tourist locations, pedestrian shopping areas, subway stations, bus terminals, and on crowded buses and the metro. Criminals often work in pairs with one distracting the victim with a motion or sound while the other criminal steals the victim's property. Restaurants, pubs, and food courts and major hotel chains are also popular locations for theft of purses, backpacks, briefcases, and laptops.

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Credit card fraud remains a concern. Police have uncovered various networks engaged in cloning credit cards and producing fraudulent blank credit cards. Several employees in hospitality establishments have been caught scanning clients' credit cards through skimmers.

Carjackings have dramatically increased. A news story from October 2015 reported that the theft of luxury cars had increased by 71 percent and that four out of every 10 luxury cars had been carjacked. Another story reported that according to Carabinero statistics, there were 5,000 violent carjackings from January-October 2015, surpassing the total number of carjackings during 2014.

Other vehicle-related crime includes thieves reaching through open windows to steal valuables and incidents of smash-and-grabs. Cars that are parked unattended on the street have been broken into, even in affluent areas. Particularly at risk are valuables or items perceived to be valuable that are left in plain view.

Vehicle theft (non-violent) occurs most often in the Santiago metropolitan area and in northern Chile (from Iquique to Arica), where a yearly average of 1,000 vehicles are stolen. The stolen vehicles are reportedly driven into neighboring countries where the likelihood of recovery is extremely low.

The local media coined a new crime trend in 2015: a "portanazo," which refers to a carjacking or robbery attempt while a car is pulling into or out of a "porton" (car gate). There were so many high-profile stories of portanazos throughout the year, the government created a task force within the Carabineros to address the problem.

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In 2015, reports continued of ATMs blown up by the so-called “gas saturation” method in order to steal money. This method entails filling the ATM vestibule with gas fumes and exploding the machine. Often, the money is destroyed during these attempts, but sometimes it is not. Usually, these attempts occur in the very late evening hours, and on some occasions, criminals have warned people away from the ATMs before exploding them. In early 2015, two ATMs were exploded in Metro stations. The motive was crime, not terrorism.

Areas of Concern

Outside metropolitan Santiago, the chances of being victimized by crime are lower, with the exception of the Valparaiso, Antofagasta, and Iquique areas. However, robberies and assaults against American citizens have been reported in the Vina del Mar area and the Pucon/Villarica area, both of which become quite crowded during the height of the summer season (December-March). The Embassy has also been made aware of an increase in the number of robberies in Calama/San Pedro.

After dark, the number of assaults and robberies escalates in the following popular tourist areas in Santiago: Paseo de los Huerfanos, Paseo Ahumada, Cerro Santa Lucia, Cerro San Cristobal, the Mercado Central area, and the Bellavista neighborhoods.

Transportation-Safety Situation

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Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions throughout most of Chile are outstanding by South American standards and comparable to U.S. roads. Roads are well marked on city streets and highways. Traffic lights and pedestrian signals work well but are not always obeyed.

Caution should be used when driving or walking in/around Santiago. If driving, keep your windows up and the doors locked. Keep valuables out of sight when your vehicle is parked and purses and valuables on the floorboard when driving to avoid reach-in or smash-and-grab crime. Always maintain enough distance between the car in front of you to allow you to drive away if necessary. Since vehicles parked on streets in Santiago are vulnerable to break-ins in just about any neighborhood, day or night, it is recommended that vehicles be parked in illuminated areas or in off-street parking facilities.

Public Transportation Conditions

Be particularly alert when using the subway and buses, as pickpocketing and muggings occur.

Generally, taxis are a safe means of transportation, and meters are used. However, travelers should remain alert whenever exchanging money. Some taxi drivers have passed counterfeit money, intentionally short-changed, over charged, or stolen from unsuspecting passengers.

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Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Ongoing, small-scale domestic terrorist activity attributed to anarchists includes improvised explosive device (IED) detonations at government institutions (police stations, prisons), banks, churches, and in public areas. Since 2005, over 200 IEDs have been left. This included homemade IEDs attempting to garner publicity. These incidents typically were planned to cause damage to a building and make a political statement while minimizing the possibility of injury or death to a passerby. Most of the IEDs were comprised of black powder placed inside of a fire extinguisher with a time-activated detonation trigger and were placed between 2400-0400 hours.

However, domestic terrorism in 2014 differed from years past in that there were some anarchist IEDs that targeted the general public. The change in tactics in 2014 elicited a massive police response. An IED exploded at the Escuela Militar subway stop on September 8, 2014, injuring 14 people. Three suspected anarchists were arrested for this incident and for three other incidents involving IEDs. As of January 27, 2016, they were still awaiting trial. However, other IEDs were placed throughout 2015, using the traditional method of operation that avoids casualties while drawing attention to the cause. While there is always the possibility of injury, the public did not appear to be the target of these IEDs.

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Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

Freedoms of speech and assembly are important rights in Chile. Marches and demonstrations are relatively common and generally occur with permission from governmental authorities on designated routes. In addition, there are a few traditional days for demonstrations such as September 11 (the anniversary of the 1973 military overthrow of the Allende government) and March 29 (the "Day of the Young Combatant"). Although marches and demonstrations normally commence peacefully, they can turn violent, with participants throwing rocks, Molotov cocktails, and acid at the police, who resort to tear gas and water cannon. These protests have resulted in several millions of dollars of damage to surrounding businesses.

In 2015, Chile, predominantly in the Santiago metropolitan area but also in Valparaiso, Concepcion, and other cities with large student populations, experienced large-scale demonstrations involving students, teachers, and citizens marching for educational reforms. These marches have ranged from 10,000 to over 100,000 participants.

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Labor union strikes are also common, and they have a propensity to turn confrontational.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Indigenous groups protest land claims, and there have been numerous incidents where agricultural and residential lands, primarily in the Araucania region have been subjected to arson. There have also been incidences of attacks on Carabineros and Bomberos (police and fire) when they have responded.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Chile is located in a highly seismically active zone both for earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

The largest earthquake in recorded scientific history (measuring 9.5) took place in Chile in 1960.

An 8.8 earthquake was recorded in February 2010 with the epicenter in Concepcion. During the earthquake, buildings were damaged, adobe houses crumbled, and a tsunami damaged areas as well. Aftershocks continued for several months.

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On September 16, 2015, an 8.4 earthquake struck off the coast of central Chile, the largest worldwide in 2015. While metropolitan Santiago was unscathed, there was significant damage to the Coquimbo port but minimal loss of life and damage elsewhere due to Chile's excellent earthquake and tsunami preparedness. Chile experienced hundreds of aftershocks in the months after this large-scale earthquake.

Travelers should be prepared for earthquakes while visiting Chile. Building codes have high earthquake standards that are well followed, so if you are in a modern building it should withstand an earthquake of up to 9.0 (this is only an estimate, however).

Before hiking on volcanic mountains, be alert to signs of volcanic activity and advisories from authorities. It is advisable to travel with a flashlight, a portable AM/FM or short-wave radio, spare batteries, packaged snacks and bottled water. If you are in an adobe edifice (primarily in northern Chile), exit the building immediately.

Police Response

Crime Victim Assistance

American citizens victimized by criminals can expect the Carabineros to be cooperative and professional; however, most officers do not speak English. In rare instances, American citizens have been advised by the Carabineros to not file a police report. Any victim of a crime should always ensure an official police report is filed.

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Emergency telephone numbers are 133 for police, 132 for fire, and 131 for ambulance.

Police/Security Agencies

The Carabineros are the uniformed national police force and have primary responsibility for crime prevention, order, and traffic control. They are considered to be one of the most professional, well-trained, and least corrupt police forces in Latin America.

The Policia de Investigaciones (PDI) is a plain-clothes investigatory police branch similar to U.S. federal agents. The PDI deals primarily with criminal investigations and is in charge of immigration. The PDI responds to residential burglary investigations, cybercrime, narcotics investigations, counter-terrorism, and immigration issues.

Medical Emergencies

Medical services are modern and similar to what one would find in the U.S. However, outside of metropolitan Santiago, the level of medical care can vary greatly. Hospitals with ambulance services and pharmacies exist with the greatest numbers in Santiago. A doctor's prescription is needed to obtain certain medicines, such as antibiotics.

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CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

For vaccine and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:

http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/chile?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

U.S. Embassy Santiago has an active OSAC Country Council that meets quarterly. To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email OSACWHA@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Av. Andrés Bello 2800, Las Condes, Santiago, Chile

Embassy hours: 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m.

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Embassy Contact Numbers

Operator: 56(2) 2330-3000

Post 1: 56(2) 2330-3321

Regional Security Office (RSO) Bill Gannon: 56(2) 2330-3324

Consular Affairs (CA) Matthew Gillen, Consular General: 56 (2) 2330-3364

Political/Economic Section (E/POL) Patrick Ventrell: 56 (2) 2330-3425

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Chad Whiteman, Country Attaché: 56 (2) 2330-3401

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Ben Perez, Country Attaché (Chile, Peru, and Bolivia):
56 (2) 2330-3396

Website: <http://chile.usembassy.gov/>

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

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The "Mustard Trick" happens in airports, public buildings, and on the streets. Someone "accidentally" spills a substance or notices a foreign substance on your clothes. While you are occupied dealing with the problem, an accomplice steals your valuables.

Phone scams are popular. In most cases, someone will telephone and state that a prize has been won, a family member has been in an accident, or that they are a bank calling and need your banking/credit card information. Do not give out financial information to anyone you do not know over the phone.

Other scams involve a child claiming his ball went over the wall of someone's house, allowing an adult to gain entry to the premises to burglarize the house. Another trick is for individuals to disguise themselves as employees of gas/electric companies that solicit information from homeowners to gain entry or to engage in identity theft. Never allow strangers into your home if you cannot verify their identity, never give any information over the telephone, and do not disclose that residents are not at home.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Practice sound personal security awareness along the same lines as one would when visiting any large city in the U.S. Do not hang bags and purses on backs of chairs or place them on the floor. Maintaining close personal control of your possessions will reduce your chances of being a victim of theft. Be aware of groups of youths, who frequently work together to distract people and then rob them. It is common for thieves to dress in a coat and tie to blend in. Never carry more than you are willing to lose and never carry anything considered priceless or irreplaceable. Know how to get out of your hotel using the stairway and always know where

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your money/travel documents are.

It is common practice in Chile for wait staff, gasoline station attendants, and most facilities to bring a credit card scanning device to you so you can personally scan and maintain possession of your credit card. Avoid your credit card being taken from your possession and charged outside of your view. If this is unavoidable, ensure that the card you receive back is not a substitute.

When leaving your home, always check outside of your gate ("portón") to make sure no one is waiting to rush in. Upon entering your vehicle, immediately lock the doors. Be alert as you pull out of your gate and check all mirrors to ensure no one is trying to access your property or your vehicle. Resist the urge to be distracted by personal electronics and keep the remote alarm for your house and car within easy reach to alert someone in case of an emergency. When arriving home, never open your gate if you observe unknown people or vehicles loitering. If you observe this, drive by your house and circle back after some time. You can always ask the authorities to check out the vehicle or persons. When you do open your gate, pull in and close the gate as quickly as possible. Once again, resist the urge to become distracted and possibly give an opportunity to someone to enter your property. Vigilance is the key to thwarting a "portanazo."

Exercise caution when using ATMs. If you notice the smell of fumes or see any objects out of place (a fire extinguisher where it should not be), you should immediately get as far away as possible and report it to the local authorities.

Avoid any protest regardless of size or classification due to the potential for violence.

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Extra care should be taken around ATMs, kiosks, markets, or where any cash transactions are conducted.

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