



## South Korea 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Hotels; Rape/Sexual Violence; Cyber; Maritime; Anti-American sentiment; Other Threat / Incident; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Hurricanes; Economic Espionage; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Surveillance; Drug Trafficking

East Asia & Pacific > South Korea; East Asia & Pacific > South Korea > Seoul

4/6/2016

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Low

### Crime Threats

By U.S. standards, crime rates throughout the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) are low, and the country is generally a safe destination for most travelers. There have been relatively few incidents involving U.S. Embassy, military, or expatriate victims. A majority of the crimes that are reported are non-violent and non-confrontational, including: pickpocketing, purse snatching, and thefts from hotel rooms or homes. These incidents occur more frequently in major metropolitan areas, tourist sites, and crowded markets.

Itaewon, Sinchon, Myeongdong, and Hongdae are well-known entertainment and shopping districts in which crowds, alcohol, and a higher prevalence of drug activity present a higher

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risk for crime. In most instances, criminal perpetrators are usually deterred by the risk of confrontation and engage principally in crimes of stealth.

Corresponding to combatting the four “social evils” campaign, South Korea made numerous amendments to outdated laws relating to sex crimes. With these sweeping changes, and a focus on enforcement, Korean National Police (KNP) crime statistics show a sharp increase in reported incidents in various categories of sex crimes, particularly higher numbers of reported crimes, apprehensions, and cases prosecuted. Specifically, reports of sexual assaults against foreigners have risen 40 percent since 2008. Reporting has shown that the majority of reported sexual assault cases involve the use and consumption of alcohol. South Korea has specialized police and hospital units to assist victims. Women traveling alone should review the State Department’s travel tips for Women Travelers: <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/Women.html>).

While crimes involving firearms are extremely rare due to stringent gun control laws, violent crimes sometimes occur and often involve the use of knives. Other such crimes, such as burglaries of occupied residences, are also relatively rare.

## Cybersecurity Issues

South Korea is a world leader in Internet connectivity, having the world’s fastest Internet connection speed and the highest Internet penetration in per capita (over 85 percent, while smart phone penetration rate is 80 percent). On an individual level, the threat of cyber crime is moderate but is steadily increasing; phishing schemes and theft of Personal Identifiable Information (PII) for criminal intent have increased; defamation, which is considered a criminal

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offense, also appears to have increased.

At the institutional and multinational company level, South Korea has experienced an increased number of intrusions, Distribution Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, and the use of malicious software to disrupt networks. Korean financial institutions have also been targeted by hackers, who have stolen Korean Identification Numbers (KID) and other PII with financial motives. (KID is similar to an American Social Security Number and used in Korea as a primary identity document for personal and financial transactions). The use of malicious software to disrupt or shut down government, public, and private networks continues to negatively impact the economy and jeopardize the security of critical infrastructure. In December 2014, malicious software was used to gain access to the Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power Company.

Official U.S. government travelers are advised not to leave personal electronic items that have any sensitive information on them unsecured in hotel rooms.

## **Transportation-Safety Situation**

### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Roads are generally well-paved, and traffic signals are largely operational. Seasonal heavy rains can cause isolated sections of road to become blocked temporarily or washed out. South Korea's mountainous topography dictates unusual road networks and interchanges in

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some areas; foreigners who cannot read Korean report that road signs are difficult to use for navigating.

Drivers are aggressive, especially in large cities. Pedestrians should be aware that vehicles frequently do not yield to pedestrians in marked crosswalks.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2014 International Transport Forum Road Safety Report, the rate of road fatalities per registered vehicle is nearly twice that of the U.S. The report also shows that in 2012 the number of fatalities increased by 3.1 percent over 2011. Causes of accidents include frequent, abrupt, and unsignaled lane changes; running red lights; and aggressive bus, taxi, and motorcycle delivery drivers. While illegal, it is common for drivers to watch live television on personal GPS devices via DMB (Digital Multimedia Broadcasting) technology, a contributing factor in many accidents.

South Korea plans to implement a law requiring all passengers in vehicles to wear seatbelts. Until then, the law only requires seatbelt use by the driver and front seat passengers and all passengers when traveling on a highway. This change in law is expected to reduce fatalities from vehicular accidents.

It is very common to find a "black box" installed in vehicles. Black boxes are small (surveillance) cameras installed in the front/back of vehicle. Police use the video footage taken from these black boxes for investigations and as evidence in court, and insurance companies use it to catch/prevent insurance fraud.

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## Public Transportation Conditions

South Korea has a modern, efficient public transportation system that is integrated with all modes of public transportation, including subways, trains, and buses. In Seoul, a majority of people utilize the public transportation system instead of traveling on congested roadways. Reliability and ease of use of this sprawling, vast network affords people the opportunity to travel between smaller cities/towns and urban areas. Trains, buses, and subways are clean and punctual, and most subway/train stations have signs in Korean and English. Timetable and bus stop names are typically in Korean, and bus drivers, for the most part, do not speak English. Public transportation systems are considered safe, although petty crimes of opportunity can occur at subway, train, and/or bus stations.

There are occasional reports of taxi scams, in which drivers refuse to use the meter and then quote unreasonable fares or stop at disreputable gem/souvenir shops.

## Aviation/Airport Conditions

Seoul Incheon International Airport (ICN) is one of the largest, busiest airports in the world, servicing over 90 airlines. For several years, it has been rated the best airport worldwide by the Airports Council International. Seoul Incheon airport replaced Gimpo International Airport as the primary international airport in the early 2000s. Gimpo mostly services domestic destinations with some flights to Japan and China.

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## Other Travel Conditions

In response to the Sewol Ferry disaster on April 16, 2014, the government has strengthened maritime safety by amending the maritime laws related to the safety of passenger ships. The disaster has had a profound impact on Korean society, causing the government to be more proactive in instituting additional measures to further prevent and/or reduce maritime accidents.

## Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Threat Level: Low

### Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

While Americans are subject to the worldwide threat from international terrorism, no information suggests any specific terrorist threats directed at Americans or U.S. interests. Although there has not been a terrorist incident against American interests in South Korea in recent history, the possibility of a 'lone-wolf' attack or transnational terrorist organizations attempting to operate in the country cannot be ruled out.

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## Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

South Korea is one of the most pro-U.S. countries in the world. However, the presence of approximately 30,000 U.S. troops has periodically resulted in increased anti-American sentiment, particularly in response to high-profile accidents and crimes committed by American service members.

In 2002, a U.S. military vehicle fatally injured two 14-year old South Korean girls, prompting large-scale protests against U.S. Forces Korea.

In 2008, there were mass protests in Seoul against the importation of American beef.

In 2011, there were mass protests in Seoul against the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

In recent years, there have been no accidents, crimes, and/or policies that have elevated anti-American sentiment.

## Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and South Korea remain in a state of war. There is peace on the Korean peninsula because of the armistice agreement that has endured since 1953; in the past two decades, the number and type of political, economic, and social interactions between the Koreas have increased. Nonetheless, bilateral tensions remain moderately high and have escalated to limited military confrontations.

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In the last decade, provocations from the North have included ballistic missile tests, nuclear tests, and attacks on South Korea-held territory. The unprovoked sinking of a South Korean naval vessel, Cheonan, in March 2010 by the North and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island off the northwest coast of South Korea in November 2010 significantly increased tensions. The South Korean government stated that it would respond militarily to any further provocation.

The sudden death of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, in December 2011 led to widespread speculation about successor Kim Jong Un's intentions. Hopes that Kim Jong Un might prove to be a more modern, less confrontational leader diminished after the North twice attempted to launch what it called a satellite into orbit in 2012, dramatically failing in April but succeeding in December. The North claims that such research is a peaceful use of space; the South maintains that the real intent is to advance missile technology and is in violation of UN sanctions and resolutions.

In August 2015, two South Korean soldiers were maimed while patrolling the DMZ by two strategically placed landmines. After an investigation, it was determined that North Korean soldiers had surreptitiously passed through the DMZ and placed the mines by a South Korean sentry post.

On August 20, 2015, North Korea fired a rocket and shells across the border at loudspeakers that were broadcasting anti-DPRK propaganda. The South Korean military responded by firing artillery shells at the location of the rocket launch. The provocation led to talks of war, which initiated troop movements by both the North and South. To avoid further military confrontation, a truce was reached after hours of tense negotiations.

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On January 6, 2016, the North allegedly detonated a small nuclear device underground that created a 5.1 seismic event. The UN Security Council strongly condemned the test and agreed to prepare further unspecified measures against the North. North Korea continues to be a clear threat to international peace and security.

The South maintains a high level of readiness to respond to military threats. Military training exercises, including quarterly civil defense drills, are conducted throughout the year. Although the North typically responds to such activities with strong rhetoric, these situations rarely escalate beyond that point.

Post Political Violence Rating: Low

Civil Unrest

Political demonstrations are extremely common. In recent years, there has been a marked decrease in violence associated with political demonstrations, but even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational quickly.

On November 14, 2015, thousands of demonstrators participated in an anti-government rally, marking the largest such gathering since 2008. The demonstration led to violent clashes with police, resulting in dozens of injuries and more than 50 arrests. Due to the frequency of protests and demonstrations throughout South Korea on a daily basis, the U.S. Embassy closely monitors and assesses each event. If warranted, a Security Message is released to

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alert the American community.

## Post-specific Concerns

### Environmental Hazards

South Korea has experienced earthquakes, but a majority causes little/no damage.

In March 2014, a 5.1 earthquake struck off the west coast, the fourth most powerful earthquake ever recorded on the Korean peninsula.

During the monsoon season (June-August) and the typhoon season (May-November), heavy rains and flooding sometimes occur in South Korea. The monsoon season typically involves 4-6 weeks of heavy rain. Damage from flooding varies from year to year but can be severe, particularly in rural areas.

Typhoons occasionally cause damage.

In August 2012, typhoons caused a few deaths and moderate, isolated damage.

The U.S. Embassy in Seoul maintains a web page with local information about emergency preparedness. Stay informed by bookmarking the Disaster Preparedness

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([http://seoul.usembassy.gov/acs\\_emergency\\_preparedness.html](http://seoul.usembassy.gov/acs_emergency_preparedness.html)) page and following local current events during your time in Korea. See general information about natural disaster preparedness at the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) website: <http://www.fema.gov/>.

### Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Infrastructure is highly developed due in part to the desire to continue economic growth. There are safety issues that stem from limited enforcement of regulations, minimal consequences for violators, and a tendency to value economic progress over safety. However, following the April 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster and the October 2014 collapse of a ventilation grate that led to the death of 16 people at a music concert, public perception appears to have shifted, and there is greater emphasis on the need for stricter enforcement of safety standards.

### Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

South Korea has made significant strides in terms of its protection of intellectual property rights in certain respects. It cooperates aggressively with U.S. law enforcement to pursue criminal investigations and to seize counterfeit goods, including luxury items. In 2013, Korean police working with U.S. federal agents seized over US\$66 million worth of counterfeit items, including clothing and leather goods.

Industrial espionage remains a high-profile concern.

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In early 2011, agents from the South Korean National Intelligence Service were widely reported to have been caught attempting to compromise a laptop inside the Seoul hotel room of a visiting Indonesian defense procurement delegation member.

In October 2012, a U.S. grand jury indicted a South Korean firm, Kolon, for allegedly stealing U.S. corporate secrets so that it could introduce its own version of Kevlar material.

Open sources have also reported that South Korea may have attempted to compromise protected technology of U.S. F-15 fighters it purchased.

## Privacy Concerns

According to the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), the government imposes more constraints on the freedom of online speech than most other democratic countries. In November 2010, ONI conducted testing on KT Corporation, the largest South Korean Internet Service Providers, and found a select number of blocked websites, the majority focused on issues related to North Korea, dating, pornography, and gambling. Many of the sites are still blocked.

There have also been several high-profile incidents of privacy/data leaks.

In July 2011, personal data of over 35 million SK Communications users were compromised.

In July 2012, 8.7 million KT Mobile users also had their private information compromised.

In January 2014, 20 million citizens had personal information stolen by a worker at the Korea Credit Bureau, leading to a massive effort by bank customers to replace compromised credit cards.

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## Personnel Background Concerns

Although very uncommon, there have been reports of racial discrimination against American citizens attending schools in South Korea.

## Drug-related Crimes

Narcotics production/abuse is not a major problem. However, reports indicate that an undetermined quantity of narcotics is smuggled through South Korea to Japan and other countries. In response, the government has taken significant steps to counter drug transshipment. Reporting reflects that in Seoul, most drug-related offenses occur in the Gangnam and Yongsan districts, involving drugs usually distributed through night clubs.

## Kidnapping Threat

Kidnappings are rare, but they do occur. KNP crime statistics for 2012 reflected a total of 403 indicted kidnapping cases. Some of the more high-profile cases include:

A Korean-American dual citizen was kidnapped in late 2011 and reportedly murdered by a Korean relative because of an inheritance dispute.

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In April 2012, a Chinese national of Korean ethnicity kidnapped and murdered a woman in Suwon; the case was mishandled by police, became a national scandal, and led to the resignation of the KNP Commissioner General.

## Police Response

In 2013, the Korean National Police (KNP) created a new unit called the “tourist police” that is responsible for patrolling major tourist areas in Seoul and whose officers are fluent in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. Because of this, many street crimes involving tourists and foreigners have decreased in recent years.

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

Foreigners who are arrested or detained by police are treated with respect. Upon arresting a foreigner, police will notify the KNP Foreign Affairs Division, which will assume responsibility for the investigation. If the crime is a misdemeanor, the police will generally release the individual on his/her own recognizance after confirming the individual's ties to Korea through verification of the subject's address, telephone number, and employment.

### Crime Victim Assistance

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Foreigners should call the police emergency telephone number 112 if they are the victim of a crime or need police assistance. Officers with English-speaking capability are on duty 24-hours a day, 365 days a year.

### Police/Security Agencies

Under the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, the Korean National Police Agency (KNP) is the national police force. With over 115,000 police officers, the KNP is responsible for criminal investigations, public/cyber safety/security, traffic affairs, counterterrorism, riot control, dignitary protection, and various other initiatives.

The KNP Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit is the premier civilian authority charged with counter-terrorism operations and responsible for serving high-risk arrest warrants, hostage rescue, and other acceptable high threat missions. SWAT teams are well-equipped with the latest equipment/technologies and appear to be well-organized and trained.

The KNP has also invested heavily in police education and training to include having an established Korean National Police University, Police Training Institute, Central Police Academy, and Police Investigation Academy. Through these police-affiliated institutions, police officers are provided with knowledge/information related to investigations, counterterrorism, and enforcement of Korean laws.

The Supreme Prosecutors' Office (SPO) consists of both prosecutors and investigators, and unlike prosecutorial services in most developed countries, SPO possesses much investigative

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authority usually exercised by police. SPO representatives can detain/arrest subjects and execute warrants. Tensions between KNP and SPO flared up in late 2012 in the wake of scandals that led to the resignation of the Prosecutor General; in August 2014, KNP arrested the Chief of the Jeju District Prosecutors' Office. The underlying issue between KNP and SPO is that they have overlapping jurisdictions, namely investigative powers, and there remain calls for the government to devolve some authority from SPO to KNP.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) is the domestic and foreign intelligence service, but it also has a quasi-law enforcement function in that it is responsible for counter-terrorism activities and security planning for major international events (through its Threat Information Integration Center).

The Presidential Security Service (PSS) is independent from other agencies, administered from the Blue House, and responsible for the protection of the president, the Blue House and other presidential sites, and of the U.S. president and secretary of state when in South Korea. Of note, other U.S. cabinet officials that qualify are protected by the Dignitary Close Protection unit of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency (SMPA).

## **Medical Emergencies**

Foreigners may call an English-speaking doctor 24-hours a day for assistance with emergency medical information; within Seoul, dial 1339 (from a cell phone or outside Seoul, dial 02-1339).

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Hospitals are generally well-equipped with state-of-the-art diagnostic and therapeutic equipment. High quality general and specialty dental care is available in Seoul. Western-style medical facilities are available in the major urban areas of Seoul, Busan, Daegu, and a few other large cities. Not all doctors and staff in major urban areas are proficient in English; most clinics in rural areas do not have English-speaking doctors. Pharmacies are first-rate, and most prescribed medications, except for psychotropic medicine, can be obtained with a prescription.

South Korea has very good emergency response capability, but ambulances are not staffed by fully-trained and equipped emergency medical technicians akin to the U.S. Ambulances usually have only basic supplies like oxygen; they do not have sophisticated medical equipment. Nonetheless, official fire department ambulances (dial 119) respond quickly and take patients to the nearest hospital.

#### Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

The U.S. Embassy in Seoul maintains a list of English-speaking health care providers in various cities. While the list is not intended to be exhaustive nor indicative of any official Embassy endorsement, it can be viewed at: [http://seoul.usembassy.gov/acs\\_health.html](http://seoul.usembassy.gov/acs_health.html).

#### Available Air Ambulance Services

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U.S. citizens can call the Seoul “International SOS” office at (02) 3140-1700 in the event emergency medical evacuation is required. Information can be obtained at the website: <https://www.internationalsos.com/en/>.

Visitors may also contact the U.S. Embassy in Seoul to request information about other air ambulance/medevac services options.

### Recommended Insurance Posture

Travelers should consider obtaining temporary medical insurance prior to departing the U.S. Some Korean hospitals accept some American medical insurance, but only a limited number have direct-billing procedures worked out with American insurers. Most require foreigners to pay for treatment then seek reimbursement through their insurance company. Hospitals, including emergency rooms, also will not usually admit foreigners as patients without payment up front (meaning, either one must have insurance that the hospital will accept or one would likely be required to make a deposit or put up a guarantee in order to be admitted).

### Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Food sanitation is usually up to U.S. standards, but caution should be taken when eating at small street vendors. Local city water is considered safe for drinking, though most local people drink bottled, boiled, or specially-treated, purified water. When in doubt, beverages that are bottled or otherwise packaged are usually safe to drink.

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On May 20, 2015, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed three cases of MERS. The index case (the first patient), who had visited Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE with his wife, who also became sick, was not isolated and infected his roommate, who died on June 4, 2015, in a hospital in Gyeonggi province. Within days, a man who had been asked to stay in isolation traveled to Hong Kong, which then implemented a quarantine of 18 people who were in close proximity with the South Korean on a bus to Guangdong. China detained and isolated the South Korean, who became China's first confirmed MERS case. Korea isolated nearly 3,000 people based on contact tracing. Many of them (1,565 people) had attended a conference with an infected doctor. As of June 10, 2015, Korea had more than 120 confirmed MERS cases with 10 deaths. The government closed nearly 2,000 South Korean schools and cleaned public transport. On June 9, 2015, the U.S. Embassy in Seoul issued a Security Message for U.S. Citizens on the MERS outbreak, the largest outside of Saudi Arabia. By the end of July 2015, the South Korean government declared the effective end to the deadly outbreak of MERS, which was responsible for 36 deaths.

For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: [http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/south-korea?s\\_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/south-korea?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001).

## **OSAC Country Council Information**

For any inquiries on the South Korea Country Council, please contact Regional Security Officer Keith J. Byrne at: [DS\\_RSOSeoul@state.gov](mailto:DS_RSOSeoul@state.gov) or 82-2397-4161. To reach OSAC's East

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Asia-Pacific team, please email [OSACEAP@state.gov](mailto:OSACEAP@state.gov).

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

### Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

Embassy of the United States, Republic of Korea

188 Sejong-daero, Jongno-gu, Seoul

Mon-Fri: 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

### Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy Switchboard: 82-2-397-4114

Duty Officer (cell): 82-11-9101-9057

After-Hours Emergencies for American citizens:

Tel: 82-2-397-4114

In the event of an emergency, contact us at 1-888-407-4747 toll-free within the United States

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and Canada, or via a regular toll line, 1-202-501-4444, from other countries.

#### General American Citizen Services

Email: [seoulinfoacs@state.gov](mailto:seoulinfoacs@state.gov)

Tel: 82-2-397-4040

Fax: 82-2-397-4101

#### Visa inquiries (all public inquiries)

Email: [support-korea@ustraveldocs.com](mailto:support-korea@ustraveldocs.com)

Tel: 1600-8884 (within Korea) or 1-703-520-2234 (United States)

#### Foreign Commercial Service (FCS)

Email: [office.seoul@trade.gov](mailto:office.seoul@trade.gov)

Tel: 82-2-397-4535

Fax: 82-2-739-1628

#### Medical Unit

Tel: 82-2-397-4140

Fax: 82-2-397-4566

#### Political Section

Tel: 82-2-397-4210

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Fax: 82-2-733-4791

Economic Section

Tel: 82-2-397-4400

Fax: 82-2-722-1429

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

Nearby Posts

Consulate Busan: <http://busan.usconsulate.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

If the Embassy becomes aware of any specific and credible threat to your safety and security, we will inform through our website, through social media, or by email if you register your contact details through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). Follow us on U.S. Embassy Seoul's "Americans in Korea" Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/americansinkorea>.

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Enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program so we can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements. Follow the Bureau of Consular Affairs on Twitter and Facebook. Bookmark the Bureau of Consular Affairs website, which contains the current Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts as well as the Worldwide Caution. Follow the U.S. Embassy in Seoul on Twitter: <https://mobile.twitter.com/usembassyseoul> and by visiting the Embassy's website. Take some time before traveling to consider your personal security and checking for useful tips for traveling safely abroad:  
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/checklist.html>.

## Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

### Scams

There are occasional reports of taxi scams in which drivers refuse to use the meter and then quote unreasonable fares.

### Situational Awareness Best Practices

The common sense security precautions a person would take in any large American city are appropriate throughout Korea. Many crimes can be averted by remaining alert to any unusual activity around one's home, hotel, and business, and by reporting any significant incidents to local police by calling 112. Visitors should use caution in all crowded entertainment, nightlife, and shopping districts, such as Itaewon, Sinchon, Myeongdong, Hongdae in Seoul. U.S. citizens should remain alert to their surroundings and avoid carrying anything that is not

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needed. They should avoid carrying valuables in backpacks, which are more easily targeted by pickpockets.

Visitors who cannot speak/read Korean should ask their hotel for language cards with the names and contact information for their hotel, destinations, etc.

American citizens should stay informed through local media about military exercises and civil defense drills that sometimes occur at short notice and for which the U.S. Embassy may not always be able to provide advance notification. Visitors should also avoid demonstrations where possible, avoid confronting demonstrators, and exercise caution if within the vicinity of protests or rallies. Technically, foreigners may not participate in political demonstrations in Korea because doing so would violate one's visa terms.

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