



Panama 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Murder; Burglary; Narcoterrorism; Drug Trafficking; Human Trafficking; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Landslides and mudslides; Floods; Maritime; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Information Security; Kidnapping; Disease Outbreak; Fraud; Financial Security

Western Hemisphere > Panama; Western Hemisphere > Panama > Panama City

4/20/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Panama remains relatively safe when compared to other Central American countries, yet crime rates are still higher than one would encounter in most of the U.S. The three provinces with the largest cities also had the highest overall crime rates: Panama, Colon, and Chiriquí.

According to statistics derived from Panamanian National Police (Policia Nacional de Panama, PNP) and the Ministry of Public Security (Ministerio de Seguridad Publica), homicides fell from 631 in 2014 to 420 in 2015, continuing a steadily declining trend over several years.

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Reports of armed robbery fell from 987 in 2014 to 883 in 2015. Reports of unarmed robbery continued a downward trend, from 503 reported cases in 2014 to 308 in 2015. Simple theft also decreased, with 182 cases reported in 2015 versus 326 cases registered in 2014. Reports of thefts from commercial establishments and burglaries of homes both continued their downward trends. Reports of car theft, however, rose from 226 in 2014 to 359 in 2015, while violent car robberies lowered from 549 in 2014 to 352 in 2015. These are positive signs, however crime, and especially non-confrontational crime, remains a problem. The use of weapons (handguns and knives) is common in street robberies; gratuitous violence is uncommon when the victims comply and hand over their property.

Residential burglaries are common for occupied and unoccupied dwellings. These burglaries tend to happen when it is less likely for the resident to be home, as the thieves are focused on stealing property and tend to avoid violent confrontations. Contributing factors to residential burglaries are: inadequate perimeter walls, minimal lighting, non-existent/weak grilles, and poorly paid/trained guards. The numbers of reported residential burglary cases have lowered from 1,043 cases for 2014 to 928 cases for 2015. Although there has been a decline in total home burglaries, the numbers of home-invasion robberies have stayed relatively unchanged and appear to have increased in the more affluent neighborhoods in 2015.

Another significant problem is thefts from vehicles, known as slider thefts. Slider thefts are crimes of opportunity, targeting vehicles where there are visible high-value items, bags, and purses. The numbers of reported cases are 394 for 2015, down from 579 for 2014. Despite the decrease, this is still a pervasive problem, and such crimes are no longer exclusive to business and shopping districts; they occur in residential areas as well

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Crime statistics reflected in PNP source documents may be higher than listed due to lack of reporting.

Areas of Concern

The Regional Security Office (RSO) has identified high crime areas in Panama City and throughout the country that have the potential to be relatively more dangerous. These areas tend to be lower income areas and/or areas of increased gang activity with a lower police presence. The high crime areas in/around Panama City are El Chorrillo, San Miguel, Santa Ana, Cabo Verde, Curundu, Veracruz Beach, Santa Librada, Rio Abajo, San Miguelito, Panama Viejo, and the Madden Dam Overlook. The police periodically conduct vehicle checkpoints at key intersections in the city in an effort to raise their visibility and hamper criminals' movements through the areas.

The entire city of Colon is a high crime area; travelers should use extreme caution when in Colon.

The Mosquito Coast (Caribbean side) and the Darien Region (Colombian border) are particularly hazardous due to their remoteness and the presence of criminal organizations.

The area referred to as the "Mosquito Coast" is an extremely remote and inaccessible area along the Panamanian north coast bounded by Boca de Rio Chiriquí to the west and Coclé Del Norte to the east and stretching inward from the coast for five kilometers. Access to the region is almost exclusively by boat/aircraft. The area may also have a few unimproved roads/paths that are not marked on maps. This may be particularly true in the mining area

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along the Petaquilla River. Sections of this coastline are reportedly used for narco-trafficking and other illicit activities.

The area of the Darién encompasses the Darién National Park as well as some privately-owned nature reserves and tourist resorts. The general remoteness of the region contributes to the potential hazards. Due to scarcity of roads, most travel is by river or by footpath. This, combined with spotty medical infrastructure outside of major towns, makes travel there potentially hazardous. In addition, there have been reports of Colombian narco-traffickers and other criminals operating in the Panama-Colombia border area.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Travelers should carry identification with them and be prepared for unannounced checkpoints throughout the country, especially at night.

Panama's roads, traffic, and transportation systems are generally safe, but frequently traffic lights do not exist, even at busy intersections. Traffic moves on the right, and Panamanian law requires that drivers and passengers wear seat belts.

Driving can be hazardous and difficult due to heavy traffic, undisciplined driving habits, poorly maintained streets, and a shortage of effective traffic signs/signals. Use caution when driving

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at night; night driving is particularly hazardous on the old Panama City-Colon highway. Defensive driving is fundamental.

In addition, roads in rural areas are often poorly maintained and lack illumination at night. These roads are generally less traveled, and the availability of emergency roadside assistance is very limited.

During travel, you are more vulnerable than at any other time. The following are recommendations that should be considered to minimize that vulnerability:

- Keep your vehicle in top mechanical condition (brakes, tires, lights, horn)
- Use your seat belts and mirrors
- Keep gas tank at least 1/2 full.

Flooding (April-December) can make city streets impassible and may wash out some roads in the interior.

When driving, be conscious of the flow of traffic and keep adequate room between you and other cars for maneuvering. Watch out for cars that pull in front of you and slow down, pull alongside of you and do not pass, or speed to catch up with you and then maintain your speed.

Public Transportation Conditions

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Use caution when taking taxis. Use only licensed and registered taxis. Check to see that the number on the side of the taxi matches the number of the license plate. Ensuring the car is a registered taxi with a number on the side is a quick way to help prevent incidents. There are two types of taxis: regular taxis are yellow and tourist taxis are white.

In addition, never get into a taxi that already has a passenger and instruct the driver not to pick up any additional fares while en route to your destination. Many hotels also have "tourist taxis" that are not yellow but only pick up passengers in front of well-known hotels and airports. Never let a "helpful" stranger direct you to a particular taxi or taxi stand, and always negotiate the fare before getting in to ensure a fixed price.

Public transportation should be used with caution. While RSO do still receive reports of thefts and pickpocketing, new metro buses, with bigger windows and better lighting, have been introduced and, according to PNP reports, seem to have reduced the instances of violent crime.

The first rail line of the newly inaugurated Metro de Panama system started operation in April 2014. Riders should be aware that not all of the stations are operational and that trains will not stop at a station until construction is complete. Riders should determine if their desired stop is operational before riding. The metro, though equipped with state of the art security features, will traverse and stop in some of the highest crime areas of the city. Confined spaces, such as on the metro trains, provide excellent environments for pickpockets and other criminal activities. The PNP has established a Metro Police Unit responsible for the security of the trains and platforms.

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Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Transnational terrorism is not considered to be a major threat in Panama. However, travelers should be aware of the State Department's periodic Worldwide Caution announcement reemphasizing the threat of terrorist actions and violence against Americans and interests overseas.

The presence of Colombian narco-traffickers and other criminals is common around the Panama-Colombia border area, increasing the danger to travelers in that area. While the government has eliminated permanent encampments, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) operates drug and human smuggling through the Darien province that have counter-terrorism implications. The U.S. Secretary of State has designated the FARC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

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Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

Protests are relatively common. Demonstrations often focus on internal Panamanian issues or, very rarely, manifestations of anti-American sentiment by small, but vociferous, groups. While most demonstrations are non-violent, it is a good security practice to avoid demonstrations. The Panamanian National Police have used tear gas and/or other riot control measures in response to demonstrations, particularly when roadways are blocked. Demonstrations and marches can and do occur around the country, to include in Colon and along the Pan-American Highway.

Protests outside of the city have caused road closures on major thoroughfares that, in some cases, lasted for several days. During these extended road closures, the security situation can be tense, and there is a potential for violence between authorities and protestors. Local news and local police may be consulted for the most recent information on possible road closures.

Caution is warranted near the campus of the University of Panama and the National Assembly, both of which have been the scenes of protests.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

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The protests that closed the Pan-American Highway in February 2012 originated in a dispute between the government and a local indigenous group over mining and water rights. In addition to the road closure, protestors burned and ransacked police stations in the Chiriquí area. There were also reports of protestors using improvised incendiary devices and firearms against anti-riot police. Subsequent indigenous protests have not seen these levels of violence.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Earthquakes occur. The central corridor is at a lower seismic risk than either Colombia or Costa Rica; however, there are several fault lines in Panama. There have been two recorded earthquakes as early as January 2016.

During the rainy season, torrential rains (particularly in October-December), cause mudslides, road closures, and flooding.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

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Industrial and transportation accidents are a concern, particularly for truck traffic on the highways. Panama does not have a large manufacturing center, but there are occasional accidents that have led to temporary office evacuations due to spills of industrial strength chemicals being transported.

The Panama Canal Authority has requirements in place to mitigate potential accidents in the Canal and regularly practices emergency response procedures.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Economic espionage is not a major concern; though because of the insular nature of the business community, it is not uncommon for proprietary information to become public. Panama has an adequate and effective domestic legal framework to protect and enforce intellectual property rights, though there are occasional complaints of violations, especially in the Colon Free Zone.

Privacy Concerns

Privacy concerns include the vulnerability of cyber infrastructure that contains personally identifiable information.

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Drug-related Crimes

Panama reported seizing approximately 54 metric tons of drugs in 2015, up from 35 metric tons in 2014.

Kidnapping Threat

There have been no reported kidnappings for 2015. However, there have been 32 detentions, commonly classified as a "Privacion de Libertad." These detentions are occasionally "express kidnappings" from ATMs, in which the victim is briefly kidnapped and robbed after withdrawing cash from an ATM.

Police Response

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Incidents of police harassing foreigners for bribes are uncommon. If it does occur, the best course of action is to refuse to pay any bribe and if they persist, request to speak with their supervisor. Such extortion attempts against American citizens can be reported to American

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Citizen Services at Panama-ACS@state.gov.

Crime Victim Assistance

The Panamanian National Police (PNP) have a special unit (Tourism Police) to deal with crimes against tourists and foreigners. The PNP have sub-stations in all the major regions in Panama and numerous offices in Panama City. Their performance and responsiveness to incidents involving Americans has been good. The main police number is 104; however, telephone operators may not speak English, and most police officers speak very little English.

If personnel are victims of a crime, they will need to go to the local Judicial Investigative Directorate (DIJ) office to lodge an official complaint or denuncia. Americans should take the time to lodge a denuncia, even if some time has passed, as criminals often repeat the same crime within the same general location. Finally, a denuncia is also strongly recommended when an American passport has been lost or stolen.

Police/Security Agencies

In addition to the Panamanian National Police, other law enforcement/security entities include the National Institutional Protection Service (SPI), the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), and the National Air/Naval Service (SENAN).

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Medical Emergencies

If you believe a medical problem is a life-threatening emergency, go directly to the nearest hospital emergency room or call an ambulance.

Panama City has excellent trauma hospitals; however, most other communities have lesser services, facilities, and/or clinics. Ambulance service outside the urban centers is non-existent. For medical emergencies call 911 and fire emergencies call 103.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Centro Medico Paitilla

Calle 53 & Ave. Balboa, Marbella

Emergency Room 265-8888 / 8880

Hospital Nacional

Ave Cuba & Calle 39

Emergency Room 207-8110

Clinica Hospital San Fernando

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Via España, Las Sabanas

Emergency Room 305-6305

Hospital Punta Pacífica

Boulevard Pacífica, Via Punta Darien

Emergency Room 507-204-8185

Recommended Insurance Posture

Travelers with medical conditions may wish to consider medical evacuation insurance prior to visiting Panama. Individuals are expected to pay for medical services with cash at the time of the service; however, some hospitals accept U.S. insurance cards with a deposit payment. Hospitals will accept international credit cards.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Panama is one of several countries in Latin America where there is an ongoing transmission risk for the Zika virus. The CDC has issued a travel alert (Level 2-Practice Enhanced Precautions) for people traveling to Panama and elsewhere.

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For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:
http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/panama?s_cid=ncezid-dgmg-travel-single-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

For information on the OSAC Country Council, please contact Co-Chair Sean Sirker, Regional Security Officer – sirkersa@state.gov. 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

The Embassy is located on Ave Demetrio Lakas, in the Clayton Neighborhood of Panama City.

Operating Hours are Mon-Thurs, 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., and Fri, 8:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

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Embassy Contact Numbers

The Embassy's main number is 317-5000.

The Consular Section's main number is 317-5332.

For non-Consular after-hours emergencies, call the U.S. Marine Guard Post One at 317-5200.

The Regional Security Officer's number is 317-5160.

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

Embassy Guidance

The Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy suggests registration in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) if you plan to be in Panama for an extended time or if you are traveling extensively. To register, visit <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>. The Consular Section also provides notifications and warnings to Americans in country.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

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There is a continuing risk of various types of fraud schemes, the most common being the unauthorized use of credit cards, either by a clerk skimming/recording the number for later illegal use or through inflated charges. Travelers should pay close attention to their credit card receipts before they sign them and be very observant when handing someone their credit card. Because of this pervasive problem, many establishments within the Panama City limit the use of portable credit machines.

Watch out for con artists who are posing as U.S. citizens in distress and/or who ask for financial assistance. When possible, pay for low value items in cash and use your credit cards at larger purchases.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Maintain a low profile and dress casually, keep valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself. Avoid carrying more cash than you are willing to lose, notably expensive jewelry or personal items you consider irreplaceable. Before each outing, disperse credit cards, and cash about your person. Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended. Travelers should always trust their instincts when deciding whether to resist or comply.

Keep copies of your important documents with you while maintaining the originals in a secure location.

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Stay alert to your surroundings. If you see something suspicious or that makes you uncomfortable, go back the way you came or get to a place of relative safety.

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