



Venezuela 2011 Crime and Safety Report

Crime; Political Violence; Terrorism

Western Hemisphere > Venezuela > Caracas

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The criminal threat level for Caracas and all of Venezuela is rated as critical by the U.S. Department of State. In 2010, Caracas became the deadliest capital in the world with the highest murder rate in the world, averaging one murder every hour. Much of Caracas' crime and violence can be attributed to mobile street gangs and organized crime groups. Caracas continues to be notorious for the brazenness of certain high profile, violent crimes such as murder, robberies, and kidnappings. Armed assaults and robberies continue to be a part of normal everyday life. Every Caracas neighborhood is susceptible to crime. Reports of armed robberies continue to occur regularly, day or night, in the generally affluent Caracas residential sections of Chacao, Baruta and El Hatillo; where a number of host government, business leaders, and a majority of the U.S. Embassy employees reside. While there are attempts by foreign press to report about the critical crime situation in Caracas, they also report attempts by the Venezuelan government (GoV) to control the information flow. Various studies and reports cite a variety of reasons for the critically high and constant level of violent criminal activity in Caracas, including: poorly-paid and often corrupt police; inefficient politicized judiciary; a violent and overcrowded prison system; overworked prosecutors; and the presence of up to 15 million illegal weapons in the country.

Crime Threats

Crime is by far the principal threat in Caracas, impacting both locals and foreigners in the city. As of August 2010, the murder rate in Caracas was 233 per 100,000 inhabitants, and continues to have one of the highest incidents of murder in the world. Various reports estimate the murder rate per annum in Venezuela from 14,000 to 16,000. For calendar year 2009 in the state of Miranda alone, record levels of murders (nearly 1,500), robberies (3,000), and kidnappings were recorded. According to the Central University of Caracas Violence

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Observatory group, the murder rate in Caracas stands at 200 per 100,000 inhabitants. That compares with recent measures of 22.7 per 100,000 people in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, and 14 per 100,000 in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. There have been 43,792 homicides in Venezuela since 2007, according to the Violence Observatory, compared with about 28,000 deaths from drug-related violence in Mexico since that country's assault on cartels began in late 2006. Most violent crimes in Caracas, especially murder, involve firearms. There is no evidence to indicate criminals and gang-related activities are specifically targeting U.S. citizens. Crime in Venezuela can be attributed to several factors: poverty, retribution, politics, gangs and drugs. Caracas suffers from areas of extreme poverty which provide gangs and criminal elements with an environment conducive to crime and is subsequently difficult to police. The majority of violent crimes in Venezuela take place in these areas. However, due to their proximity to affluent areas/neighborhoods, it is relatively easy for gangs and criminal elements to infiltrate the more affluent neighborhoods. Within the embassy community, Venezuelan employees fall victim to crime far more frequently than do their American employee colleagues, a fact attributable to the differing demographics between upscale expatriate neighborhoods and the rest of the city in general. Police are unable to protect less affluent neighborhoods, and as a result, crime is quite common and criminals operate with impunity.

The majority of crimes that tend to dominate the environment in Caracas are "express" kidnappings, carjackings, robberies, and home invasions. Express kidnappings have become more common than traditional kidnappings. Foreign nationals and wealthy locals are often targeted. They occur when criminals force their victims to extract daily cash limits from ATM machines or credit cards until the card is shut off. All of this is done while driving the victim around the city for several hours. (Venezuelan government does not report kidnapping statistics, but kidnap-for-ransom rates in Caracas have risen significantly in recent years.) In recent years many travelers using the Caracas International Airport (CCS) have become victims of organized gangs that operate from within the Airport.

Home invasions involve large groups of heavily armed criminals who take over houses, and rob all the owners, or apartment complexes, and rob the owners or all the occupants.

Home/complex invasions are well planned and involve the use of a person on the inside or a scam (such as impersonating police, delivery personnel, or utility company personnel) to gain access. Home invasions have occurred in buildings where Embassy employees reside.

Levels of gratuitous violence are on the increase and the majority of criminals use lethal weapons in the course of carrying out their activities. The majority of victims of robberies that

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have reacted negatively to criminal demands have usually been seriously injured as a result of their noncompliance. Therefore it is common practice in Caracas to never resist an attempted robbery.

Additionally, pickpockets and grab artists operate in all areas of Greater Caracas. However, they are mostly active in the historic city center downtown; around the Parque Simon Bolivar; near the Capitolio; in the Sabana Grande area; and at crowded bus and subway stations.

Road Safety

Driving regulations in Venezuela are similar to those in the United States, although many drivers do not obey them. Defensive driving is an absolute necessity. Motorcyclists often weave in and out of lanes, so caution is advised. Child car seats and seatbelts are not required and are seldom available in rental cars and taxis. Outside the major cities, night driving can be dangerous because of unmarked road damage, repairs in progress, unlighted vehicles, and livestock. It is a common practice to ignore red traffic lights in the evening. Even in urban areas, road damage is often marked by a pile of rocks or sticks left by passersby near or in the pothole or crevice, without flares or other devices to highlight the danger. Many roads are unsafe as rock slides are common. Traffic fatalities are a common occurrence in Venezuela. If you are involved in a traffic accident, Venezuelan law requires that you do not move the vehicle until the traffic police arrive on the scene. It is recommended that you do not leave the scene of an accident unless you feel you may be in danger.

Carjackings are also on the rise in Venezuela; perpetrators target four-wheel-drive models, which are common among rental agencies. Armed bandits have stopped and robbed multiple travelers along the Caracas-La Guaira road, which connects the capital region with La Guaira port and Maiquetia-Caracas International Airport (CCS), approximately 20 miles north of downtown Caracas.

Traffic jams are common within Caracas (regardless of the hour) and are frequently exploited by criminals. Armed motorcycle gangs often operate in traffic jams and tend to escape easily. Cases of armed robbery by motorcyclists and theft of other motorcycles have increased and may result in death if the victim does not comply. National Guard and local police checkpoints are mandatory. Drivers should follow all National Guard instructions and be prepared to show vehicle registration, proof of insurance, and passports. Vehicles may be searched.

Be particularly vigilant when stopped in traffic jams. On trips into outlying and/or isolated areas, keep extra water and oil in the trunk. Extra fuel should only be kept in the trunk and in approved-for-use metal containers. If approached, do not resist; robbers are often armed.

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Peak holiday travel occurs during summer and winter school breaks and major civil and religious holidays, including Carnival, Easter, Christmas and New Year's holidays. Lengthy delays due to road congestion are common during these peak periods. It is advised that prior to any road travel, one must ensure that their vehicle is in good operating condition, paying particular attention to the engine, brakes, tires, head and tail lights, spare tire and jack, horn and fluid levels. Always advise others of your travel plans, including anticipated arrival and departure times and contact information. Inexpensive bus service is available to most destinations throughout the country, but the high incidence of criminal activity on public transportation makes bus and subway travel inadvisable.

The following items are recommended for extended road trips:

- cell phone with charger
- potable water
- non-perishable food items
- first-aid kit
- jumper cables
- spare tire
- flares/reflectors
- flashlight
- tools (screwdriver, wrench, pliers, etc.)

When parking, avoid leaving your vehicle on the street. It is recommended that you park inside a residential compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location of your visit. When parking within a shopping facility lot, be sure to park as close as possible to the store entrance and away from dumpsters, bushes or large vehicles. Be sure to lock your doors, close windows and hide shopping bags and gifts/valuables in the trunk, out of sight. If there are no secure parking areas, select a well-lighted and non-isolated spot as close to your lodgings as possible and away from trucks, buses, dense shrubbery, or small buildings that might conceal thieves.

Political Violence

Historical Perspective

The threat of political violence remains an ever-present possibility. Civil disruptions are common in Venezuela, and even small and seemingly peaceful rallies can rapidly deteriorate into violence without warning. Political marches and demonstrations are frequent in Caracas

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and around Venezuela. Harassment of U.S. citizens by pro-government groups, Venezuelan airport authorities, and some segments of the police, occurs but is limited. Venezuela's most senior leaders, including President Chavez, regularly express anti-American sentiment. The Venezuelan government's rhetoric against the U.S. government, its American culture and institutions, has affected attitudes in what used to be one of the most pro-American countries in the hemisphere.

Terrorism and Organized Crime

Cross-border violence, kidnapping, drug trafficking, smuggling, and cattle-rustling occur frequently in areas along the 1,000-mile long border between Venezuela and Colombia. Some kidnap victims have been released after ransom payments, while others have been murdered. In many cases, Colombian terrorists or local guerillas are believed to be the perpetrators.

Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are active in Venezuela. Many unaffiliated criminals are also increasingly involved in kidnappings, either dealing with victim's families directly or selling the victim to terrorist groups.

In-country travel by U.S. Embassy employees, both official and unofficial, within a 50-mile area along the entire Venezuela/Colombia border, is prohibited. The State Department warns American citizens not to travel within a 50-mile area along the entire Venezuela/Colombia border. U.S. citizens who elect to visit areas along the border region with Colombia despite this warning could encounter Venezuelan military-controlled areas, may be subject to search and arrest, and increase the risk from the Colombian terrorist threat.

Civil Unrest

Travelers should be aware that violence, including exchanges of gunfire and tear gas, has occurred at political demonstrations in the past. Demonstrations tend to occur at or near university campuses, business centers, and gathering places such as public squares and plazas. Marches generally occur on busy thoroughfares, and attempt to significantly impact traffic. In the past, most major tourist destinations, including coastal beach resorts like Margarita Island, have not been affected by protest actions. The city of Merida, however, a major tourist destination in the Andes, has been the scene of frequent demonstrations, some of them violent, including the use of firearms and tear gas. U.S. citizens traveling or residing in Venezuela are advised to take common-sense precautions and avoid large gatherings and demonstrations, no matter where they occur.

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There were reports of minor criminal activity during the Venezuelan parliamentary elections that took place on September 26, 2010.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Venezuela is an earthquake-prone country and is occasionally subject to torrential rains, which can and have caused landslides. The September 2009 earthquake near Caracas registered 6.3, injured 14 people, and damaged many buildings. A medium to large scale earthquake would quickly overwhelm local emergency response services. Travelers who intend to rent or purchase long-term housing in Venezuela should choose structures designed for earthquake resistance. Such individuals may wish to seek professional assistance from an architect or civil/structural engineer, as does the Embassy, when renting or purchasing a house or apartment in Venezuela. Americans already housed in such premises are also encouraged to seek a professional structural assessment of their housing.

Earthquake Preparation Tips

Develop an earthquake safety action plan for your family identifying places that can provide the highest amount of protection during an earthquake as well as an escape route and off-premises meeting place.

Teach family members how to shut off water, gas, and electricity to the house.

Purchase at least one multi-purpose dry chemical fire extinguisher.

Install smoke detectors and change the batteries regularly.

Prepare an emergency supplies kit including a three day supply of bottled water and non-perishable food, as well as a manual can opener, paper plates, cups, utensils, first-aid kit, flashlight, and battery-operated radio with extra batteries.

Attach cabinets and bookcases to the wall using brackets.

Secure heavy objects (e.g. television, stereos, computers, armoires) with brackets or safety straps.

Secure picture frames, bulletin boards and mirrors to walls using closed eye screws into wall studs.

Apply safety film to windows and glass doors.

Anchor large appliances (e.g. refrigerator, stove) to walls using safety cables or straps.

Tack down glassware, heirlooms and figurines with putty.

Install latches on kitchen cabinet doors to prevent items from falling.

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Safety tips

At the first sign of an earthquake, drop and take cover under a sturdy piece of furniture or against an inside wall away from objects that may fall on you.

Sit or stay close to the floor and hold on to furniture legs for balance.

Use your arm to cover and protect your eyes.

If there's no sturdy furniture nearby, kneel or sit close to the floor next to a structurally sound interior wall away from windows, shelves, or furniture that could fall and place your hands on the floor for balance.

Do not run outside – unless the building you are in is determined to be unsafe.

If outdoors, quickly move into the open, away from electrical lines, trees and buildings.

If driving, bring your vehicle to a stop at the side of the road away from traffic.

Do not stop on or under bridges, near or under power lines or road signs.

Recovery tips

Be alert for aftershocks.

Look for injured victims and administer first aid.

Pay attention to damaged utilities. Avoid loose or dangling electric power lines and report all gas and electrical problems to the proper authorities.

Turn off any damaged utilities.

Check for fire hazards and use flashlights instead of candles or lanterns.

Wear protective shoes. Have them by your bed in case the earthquake happens in the middle of the night.

If your building is sound, stay inside and listen for radio advisories.

Earthquakes – Response

Indoors: Remain indoors. Get under a desk or table or stand in a corner.

Outdoors: Go to an open area away from trees, buildings, walls and power lines.

In a high-rise building: Stay away from windows and outside walls. Get under a table. Do not use elevators.

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Driving: Pull over to the side of the road and stop. Avoid overpasses and power lines. Stay inside your car until the shaking is over.

In a crowded public place: Do not rush for the doors. Crouch and cover your head and neck with your hands and arms.

Stay indoors until the shaking stops and you are sure it is safe to exit.

If you are in a mountainous area or near unstable slopes or cliffs, be alert for falling rocks and other debris. Landslides are often triggered by earthquakes.

After the earthquake

Expect aftershocks. Aftershocks frequently occur minutes, days, weeks and even months following an earthquake.

Get everyone outside if your building is unsafe. Exit via the stairs. Aftershocks following earthquakes can cause further damage to unstable buildings.

Be aware that fire alarms and sprinkler systems frequently go off in buildings during an earthquake, even if there is no fire. Check for and extinguish small fires. Exit via the stairs if there is fire. Fire is the most common hazard following earthquakes.

Clean up spilled chemicals, gasoline or other flammable liquids immediately.

Open closet and cabinet doors cautiously. Contents could have shifted during the shaking and could fall, creating further damage or injury.

Check the telephones. Cellular telephone equipment is subject to damage by earthquakes and cell phones might not be able to get a signal, but land line phones might work.

Landslides

Torrential rains resulted in multiple mudslides and road closures in late 2008 Caracas saw some of the worst flooding in years as a result of severe rainstorms in 2009. Highways were closed and major roads and highways were submerged underwater. In many cases, weather conditions, such as heavy rain, can cause severe gridlock within the city, sometimes turning a 50-minute ride from the center of the city to Maiquetia Airport into a three-hour marathon. Although it is difficult to predict when a landslide may occur, everyone is encouraged to review the below basic steps to include in your family's emergency plan. More information can be found at www.ready.gov.

Recognize Landslide Warning Signs

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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 or 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 such as streets or driveways.

- 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 is noticeable as the landslide nears.

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

- Unusual sounds, such as trees cracking or boulders knocking together, might indicate moving debris.

- Collapsed pavement, mud, fallen rocks, and other indications of possible debris flow can be seen when driving (embankments along roadsides are particularly susceptible to landslides).

During a Landslide or Debris Flow:

The following are guidelines for what you should do if a landslide or debris flow occurs:

- Move away from the path of a landslide or debris flow as quickly as possible.

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

After a Landslide or Debris Flow:

The following are guidelines for the period following a landslide:

- Stay away from the slide area. There may be danger of additional slides.

- Check for injured and trapped persons near the slide, without entering the direct slide area. Direct rescuers to their locations.

- Watch for associated dangers such as broken electrical, water, gas, and sewage lines and



damaged roadways and railways.

Industrial and Transportation Incidents

As the economic and commercial center of the country, as well as the most populated, Caracas sees its share of industrial and transportation incidents. Vehicle accidents involving hazardous chemicals on the major highways of Caracas are not common but do occur, causing roadways to be closed down for significant periods of time until the area can be cleared. Due to mountainous terrain, Venezuela roadways employ multiple large tunnels. When accidents occur inside these tunnels the flow of traffic is often blocked for hours until emergency response services can clear the accident from inside the tunnel.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has been unable to assess the actual security measures at international airports in Venezuela that serve as the last point of departure for nonstop flights to the United States.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is required to assess security at foreign airports with direct service to the United States to determine compliance with standards established by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). More information about TSA is available on the TSA Website. Embassy officials have not been able to assess the reliability and safety performance of local Venezuelan airlines and airports. Delays and flight cancellations are common within the Venezuelan airline industry. Air carriers issuing tickets for travel between the United States and Venezuela are directed to notify ticket purchasers in writing of the situation. TSA directed that this advisory be displayed prominently at all U.S. airports and published in the Federal Register, pursuant to Title 49 U.S.C., Section 114.

Incidents of piracy off the coast of Venezuela remain a concern due to the fact that foreigners have been targeted. Attacks on foreign tourists in Venezuelan coastal waters and around Margarita Island have increased over the last several years. Recent attacks have been especially violent, including the killing of a French yachter in September 2008 and the murder of a U.S. citizen on his boat in November 2008. Previous violent attacks include the severe beating of a U.S. citizen in 2002, the fatal shooting of an Italian citizen in January 2004, and a machete attack on a U.S. citizen in 2005. U.S. citizen yachters should note that anchoring off shore is not considered safe. Marinas, including those in Puerto la Cruz and Margarita Island (Porlamar), provide only minimal security, and therefore U.S. citizens should exercise a heightened level of caution in Venezuelan waters. Please consult the U.S. Coast Guard website for additional information on sailing in Venezuela.

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In addition to security concerns, yachters should be aware of registration and other required permits in order to anchor in Venezuelan marinas. U.S. citizens docking in Venezuela are strongly encouraged to check with local authorities regarding the proper documentation for their vessels and themselves. Furthermore, rules governing the sale of fuel to foreign sailors in Venezuela vary by state. U.S. citizen yachters should inquire about specific state procedures prior to attempting to purchase fuel in any given location.

Private aircraft companies and operators are strongly encouraged to consult with the Venezuelan Civil Aeronautical National Institute regarding current Venezuelan laws and regulations, such as those pertaining to tail markings, registrations and other required authorizations.

Failure to comply with national or local requirements can result in arrest and criminal charges.

Drug and Narco-Terrorism:

The presence of Colombian terrorists along the border region is of particular concern in Venezuela. Cross border violence to include kidnapping, drug trafficking and smuggling occurs with impunity. Venezuela is a major drug-transit country. Lack of international counternarcotics cooperation and a shift in the trafficking patterns in Venezuela has enabled a growing illicit drug transshipment industry. Venezuela has become one of the preferred routes for trafficking illicit drugs out of Columbia. While the majority of narcotics continue to pass through Venezuela to the U.S., a rapidly increasing percentage has begun to flow towards Europe. The movement of drugs has greatly increased the level of crime and violence throughout Venezuela.

Kidnappings:

Kidnappings, whether traditional, express or virtual, are a growing industry in Venezuela. Because groups that specialize in these types of crimes operate with impunity or fear of incarceration, more entrepreneurial criminals hit the streets. In 2009 reported kidnappings more than doubled from the previous year. Statisticians and police have openly stated that only 30-40% of all kidnappings get reported to the police. If the experts are right, for the year 2009 there was an alarming 9.2 incidents of kidnapping per 100,000 inhabitants in Venezuela.

Police Response

Police support, both from the national and municipal levels, vary. Police authorities cite a lack of resources, under-staffing, payroll issues and lack of response by the judicial and corrections systems, among the key reasons why response times are delayed and a significant amount of criminals go unpunished. While municipal police are tasked with

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responding to crimes, it is the national police that are responsible for investigating and prosecuting the cases. Challenging infrastructure problems and prolific corruption within law enforcement and the judicial system, continue to be important factors with regard to crime response and prevention. Venezuelan law enforcement entities continue to look for creative policing strategies to overcome these obstacles, e.g. community policing base stations, motorcycle and bicycle patrols, augmenting traditional foot and vehicle policing. A study released in February 2010 revealed that 91 percent of all homicides reported go unpunished. The small chance of being arrested for committing murder may be responsible for the increase in violent crime.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment:

While investigative follow-up is intermittent and perpetrators of crime are rarely caught, the police will generally respond to an emergency situation. Americans who are detained by the police are normally given an opportunity to contact friends or family. Take this opportunity to contact the US Embassy in Caracas. The Embassy can, for example, assist you to contact family members or friends, explain how funds can be transferred should the need arise, and/or find appropriate medical care. While investigations of crime and prosecution are solely within the purview of the Venezuelan government, the Embassy can assist in obtaining legal representation. While police harassment is not common with foreigners, you should report any incidents of harassment to the US Embassy.

Where to Turn for Assistance if You Become a Victim of a Crime and Local Police Telephone Numbers:

If you are a victim of a crime, immediately contact local police by dialing 171, the designated local emergency response number.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care at private hospitals and clinics is generally considered to be good. Public hospitals and clinics provide a lower standard of care, are often over-crowded and understaffed, and at times, basic medical supplies are unavailable. Cash payment is usually required in advance of medical care at private facilities, or the patient will be referred to a public facility. Long term visitors should consider private ambulance service insurance, because the public ambulance response services are unreliable. Contact information for local hospitals and clinics in Caracas is as follows:

Clinica El Avila

Av. San Juan Bosco, c/6ta. Transv.

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Air Ambulance Services
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Telephone: 761-6998

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Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

The crime threat in Caracas is critical due to the violence and frequency of criminal activity throughout Venezuela. Crime continues to be the principal threat to local personnel and visitors. Armed street robberies are common in Caracas and most cities in Venezuela. Embassy employees and visitors have been robbed at gunpoint while walking on the street and while driving. The high volume of vehicular traffic, combined with the poor conditions of roads, has created major traffic problems within Caracas. Armed bandits patrolling the streets on motorcycles prey on potential victims waiting at traffic lights or stuck in heavy traffic. Keeping windows rolled up and doors locked and keeping valuables out of sight (to include iPods, cell phones, Blackberrys) are viewed as the best defenses against this type of random criminal activity. While there are no specific areas within Caracas that are recommended off-limits, the poor neighborhoods that cover the hills around Caracas are extremely dangerous. These areas are seldom patrolled by police and should be avoided. Travelers are encouraged to check with the U.S. Embassy for current information prior to their trip. Visitors should practice common sense preventative security techniques, just as they would in any large metropolitan city in the world where crime is prevalent. Below are some of the more important tips visitors should follow to avoid becoming a potential crime victim:

Transportation Security:

Travel to and from Maiquetía Caracas International Airport, can be dangerous. Corruption at the airport itself is rampant. Both arriving and departing travelers have been victims of personal property theft and muggings. The Embassy has received multiple, credible reports that individuals wearing what appear to be official uniforms or other credentials are involved in facilitating or perpetrating these crimes. For this reason, American citizen travelers should be wary of all strangers, even those in official uniforms or carrying official identification, and should not pack valuable items or documents in checked luggage. Documents and valuable personal items should be kept in carry-on luggage. The Embassy has also received multiple,

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credible reports of victims of “uniformed” airport officials attempting to extort money from travelers as they go through the normal check-in and boarding process for departing flights. Furthermore, there are known drug trafficking groups working from the airport. Travelers should not accept packages from anyone and should keep their luggage with them at all times.

The road between the Maiquetía Airport and Caracas is a notoriously dangerous road. Visitors traveling this route at night have been kidnapped and held captive for ransom in roadside huts that line the highway. Because of the frequency of robberies at gunpoint, travelers are encouraged to arrive and depart only during daylight hours. If not, travelers should use extra care both within and outside the airport. The Embassy strongly advises that all arriving passengers make advance plans for transportation from the airport to their place of lodging. If possible, travelers should arrange to be picked up at the airport by someone who is known to them or at least try to caravan in known groups en route to Caracas. Travelers should be aware of chokepoints inside tunnels and avoid obstacles in the road. The Embassy has received frequent reports of armed robberies in taxicabs going to and from the airport at Maiquetía. There is no foolproof method of knowing whether a taxi driver at the airport is reliable. The fact that a taxi driver presents a credential or drives an automobile with official taxi license plates marked “libre” is no longer an indication of reliability. Incidents of taxi drivers in Caracas overcharging, robbing, and injuring passengers are common. Travelers should take care to use radio-dispatched taxis or those from reputable hotels. Travelers should call a 24-hour radio-dispatched taxi service from a public phone lobby or ask hotel, restaurant, or airline representatives to contact a licensed cab company for them.

When traveling with a Venezuelan airline carrier, travelers should review airlines' safety records prior to use. Some serious incidents have occurred in recent years. On March 22, 2010, a light airplane crashed due to engine failure in the northern residential area of Guarapiche, leaving seven dead.

For more information regarding transportation services, please refer to the U.S. Embassy Caracas website. The Embassy does not vouch for the professional ability or integrity of any specific provider. The list is not meant to be an endorsement by the U.S. Department of State or the Embassy. Likewise, the absence of any individual or company does not imply lack of competence.

Traditional Kidnappings, “Express Kidnappings”, and Carjackings:

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Kidnappings, whether traditional, express, or virtual, and carjackings are a growing industry in Venezuela. Because groups that specialize in these types of crimes operate without impunity or fear of incarceration, more entrepreneurial criminals operate on the streets.

Express kidnappings are a monumental problem in Venezuela. Express kidnappings occur when a victim is seized in an attempt to get quick cash and is then driven around for hours until an exchange for their release is established. One common practice is for kidnapers to follow potential victims into building garages and kidnap them at gunpoint. Kidnappings of U.S. citizens and other foreign nationals from homes, hotels, unauthorized taxis, and the airport terminal do occur and are more frequently being reported to the Embassy. Use ATMs located inside banks or hotels, rather than those on the street. In Caracas and Maracaibo, express kidnapping is becoming increasingly common.

"Virtual kidnappings," in which scam surveys are conducted to collect contact information on minors, are then used to call parents for ransoms without the children being taken, and "inside kidnappings," in which domestic employees are being paid large sums of money for keys and information in order to enter and kidnap children for ransom, have also been reported to the Embassy. U.S. citizens should be alert to their surroundings and take necessary precautions. While the incidents of reported carjackings and car robberies decreased slightly in 2009, they remain a common occurrence in Caracas. The Embassy has received reports of carjackings and robberies in areas near the Embassy. They often occur during peak traffic hours and at entrances and exits of major roadways.

Home Invasions and Robberies:

Reported home invasions that were investigated by the police typically involve large groups of heavily armed criminals who take over either houses or apartment complexes and rob the owners or all the occupants. In 2009, Caracas saw a dramatic increase in the number of brazen apartment complex robberies during daylight hours. Home or apartment complex invasions usually are well planned and involve the use of a person on the inside or a scam (such as impersonating police, delivery personnel, or electrical or telephone company personnel) to gain easy access. While the invasions and robberies are well planned and executed, they do not appear to specifically target any one location or persons, but instead, police report the criminal gangs randomly target a location because of the perception or reports that the occupants are wealthy. The best defense to these types of criminal gangs is to not open your doors to anyone that you are not expecting and do not know. It is important to train your family members, domestic staff, and complex vigilantes (guards) to not open the doors or accept deliveries from strangers. In addition, it is recommended that houses and

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apartments have functional alarm systems in use, and strong deadbolt locks on all exterior doors and windows.

Personal Security Tips:

Do not carry or wear valuable items such as jewelry and watches that will attract the attention of thieves.

Do not physically resist any robbery attempt. While this is a personal decision, statistics show that resistance will lead to severe consequences such as injury or death.

Avoid public transportation, due to it passing through high crime areas and is susceptible to robberies. In 2010, several public buses were stopped and robbed while on the road between Caracas and Maiquetia Airport. All the occupants on board were robbed, and the drivers were killed.

Avoid using international credit cards while traveling in Venezuela. Credit card fraud and scams have been reported to the Embassy, even at local restaurants and major hotel chains in Caracas. If travelers have to use a credit card, ensure that the credit card stays in your sight and remember to monitor the billing activity on that card for several months after you return home.

Only use legitimate radio-dispatched taxis at designated taxi stands or have your hotel call one for you directly.

Be aware of the street environment, and avoid contact with those who may be looking for potential crime targets. Seek a safer location. Go into a store, bank, or simply cross the street and alter your route.

Do not withdraw large amounts of cash from banks or ATM machines. If you need to withdraw a large sum of money, request a check. The Embassy has received reports of people who were targeted and robbed as they exited a local bank.

Use well-traveled, well-illuminated street. Always plan your routes before you leave for your final destination.

Further Information

U.S. organizations are encouraged to contact the Regional Security Officer (RSO) in Caracas for specific inquiries concerning the local security situation. Information is also available from the active OSAC Country Council operating in Caracas.

In the event of an emergency during business hours (8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.), the U.S.

Embassy operator can assist American travelers in contacting the American Citizen Services

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(ACS) Officers in the Consular section. After business hours, on weekends, and holidays, the U.S. Embassy Marine Security Guard can assist American travelers in contacting the Embassy's duty officer for assistance with their emergency. The Embassy duty officer is there to assist in emergency situations only. All other calls should be placed during regular business hours.

United States Embassy Caracas:
Calle F con Calle Suapure
Urb. Colinas de Valle Arriba
Caracas, Venezuela

The Embassy telephone switchboard number is (58) (212) 975-6411. The Regional Security Office may be reached at (58) (212) 907-8403. The American Citizen Services section may be reached at (58) (212) 907-8581. Emergency calls after normal hours may be directed to Marine Security Guard at Post One at (58) (212) 975-9821.

OSAC Country Council

The U.S. Embassy has a vibrant OSAC Country Council and a proactive Executive Board with representatives from over 20 major U.S. companies in a varied number of industries. The Executive Board meets monthly at various venues throughout Caracas. The RSO attends most council meetings to engage in roundtable discussions with members. The council takes an active role engaging issues of crime and security in Caracas and other metropolitan areas in Venezuela, to include a weekly security report, outreach to public officials for speaking engagements, training and briefing seminars, as well as an extensive email network to promote ideas and facilitate the exchange of information and contacts. Country council information can be located, via password, at the OSAC website at the following address: www.osac.gov/countrycouncils. The point of contact for the Caracas OSAC Council is RSO Wendy Bashnan. Ms. Bashnan can be reached at (58) 212-907-8403 and through e-mail at CaracasRSO@state.gov.

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