



Panama 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Murder; Theft; Stolen items; Kidnapping; Burglary; Fraud; Financial Security; Transportation Security; Maritime; Counterfeiting; Drug Trafficking; Money Laundering; Human Trafficking; Left-wing; Surveillance; Earthquakes

Western Hemisphere > Panama > Panama City

4/6/2012

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

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 United States. Violent crime started to rise in 2007 and topped 800 murders in 2009. However, new efforts by Panama's National Police (PNP) to combat this trend appear to have made an impact. The homicide rate fell in 2010 and 2011, which ended with a reported 704 homicides for the year – a rate of 19.3 per 100,000 inhabitants. This downward trend was also reflected in crimes involving gun violence and armed robbery rates. The rate of simple theft was up, and Blackberry-type smart phones were a particular target of theft. The three provinces with the largest cities also had the highest overall crime rates: Panama, Colon, and Chiriqui.

The majority of homicides are committed with a firearm (73 percent in 2011). The use of military style weapons (AK-47, M-4, etc.) by criminal gangs is not unheard of. Local gangs are mainly involved in low level crimes, with violence concentrated between rival gangs. The use of weapons (handguns and knives) in the commission of street robberies is common, but gratuitous violence is uncommon as long as the victim complies. Home burglaries and, more worrying, home-invasion robberies do appear to be on the rise, especially in the more affluent

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neighborhoods.

"Express kidnappings" are also a source of worry for personnel moving about the city. This is an incident where armed robbers approach the victim who is either on foot or stopped in a car and force the victim to accompany them to one ATM machine after another until the account is depleted. The victims are released a short time later, unharmed.

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. In addition, the RSO has received reports of individuals being "doped" while at a bar and then robbed of their belongings; sometimes the victim is led to his/her hotel room so more property can be stolen. Another scheme involves callers contacting family members of persons who may or may not be traveling in Panama and stating their loved one is in trouble (arrested, hurt in an accident, etc). The caller then asks the family member to wire money to help with the emergency. If you will be traveling to Panama, make sure your office and family have contact information for you and your host or point of contact and warn them to be suspicious of any such calls. If they receive such a call and they know you are traveling in Panama, they should first try to contact you directly, your hosts, and/or the U.S. Embassy in Panama's Consular Section before sending funds.

Police continue to conduct vehicle checkpoints at key intersections in the city in an effort to raise their visibility and hamper criminal movements. The high crime areas in and around Panama City continue to be San Miguelito, Rio Abajo, El Chorrillo, Hollywood, Curundu, Veracruz Beach, Panama Viejo, Casco Viejo (particularly at night), Santa Librada, San Miguel, Cabo Verde, and the Madden Dam overlook.

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We advise against using the local city buses called Diablos Rojos or "Red Devils." A modern public transit infrastructure, using modern buses, is being rolled out and the Diablos Rojos are being retired. It is premature to evaluate the security of the new transit system. Taxicabs are a better form of public transportation, especially radio-dispatched taxis.

Corruption is an ever present problem and the vast amounts of dollars from the shipment of drugs and other illicit goods fuel many of Panama's crime problems. Panama's land and sea borders are routinely penetrated by smugglers.

Road Safety

Driving is often hazardous and difficult due to heavy traffic, undisciplined driving habits, poorly maintained streets, and a shortage of effective signs and traffic signals. Auto insurance is mandatory, but many drivers are uninsured.

Political Violence

Historical Perspective

Panama has a strong, growing economy and a stable government. Panama's economy is powered by revenues from the Canal, transportation services, financial services, and the Colon Free Trade Zone. Panama's strategic location between the two American land masses

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gives it an advantage in the world of trade. Unfortunately this same strategic advantage that attracts legitimate business also attracts Panama's biggest problems: narco-trafficking, smuggling of fraudulent/counterfeit merchandise, money laundering, and trafficking in persons.

Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime

There is concern about the possibility of Mexican-style gangs eventually developing in Panama, increasing violence and putting pressure on law enforcement.

International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

The 57th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) continues to maintain a presence in Panama. The 57th Front primarily operates as a logistical and support unit in the Darien Province along the border with Colombia.

Civil Unrest

Demonstrations have occurred throughout the year by groups such as labor unions, student and teacher organizations, doctors, and others. Most demonstrations have centered around worker safety, rights, and benefits issues. There have been other demonstrations more

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politically motivated, such as the anniversary of the 1989 invasion, or local political issues such as mining laws, transport issues, or the distribution of funds to local governments.

Public demonstrations tend to fall into two categories: organized marches and fixed demonstrations. The organized marches draw approximately 2,000 to 3,000 people and follow well-established routes in the center of the city near parks and centers of local government. Normally, there is a good deal of public notice in the press, local publications, and handbills announcing the reason for the march, the organizers, and the timing. The fixed demonstrations can be well organized and well known or occur with little advance warning. These demonstrations are generally located at major intersections in order to have a greater impact on traffic, bringing more attention to the demonstrators' cause.

Public demonstrations are generally non-violent although a protest can turn violent if there is the right mix of conditions. The PNP tend to let demonstrations run their course without too much interference, even when traffic is affected. The police will use tear gas and force to break up a demonstration if it becomes widespread or disruptive.

In June 2010, a demonstration in the Bocas Del Toro province turned violent, resulting in the deaths and injuries of some protestors. The police were outnumbered, ill-prepared, and responded with ineffective crowd control techniques. This kind of police/protestor interaction is rare. Americans are generally not the target of the protestors but are advised to stay away from protests and marches, as there is always danger in being caught in the middle of rival protests or police action.

Post-Specific Concerns

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Environmental Hazards

Panama has geological fault lines running beneath the country, which does experience earthquakes. Most of these earthquakes have been near the western border area or out to sea, but during 2009, Panama City did have an earthquake that registered 6.0 on the Richter scale. Damage in the city was very minor, but it is a good reminder that a larger and more devastating earthquake is possible.

Kidnappings

The possibility of kidnapping for ransom remains, but the number of reported cases has been low (38 cases in 2009 and 38 in 2010; 2011 numbers not yet available).

Drugs and Narco-terrorism

Some reporting indicates that local street gangs may be used by narco-traffickers to provide protection and logistical assistance for the movement of illegal drugs, but there is no evidence that an organized structure like that seen in Mexico has developed.

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Police Response

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

A traffic accident is one of the more common areas where Americans may come into contact with the police. It is common local practice for drivers to leave the cars in the roadway after an accident rather than move them off to the side of the road. Drivers should stay at the scene and wait for the arrival of the police.

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. There has been a strong push to improve police professionalism and to dampen police corruption; training, increased pay, and new equipment have all done their share to improve the PNP.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Incidents of police harassing foreigners for bribes is uncommon. If it does occur, the best course of action is to refuse, and if they persist, you should request to speak with their

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supervisor.

Medical Emergencies

Panama City has excellent trauma hospitals, though most other communities have lesser services, facilities, and/or clinics. You 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. Ambulance service outside the urban centers is non-existent.

For medical emergencies call 911; fire emergencies call 103.

Air Ambulance Service

Air ambulance support is from the United States. Travelers with medical conditions may wish to consider medivac insurance prior to visiting Panama.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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Keep a low personal profile. Do not flash cash or wear expensive jewelry.

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.

Keep your smart phone on your person, preferably covered with a jacket or shirt.

Negotiate taxi fares up front and tell the driver not to pick up additional passengers. Personnel are advised to never get into a cab that is already occupied, never let yourself be directed to a particular taxi or taxi stand by a stranger, and always negotiate the fare before getting in. Tell the driver when you get in that you will pay extra so he will not pick up additional fares along the way. Drive with your doors locked and windows up.

Do not use the public buses, especially the "Diablos Rojos."

Do not drive outside of the city after dark.

Park in well-lit areas, preferably in lots with security guards.

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Travelers should pay close attention to their credit card receipts before signing and be very observant when handing someone their credit card.

The best way to avoid being drugged is to watch your drink being poured, never accept a drink from someone that you do not know, and do not leave your open drink unattended.

Areas to Avoid

Avoid the higher-crime “Red Zones” of San Miguelito, Rio Abajo, El Chorrillo, Hollywood, Curundu, Veracruz Beach, Panama Viejo, Casco Viejo (particularly at night), Santa Librada, San Miguel, Cabo Verde, and the Madden Dam overlook.

There are travel restrictions placed on U.S. government officials for certain areas of the Darien and San Blas regions. Travelers should use caution traveling south of Metiti and avoid any travel south of Yaviza. American businessmen and tourists are encouraged to read the safety and security section of the U.S. Department of State’s Country Specific Information on www.travel.state.gov regarding Panama and in particular travel to the Eastern Border Areas of the country.

Further Information

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Be sure to register with the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy 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.

The Embassy's main number is 207-7000, and the Consular Section's main number is 207-7332. For non-Consular after-hours emergencies call the U.S. Marine Guard Post One at 207-7200. The Regional Security Officer's number is 207-7160.

OSAC Country Council

Panama City has an active OSAC Country Council. U.S. private sector organizations interested in joining the Panama City OSAC Country Council should contact the Regional Security Officer in Panama City or OSAC's Country Councils and Outreach Coordinator at OSAC headquarters.

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