



Panama 2015 Crime and Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Murder; Floods; Left-wing; Riots/Civil Unrest; Racial Violence/Xenophobia; Earthquakes; Landslides and mudslides; Maritime; Drug Trafficking; Kidnapping; Fraud; Financial Security

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

3/2/2015

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Panama remains relatively safe when compared to other Central American countries, although crime rates are higher than one would encounter in much of the U.S.

According to statistics derived from Panamanian National Police reporting (Policia Nacional de Panama – PNP), the homicide rate fell from 666 in 2013 to 519 in 2014. Crime statistics reflected in PNP source documents may have been under-reported in 2014 due to the phased roll out of a new reporting system that may not have captured monthly reports from earlier in the year. It is estimated that actual crime rates may be 15-20 percent higher than reported.

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The Ministry of Public Security lists a total of 8,748 reported thefts in 2013. The 2014 number was not available at the time of this writing but may have increased. Both un-official and anecdotal crime reporting indicate an upward trend despite significant PNP efforts at combatting crime.

Additionally, there were 1,497 robberies of persons reported in 2014.

Areas of Concern

RSO has identified areas in Panama City and throughout the country that have the potential to be more dangerous. The areas within the city limits tend to be lower income areas and/or areas of increased gang activity and lower police presence, including: Panama Viejo (the neighborhood, not the park itself), Cabo Verde, Curundu, San Miguel, Marañon, Chorillo, Barraza, Santana, Monte Oesuro, San Miguelito, Ciudad Radial, San Cristobal, San Pedro, Pedregal, San Juquin, Mañanitas, Nuevo Tocumen, 24 de Diciembre, Sector Sur Tocumen, Felipillo, Chilibre, Caimitillo, Alcalde Diaz, and Pacora.

U.S. citizens should exercise caution near the campus of the University of Panama and the National Assembly, which have been the scenes of protests.

Outside the city limits, RSO and COM have designated the Mosquito Coast (Caribbean side) and the Darien Region (Colombian border) as off limits to all COM personnel. Both areas are

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extremely rural, usually with limited police presence and medical capabilities, and commonly used by smugglers and gangs to move illegal drugs. Access to these areas by COM personnel requires prior approval from RSO and COM and coordination with host nation law enforcement entities.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Panama's roads and traffic are generally safe, but frequently traffic lights do not exist, even at busy intersections. Traffic roundabouts are common, and extreme care should be taken when entering/exiting them. Traffic moves on the right, and Panamanian law requires that drivers and passengers wear seat belts.

Driving in Panama City is often hazardous and difficult due to heavy traffic, undisciplined driving habits, poorly maintained streets, and a shortage of effective signs and traffic signals. Drive with your doors locked and windows up. Park in well-lit areas, preferably in lots with security guards. On roads where poor lighting and driving conditions prevail, night driving is difficult and should be approached with caution. Night driving is particularly hazardous on the old Panama City – Colon highway.

U.S. citizens traveling by road outside Panama City should have full fuel tanks, keep extra potable water and food in their vehicles, and ensure cell phones are charged during their

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travel.

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

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation should be used with caution. A modern public transit infrastructure, using modern buses, has been rolled out, and the older Diablos Rojos ("Red Devils") buses have mostly been retired, but the security of the new transit system cannot be evaluated. The first line of the new metro subway system opened in 2014, and the Panama National Police created a new unit dedicated to ensuring passenger security.

Ensure your taxi is real. Real taxis will have a taxi license plate and have the license plate number and company logo painted on the back door on both sides. 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 helpful 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.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

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Political Violence Rating: Medium

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The presence of Colombian terrorist groups, drug 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 Panama's Darien Province. The U.S. Secretary of State has designated the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

Terrorism Rating: Low

Civil Unrest

Protests are relatively common. Demonstrations often focus on internal Panamanian issues (students' rights, labor disputes, etc.) 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

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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 the potential for violence between authorities and protestors is a possibility. For the most recent information on possible road closures, the Embassy advises U.S. citizens to monitor local news and consult local police.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

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

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Earthquakes occur. The central corridor of Panama is at a lower seismic risk than either Colombia or Costa Rica; however, there are several fault lines in Panama. During the rainy season, torrential rains, particularly in October-December, cause mudslides, road closures, and flooding.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

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.

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Privacy Concerns

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

Drug-related Crimes

Panama reported seizing approximately 35 metric tons of drugs in 2014, down from 41 metric tons in 2013. The increase and subsequent decrease in violent crime from 2007-2013 has paralleled the increase and decrease of drug seizures.

Kidnapping Threat

The number of reported kidnappings and detentions increased in 2014. Following a downward trend in earlier years, the Ministry of Public Security reported an increase to 96 kidnappings in 2013, with the number decreasing to 49 in 2014. Crime statistics reflected in PNP source documents may have been under-reported in 2014 due to the phased roll out of a new reporting system that may not have captured monthly reports from earlier in the year. It is estimated that actual crime rates may be 15-20 percent higher than reported.

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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 can be reported to American 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.

Police/Security Agencies

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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).

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. FIRST AID FOR POISONING- Poison Center in United States (001-800 222-1222 or 001-202-625-3333).

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

Hospital Emergency Rooms

Centro Medico Paitilla

Calle 53 & Ave. Balboa, Marbella

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Emergency Room 265-8888 / 8880

Hospital Nacional

Ave Cuba & Calle 39

Emergency Room 207-8110

Clinica Hospital San Fernando

Via España, Las Sabanas

Emergency Room 305-6305

Hospital Punta Pacifica

Boulevard Pacifica, Via Punta Darien

Emergency Room 507-204-8185

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

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Air ambulance support is from the U.S.

Recommended Insurance Posture

Travelers with medical conditions may wish to consider medevac 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

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.

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 in Panama should pay close attention to their credit card receipts before they sign them and be very observant when handing someone their credit card.

Watch out for con artists who are posing as U.S. citizens in distress and/or who ask for financial assistance.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

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.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

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

Operating Hours are Monday-Thursday, 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., and Friday, 8:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

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.

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.

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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.

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