Argentina 2013 Crime and Safety Report

Burglary; Theft; Stolen items; Fraud; Surveillance; Kidnapping; Rape/Sexual Violence; Carjacking; Hotels; Transportation Security; Anarchist; Bombing; Riots/Civil Unrest; Floods; Earthquakes; Drug Trafficking; Narco-Terrorism; Travel Health and Safety; Financial Security; Counterfeiting

Western Hemisphere > Argentina > Buenos Aires

2/5/2013

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

Crime is a serious problem but can be managed with common sense precautions. Street and residential crime appears to be increasingly common, more violent than in the past, and often is perpetrated with a firearm or other deadly weapon. In January 2010, local press reported that over 1.2 million firearms are registered to nearly 700,000 users, with almost 36,000 permits issued in 2010 (down from the 55,000 issued a decade earlier). The office within the government that regulates firearms, Registro Nacional de Armas (RENAR), stated that since its creation in 2007 the "Money for Weapons" program recovered a total of 141,000 weapons and more than 1,098,000 rounds of ammunition.

Criminal activity is concentrated in urban areas, especially greater Buenos Aires, Cordoba, Rosario, and Mendoza. The wealthier parts of metro Buenos Aires experience high rates of property crime, with high-income neighborhoods often registering twice as many complaints as some of the poorer parts of town. This may be a result of better or more frequent reporting by the citizens living in these areas.

Urban crime includes pick-pocketing/purse snatching, scams, mugging, express kidnapping, residential burglary, home invasion, thefts from vehicles (including “smash-and-grab”), sexual assaults/rape, car theft, and carjacking. Short-term visitors to urban areas are subject to street crime and should exercise appropriate levels of caution. Visitors have reported robberies in while in touristic areas, at banks and change houses, on the subway, and while using other public transportation. Thieves specifically target expensive looking jewelry, watches, cell phones, cameras, and backpacks/bags. They regularly nab unattended purses, backpacks, laptops, and luggage and will often distract visitors for a few seconds to steal valuables. This includes robbing purses and bags from occupied tables at restaurants. American tourists
routinely report stolen U.S. passports to the Embassy. Some of these were stolen in a violent manner, including at gunpoint. Criminals frequently use a version of the “mustard on the back” scheme in which a helpful person informs the victim of a substance on their person and offers help to clean it off. While the victim is distracted, a partner robs the victim of valuables.

Long-term residents have greater exposure to criminal activity while walking on the streets, driving, traveling, and at home. Reports of home invasions and robberies are being received more frequently. Most cases reported to the RSO have been with firearms.

Many criminals are armed and ready to use their weapons at the first sign of resistance. Crimes occur at all hours, and armed robberies often take place during business hours. Favorite targets for armed robberies are banks and businesses dealing in cash or high-value merchandise. There are occasional high-profile assaults on armored cash carriers. Entire restaurants have been victims of armed robberies. Apartment invasions and burglaries occur, and occasionally entire buildings are taken hostage.

Criminals regularly employ target-of-opportunity tactics. A recent trend is for criminals to go through neighborhoods and apartment buildings waiting for delivery people bringing food to the doors of the tenants. Many home-invasion gangs seek the hoard of cash many Argentines are thought to keep in their homes. Criminals have also targeted individuals withdrawing cash from bank ATM machines and are also known to target customers when exiting banks or change houses. The normal tactic used is either an overt act where the criminal challenges an individual directly or a scam that involves altering basic ATM functions causing the individual to believe the machine failed to dispense the cash and may be out-of-order.

In the countryside, there have been a few robberies in isolated areas and occasional burglaries of hotel rooms in resort areas.

Officially reported, country-wide full range crime statistics are not available; however, when an occasion statistic is released, the information varies widely. The province of Buenos Aires provides detailed semi-annual crime statistics covering the entire province (www.hcdiputados-ba.gov.ar/osl/informes.html). The most up to date statistics from January-December 2010 state that there were a total of 617,502 reported cases involving adults. Of these, the top ranking categories were threats against personal freedom (14.1 percent), simple assault (11.05 percent), and robbery (10.63 percent). The semi-annual crime statistics covering the first half of 2012 in Buenos Aires province reveal that criminal reports have increased 8 percent compared to the same period of 2011. These reported crimes are generally crimes of violence such as murder, rape, kidnapping, and theft. The Buenos Aires Provincial Ministry of Security underlined that the rate of homicides during robberies has
dropped 16 percent between 2009 and 2012 (692 vs. 583). Conversely, a statistic from the Argentine Supreme Court from 2010 to 2011 said there was an increase in homicides by 13 percent. The Federal Ministry of Justice's website on crime has not been updated and still displays statistics from 2009. According to the Organization of American States (OAS), Argentina has the highest rate of theft in South America. The robbery rate was 973 per 100,000, while the average on the continent is 456 per 100,000.

Crimes reported to the U.S. Embassy by U.S. citizens reveal they are most often victims of theft or non-violent robbery, principally in the tourist neighborhoods, although an increase in robberies at change houses has been noted in recent months.

**Overall Road Safety Situation**

Highway robbery largely affects commercial vehicles. Hijacking of inter-city buses is uncommon. But, traffic accidents are common, especially in Buenos Aires.

Remises (hired car and driver) are the best and safest form of public transportation. They normally charge by the kilometer and are reasonably priced. Hotels, many restaurants, and shopping centers can call one from an established service. Radio taxis are the next best choice. Taxis are black and yellow in the capital, and white with blue lettering in the provinces. A number of Remise companies have stands inside the Ezezia airport that offer a set fee for transport into the city. They can be hired just as you exit Customs. The fee is paid at the airport and not to the driver. These companies are well established and used by a number of embassy employees.

Traffic laws are not routinely obeyed, and vehicles often travel at excessive speeds. A recently published report produced by the non-governmental organization Luchemos por la Vida (www.luchemos.org.ar) states that for third consecutive year there was a decrease in traffic deaths throughout the country; 7,517 people died in vehicle accidents during 2011 as opposed to 7,485 deaths in 2012. In Buenos Aires, the number of fatalities also decreased from 141 deaths (2011) to 98 (2012). The province of Buenos Aires has the highest rate of traffic-related deaths at 2,354.

**Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The government of Argentina (GOA) or its agents have not committed any politically-motivated killings. There were reports that police were involved in killings involving
unwarranted or excessive force. Authorities investigated and, in some cases, detained, prosecuted, and convicted the officers involved.

Despite the negative perception of various U.S. government policies, Argentines are friendly to Americans, and visitors are unlikely to experience anti-American sentiment.

There is no recent and significant operational terrorist activity, but international terrorists used car bombs to destroy the Israeli Embassy in 1992, killing 29 persons, and a Jewish cultural center (AMIA) in 1994, killing 85 persons and injuring hundreds. Individuals and organizations providing financial support to extremist groups reportedly operate in Ciudad del Este and along the tri-border area between Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina.

Additionally, there have been several minor bombings since August 2009 that purportedly involved indigenous anarchist groups that share ideological similarities with Chilean and Greek anarchist groups. These bombings have occurred during the early morning hours and have resulted in one death and two injuries.

Civil Unrest

There are frequent demonstrations in greater Buenos Aires and frequent demonstrations in other major cities. Most protests are related to domestic economic and political issues including labor disputes. U.S. interests are occasionally targeted based on current events, such as U.S. military presence in the region, the Haiti earthquake response, or policy toward Cuba. U.S. companies are also sometimes the target of labor protests. The largest and most disruptive protests, ranging from dozens to tens of thousands of participants, usually feature "piqueteros" (a collection of social activist groups whose main tactic is to block roads).

In Buenos Aires, demonstrations most commonly occur downtown and often end up at the Plaza de Mayo, Casa Rosada, Congress, or the obelisk on Avenida 9 de Julio. Protestors generally come from labor unions, unemployed/underemployed/landless movements, student groups, and the political left. While most protests are peaceful, there are hooligan elements that periodically show up to fight the police and/or engage in vandalism. Furthermore, the use of sound systems, fireworks, and musical instruments is a common occurrence, as is the burning of effigies and flags.

Pipe bombs or incendiary attacks attributed to or claimed by anarchist groups have been occasionally used. The majority of the explosions result in property damage and generally occur during the very early morning hours. Targets have included bank branches, municipal or public utility offices, and other commercial businesses. In 2011, there were four known
anarchist-related attacks in Buenos Aires proper and one in a nearby suburb. In 2012, there were only three bomb-related attacks: two in Buenos Aires city and one in the suburbs. In Buenos Aires city, the European Union Offices and the Federal Department of Corrections were the target of low-power bombs that resulted in property damages, both during early morning hours. A third explosive device was deactivated by the Federal Police EOD Team in a theater located in the downtown area of Buenos Aires city, where former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe would deliver a lecture. The explosion in the suburbs (a municipal office in the Greater Buenos Aires) was the most serious bombing; a member of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police EOD Team who was trying to disable a IED was seriously injured when the explosive went off.

In addition to organized demonstrations, there are occasional, spontaneous protests by groups of displaced workers, unemployed persons, unpaid pensioners, people upset by electricity service disruptions, etc.

**Post-specific Concerns**

**Environmental Hazards**

Argentina experiences occasional flooding along the coast, including parts of Buenos Aires, and in low-lying parts of the interior, such as Santa Fe province.

Western/northwestern provinces, such as San Juan, Mendoza, Salta, Jujuy, and Tucuman periodically have earthquakes.

**Industrial and Transportation Accidents**

Road conditions are moderate, but traffic is fast throughout the country and heavy in the big cities. Almost all highways are two-lane with no separation between traffic travelling in opposite directions. Drivers are very aggressive and often oblivious to lane designations and many other traffic laws. The accident rate is very high.

**Drug-related Crimes**

Argentina is a transshipment route for cocaine from Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia intended for Europe and other destinations. The counter-narcotics efforts in Mexico and Colombia are pushing traffickers into Argentina, according to Argentine officials. Large seizures of cocaine in Europe have been linked to Argentina, and individual carriers of small quantities from Argentina to Europe are regularly discovered. There is evidence of increasing use by
traffickers of light aircraft to bring drugs across the long northern borders with Bolivia and Paraguay. A cheap, readily available and mentally debilitating drug “paco” (a derivative of cocaine production similar to crack) is consumed in poorer neighborhoods. The abuse of paco appears to be increasing. Paco is readily available on the streets and is smoked in pipes or mixed with tobacco. Argentine law enforcement officials and local press report that a rise in street crime has been fueled by a corresponding increase in paco consumption.

Marijuana, the bulk of which is imported from Paraguay and used for domestic consumption, continues to be the most widely abused illegal drug. However, the prevalence of cocaine use has risen sharply, and the country has the second largest internal cocaine market in South America after Brazil. Cocaine remains by far the leading drug for which Argentines seek help at treatment centers, and the use of cocaine base is a growing problem among economically disadvantaged members of society. The United Nations Office of Drug Control’s (UNODC) World Drug Report 2011 cites 2008-2009 treatment center data to list the primary drugs of abuse among persons treated for drug problems as the following: cocaine based drugs 45.4 percent of users in treatment centers that includes “paco”; cannabis (marijuana) 37 percent; and inhalants 7.6 percent.

Cocaine trafficking is the most challenging drug threat faced by authorities. According to the 2011 UNODC World Drug Report, Argentina had the highest prevalence of cocaine use (2.6 percent) in South and Central America among 15 to 64-year olds. Based on UNODC estimates, Argentina is home to 25 percent of the cocaine users in South and Central America (675,000 users), second only to Brazil.

According to official government figures, DEA reporting, and open source information, significant amounts of cocaine HCl are imported into Argentina from Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. The UNODC’s World Drug Report 2011 cites numerous surveys indicating that cocaine use has risen in South America overall, especially in cocaine source countries such as Bolivia and Peru. Since 2000, this increase in cocaine is parallel with rising levels of coca cultivation and cocaine production regionally. The use of cocaine products has increased concurrently as the country has increasingly been used as a transshipment zone for cocaine from South America to supply expanding cocaine markets in Europe, Africa, and to a lesser extent, the Far East.

Kidnapping Threats

Express kidnapping (short duration/low ransom) occurs occasionally with conventional mugging. Extortion kidnapping for ransom is relatively rare and has mostly affected well-off
Argentines. The true rate of kidnapping is unknown but believed to be considerably lower than elsewhere in the region.
Virtual kidnapping, a telephone scam in which the caller claims to have kidnapped someone who is simply not at home, continues to occur. There are many variations of the virtual kidnapping scam. One such variation, which appears to be on the rise, is the caller claiming that a family member has been involved in a horrific accident and personal information is needed by on-scene medical authorities. Once personal information is divulged, the caller becomes more aggressive and uses the newly acquired information to extort valuables. Such calls often come from jails, and the callers ask for prepaid phone cards, which are a form of money inside prisons.

Police Response

In Buenos Aires, the Tourist Police (office within the Argentine Federal Police) are generally very responsive and assist many tourists with language services to file police reports.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Expatriates can generally expect better police response and less harassment than in many other Latin American countries. Argentine law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the GOA generally observes these prohibitions; however, there are reports of the police arresting and detaining citizens arbitrarily on occasion. Any irregular police procedures (demands for bribes, etc.) should be reported to the Embassy. Individuals detained by the police should ask to contact the Embassy or Consulate.

Checkpoints are common, especially around Buenos Aires, and drivers must have all documentation, including passport or Argentine identification card, driver’s license, vehicle registration, and proof of third-party liability insurance.

Various Police/Security Agencies

For all police emergencies (Capital Federal and Buenos Aires Province): 911

Argentine Federal Police: 4383-1111/2-9; Av. Moreno 1550, Capital Federal

Prefectura (Coast Guard): 4318-7558 or 4318-7400; Av. Macacha Guemes 150, Capital Federal
Tourist Police: 4346-5748; Corrientes 436, Capital Federal

Bomberos (Fire Department): 100 or 4951-2222, 4381-2222, 4383-2222; Av. Moreno 1550, Capital Federal

Medical Emergencies

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics

Capital Federal (City of Buenos Aires):
- SAME (Municipal Emergency Medical Service, for transport to a public hospital): 107 or 4923-1051/9
- SUME (For-fee ambulance service, for transport to a private hospital): 0810-222-5222 or 4860-7000
- Hospital Fernandez: 4808-2600; Cervino 3356, Capital Federal
- Hospital Aleman: 4827-7000; Pueyrredon 1640, Capital Federal
- Sanatorio Trinidad: 4127-5555; Cervino 4720, Capital Federal

Buenos Aires Province (San Isidro, suburbs):
- San Isidro: 4512-3700; JJ Diaz 818, San Isidro
- San Lucas: 4742-8888; Belgrano 369, San Isidro
- Sanatorio Trinidad: 4898-6700; Av. Fondo de la Lengua 851, San Isidro

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Argentina is experiencing an uptick in Dengue fever infections. General mosquito bite defense is the key avoiding all of the mosquito-borne diseases endemic to the region. There is no prophylactic medication that can be taken to prevent Dengue. Avoiding the times of day when mosquitos are most active, wearing long sleeves, adequate sleeping arrangements, and appropriate mosquito repellents on skin and clothing and imbedded in bed nets are the most effective defenses. For additional health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/argentina.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Crimes/Scams

Theft of Valuables.
MUSTARD ON THE BACK SCAM: Unknown to you, a liquid is squirted on your back. After a few steps, someone, often a middle-aged woman, will inform you that you have something on your back and offer to help clean it off. Meanwhile, she or an accomplice picks your pockets. This scam has been used regularly in tourist areas such as San Telmo, La Boca, 9 de Julio, Recoleta, and Florida Street. Fortunately, this is one of the least confrontational crimes; just say "NO" and walk away.

Areas to be Avoided and Best Security Practices

Criminals frequently resort to violence if they perceive a victim is being uncooperative. If confronted, offer no resistance and immediately hand over everything demanded.

Do not wear flashy or expensive jewelry that draws attention or show cell phones, cameras, or other expensive equipment. Women should safeguard their purses while walking and when eating in restaurants or cafes. Be alert to pick pocketing in tourist and shopping areas. Do not flash large amounts of cash, or carry expensive-looking bags, briefcases, or laptop cases in public.

Criminals are often well-dressed, and crime can occur anytime during the day at any location. Use common sense and remain vigilant. Travel in groups when possible. Always stay in well-lit, populated areas and avoid parks after dark.

Do not carry all of your important documents in your wallet or purse. Carry a photocopy of your passport.

Use ATM machines located in public places like the hotel, shopping mall, or event venue. If the booth has a door, make sure it closes behind you.

If you are in a restaurant or other business that gets robbed, follow the instructions of the robbers and hand over valuables on demand.

Pay with exact change as much as possible. If you pay for a small item with a large bill, you risk being shortchanged or getting counterfeit in change. Only take pesos as change.

Use credit cards only at the hotel and major stores and restaurants. Watch your bills carefully for fraudulent charges.

Avoid black and yellow taxis with the word "Mandataria" on the door. These taxis are rented on a daily or hourly basis and are often involved in criminal acts. Do not take rides offered by
people on the street or outside an airport. The following, in order of preference, is recommended: a) call for a remise or taxi, b) take one from an established stand, c) hail one on the street (but not in front of a bank). Use the seatbelts, lock the doors, and keep windows up. Do not place your purse or other valuables on the seats, in plain view from the outside or unattended.

Subways, buses, and trains are safe, but watch out for pickpockets and be ready for work stoppages. Watch your bags at airports, bus, and ship terminals.

Pedestrians should be vigilant when crossing streets and remember to look in both directions, even if the street is designated one way.

Personnel are advised to maintain vigilance while paying particular attention to any unattended baggage and suspicious behavior.

**U.S. Embassy/Consulate Location and Contact Information**

U.S. Embassy Buenos Aires  
American Citizen Services  
Av. Colombia 4300  
C1425GMN Buenos Aires  

The Embassy is located in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. The Plaza Italia Line D subway station is the nearest one.

Regional Security Officer: RSO Kristen Sivertson at 54-11-5777-4298/4535;  
RSOBuenosAires@state.gov  
Embassy Operator: 54-11-5777-4533/4534  
Consular Affairs: Consul General Daniel Perrone at 54-11-5777-4310;  
BuenosAires-ACS@state.gov  

The American Citizens Services (ACS) Unit of the Consular Section is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 12:00 pm and 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm, except U.S. and Argentine holidays and administrative days.

**OSAC Country Council Information**

Buenos Aires has an active OSAC Country Council that meets regularly. For information on upcoming meetings and how to join, please contact the RSO Kristen Sivertson at
54-11-5777-4298/4535 or RSOBuenosAires@state.gov or OSAC’s Country Council and Outreach Coordinator for the Western Hemisphere at 571-345-7747.