

## Safety Briefing: Mexico City, Mexico

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### Travel Advisory

Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution (8/22/23)

### Crime

Mexico suffers from high rates of crime, exacerbated by its low rate of criminal convictions. Most crime in Mexico goes unreported, or simply cannot be accurately captured due to large number of individuals who have “disappeared.” Although there is no evidence of criminals specifically targeting foreign or U.S. businesses and personnel, criminals will target victims based on the appearance of affluence, vulnerability, or lack of awareness. Armed robbery, kidnapping, car theft, credit card fraud, and various forms of residential/street crime are daily concerns. Criminals can easily resell jewelry (including expensive watches) and cellular phones in illegal markets. Although Mexico has strict gun-control laws, criminals often carry handguns, knives, and increasingly high-caliber weapons.

However, Mexico City can be visited without major issue by following travel recommendations that would be applicable in many large Latin American cities. The city has made some gains regarding citizen security in recent years, with overall homicides decreasing since 2019. The main types of crimes that short-term visitors suffer in Mexico City are petty street crime, including pickpocketing, robbery, mugging, or scams that target tourists. Most of these are crimes of opportunity, so limiting those opportunities is key, by being mindful of the locations you visit, who you engage with, how you transit the city, and how you appear to others.

Be careful of cash transactions on the street. A hurried transaction for merchandise often leaves the customer with shoddy or counterfeit goods, out-of-circulation valueless currency, or incorrect change. Some vendors will accept U.S. dollars, but at their own exchange rate.

Credit card security remains a concern, particularly in tourist areas. There have been reports of criminal use of credit cards. There are numerous reports in which criminals skimmed U.S. credit/debit card numbers, stealing the money in their debit accounts, or fraudulently charging their credit cards. Skimming is the theft of credit card information by an employee of a legitimate merchant or bank, manually copying down numbers or using a magnetic stripe reader or using a camera and skimmer installed in an ATM. In addition to skimming, the risk of physical theft of credit or debit cards also exists. Criminals may also acquire card data manually when cards are handed to or left momentarily with employees of businesses. Try to use ATMs in bank branches during business hours. Portable credit card terminals are commonly used in Mexico. Always request the establishment bring a portable credit card terminal to charge a credit card in your physical presence.

Regarding cartel violence, wrong-place/wrong-time incidents present the greatest threat to personal safety. The best ways to reduce the risk is to practice good personal security habits, especially maintaining a high-level of situational awareness and promptly departing from potentially dangerous situations. At present, the two largest TCOs in the country are the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel. Each group has a nationwide presence, although the CJNG has engaged on a more aggressive campaign to expand into new territory. The Sinaloa Cartel, while once the dominant TCO in the country, has its largest presence in the northwestern region of the country and has suffered from internal competition for leadership in the aftermath of Joaquín Guzmán Loera’s imprisonment. Other TCOs in the country with significant presences include the Gulf Cartel and Northeastern Cartel, based in the states of Tamaulipas; and Familia Michoacana, based in Michoacan and Mexico State. Local groups, like the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel in Guanajuato or the Juarez Cartel/La Linea, have smaller geographical footprints but contribute heavily to violence in the areas in which they operate.

## **Kidnapping**

The U.S. Department of State has included a Kidnapping “K” Indicator on the [Travel Advisory](#) for several states in Mexico including Baja California, Chihuahua, Colima, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nuevo Leon, Puebla, San Luis Potosi, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Zacatecas. The “K” indicates that criminal or terrorist individuals or groups have threatened to and/or have seized or detained and threatened to kill, injure, or continue to detain individuals in order to compel a third party (including a governmental organization) to do or abstain from doing something as a condition of release. The number of kidnappings reported throughout Mexico, while difficult to determine, is concerning. Most cases go unreported to authorities, as the popular belief is that the police may be involved or are unable to resolve the situation. Victims of traditional kidnappings are physically abducted and held captive until a ransom is paid. Most cases reported to U.S. Mission Mexico have been kidnapping for ransom (KFR). In some KFR cases, the captors receive a ransom and set the victim free; in others, the captors kill the victim despite having received a ransom. Kidnappings for ransom in the Yucatán Peninsula remain an anomaly.

## **Terrorism**

The U.S. Mission Mexico focuses on Mexico as a potential transit country for foreign terrorist groups to conduct operations against the U.S. There are no known foreign terrorist organizations operating/residing in or transiting through Mexico, and there is no evidence that any terrorist group has targeted U.S. citizens in Mexico.

## **Transportation**

Driving in Mexico requires vigilance. Drivers are not uniformly experienced, and often drive cars in disrepair. Be alert for vehicles moving slower than the rest of the traffic flow, and for vehicles speeding through traffic signals at the last minute. Give a wide berth to public buses and trucks. Road conditions in urban areas can also vary considerably. In upscale or tourist neighborhoods of major cities, the roads are in good condition, whereas roads are often in poor condition in marginalized areas. There are large speed bumps (topes) installed around major cities, including on some highways, that often lack appropriate markings; hitting one at or above speed could cause major damage to your vehicle. Be alert to changing road conditions. Drivers routinely disobey even the most fundamental traffic laws and commonly treat red lights like stop signs, crossing as soon as they have checked for opposing traffic.

It is common for strangers to approach vehicles asking for directions or change, handing out flyers, washing windows, or selling goods. Be alert, lock doors, and keep windows up far enough in case they are not well intentioned. When stopped in traffic, leave adequate distance between vehicles to escape. Do not stop to assist strangers whose vehicles appear broken down. Park inside a residential or hotel compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location of your visit. When parking in the lot of a shopping facility, park as close as possible to the store entrance and away from dumpsters, bushes, or large vehicles.

Local commercial and municipal buses and taxis are readily available in most cities. Drivers can be untrained and do not always follow the rules of the road. Vehicles may be poorly maintained or in disrepair. Accidents are common. First-class commercial bus service between major cities and tourist areas exists. In Mexico City, municipal buses, rapid transit buses (Metrobus), and the Metro (subway) are generally safe to use. City buses and the Metro may be crowded. Passengers should be on the alert for pickpockets and other thieves, especially on the most crowded, busiest routes during rush hour. Avoid non-municipal buses (micros).

Visitors should travel by intercity bus only during daylight hours, and only by first-class conveyance whenever possible. Although there have been several reports of bus hijackings and robberies on toll roads, buses on toll roads have experienced a lower rate of incidents than second- and third-class buses that travel on less secure, libre highways. There have been occasional reports of significant security incidents (apart from theft) on tourist buses in/around Mexico City and to nearby tourist destinations.

## LGBTI+ Travelers

Same-sex relations are legal in Mexico. The law provides for protections against discrimination based on gender identity. Travelers will generally find more openness and acceptance in urban areas, and conservative stances in rural areas. Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is prevalent, despite a gradual increase in public tolerance of LGBTI+ individuals, according to public opinion surveys. Due to sporadic reports of violence targeting LGBTI+ individuals, travelers should exercise discretion in identifying themselves publicly as LGBTI+.

The [Equaldex Equality Index](#) measures the status of LGBTI+ rights, laws, and freedoms, as well as public attitudes towards LGBTI+ people around the world. As of this report's publication date, Mexico has a score of 75/100, ranking 24 out of 198 countries on the index.

Consider information from [Destination Pride](#), a data-driven search platform associated with PFLAG Canada that visualizes the world's LGBTQ+ laws, rights, and social sentiment; as well as from ILGA World, a worldwide federation that produces an annual [map](#) showing sexual orientation laws from around the world, available in multiple languages.

## Women Travelers

Rape and sexual assault are serious problems in some resort areas. Many incidents occur at night or during the early morning hours, in hotel rooms, on hotel grounds, or on deserted beaches. Assailants have drugged the drinks of victims before assaulting them. Pay attention to your surroundings and maintain positive control of your drink.

The [Solo Female Travel Safety Index](#) combines the experiences of solo female travelers with other reliable indices to award a single rating indicating the relative security female travelers might experience in a given country. The qualitative portion of the index examines risk of scam, theft, and harassment, as well as the country's perceived attitude towards women. As of the date of this report's publication, Mexico has a score of 2.2 on a scale of 1.0 (safest) to 4.0 (least safe). All solo female travelers are able to share their solo travel experiences by signing up with the Solo Female Travelers portal; the organization draws qualitative data from women traveling solo, depending on active participation and honest information.

## Political

Mexico is a multi-party, presidential democracy featuring a federal system of 32 states. Free and fair elections most recently took place in the June 2023 gubernatorial elections in Mexico state and Coahuila. Mexico transitioned away from the hegemonic rule of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) in 2000. Transitions of power, including those between rival political parties, have been peaceful. Incidents of electoral violence, including murders of candidates, occur regularly at the municipal level.

Peaceful demonstrations of all sizes gather regularly in Mexico City at the Monument to Independence (popularly known as the Angel), near the U.S. Embassy, to protest government policies, labor, social issues, and, occasionally, U.S. policies. Some protestors will march from the Angel along Paseo de La Reforma to the Zocalo in the Historic Center, sometimes passing the Monument to the Revolution. These protests often affect traffic during peak commuting hours on and near Paseo de La Reforma, the city's primary avenue. Most demonstrations are peaceful. However, even demonstrations intended to be peaceful may turn confrontational and escalate into violence. Outside of Mexico City, groups associated with teachers' unions and those protesting alleged human rights violations in Guerrero have used checkpoints as a way of raising money for their causes.

Protesters in Mexico may block traffic on roads, including major thoroughfares, or take control of tollbooths on highways. Those who encounter protesters demanding unofficial tolls generally may pass upon payment. Non-Mexican nationals should avoid participating in demonstrations and other activities that authorities might deem political, as Mexican law prohibits political activities by foreign citizens and such actions may result in detention and/or deportation.

## Environmental

Air pollution is a significant problem in several major cities in Mexico. Consider the impact seasonal smog and heavy particulate pollution may have on your health. Many cities in Mexico, such as Mexico City, are at high altitude, which can lead to altitude illness.

Earthquakes are routine, especially in Pacific coast states. Mexico experienced a 7.1 magnitude earthquake in 2021 near Acapulco, and a 7.4-magnitude quake in 2020 with an epicenter off the coast of Oaxaca. Although there have been substantial improvements in building regulations and response planning since the devastating 1985 earthquake, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake in 2017 killed over 300 people with rebuilding costs estimated near USD 2 billion.

Active and dormant volcanoes are scattered throughout central Mexico. One of the country's largest volcanoes, Popocatepetl, is located 43 miles southeast of Mexico City and has had several low-level eruptions in the past several years. The last violent eruption was in 2000. The government prevents access to the mountain, closing it to climbers and hikers. According to public safety officials, travelers to the area should have N-95 filter masks available in case ash falls on them. Clouds of ash associated with volcanic activity can limit air travel and make evacuation by air difficult. Several times in 2019 Popocatepetl spewed lava and produced ash clouds from 13,000-28,000 feet high. In May 2023, it erupted again causing temporary airport closures, cancelation of outdoor activities, and air quality warnings for residents in Puebla, Mexico City, and the surrounding areas.

From May to November, hurricanes may affect the coastal states, but storms have caused flooding and disruption of utility services inland as well. Minor tropical storms can develop into hurricanes very quickly, limiting the time available for a safe evacuation. In 2020 Mexico experienced the most active hurricane season on record, with 29 tropical storms and 17 hurricanes. In October 2023, Hurricane Otis rapidly intensified before making landfall near Acapulco, killing 50, and causing billions of dollars in damages. Travelers in affected regions have had to delay their departure due to infrastructure damage to airports and limited flight availability. Travelers should apprise family and friends of their whereabouts and keep close contact with their tour operator, hotel staff, business contacts, and/or local officials for evacuation instructions in the event of a weather emergency. Monitor local radio, the [National Weather Service](#) and [Mexican weather authorities](#).