



Sierra Leone 2020 OSAC Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Freetown. OSAC encourages travelers to [use this report](#) to gain baseline knowledge of security conditions in Sierra Leone. For more in-depth information, review OSAC's [Sierra Leone country page](#) for original OSAC reporting, consular messages, and contact information, some of which may be available only to private-sector representatives with an OSAC password.

Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Sierra Leone at Level 2, indicating travelers should exercise increased caution due to crime. Review OSAC's report, [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#).

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Freetown as being a **CRITICAL**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Victims rarely report crimes to the police for fear of reprisal and lack of trust in the systems in place to arrest and prosecute criminals. Robberies, home invasions, assaults, and petty street crimes continue to rise throughout the country. However, the rate of violent crime in Sierra Leone remains comparable with that of other West African countries.

Sierra Leone continues to grapple with poverty, rising inflation, and high unemployment rates; this is especially so among the youth, who possess limited job prospects. More than 75% of Sierra Leoneans live below the national poverty line, with most making less than \$2 per day. Economic desperation has fueled increases in crime.

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal in Sierra Leone and punishable by up to 15 years in prison. However, rape is common and indictments are rare. Domestic violence is illegal and punishable by a fine of up to five million Leones (\$513) and up to two years in prison. However, domestic violence is common and police are unlikely to intervene.

Most crimes against U.S. travelers in Sierra Leone are opportunistic and non-violent, though violent crime remains a concern. Pickpocketing and petty theft are the most common types of non-violent crime affecting Westerners. As in many countries, expatriates are the targets of petty crime due to their perceived wealth. Petty crime and pickpocketing of wallets, cell phones, and passports is very common, especially on the ferry to/from Freetown's Lungi International Airport (FNA), as well as in the bars, restaurants, and nightclubs in the Lumley Beach and Aberdeen areas of Freetown. Thieves often attempt to distract a victim by asking questions, begging for money, bumping or jostling the individual, or offering to sell items.

Areas tourists frequent are havens for incidents involving theft, prostitution, drug sales, and disorderly conduct. The Lumley Beach area is one such location in Freetown. Avoid walking in this area at night, as it has poor lighting and attracts intoxicated persons.

Criminals may steal personal belongings from hotel rooms, even with doors locked. Store valuables securely at all times. There have been no reported thefts of items from within installed hotel room safes since 2016 at internationally branded hotels; however, no hotel in Sierra Leone is immune to theft – even upscale establishments. The small safes provided by the hotel are vulnerable; do not trust them with highly valuable items. Review OSAC's reports, [Hotels: The Inns and Outs](#) and [Considerations for Hotel Security](#).

Travel to/from Sierra Leone increases during the Christmas and New Year's holidays as people travel to visit family and friends. Hotel rooms and international flights may become scarce from November until February. Freetown experiences seasonal rises in crime (e.g., petty theft, luggage pilferage, pick pocketing, scams, fraud) with the influx of affluent visitors. Review OSAC's reports, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#).

There have been incidents in which criminals used local tools of convenience (e.g. machetes, bladed weapons) during robbery attempts. In the event of confrontation with an armed criminal actor, immediately hand over the desired property to avoid escalation or injury.

In 2019, there were no reports of carjacking involving U.S. Citizens.

Keep security plans diverse and flexible to ensure the safety of individuals and the security of property. Diplomatic missions, foreign organizations, expatriates, and wealthy local nationals typically contract with private security services for the protection of facilities and residences as a deterrent to property crime. Crime can still occur despite the employment of private security personnel. Do not invite strangers into your living quarters. Supervise/escort all workers in your living quarters. Practice good operational security if you are transporting valuable items into and around Sierra Leone. Some reported robberies committed against expatriates appear to involve those with inside information regarding the victims.

Gangs pose a potential threat to public order, with increased criminality, antisocial behavior, and drug use. Most often, gangs are composed of unemployed youth who align according to political affiliation, sports teams, or music preferences (e.g., rival local hip-hop artists). Most gang activity occurs in the eastern area of Freetown, and usually does not affect foreigners.

In 2019, the United States deported 84 Sierra Leonean nationals convicted of various types of crimes. The U.S. Government discontinued the issuance of B visas - temporary visitors for business and pleasure - for officials affiliated with the Foreign Affairs and Immigration Ministries. These visa restrictions do not affect other consular services within the U.S. Embassy, including adjudication of applications from individuals not covered by the suspension.

Sierra Leone has a cash economy. Most stores, restaurants, and hotels do not accept credit cards, so you must pay in cash. Some businesses are beginning to accept credit cards. Visa cards are more prevalent than other brands. Point-of-sale terminals exist in some major shops, hotels, and restaurants. Credit card machines operate over the cell phone system, so ensure the machine comes to you. Some ATMs accept international Visa cards. There are no functioning MasterCard cash points in Sierra Leone. Use credit cards cautiously; there is a serious risk that criminals may steal the card numbers for use in fraudulent transactions. Review OSAC's reports, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#) and [Taking Credit](#).

In August 2019, the Bank of Sierra Leone announced a prohibition on conducting business in foreign currency. The prohibition went into effect immediately, with violations punishable by a fine of 100 million Leones (\$10,275) and/or imprisonment of not less than three years. Handle currency exchanges only through a bank or established foreign exchange bureau. Avoid exchanging money with street vendors, since criminals may "mark" such individuals for future targeting; there is also a risk of receiving counterfeit currency or being short-changed in the transaction. Establishments will not accept U.S. dollars dated 2006 and earlier, even though they are legal tender in the United States. An anti-money laundering law passed in 2005 prohibits importing more than \$10,000 in cash except through a financial institution. Most outlets do not accept travelers' checks as payment.

Cybersecurity Issues

The Embassy has received reports from U.S. citizens about financial scams. Scams involving promises of investment or business opportunities happen in Sierra Leone. Do not respond to any unsolicited opportunities to make money. Perform due diligence before entering into any financial agreement.

Review OSAC's reports, [Cybersecurity Basics](#), [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#), [Traveling with Mobile Devices: Trends & Best Practices](#), and [Satellite Phones: Critical or Contraband?](#)

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Driving conditions in Sierra Leone present a serious hazard to travelers. Sierra Leone's roads are poorly maintained, lack illumination, do not have shoulders for parking or stopping in emergencies, and have minimal/no signage. There are few adequate sidewalks and guardrails. Local motorists rarely adhere to the rules of the road, and regularly engage in unsafe driving practices, such as failing to signal while turning or not remaining in correct travel lanes. Motorcycle taxis (*okadas*) are notorious for passing between vehicles or driving on roadsides, sometimes in the opposite direction of traffic.

The lack of a systematic and rigorously enforced vehicle registration and inspection system contributes to the dangers of driving in Sierra Leone. Many vehicles do not meet international safety standards; some lack headlights and/or brake lights.

The U.S. Embassy recommends its personnel not drive at night outside of Freetown. Outside of Freetown, accidents occur frequently due to poorly maintained and dimly lighted roadways, speeding, transiting livestock, and the presence of large vehicles such as long-haul trucks and buses. After a vehicular accident, a large crowd may gather and could become hostile and aggressive. This may happen even if you are not at fault. If you feel threatened or fear for your safety, leave the scene and go to the nearest police station.

During the rainy season (April-November), roadway hazards increase substantially throughout Sierra Leone. Roadway flooding and near zero-visibility present added hazards to motorists; plan for delays while traveling during the rainy season. Familiarize yourself with flood-prone areas and consider traveling in high-clearance, 4x4 vehicles.

Drinking and driving is illegal; police do not routinely enforce this prohibition due to a lack of a vehicle-equipped traffic police. As a result, local drivers may be under the influence. The U.S. Embassy maintains a zero-tolerance policy for mission personnel driving under the influence.

Police and immigration checkpoints occur throughout Sierra Leone. These checkpoints are official and require all vehicles to stop so that police can search passengers and vehicles and verify occupants' identity documents. Legitimate checkpoints feature police officers in uniform and normally feature a "Police" sign or the logo of the Sierra Leone Police. Children and road repair crews often establish impromptu roadblocks using string, rocks, or branches to obtain money from passing motorists. These impromptu roadblocks are illegal; do not feel compelled to pay for passage.

Review OSAC's reports, [Road Safety Abroad](#), [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#), and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#); and read the State Department's webpage on [driving and road safety abroad](#).

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation vehicles are in poor condition, frequently overloaded with passengers, and do not meet Western safety standards. Minivans used as taxis (*poda-poda*) routinely carry more passengers than is safe. Motorcycle taxis normally carry one passenger, but many carry up to three at once. Three-wheeled vehicles (*keke* or *tuk tuk*) are another popular form of public transportation. There is a very limited domestic bus system. The use of helmets by motorcyclists and safety belts by vehicle occupants is rare. U.S. Embassy employees may not use *kekes*, *okadas*, and *poda-podas*. The U.S. Embassy mandates the usage of seat belts by all occupants of official vehicles, and prohibits staff use of taxicab, motorcycles, and minibus taxis. Avoid public transportation, including buses, taxis, and motorcycles. Hire a dedicated car and driver from a trusted and reliable source.

Review OSAC's report, [Security In Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Lungi International Airport (FNA) is located in Lungi across the Sierra Leone River, and is accessible by a water taxi or public ferry. Travel to the airport is also available by roadway, but the drive time from Freetown to Lungi can take three or more hours depending on road conditions. Use only licensed water taxis and ferries. Helicopter service from Lungi discontinued after a fatal accident.

Sierra Leone relies on shipments of gasoline and diesel to maintain the nation's fuel supply. Occasional interruptions to these deliveries have caused fuel shortages which, in turn, led to price gouging, long lines, and gas stations closing due to lack of fuel delivery.

Terrorism Threat

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Freetown as being a **LOW**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. There are no known organizations targeting U.S. citizens or interests in Sierra Leone. However, there exists a real and growing threat in West Africa due to the operational presence of multiple terrorist groups, including regional affiliates of al-Qa'ida and ISIS. Sierra Leone has not experienced terrorist attacks, but remains vulnerable to terrorist activities due to its porous borders, regional instability, and increasing terrorist attacks targeting Western interests, foreigners, and African governments. The Government of Sierra Leone remains sensitive to the threat of terrorism, and engages with its international partners to detect and combat it.

Al-Qa'ida-affiliated terrorist groups based in Mali have launched multiple attacks on soft and hard targets foreigners frequent in major cities in West Africa, including those outside of the traditional areas of operation for these groups.

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

Anti-U.S. sentiment is rare.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Freetown as being a **MEDIUM**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. There have been no acts of political violence directed toward U.S. citizens in recent years. Political violence is sporadic and normally increases during election periods.

Civil Unrest

Political demonstrations and rallies are generally peaceful, but sporadic clashes do occur, often instigated by individuals within the crowds. Participants at political rallies are easily incited and may use weapons of opportunity, including sticks and rocks. Strong rivalries exist in Sierra Leone; participants at large demonstrations can become aggressive toward one another and the police. The police deploy crowd-control techniques, including the firing of warning shots and use of tear gas. Avoid all political rallies and demonstrations; even peaceful gatherings can escalate to violence. Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

Religious/Ethnic Violence

The rising number of gangs in Freetown remains a concern, given that some have aligned along ethnic lines.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Flooding remains a major concern. Freetown lacks the drainage infrastructure to accommodate storm water runoff. As a result, low-lying areas of the city and major vehicle thoroughfares flood during the rainy season. Torrential rains also challenge Freetown's often poorly constructed hillside structures.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Traditional landline telephone service is almost non-existent in Sierra Leone. Most communications are via cellular phones and/or the internet. Nationwide, internet service is expensive and slow.

Sierra Leone does not have major problems with piracy within its territorial waters or banditry along its highways. There are growing disputes over territorial rights between Guinean, Liberian, and international anglers caught in Sierra Leonean waters. Sierra Leone currently prosecutes piracy on the high seas as "armed robbery;" lawmakers continue to work on specific laws to recognize this crime as piracy. Sierra Leone has also become a "flag of convenience" country in the international shipping industry. The government has certified a shipping agency headquartered in Singapore to manage Sierra Leone registrations of vessels; however, Sierra Leone's staff responsible for the registry of sea vessels requires more training and management to meet international standards.

Economic Concerns

U.S. nationals and foreigners can be victims of schemes involving the purchase of gold dust and diamonds by local nationals who claim to work for various gold vendors, the Government Gold and Diamond Office (GGDO), government ministries, customs, and the police. The Embassy received one report last year from a U.S. citizen who attempted to invest in extractive industries and was defrauded. Beware of offers to sell you gold, diamonds, etc.; these types of activities could result in substantial loss of money or violation of local laws. Regulation of the gold and diamond industry remains under the control of the government. Only make purchases of gold or diamonds through licensed brokers. Do not purchase diamonds, gold, or other gems/minerals from an unlicensed source. Many diamond distributors are unlicensed and produce fraudulent gem certificates.

Land-fraud schemes continue to be prevalent throughout Sierra Leone. Many foreign investors fall victim to individuals claiming to be employed by the National Power Authority (NPA) who are providing false documents of land ownership to would-be investors. Conduct any transactions involving investment or land purchases directly with the NPA and not with individuals claiming connections within the NPA to facilitate the sale.

U.S. citizens wishing to conduct business in Sierra Leone should consult the U.S. Embassy's Economic Section [webpage](#) for business advice and words of caution. The U.S. Embassy continues to support the establishment of an American Chamber of Commerce in Sierra Leone. When searching for legal representation in Sierra Leone, use extreme diligence; some local attorneys are often at the center of criminal activities.

Personal Identity Concerns

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is widespread in Sierra Leone. The government imposed a moratorium on practicing FGM/C as an emergency health response to the Ebola outbreak, and the moratorium remains in place, but authorities do not actively enforce the prohibition. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [female travelers](#).

Consensual sexual relations between men are illegal in Sierra Leone. Although the U.S. Embassy is not aware of any recent prosecutions for consensual sexual activity between men, penalties can include imprisonment. While there is no explicit legal prohibition against sexual relations between women, lesbians of all ages can be victims of "planned rapes" initiated by family members in an effort to change their sexual orientation. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [LGBTI+ travelers](#).

Sierra Leone law does not prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities and offers no specific protections for such persons. The law does not mandate accessibility of buildings or assistance to disabled persons and there is no government policy or program to assist persons with disabilities. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [travelers with disabilities](#).

Review OSAC's report, [Freedom to Practice](#), and the State Department's webpage on security for [faith-based travelers](#).

Drug-related Crime

Drug trafficking and cultivation exist in Sierra Leone and continue to threaten the stability and safety of the region. The increase in narcotics trafficking through Sierra Leone, with links to international organized crime syndicates, is a disturbing trend. The considerable wealth associated with the drug trade, channeled with the help of corrupt officials, has had a destabilizing impact on the country. Transiting drugs, including cocaine, methamphetamines, and marijuana, are easily found on the local market. Most of the marijuana in the country is for transport and sale across neighboring borders. Poorly maintained border controls contribute to the growth of the illicit drug trade in the region, and provide opportunities for the expansion of organized crime.

Other Issues

Borders areas with neighboring states are more susceptible to criminality due to the lack of security force presence and/or enforcement of customs/immigration laws at most crossing areas.

Always ask permission before taking a photograph. Local citizens may request a small fee for taking a picture ("snap") of them or their surroundings. Obtain official permission to photograph government buildings, airports, bridges, or official facilities, including the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the U.S. Embassy. Review OSAC's report, [Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography](#).

Sierra Leone's customs authorities enforce strict regulations concerning the export of gems and precious minerals, such as diamonds and gold. All mineral resources, including gold and diamonds, belong to the State, and only the Government of Sierra Leone can issue mining and export licenses. The National Minerals Agency (NMA) can provide licenses for export, while the agency's Directorate of Precious Minerals Trading is responsible for Kimberly Process certification of diamonds. For further information on mining activities in Sierra Leone, contact the [Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources](#), or see the [Department of State's annual Investment Climate Statement](#). Read the State Department's webpage on [customs and import restrictions](#) for information on what you cannot take into or out of other countries.

Police Response

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) is a national police force administered from Freetown. Of the approximately 12,000 members, there are about 3,000-armed officers assigned to the Operational Support Division (OSD). OSD officers carry shoulder weapons and usually staff roadside checkpoints, serve on emergency response patrol teams, and protect foreign missions.

SLP capabilities have improved with guidance and support from international advisors, but only continued training will help the police reach international policing standards. SLP seeks to improve its response to escalating crime, but the lack of resources hinders progress. The lack of police vehicles to provide transportation for officers and, at times, no paper on which to prepare reports are challenges the SLP faces in its daily operations. As a result, officers must rely heavily on local transportation to travel to/from assignments. While vehicles may be available, fuel may not be. Police response is often slow and unreliable. It is not an uncommon practice for victims of crime to pay for or provide transportation for police officers to accompany them to the local station to file a report. The U.S., UN, and UK continue to work with the SLP on preparedness and crime prevention strategies.

The SLP has been accused of excessive use of force and corruption within its ranks, especially among OSD officers. The Government of Sierra Leone calls upon OSD to quell public protests that arise. Public opinion of and confidence in the SLP remain low. Sierra Leone ranks [119th](#) out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, and [26th](#) out of 54 on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance.

Travelers requiring police assistance should contact the police through the Control Room +232 76 771 721, which has the best-equipped offices to assist international travelers. If this number is unavailable, contact the Local Unit Commander (LUC) for the area in which the incident occurs. Many local residents call their LUC when in need of assistance. Visitors should obtain the phone numbers of LUC of the areas they will visit. The U.S. Embassy is unable to provide these contact numbers, as the LUCs frequently change assignments and phone numbers. Local police stations, like so many residences and businesses, do not have working landline telephones. Most police officers rely on private cell phones for communication, and these numbers are not made public. Officers answering the telephone often do not understand English-speakers with a U.S. accent. Many nationals speak "Krio," the *lingua franca* of the country.

Some U.S. citizens who have traveled to a police station to report a crime or accident have stated that police officers requested money in order to purchase paper and pens before the officer could take a statement or write a report. There is a fee to make a police report; for foreigners, the cost is 300,000 Leones, (about \$30) and 50,000 Leones for local residents. Pay at the bank, not at the police station. Download the State Department's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

Do not pay bribes, "gifts," or on-the-spot fines; if one is requested of you, obtain the officer's name and badge number, and politely ask to speak with a supervisor and/or request to go to police headquarters for further processing.

By international convention, the Government of Sierra Leone must notify the U.S. Embassy when it arrests a U.S. Citizen; however, it consistently fails to do so. Arrested or detained U.S. nationals should assert the right to speak with a representative from the U.S. Embassy; you may need to repeat this request.

Medical Emergencies

Medical facilities fall critically short of U.S. and European standards. The Ebola outbreak negatively affected the state of medical services; even prior to the crisis, medical facilities were poorly equipped, understaffed, and generally incapable of providing even basic services. Since the Ebola outbreak, physician availability has been spotty and inconsistent. Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the [U.S. Embassy website](#).

Trauma care is extremely limited. Only use local hospitals in the event of an extreme medical emergency. Blood transfusions can be life threatening due to inadequate donor screening. Many primary health care workers, especially in rural areas, lack adequate professional training. Medicines are in short supply and because of inadequate diagnostic equipment, lack of medical resources, and limited medical specialty personnel, complex diagnosis and treatment is unavailable.

The availability and quality of medications is inconsistent, and counterfeit drugs remain a problem. Bring sufficient medication supplies for the duration of your stay, if possible, including over-the-counter drugs. Do not pack medications in checked luggage.

The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends purchasing international health insurance before traveling internationally. Review the State Departments webpage on [insurance overseas](#).

All visitors traveling to Sierra Leone should have current vaccinations prior to arrival. These include, but are not limited to, tetanus, yellow fever, polio, meningitis, typhoid, hepatitis A and B, and rabies. The cholera vaccine is not required, but health officials at ports of entry do request proof of yellow fever vaccination. Yearly cholera outbreaks are common. Malaria is endemic and prophylaxis is a necessity. Expatriates have died from cerebral malaria as recently as 2017. Consult your physician for anti-malaria medication prior to traveling. Lassa fever is endemic in the Eastern provinces with deaths reported in November, 2019. The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Sierra Leone](#).

Review OSAC's reports, [The Healthy Way](#), [Traveling with Medication](#), [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#), [Shaken: The Don'ts of Alcohol Abroad](#), [Health 101: How to Prepare for Travel](#), and [Fire Safety Abroad](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

U.S. Embassy Freetown hosts an OSAC Country Council. Participants meet on a quarterly basis at various locations throughout Freetown. Interested private-sector security managers should contact [OSAC's Africa Team](#) with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Contact Information

The U.S. Embassy in Freetown is located at Leicester Square, off Regent Road, in the hills above the city.

Mission hours: Monday-Thursday 0800-1715; Friday 0800-1300

Switchboard: +232 99 105-500; After-hours Mission Duty Officer: (099) 905-007

Helpful Information

Before you travel, consider the following resources:

[OSAC Risk Matrix](#)

[OSAC Travelers Toolkit](#)

[State Department Traveler's Checklist](#)

[Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#)