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Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States and must abide by U.S. law and federal regulations. Despite the presence of U.S. military and law enforcement agencies on the island, Puerto Rico has suffered from a long history of extremely high crime rates. Although violent crimes are normally focused within local communities, visitors to Puerto Rico, including Americans from the mainland, have been victims of homicides and robberies in the past. There is no evidence, however, that suggests they have been targeted because of their nationality. Additionally, tourists in Puerto Rico face a prevalent threat from petty crime and should take appropriate actions to mitigate this risk.

Much of the crime on the island is attributed to an expansive drug trade that has marred the Commonwealth and the rest of the Caribbean for several years. Violent confrontations between authorities and drug traffickers and gangs have been widespread in Puerto Rico’s metropolitan areas. Those travelling to Puerto Rico should avoid areas known to be hotspots for drug sales or gangs associated with the drug trade. Tourists attempting to purchase illegal drugs, including cannabis, have been victims of violence from drug gangs in the past, and even tourists simply travelling through these areas have become bystander victims of violent confrontations.

A poor economy and rising unemployment in Puerto Rico have fueled local participation in illicit activities, such as illegal sales of counterfeit goods and prostitution. Several metropolitan areas also have large homeless populations because of a lack of jobs on the island and a high cost of living. These individuals often invade abandoned buildings and set up squatter camps where a variety of illicit activities occur. Visitors to the island are recommended not to seek out abandoned buildings as the risk of violence in these settings is heightened. Additionally, these issues have sparked protests in the capital of San Juan that tourists should avoid.

Federal and local law enforcement authorities are present throughout Puerto Rico; however, many of these resources are limited to metropolitan areas, predominantly San Juan, and smaller centers received less attention. While access to emergency services on the island is acceptable, travelers in more rural areas are not guaranteed speedy responses, and some rural police officers do not speak English. Additionally, resources spent on infrastructure are also focused within larger metropolitan zones. Consequently, many roads outside of larger cities are in poor condition and should be travelled with caution.

Lastly, there is a variety of health concerns on the island that visitors should give particular attention. Chikungunya has been widespread in Puerto Rico and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) maintains a Level 1 health notice for the illness in Puerto Rico. All visitors should practice standard health precautions, especially to avoid mosquito bites. This concern may be greater in areas suffering from drought, where people may collect rainwater that attracts mosquitoes. Additionally, travelers should take notice of Puerto Rico’s pollution problems. Drinking water in urban areas is generally regarded as safe, but when travelling in...
rural areas, visitors should drink bottled water. Also, Puerto Rico’s air quality contains several irritants that may cause difficulty breathing or induce asthma attacks.

Arrival

Most visitors arrive in Puerto Rico by way of Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport (SJU) in Carolina, near San Juan. SJU is Puerto Rico’s main international gateway and connection to the continental U.S. The facility is under renovation; however, most of the passenger terminal areas’ renovations have been completed. It is regarded as a modern airport with a variety of service available to passengers, including paid Wi-Fi access. As a U.S. territory, all airports in Puerto Rico must abide by U.S. federal aviation security requirements and are regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration and Transportation Security Administration. SJU is well protected through a variety of security countermeasures, both within the terminals and across the facility grounds. The Puerto Rico National Guard also has a visible presence at the airport as part of anti-drug trafficking efforts; this, however, does not suggest that the airport is under threat from violent crime. The areas surrounding the airport are safe and the roadways are heavily patrolled by the Puerto Rico Police Department (Policía de Puerto Rico) and the municipal police forces of San Juan and Carolina.

Travel

Taxis

Taxis throughout Puerto Rico are generally regarded as safe and reliable ways to travel. Commonwealth law requires taxis to register with the Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC), the government-owned corporation in charge of the island’s tourism regulations. Most taxis in Puerto Rico operate on a fixed fare system, with prices set by the PRTC for specific areas. White “Turístico” taxis can be found throughout San Juan’s tourist areas and will always use the fixed fare system. Generally, tipping 10-15 percent of the fare is normal. If using a taxi service at the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport, or one of the other airports on the island, you will receive a slip that indicates the fare to be paid; an example is available here. This information, along with the taxi’s license plate number, should be kept in case a claim needs to be made. If a driver attempts to charge a different fare, refuse and contact the PRTC Transportation Division at 787-999-2100. In areas outside of fare zones, taxis are supposed to use metered fares; however, especially in San Juan, drivers will offer you a flat rate instead. This is often a way to pay less taxes and is usually cheaper than the metered fare. If you want the driver to use the meter outside the fixed fare
zones, they are required by law to comply. If they do not comply, exit the vehicle and report the driver to the PRTC Transportation Division.

**Públicos**

**Públicos**, or “public cars” or “Mini-buses,” are 17 passenger vans that operate similarly to taxi services but are usually cheaper. These vehicles are regulated by the Puerto Rico Public Service Commission (PSC) and have license plates that begin with “P” or “PD”. These vans do not usually frequent tourist areas unless they are hotels; however, they do sometimes make stops throughout San Juan’s tourist areas. These services are generally regarded as safe; however, certain routes have vehicles that are not well maintained and should not be used. Additionally, these types of public transportation can be very crowded and make it easy for pickpockets to target tourists. It is not recommended to use **Públicos** with only a few passengers are inside; while no evidence suggests violent crimes are common with **Públicos**, this situation makes individuals more vulnerable to crimes of robbery and sexual assault.

**Mass Transit**

The most popular form of government-owned mass transit among residents in Puerto Rico is the **Tren Urbano**, or “Urban Train,” a light-rail system serving San Juan and surrounding areas. A full map of the system’s operating areas is available [here](#). **Tren Urbano** stations are well patrolled by both police and private security; consequently, violent attacks are very rare. The system is mostly used for local commuters and, due to limited operations in tourist areas, tourists do not often utilize the service. The Puerto Rico Metropolitan Bus Authority, or **Autoridad Metropolitana de Autobuses** (AMA), serves the San Juan metropolitan area; however, it is also not often used by tourists. Those looking for cheap mass transit in Old San Juan will use the bus system, as the **Tren Urbano** does not operate in that area. Bus stops can be identified by a yellow or green sign that says “Parada;” a full map of the AMA service area is available [here](#). While uncommon, numerous knife attacks on locals have occurred late at night on public buses. Due to the small number of tourists using these services, tourists tend to be easily identified and may be targets of petty theft. Whether traveling by the **Tren Urbano** or by bus, tourists should avoid carrying valuables, dressing extravagantly, and should keep bags close.

**On Foot**

Many tourists in Puerto Rico prefer to explore on foot because of heavy traffic. Visitors should, however, pay close attention to vehicle traffic while walking due to dangerous driving behaviors, such as running stoplights and not yielding to pedestrians. Travelling on foot in urban areas is generally safe during the daytime; however, it is not recommended to travel by foot in the evening or at night unless in a well-trafficked area. According to the PRPD, 75 percent of all violent crime occurs along public roadways. Therefore, travelers should be particularly attentive when walking along streets outside of residential areas, as they are more likely to become victims of crime when travelling on foot. Travelers should pre-plan their routes before departing.
and ensure they avoid known areas of crime or danger; this is particularly important in cities, such as San Juan or Ponce, where it is very easy to walk into an unsafe area by accident. Foot travelers are common victims of muggings, and occasionally, gang battles pose a threat to tourists walking through urban areas. Tourists should avoid wearing jewelry or expensive clothing, carrying cameras or bags, and other behaviors that may identify them as a non-local. If travelling in a tourist area, visitors can often find officers of San Juan’s Tourism Police Division who will be able to advise travelers of areas to avoid. Also, visitors who wish to run/jog while in Puerto Rico should do so in groups of at least three and only in well-trafficked areas. While uncommon, runners have been violently attacked in the past, even in tourist areas.

Additionally, those travelling on foot should ensure they apply sunscreen every two hours, as long exposure to the sun’s UV rays is harmful. This is a particular issue when walking near water, which increases UV exposure. Travelers should monitor their location’s UV index level by checking local weather sources or, if travelling with a smartphone, download a weather app that provides this information (the iPhone Weather app displays this at the bottom of the page). According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), any UV index above three requires the consistent application of sunscreen. If you are unable to access UV index information, follow the “Shadow Rule:” if your shadow is taller than you are, the UV index is likely to be lower; if your shadow is shorter than you are, the UV index is likely to be at harmful level.

Roadway Safety

Road conditions can vary throughout Puerto Rico but are generally regarded as acceptable compared to the rest of the U.S. Expressways and highly trafficked roads are normally in acceptable conditions but smaller side roads can often be found in a state of disrepair. Some of Puerto Rico’s highways are toll roads; therefore, drivers should take notice of any route they take that requires toll payment. Lanes on these roads marked “Cambia” can provide change but lanes marked “Cambia exacto” require exact change. The most significant problem with driving in Puerto Rico is the heavy traffic congestion that occurs in urban areas. Traffic and road condition information can be found on the Puerto Rico Department of Transportation and Public Works website, found here. It is also recommended that those travelling with smartphones download a traffic app that will provide this information, such as Google Maps or INRIX Traffic. Drivers’ attitudes toward traffic laws also vary across Puerto Rico, both in urban and rural areas. Unsafe driving practices are particularly prevalent throughout San Juan, including the expressways. Despite heavy traffic police presence, drivers in Puerto Rico often ignore traffic signs and drunk driving has been a particular issue. Those visiting Puerto Rico who choose to drive should be cautious and aware of aggressive drivers. Those driving in Puerto Rico should also take note that police vehicles are required to keep their blue emergency lights on at all times and will only use their sirens to pull someone over or while responding to emergencies. In the event of an accident or other emergency while in Puerto Rico, dial “911” to contact emergency services.
Additionally, vehicles should not be used to store valuables, as rental vehicles are often targeted for smash-and-grabs, where thieves smash the windows of a vehicle and steal valuables from inside. Car theft is common in urban areas of Puerto Rico, especially San Juan; therefore, visitors should always lock parked vehicles and ensure all windows are rolled up. Also, while carjacking rates have decreased dramatically since a surge in the 1990s, carjackings do occur throughout Puerto Rico, but tourists are rarely ever victims of this crime. They can occur both on well-trafficked streets and in areas set back from vehicle and pedestrian traffic; however, they do primarily occur at night. Therefore, any person driving at night in Puerto Rico should be attentive to individuals loitering at stoplights and should keep their windows rolled up leaving no more than a two-inch space.

**Security Assessment: Puerto Rico**

**Crime**

Puerto Rico has a dramatic history of extremely high violent crime rates compared to the rest of the world. This peaked in 2011 when the island saw 1,164 murders, a murder rate of 32 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to Pittsburgh, PA, which had a 2011 murder count of 44 at a rate of 14.3 per 100,000 inhabitants. Also, other Class 1 felonies, such as rape, assault, and burglary, which had been declining, saw drastic increases in Puerto Rico from 2008 through 2011. Additionally, the Puerto Rico Police Department (PRPD) faced an institutional crisis in this period amid investigations into human rights violations and corruption and a lack of resources consequence of the Commonwealth government’s austerity measures. This negatively affected emergency response times, crime conviction rates, and the community-police relationship. However, recent statistics suggest that Puerto Rico’s crime rates are decreasing, even after accounting for a decreasing population. According to the Puerto Rico Governor’s Office, there were 681 murders in 2014, a murder rate of 18.4 per 100,000 inhabitants and a 41.5 percent reduction from 2011. Comparatively, Pittsburgh, PA, experienced 71 murders in 2014, a murder rate of 14.3 per 100,000 inhabitants.

*Map 1: Spatial clustering of violent crime in Puerto Rico, January-June 2015*

*Source: Puerto Rico Police Department, 2015*
rate of 23.05 per 100,000 inhabitants. This decrease in crime may be attributed to several government programs initiated after the 2013 inauguration of the current Governor, Alejandro García Padilla, such as police reform and the use of ShotSpotter, a technology that triangulates gunfire incident locations. Following the 2011 murder of his son, a local man also developed a smartphone app known as “Basta Ya PR” that allows individuals to immediately report a crime along with its location directly to the police. This app is widely used and supported by the Puerto Rican government. Another large influence on this decrease likely stems from greater collaboration with the federal government on countering drug related crimes.

Despite the recent decrease in violent crimes across Puerto Rico, crime remains a concern for those visiting the island. While overall incidents of violent crime may have recently decreased, their spatial presence continues to be widespread. A spatial analysis of reported crime data for the first half of 2015 underscores expected high crime levels in urban areas, particularly in San Juan, but also highlights the exurbanization of crime into rural communities. This is likely attributed to widespread participation in drug trafficking, including in rural areas, and a poor economy with few employment opportunities. Consequently, those travelling to Puerto Rico should maintain heightened awareness even when outside of urban centers.

Also, in the same period that crime has decreased, gun ownership in Puerto Rico has tripled. While it is likely that this increase is a response to the high crime rates of the past decade, it also means that potential attackers are more likely to be armed with a weapon, legally or illegally. Despite extremely strict gun laws, 89 percent of the 229 murders in Puerto Rico between January and June 2015 have been by firearm. Consequently, if travelers are victims of robbery or petty theft, it is highly recommended that they do not resist or attempt to confront the perpetrator, as they are likely to be armed with a firearm. Rather, immediately contact the police and seek medical attention if necessary.

**Drug Trade and Organized Crime**

Puerto Rico serves as one of the main transshipment hubs for illegal drugs as they make their way from South America to the mainland United States. Since 2011, seizures of cocaine, the most profitable drug for smugglers, have quadrupled in Puerto Rico. This sharp increase highlights shifting patterns of traffickers in Colombia and Venezuela who are looking for new routes to the U.S. Violence among drug gangs along the U.S.-Mexico
border and a law enforcement crackdown has made the southern U.S. border an increasingly risky drug route. Puerto Rico, however, offers traffickers a more attractive option for moving their product because once drugs are on the island they are not subject to customs searches when shipped to the mainland U.S. Most of these drugs are transported across the Caribbean by means of small boats, known as “go-fast boats,” that can easily conceal themselves along Puerto Rico’s 700-mile coastline of rough terrain and naturally occurring clandestine hideouts. U.S. military and law enforcement agencies, as well as Puerto Rican authorities, lack the resources to monitor the entire coastline effectively and interdict shipments. This makes rural coastal areas more threatening to visitors who may come across drug trafficking activities; drug traffickers are quick to kill those who may alert authorities to their operations. It is advised travelers stay away from coastal areas outside of urban centers unless they are popular spots for tourists.

Approximately 80 percent of drugs that reach Puerto Rico are shipped to the mainland United States; the remaining 20 percent are sold on the domestic market. Local gangs fight for control of distribution within Puerto Rico and significantly contribute to the high crime rates; an estimated 80 percent of murders are linked to drugs. As drug transit through Puerto Rico has increased, these gangs have grown in size and power within local communities. The economic downturn of the past decade in Puerto Rico has also fueled these gangs’ operations. As more Puerto Ricans become unemployed, more turn to selling drugs for local gangs and also become consumers themselves. This is especially prominent among the growing homeless population on the island. The drug gangs are known for their violent retribution against their enemies and are responsible for many drive-by shootings using high caliber weapons, such as AK-47s and AR-15s. As the amount of drugs trafficked through the island continues to increase, these gang’s connections to transnational criminal organizations will also grow, expanding their access to deadly weapons and increasing violent encounters with authorities. Despite most anti-drug resources being dedicated to the U.S.-Mexico border, federal agencies and Puerto Rican authorities have formed task forces to facilitate a bilateral approach both at sea and on land to combat the problem. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) have shifted greater numbers of agents from their Miami field offices to Puerto Rico; the U.S. Coast Guard is also expecting the delivery of six new fast-response crafts to the San Juan sector. The U.S. Attorney’s Office in Puerto Rico has also begun arresting gang and drug trafficking leaders on federal weapons charges, making it more difficult to get bond and disappear. While all of these efforts may have contributed to the recent drop in crime, gangs and drug trafficking continue to present a threat to those visiting Puerto Rico, both locals and tourists. Visitors are advised to stay away from areas known for drug activity, particularly the La Perla and Puerta de Tierra neighborhoods of San Juan, as these places are more likely to experience gang-related violence.

**Struggling Economy and High Unemployment**

Puerto Rico’s economy has experienced a massive downturn over the past 20 years, falling in and out of recession since 2006. Puerto Rico’s unemployment rate as of June 2015 was 11.6 percent; comparatively, Pittsburgh, PA, had an unemployment rate of 5.4 percent as of June.
2015. Only 41.3 percent of working-age Puerto Ricans have jobs and only one million of those are employed in the formal economy, the rest involved in the drug trade. As of June 2014, 45.2 percent of Puerto Rican households lived below the federal poverty line; the U.S. national average for households under the federal poverty line in 2014 was 15 percent. Additionally, Puerto Rico’s government is suffering from a fiscal crisis. Due to several years of high levels of borrowing to make up for government deficit spending, Puerto Rico holds $73 billion in debt via municipal bonds. In 2014, the credit rating agencies Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s downgraded Puerto Rico’s debt to junk status, making it much harder for the island to borrow more money. Due to these poor economic conditions, the government has been forced to implement austerity measures and cut government services. This has exacerbated problems faced by unemployed locals who depend on government assistance. Many Puerto Ricans have lost their homes and have been forced to live on the streets; Puerto Rico’s homeless population nearly doubled between 2011 and 2013, increasing from 980 to 1,650 across the island of 3.7 million. For comparison, Pittsburgh, PA, had 1,492 individuals considered homeless at the beginning of 2014. The weakness of the island’s formal economy and increase in poverty has contributed to an increase in drug use throughout Puerto Rico. Not only are more people using illegal drugs, many are also turning to drugs as a source of income; many impoverished Puerto Ricans are attracted to the drug gangs who offer them money to sell drugs on the street. While many of Puerto Rico’s homeless are nonthreatening, the connection between this population and drug activities presents a significant risk to visitors on the island. Travelers are advised to avoid areas where homeless individuals may be sheltering themselves, such as abandoned buildings and in parks at night, due to the risk of drug-related violence. Additionally, while crime incidents involving homeless individuals are related to drug activity, there are a growing number of incidents involving theft and financial crimes, such as credit fraud. Consequently, visitors are recommended not to use ATMs where homeless individuals are loitering.

The poor economic conditions in Puerto Rico have also sparked demonstrations against further government austerity proposals. On May 13, 2015, thousands of students, teachers, and staff from the University of Puerto Rico and other local schools marched in San Juan from the Puerto Rican Capitol building to La Fortaleza, the home of the Puerto Rican Governor. The demonstration was aimed at Governor Padilla’s proposal to slash the island’s public university system’s budget by one-fifth. These protests were largely peaceful with riot police and SWAT officers standing by to control crowds. However, a small, improvised “chemical bomb,” a soda
bottle filled with acid and aluminum, detonated near the Governor’s Mansion; police are unsure whether this device was directly related to protestors. Past student protests in Puerto Rico have been associated with significant violence; however, this violence was mostly against protestors as police attempted to clear crowds. Other issues that have sparked similar public reactions have included cuts to police salaries and benefits, increased value-added taxes (VATs), and cuts to government social services. While protests in Puerto Rico are considered peaceful, visitors are advised to avoid demonstration areas as police may use violent methods to control crowds and these areas offer pickpockets easy opportunities to target tourists. Mainland U.S. media outlets have reported little on demonstrations in Puerto Rico; therefore, it is recommended that visitors follow local media sources, which can be found in the “News & Emergency Contact Information” section of this assessment.

Site Specific Assessments

Santurce

Santurce is one of the largest barrios in San Juan and is often trafficked by visitors. This area is home to approximately 81,000 residents with a population density of 15,225.6 per square mile; comparatively, Pittsburgh, PA, has a population density of 5,540 per square mile. The area has historically been known for high crime rates due to high levels of drug activity and poverty, especially in large public housing projects. While crime rates remain elevated due to its high population density, the neighborhood’s safety has greatly improved and is comparable to other urban centers in the United States. This has followed increased investment in the area by the Puerto Rican government and private developers, especially around the La Placita/Plaza del Mercado area. This has attracted young entrepreneurs and artists to Santurce and has led to a decrease in violent crimes.

Despite Santurce’s decrease in crimes, areas of concern still exist, including spots frequented by tourists, and visitors should still practice safety precautions. Spatial analysis of reported crime incidents indicates that the
The southeastern portion of Santurce experiences less violence than the districts to the northwest. The majority of violent crimes in the area were robberies and car thefts; these occurred mostly on major roadways, such as Avenida Eduardo Conde and Avenida Juan Ponce de León.

As noted above, the risk of experiencing violent crime increases when travelling to popular areas such as La Placita/Plaza del Mercado and clubs and bars in western Santurce. Due to the area’s popularity with tourists, robberies and instances of petty theft are widespread; aggravated assault is also significant in the area, likely due to alcohol and drug consumption associated with the clubs and bars. Those visiting these areas between 10:00 P.M. and 4:00 A.M. should follow standard safety precautions and are advised to use a legitimate taxi service for transportation to and from their hotel. Additionally, travelers are advised to avoid Parque Central in southern Santurce and the beachfronts during nighttime as they experience increased reports of robbery and violent assault and are not patrolled by police at night; these areas are also common nighttime shelter areas for homeless individuals. Lastly, visitors are advised to stay away from public housing projects, or Caserios, such as Louis Lloren Torres, as these are often hotspots for drug activity and gang violence. During the daytime hours, however, most areas of Santurce are considered safe and can be travelled using normal safety precautions.

Old San Juan

Old San Juan, also known as Viejo San Juan, is the historic core of San Juan and one of the most popular tourist sites in Puerto Rico. Due to the area’s popularity, it is well patrolled by police who are specially trained to handle tourist issues and speak fluent English; consequently, this area is considered quite safe compared to the rest of San Juan. While violent crime does occur in Old San Juan, security concerns in the area are minimal with the biggest threats stemming from petty theft and occasional nighttime muggings; most crime in the area occurs between 12:00 A.M and 4:00 A.M. Visitors who drive to Old San Juan should ensure their vehicles are locked and that valuables are not stored inside; smash-and-grabs do occur in Old San Juan, particularly in the evening hours. Drivers are recommended to park inside one of the many parking garages in Old San Juan; a full list of parking options is available here. Additionally, crimes occur more frequently on the weekends when cruise ships dock in San Juan and the number of tourists in Old San Juan increases dramatically. Pickpockets are common in tourist areas, especially on the trolleys and near parking garages. Also, visitors to Old San Juan should be careful when walking the narrow sidewalks and cobblestone streets and always wear comfortable walking shoes. Many visitors have injured their ankles from falls and instances of tourists tripping into traffic have been reported; these risks become elevated during and follow rainstorms. Lastly, visitors should be aware that Old San Juan is a hotspot for the sale of counterfeit merchandise, such as handbags and clothing. While violence associated with this activity is extremely rare, some of these merchants have ties to organized crime and drugs; therefore, visitors are advised to avoid purchasing known counterfeit goods.
While Old San Juan is considered safe, there are areas in its vicinity that tourists are strongly advised to avoid. The La Perla neighborhood in the northern part of Old San Juan (highlighted in red in Map 4 above) is known for very high crime rates and drug activity and should be avoided by tourists. La Perla is situated between Castillo San Felipe del Morro, commonly referred to as “El Morro,” and Castillo San Cristóbal, two very popular tourist historical sites; many visitors accidently wander into La Perla while trying to walk from one to the other. There are occasional salsa dancing and arts festivals held in the neighborhood that are considered safe in the daytime; however, it is strongly encouraged that visitors only attend these events in large groups. Also, visitors are advised to avoid Puerta de Tierra, a neighborhood located to the east of Old San Juan. During the day, this area is a low risk to travelers; however, drug activity and gang violence increase in the evening and nighttime hours.

**Vietnam Neighborhood: Guaynabo Waterfront Area**

The Vietnam neighborhood is located in the Amelia district of the Pueblo Viejo barrio in Guaynabo. While Guaynabo is known for being a high-income municipality, attracting some of Puerto Rico’s wealthiest, Vietnam is considered low- to middle-income. The Vietnam community was established in the 1960s/70s and many of its members have lived there for their entire lives. Vietnam lies along the only waterfront land in Guaynabo and, therefore, has been the center of a decade long struggle between the city government and community members over redeveloping the area into the Guaynabo Waterfront Project. In 2006, Mayor Hector O’Neill began plans to develop an upscale waterfront development project that would include shopping, restaurants, multi-million dollar homes, and several hotels. He also stated that the area, originally built on a landfill, was in desperate need of infrastructure upgrades. This sparked backlash from Vietnam residents who did not want to be forced to sell and move from their homes. Since the
city’s efforts began, more than 200 homes in Vietnam, mostly along Calle N, have been taken over by the city; new housing projects were built to accommodate those families who sold their homes, such as the Urb. Villa Concepcion developments. In December 2014, the San Juan Superior Court ruled that the city did not meet the legal requirements to continue its development project. The court stated that since Vietnam had been designated a Special Community in 2001 by the then-Governor of Puerto Rico, legal protections required 75 percent of residents to approve any development plans. However, in June 2015, another judge ruled that designation of the Special Community was void because the mayor of Guaynabo was not involved in the designation process, required by law. The issue is ongoing and likely to continue into the future as local residents respond to the recent court decision. While the city plans to continue pushing for the project, it should be noted that this issue has not generated any violent confrontations and is unlikely to do so in the future.

The tight-knit nature of the Vietnam community has maintained safety and security for its residents and visitors. While it is a lower-income community, drug and gang activity does not appear to affect Vietnam as it has in other similar communities in the area. Additionally, Guaynabo municipal police maintain an acceptable presence in the area, especially near the new housing developments. Despite Vietnam’s general safety, visitors should be aware of nearby areas that may pose a safety risk. While very few violent crimes are reported in Vietnam, spatial analysis of the surrounding area’s reported crime incidents reveals a cluster of violent crime northeast of Vietnam after crossing into Cataño. The shopping area along PR-5 (highlighted in Map 5) experiences significantly more violence than the surrounding area; the majority of these crimes are thefts committed between 12:00 A.M. and 4:00 A.M. While it is unlikely Amizade volunteers will visit this area at nighttime, all travelers should practice heightened safety precautions during the evening and nighttime.

Map 5: Violent crime incidents near Vietnam neighborhood, January-June 2015
Source: Puerto Rico Police Department, 2015
Lastly, as noted above, the Vietnam neighborhood suffers from aging infrastructure and is built on a poorly constructed landfill. The primary concern from this problem is the frequent flooding of the sewage system, especially in the older areas of the community closer to the waterfront. During the rainy season (April through November), heavy rains cause the aging sewage system to backup into the streets and, in many cases, homes. This poses a significant risk of bacterial infections and other diseases. Visitors are advised to avoid streets or homes affected by sewage backup and, if in contact with wastewater, immediately wash the area with warm water and soap; depending on the level of contact, medical attention may be necessary. Additionally, it is advised that visitors carry hand sanitizer and avoid touching their face while in the area; visitors are also advised to drink only bottled water when in Vietnam.

Culebra Island and Vieques Island

Culebra Island is one of the main tourist destinations in Puerto Rico and its beaches are often ranked as some of the best in the world. The island is about 18 miles offshore from Fajardo on the northeastern tip of Puerto Rico. Vieques Island is another of Puerto Rico’s several popular tourist destinations and is known for its beaches and bioluminescence bays. The island is seven miles offshore from Puerto Rico’s east coast. In order to get to the islands, visitors must travel by ferry from Fajardo or by air. Fajardo is located about 37 miles east of...
San Juan and takes around an hour to reach by car via PR-66/PR-3. Crime in Fajardo is minimal and does not appear to target visitors other than pickpocketing and theft from vehicles. The area around the ferry terminal is quite safe and well patrolled by police. Ferries to Culebra and Vieques leave from Fajardo everyday but with increased frequency on the weekends; a schedule for the ferry service can be found here. Visitors should take note, however, that rough seas often delay, or even cancel, ferry service from Fajardo. Therefore, visitors who miss their scheduled ferry should stay close to the marina and, if visitors decide to go into the town’s center, should only travel by vehicle.

On Culebra Island, security concerns are marginal due to a small population and heavy presence of tourists. While petty theft does occur, these incidents are rare compared to the rest of Puerto Rico. Instances of aggravated assault have been reported near bars and beaches at nighttime but are uncommon and likely associated with alcohol and/or drug consumption. Visitors are recommended to keep valuables in their rooms and to avoid beaches at night unless in a large group.

On Vieques Island, however, crime poses a greater risk to visitors due to a larger population of around 10,000. Petty theft is very common on Vieques; areas on the island where this threat is significant are: Navio, Media Luna, Blue Beach, Green Beach, Playa Grande, and the waterfront in Esperanza. When travelling to these areas, visitors should travel in groups and pay attention to their belongings. Beaches surrounded with bushes or heavy shrubbery are also common spots for thieves as they can easily hide and wait for tourists to go swimming and leave their items unattended. Visitors should always leave their valuables in their rooms and, when going to the beach, only bring enough cash with them for food and drinks. Also, theft from rental vehicles is quite common on Vieques and visitors should never leave valuables inside of a rental vehicle. Rental car companies have advised customers to leave windows rolled down while on the island; thieves are more likely to break car windows even if no valuables are in plain sight. Lastly, armed robbery and assault is a concern on Vieques Island, especially toward North American tourists. Many tourists stay in isolated properties on beaches or on mountains, which makes them easier for criminals to break into. Police have increased their presence on the island; however, isolated properties still face greater risks of these incidents. While these events are relatively uncommon, they have increased in frequency. Visitors are advised to avoid staying in isolated properties that do not have security systems; if visitors are victims of these attacks, it is recommended not to resist and immediately contact the police.

Also, visitors to both islands should be especially cautious when walking along the many beaches, including popular tourist beaches such as Flamenco. From 1939 until the 1970s, the U.S. Navy used both islands as a training ground for bombing and amphibious assault practice; remnants of tanks can still be found on the beaches and are popular photo backdrops. The use of the islands for military training has left them scattered with unexploded ordinances and live
ammunition, which pose a significant risk to visitors. Despite efforts by the U.S. government to remove these materials, tourists have been injured when walking along beaches. In 2013, a young girl visiting Culebra was badly burned when she picked up an old shell containing white phosphorous that activated when the girl dropped the shell on the ground. If visitors come across any form of ordinances or ammunition, they are strongly encouraged to contact the police to properly dispose of the material and so they can inspect the area for any other dangerous material.

Additionally, visitors to the islands should be cautious when swimming at the beaches and look for jellyfish as stings are common. If stung, do not rub the area, as this will make the pain worse. Rinse the area with warm water and remove any tentacles using tweezers, as they can still sting you even if removed from the jellyfish body. More information about treating jellyfish stings can be found [here](#). In the case of a severe sting or allergic reaction, limited medical care can be found on both islands; however, transport to San Juan is required for extensive medical attention.

Lastly, visitors to Vieques should pay careful attention to the wild horse population that roams freely across the island. These animals are feral and have caused injuries in the past to those who approach them. Horses can often be found on beaches, walking through town, and on the sides of roads. Drivers are advised to drive slowly; this is especially important at night, when poorly lit streets make the brown-haired horses hard to see. If a driver accidently hits a horse, they should call the police or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 787-741-2138.

**El Yunque Rainforest**

El Yunque National Forest is a popular tourist destination in Puerto Rico and is the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest System. It is approximately 28 miles east of San Juan and can be reached by vehicle in about 45 minutes. Upon entering the forest, signs will point you to the El Portal Visitor Center; past the center you will find the entrances to the many hiking
trails. Visitors are advised to only use trails maintained by the U.S. Forest Service, which are marked; more information on the various trails can be found here.

Crime in this area is extremely rare and even reports of petty theft are uncommon. The primary concern for travelers in El Yunque is the risk of natural hazards. While most of the trails are paved, they can become very slippery, even if it is not raining, due to the high moisture levels inside the forest. Visitors are advised not to climb over or stand on large rocks or near ledges; instances of hikers slipping and falling down hillsides have occurred. Additionally, many of the trails and roads leading into the park are susceptible to flash flooding. Many of the small creeks or rivers that run through the park can quickly rise during a rainstorm and wash out pathways. It is recommended that visitors avoid travelling to El Yunque if rain is forecasted, even if it is a small amount of precipitation. Visitors should check the U.S. Forest Service’s El Yunque website for alerts and notices, particularly for trail status reports, available here.

Also, a variety of poisonous plants exist in El Yunque that visitors should avoid. Few of these species are found near the recreational trails; however, those who stray from the marked paths may encounter larger quantities of dangerous plants. The effects of coming into contact with these plants range from mild to severe symptoms; visitors are advised to review and print out the U.S. Forest Service’s El Yunque poisonous plants guide to bring with them while hiking, available here. Lastly, while a few mildly venomous animals and insects exist in El Yunque, their numbers are very small and hikers are unlikely to encounter them. Tarantulas, centipedes, and scorpions can occasionally be found near trails; however, these species are non-venomous and bites typically only result in mild irritation or allergic reactions. Visitors are also advised to bring mosquito repellant with them to El Yunque and wear long sleeves and pants to avoid mosquito bites, as the forest has a large mosquito population.

Ponce
Ponce is the second largest metropolitan area in Puerto Rico and is located on the south side of the island. It is located about 71 miles from San Juan and takes about 1.5 hours to reach by car. The recommended route follows PR-52, a modern four-lane toll way, which provides a much faster and safer route than the alternative PR-5. As an urban center, Ponce experiences an elevated rate of crime compared to its surrounding area. Most of the city’s crime can be sourced back to the drug trade and poor economic conditions. Traditionally, tourists are not targeted by violent criminals; however, visitors to Ponce should practice heightened safety precautions in the city. It faces similar concerns of crime that exist throughout the San Juan area and, as in San Juan, its security risks vary in different parts of the city. Much of the crime that is of concern to tourists surrounds the town center near the popular Parque de Bombas. Numerous reports of armed robbery and muggings have occurred in this area; fortunately, very rarely have tourists been injured in these attacks. Individuals looking for money to buy drugs have perpetrated the majority of these crimes and, when victims do not resist, they rarely harm their victims. When armed robberies and muggings are not included in the crime data, however, the danger of violent crime in the area is much less. Consequently, visitors to Ponce are advised to avoid walking at night, since the majority of armed robberies occur between 12:00 A.M. and 4:00 A.M., and are advised to always walk in a group.

Map 10: Spatial analysis of Ponce crime reports, January-June 2015
Source: Puerto Rico Police Department, 2015
Loíza is a suburb of San Juan located about 16 miles east of the city center, and it can be reached by car in about 40 minutes. While not a traditional tourist destination in Puerto Rico, many visit the town because of its rich cultural and historical importance as the home of Puerto Rico’s Afro-descendant community. Loíza and the nearby Piñones beachfront area offer visitors several cultural and natural points of interest, such as the San Patricio Church or the Maria de la Cruz Cave. However, Loíza also suffers from high rates of crime associated with a high rate of poverty; almost half of the population lives below the poverty line, a trend throughout Puerto Rico. Much of the crime is centered around the town’s at-risk youth who have few employment or education opportunities and are drawn into violent relationships with gangs and drug traffickers. The city is home to the “cementerio de los jóvenes,” a local cemetery where more than half of its burial sites are for those who were killed under the age of 28. Local citizens have developed crime watch groups and youth programs aimed at reducing the number of young persons involved in violent activities. Despite these efforts, crime is still very high in the residential areas of the town. While beachfront areas are generally safe for visitors, it is not advised to travel to Loíza at night, and visitors are also advised not to travel into the residential neighborhoods in the daytime without local community partners.

Weather

Puerto Rico is classified as tropical climate with moderate temperatures and high levels of precipitation; however, due to the topography of the island, these conditions can vary in different parts of the island. Easterly trade winds cross the island (blowing from the east to the west) carrying cool air, but the mountain range that spans the island prevents these breezes from reaching the island’s southern coastal plain. Consequently, the southern and western parts of the island are usually hotter and dryer than the north and east. The entire island, however, does experience extremely high humidity levels, especially in the summer months. Winter and spring tend to be more moderate in temperature and precipitation; whereas, April marks the beginning
of the rainy season that spans summer and fall, lasting until November. Also, Puerto Rico experiences the Atlantic hurricane season, similar to Florida and the rest of the Caribbean; however, hurricanes rarely make landfall on the island. Visitors are advised to monitor weather conditions using local weather sources or by following the U.S. National Weather Service site for alerts and notices, available here.

Additionally, Puerto Rico has been suffering from harsh drought conditions for most of 2015. A prolonged cycle of dry air, caused by the effects of the East Pacific’s El Niño cycle, has drastically reduced water reservoirs across the island. While the entire island is facing drought conditions, the interior of the eastern half of the island is facing severe drought levels. Because of this, the Puerto Rican government has imposed harsh water rationing across the island, with particularly strict controls set in place in the San Juan metropolitan area which uses most of the island’s water. This restricts the period which residents have access to public water supplies, which limits access to drinking water and showers. These conditions are expected to continue throughout the summer of 2015. Visitors are advised to monitor water restrictions from the San Juan Water District, found here, or the Puerto Rican Sewer and Aqueduct Authority, found here, and plan travel accordingly.

Lastly, Puerto Rico is located on the boundary between the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates and experiences several earthquakes daily, mostly on the western half of the island. Fortunately, the majority of these earthquakes and tremors go unnoticed due to their small size, and those that can be felt rarely cause damage. Despite these facts, the island is in a dangerous location and at risk for deadly earthquakes and associated tsunamis. As earthquakes cannot be predicted, visitors are encouraged to review earthquake emergency response recommendations. Information on earthquake preparedness can be found by visiting the CDC Earthquake Preparedness website, found here.

**Health**

*Dengue Fever*

Dengue Fever is a viral illness spread through mosquito bites. The illness has been spreading throughout Latin America and the Caribbean over the past few years, and Puerto Rico experienced particularly high levels of outbreak in 2014. While reports of Dengue in 2015 are below 2014 and

*Map 12: Dengue Fever Reports, Puerto Rico, 2015*

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)
historical averages, it is expected that these numbers will likely increase during the summer months. Continued drought conditions may reduce the amount of mosquitos throughout the island; however, it is also common practice during droughts to conserve water in buckets and barrels, which may attract greater numbers of mosquitos to residential areas. This is of most concern in the San Juan metropolitan area, which is already experiencing the highest numbers of Dengue reports. Another area of concern for travelers is the El Yunque National Forest, where moist conditions attract a large number of mosquitos. Follow the Puerto Rican Health Department’s Dengue Fever website for more information on local developments, available here.

Though most infected people do not get sick or have only mild symptoms, Dengue can be a severe and sometimes fatal illness. Symptoms can take up to two weeks to develop. Mild Dengue symptoms include fever, headache, eye pain, muscle and joint pain, nausea, vomiting, or rash. Even if mild symptoms cease, this may be the beginning of severe Dengue. Symptoms of severe Dengue that volunteers should look for are intense stomach pain, repeated vomiting, abnormal bleeding from the nose or gums, vomiting blood or blood in the stool, drowsiness or irritability, clammy skin, or difficulty breathing. If volunteers develop any of these symptoms, they should be taken to an emergency room immediately. Follow the CDC’s Dengue Fever website for updates and warnings: CDC Travel Notices

There is no medicine or vaccine to prevent Dengue; the only measure of protection is preventing mosquito bites. Mosquito bites can be prevented by the following methods:

- Use an insect repellent with an approved active ingredient (DEET, Picaridin, OLE or PMD, IR3535).
- Treat clothing and gear with Permethrin.
- Cover exposed skin with long sleeves and pants.
- Stay in a screened or air-conditioned room. In rooms exposed to the outdoors, use a mosquito net.
- Empty containers of standing water and keep trash containers closed.

**Chikungunya**

The CDC maintains a Level 1 Watch for Chikungunya for all of Puerto Rico. The illness was first discovered in Puerto Rico in May 2014 and more than 30,000 cases have been reported, although only around 4,500 have been laboratory confirmed. Twenty-four infected individuals have died; however, medical officials are unable to determine whether Chikungunya was the cause of death. The San Juan metropolitan area is of the largest concern to travelers where the highest reports of the illness have occurred; this is likely due to the north portion of the island experiencing moister air conditions than in the south. While San Juan experiences the most
reports of the illness, visitors should take note that Chikungunya spread rapidly throughout the island and remains present across Puerto Rico. Similarly to Dengue Fever, recent reports of Chikungunya in Puerto Rico have been low but are expected to begin to increase with the summer months.

Symptoms usually begin 3-7 days after being infected and include headache, muscle pain, joint swelling, or rash. Chikungunya does not often result in death, but the symptoms can be severe and debilitating, especially for those with diabetes or high blood pressure. While most people begin to feel better in about a week, it is recommended those experiencing symptoms seek medical attention, as many of the symptoms may also be signs of Dengue Fever. Taking steps to avoid mosquito bites, as outlined above, can help prevent Chikungunya. More information can be found on the Puerto Rican Health Department’s Chikungunya website, available here.

**Pollution**

While pollution is not generally a common concern for visitors to Puerto Rico, certain environmental conditions exist that may pose a significant concern for travelers. Firstly, those travelling throughout San Juan are advised to avoid contact with local bodies of water, including San Juan Bay, due to high levels of toxic pollutants. If contact with these bodies of water is necessary, rubber boots and latex gloves are recommended to minimize skin-to-water contact. It should be noted, however, that local tourist beaches are clean and considered safe.

Also, Puerto Rico suffers from cycles of heavy air pollution that are of concern to visitors. High levels of irritants in the air may cause breathing difficulties for older travelers and those who suffer from respiratory illnesses, such as asthma or allergies. Ambient particulate matter (PM) that are of concern year-round include volcanic ash and fungus spores. From June through October, however, Puerto Rico experiences a large influx of mineral dust in the air due to particles from Saharan dust storms transported across the Atlantic Ocean by wind currents. The continuous input of this ambient particulate matter (PM) drastically affects Puerto Rican air quality and impacts local health. Consequently, visitors are advised to monitor local air quality.
conditions and, if necessary, use breathing masks when outdoors; those with severe respiratory illnesses should remain indoors in these conditions. Additionally, visitors are advised to avoid public housing projects where dangerous levels of fungus spores are common and may lead to breathing difficulties.

**Hospitals**

Puerto Rico has some of the best hospitals in the Caribbean and as a territory of the United States, its hospitals must adhere to federal regulations for service and facility quality. Most of the island’s hospitals are in San Juan; however, quality healthcare facilities can be found throughout Puerto Rico, including Culebra Island and Vieques Island. If extensive medical care is needed, San Juan is easily reached by emergency transport. In the case of a medical emergency, visitors should dial “911” to access emergency services.

**Security Recommendations**

Increases in drug activity and violent crime during the nighttime period of 10:00 P.M. to 4:00 A.M. make areas further from tourist hubs particularly dangerous. To mitigate these risks, Armada recommends limiting travel by foot to daytime hours and limiting vehicle travel to only known areas if driving at night. Additionally, Armada advises that Amizade volunteers and personnel only travel to public housing project areas during the daytime and only if accompanied by a trusted community partner.

In the event of a deteriorating security situation, Armada recommends traveling to a nearby safe site to seek support. Depending on the nature of the incident, the closest police station may be the preferred location; however, during demonstrations or gang conflicts, police stations may be targets. In the event of a large-scale security concern, Amizade volunteers and personnel should relocate to a central tourist hub, such as a major hotel, where security will be much greater. Once relocated, remain in shelter and avoid unnecessary travel outside of the hotel until the situation is resolved; if necessary, contact the Puerto Rico Police Department for further instructions.

Armada advises all travelers to practice the following security awareness techniques:

- Be cognizant of your surroundings
- Avoid predictable patterns
- Do not dress extravagantly or wear expensive jewelry
- Travel in groups
- Do not give money to homeless individuals.
- Use only trusted transportation nodes (arranged by western hotel, for example)
- Do not hail street cabs
- Ensure you have proper vaccinations and have registered for travel insurance.
- Ensure you have necessary medical insurance documents.
- If traveling with a smartphone, download the “Basta Ya PR” crime-reporting app.
Media & Emergency Contact Information

Local Media Sources

Metro PR
WAPA TV
Telemundo
El Nuevo Dia

Emergency Contact Information

Police, Fire, Ambulance - “911”

U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)- San Juan Division- “1-787-754-6000”

U.S. Coast Guard- “1-787-729-6800”

U.S. National Forest Service- El Yunque- “1-787-888-1880”