



SECURITY OVERVIEW

San José – Costa Rica

Unidad de Análisis Político y Seguridad Corporativa - UAPSC

September 26, 2024.

Security Overview

San José, Costa Rica

1. Situational Analysis

In the last year, Costa Rica has experienced a 40% increase in the homicide rate, prompting an urgent government response. President Rodrigo Chaves announced a new National Security Plan that includes tougher penalties for adolescents and expanded use of preventive detention, making it easier to arrest suspects with limited evidence. This plan reflects a response to the perception of insecurity that has altered the country's image as one of the safest in the region ([El País](#), 2024). At the municipal level, the Municipality of San José has established strategic objectives to improve citizen security and reduce crime rates. This includes strengthening the citizen security service and implementing projects aimed at creating a safer and more sustainable urban environment. The local administration focuses on promoting cultural and recreational activities that foster social cohesion and reduce vulnerability in specific communities ([Municipalidad de San José](#), 2024).

In 2024, the perception of security in San José, Costa Rica, remains worrying, according to the recent CIEP-UCR survey conducted in September. This survey reveals that 32% of the population considers insecurity as the country's main problem, followed by corruption. Confidence in the government to address this problem has decreased, with 30.6% of respondents expressing 'no confidence' in the government's abilities to solve insecurity, while 70% have 'little' or 'no confidence' in its management. The survey also shows that 65.8% of respondents perceive that the security situation has worsened in the last year, although this percentage is slightly lower than the 69% recorded in 2023. Only 17% believe it has improved, and 15% believe it has remained the same. The perception of insecurity is more acute among women, with 70% feeling that the situation has worsened, compared to 61% of men ([Centro de Investigación y Estudios Políticos \(CIEP\)](#), 2024)

In this document, the Unidad de Análisis Político y Seguridad Corporativa (UAPSC) will carry out an Security Overview for the city of San José, Costa Rica, analysing the dynamics that impact security, the factors that generate risk and crime behaviour based on statistics, with the main objective of providing information on the city's security situation in order to establish prospective scenarios and recommendations that are useful for risk management, treatment and control.

2. Crime Analysis

In order to visualize the percentage changes and dynamics by crime in the city of San José, a crime analysis will be carried out below, showing the figures and trends in the variation of five high-impact crimes for two periods: the years 2022-2023 and the January-August period of 2023 vs. 2024. Subsequently, each phenomenon will be analyzed in depth, as well as the risk scenarios present in the city, associating recent events of insecurity and the areas in which they materialized.

CRIME STATISTICS IN SAN JOSÉ	Year 2022	Year 2023	Variation % 2022 vs 2023	Jan-august 2023	Jan-august 2024	Variation % jan-august 2023 vs 2024
HOMICIDES	51	83	63%	56	63	13%
THEFT FROM PERSONS	2256	2713	20%	1701	1765	4%
RESIDENTIAL THEFT	596	486	-18%	329	283	-14%
MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT	1583	1623	3%	1133	1030	-9%
RETAIL THEFT	949	879	-7%	636	570	-10%
TOTAL	5435	5784	6%	3855	3711	-4%

Resource: Own elaboration with information from Poder Judicial de la República de Costa Rica.

Note. Figures subject to change based on updating processes of the source.

According to figures from the Poder Judicial de la República de Costa Rica, the period between 2022 and 2023 will see a general increase in the crimes studied, reaching an overall increase of 6%, from 5435 complaints in 2022 to 5784 in 2023. The crime with the highest percentage increase during this period was homicide, which showed an increase of 63% from 51 cases to 83. Similarly, for theft from persons, there was an increase in the number of reported cases, from 2256 in 2022 to 2713 in 2023, representing a 20% increase in the number of cases in the Costa Rican capital. On the other hand, in the period studied between January and August 2023, and January and August 2024, total reports of the five high-impact crimes analyzed showed a 4% decrease from 3855 to 3711 cases registered. Despite this trend, two of the crimes that most affect the public's perception of security, homicides and robbery, continue to increase significantly. Homicides increased from 56 to 63, an increase of 13%, and theft from persons increased from 1701 to 1765, an increase of 4%.

2.1 Theft from persons

Theft from persons is the most common crime in the city of San José, reaching 2713 reports in 2023, an increase of 20% compared to the immediately preceding year. So far in 2024 there have been 1765 cases of theft from persons, a 4% increase compared to the same period in 2023. This shows the great impact this crime is having on the security of the Costa Rican capital. In June, a man was injured after two criminals tried to rob him near the National Theatre in the city center. As a result, the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) initiated an investigation into the repeated violent cases occurring in this critical sector of San José ([CRHoy](#), 2024). According to the Fiscalía del Primer Circuito Judicial of San José, as of July 2024 in the Costa Rican capital there had been one assault against a tourist per day during the last six months, signifying a significant increase in this type of robbery. Jorge Meckbel, prosecutor of the Unidad de Trámite Rápido, stated that there are already 35 identified criminals whose main target is foreign tourists visiting the country ([Diario Extra](#), 2024).

2.2 Theft in different modalities

So far this year, 283 cases of residential theft have been reported in the city of San José, representing a reduction of 14% compared to the same period of the previous year. According to OIJ reports, in the province of San José, residential theft occurs most frequently on Mondays and Fridays in the early hours of the morning between 12 and 12 a.m., and the most common methods used are the so-called ‘tacha’, which consists of removing items from the home by forcing entry and leaving as quickly as possible before the owners can reach their residence ([Monumental](#), 2024).

Carjacking has shown a more fluctuating behavior throughout the periods studied, as the comparison between 2022 and 2023 shows a 3% increase in this crime, from 1583 to 1623 reports, while between January-August 2023 and January-August 2024 there is a 9% decrease, from 1133 cases to 1030. According to data revealed by the OIJ in August 2024, the district of El Carmen, in the center of the capital, is the most affected by this crime. Specifically, the Escalante and La California neighborhoods are the most affected by the theft of motorized vehicles such as cars and motorbikes. This is due to the high number of people who come to this part of the city because of the many shops and restaurants that can be found in the area. Taking advantage of this, criminals often use master keys or other tools to open the vehicle and steal the items in less than 30 seconds. Cases of motorbike theft usually involve food deliverers who enter high-crime areas to place their orders, and the criminals threaten them with white or firearms to get them to hand over all their belongings ([Amelia Rueda](#), 2024).

2.3 Land piracy

The theft of merchandise or land piracy is a problem that affects companies at a closer level, as criminals through this crime affect the productivity and logistics of thousands of products and processes carried by businessmen in the country. In the territory of the city of San José this problem is not so evident or present, however, in neighboring provinces close to the Costa Rican capital this is very relevant and a problem that the authorities have been trying to solve. According to the OIJ in 2023 there were 1.4 billion colones in artifacts stolen from cargo containers, averaging 10.4 reports per month, and between January and August 2024 there are 80 reports in the country. According to this report by the authorities, the Costa Rican

provinces most affected by this are Alajuela, Puntarenas and Limón, the first two being the neighbors of the province of San José ([CRHoy](#), 2024).

2.4 Homicides

The crime of homicide has become a complex problem in San José as the arrival of organised crime in the country has increased both the number of cases and the violence in which they occur. In January 2024, an attempt was made on the life of Nicaraguan opposition leader Joao Maldonado in the city of San Pedro, in the metropolitan area of San José, when two men intercepted the opposition leader near the Universidad Latina and shot at him and his wife, who were travelling in their car. The shots hit his thorax and head, seriously injuring him. According to information from the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ), one of those involved may be a Nicaraguan journalist named Daniel Aguirre, with whom he had contact in order to obtain a visa to migrate to the USA ([La Nación](#), 2024). This type of assassination by motorbike has intensified in the city of San José, with a 426% increase in the last three years, according to the OIJ. On the eighth of September there was a shooting at the Cahuita Town bar in the Luján neighbourhood in which two delinquents arrived on a motorbike, leaving multiple victims ([La Nación](#), 2024).

2.5 Extortion, threats and kidnapping

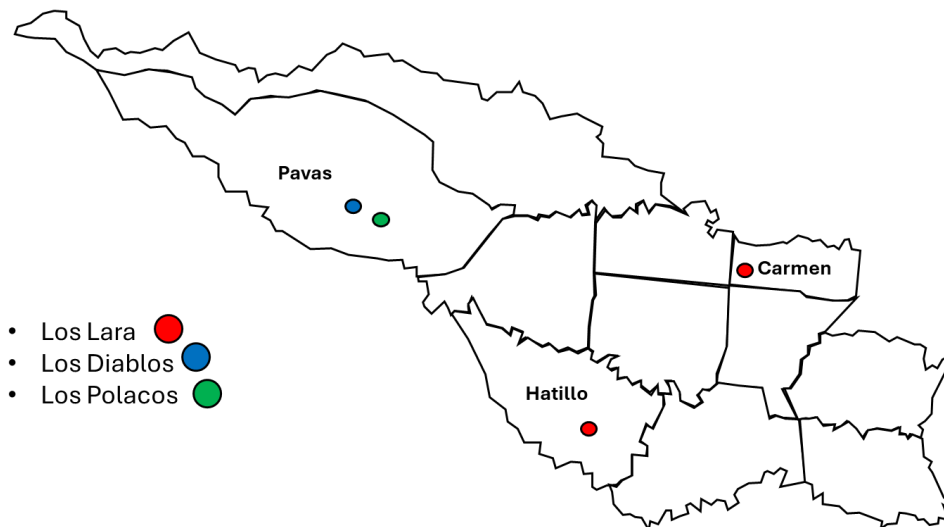
So far in 2024, a total of eight ‘virtual kidnappings’ have been registered in Costa Rica, four of which were reported in the San José metropolitan area. This extortive modality consists of contacting the victim by digital means, or by phone call, and then informing them that a loved one is being kidnapped and that a quick ransom must be paid so that nothing happens to them. All of this is an elaborate hoax, as the supposed kidnap victim is actually safe, and knows nothing of what is happening. This is why it is called ‘virtual kidnapping’, as it is an extortive method based on deception to terrorize the victim into paying what is demanded more quickly ([Prensa Latina](#), 2024). One form of extortion that has been occurring more constantly in San José is when criminals look for advertisements for businesses in order to find telephone numbers and the names of the people in charge of the business, and then contact them to threaten them. The criminals ask for money in exchange for not affecting their business or the physical integrity of anyone involved, so they demand that the payment be made quickly in order to avoid resorting to these instances ([Telediario](#), 2024).

In April, the San José police arrested three suspects suspected of kidnapping a man and torturing him in a house in the Million Court area. The incident allegedly took place at the beginning of February when the three men allegedly took the victim into the house and after two days of torture released him without serious injuries. The authorities located the victim to get a description of the criminals, and in April, in the middle of a raid in which they found illegal gambling machines and pressed marijuana, they found evidence that the kidnapping had occurred in that place. The authorities concluded that it was likely that this event was related to micro-trafficking in this sector of San José ([Telemundo](#), 2024).

3 Risk Generating Factors

3.1 Micro-trafficking and criminal groups

Distribution of the main criminal groups in San José



Resource: Organismo Judicial (OIJ), 2024.

Drug trafficking has become a driver of crime and insecurity in Costa Rica and its capital, due to the increase in drug trafficking routes from South America to the United States, Mexico, Canada and Europe. Criminal groups arriving from Mexico, Colombia or Venezuela have some presence in the country's ports; however, in San José the presence of criminal groups still remains primarily locals who take advantage of illegal rents to profit. In the metropolitan area of San José, one of the most prevalent criminal gangs is called Los Lara, which has more than 15 years of crime in the Costa Rican capital, having as its main base of operations sectors in the south of the city, from which they organize all drug trafficking and micro-trafficking operations in San José and the country. In 2018 their main leaders were captured by the OIJ, however, in 2022 they were released again due to procedural failures on the part of the prosecutor following the trial against these individuals ([AM Prensa](#), 2022). In the Las Pavas district of San José there have been recent cases of violence that were not seen before in the country, such as continuous cases of hired killings, extortion or “settling of scores”, in most cases related to criminal gangs and drug trafficking, which has led the authorities to take special care in this sector to prevent these crimes. Intelligence conducted by the OIJ in Las Pavas detected that two of the main criminal groups present in the district are Los Polacos and Los Diablos, who are fighting for territories where they exploit illicit rents throughout the city of San José. At the beginning of August 2024, a man was shot in the Lomas del Río neighborhood, district of Las Pavas, leaving

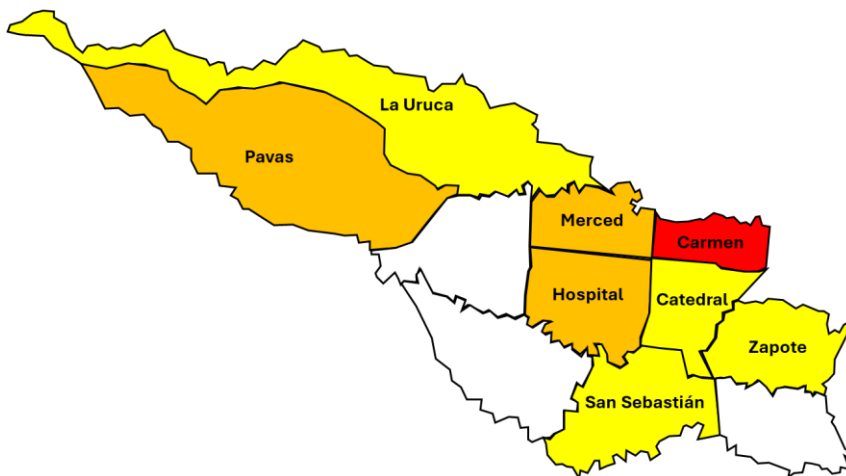
him dead in the street, but with all his personal belongings, suggesting a settling of scores by one of the gangs present in the territory ([La Nación](#), 2024).

3.2 Social Unrest

Social protest in San José, as well as in the rest of the country, has been a tool for the population to express their dissatisfaction and discontent with certain situations. This is partly why Costa Rican democracy has been categorized as one of the best in Central and Latin America. Although protests generally do not result in large-scale riots or vandalism, it is an unpredictable factor that can change suddenly. In recent times there have been massive protests by social sectors such as unions, students, educators and political sectors, demanding that the country's education budget be respected. This is because the current government of Rodrigo Chaves intends to reduce it in order to increase the defense budget in response to the growing criminality in the country. University associations and students led this great movement, as they demanded that the resources for education not be reduced in 2025, as this would generate great problems for an important part of the student population ([La República](#), 2024).

4. Risk Level

The objective of the risk level analysis is to identify the areas where, according to institutional statistics, there is a greater possibility that scenarios of violence and high impact crimes will occur. In the case of this Security Overview-San José, the characterization will be based on security and crime statistics from the Organismo Judicial (OIJ) and the Observatorio de Violencia de Costa Rica. The most problematic areas of the city will then be identified through two indicators: homicide and robbery.



Resource: Organismo Judicial (OIJ) and Observatorio de Violencia de Costa Rica, 2024.

Medium Risk Level: Catedral, Zapote, San Sebastián, La Uruca

Districts such as **Catedral, Zapote, San Sebastián, and La Uruca** have been classified as medium risk. Although they present security problems, these are less severe compared to other districts. Crime here tends to be more sporadic, with a focus on petty crime. However, the perception of insecurity remains a significant problem for residents, who report concerns about their personal safety and the safety of their neighborhoods.

Medium-High Risk Level: Hospital, Merced, Pavas

The **Hospital, Merced, and Pavas** districts are in the medium-high risk category. In these places, although violence is not as extreme as in the high-risk districts, a growing perception of insecurity is reported. Hospital and Merced are areas with high population density and commercial activity, which increases vulnerability to petty crime and assaults. Pavas has also shown an increase in violence and criminal activity associated with criminal groups.

High Risk Level: Carmen

The **Carmen** district has been classified as high risk due to its high incidence of violent crime, including homicides and drug trafficking. According to studies, Carmen has been identified as one of the most dangerous sectors for years, mainly because it is an area with heavy foot traffic and a high level of commercial activity. This makes it an easy target for organized crime.

5. Foresight Design

The security situation in San José, Costa Rica, is characterized by an increase in crime and the presence of organized groups that have generated a climate of insecurity. The most affected districts include Carmen, Catedral, Hospital, Merced, and Hatillo, where high rates of crime such as robberies, assaults, and drug trafficking are reported. Organized crime has taken control of certain areas, creating an environment similar to a “war zone” in some neighborhoods, especially in the southern arc of the city, where the presence of criminal groups is notable. This has led to a loss of confidence in security institutions and a general sense of vulnerability among citizens.

In the short term, the insecurity situation is likely to remain critical if effective measures are not implemented by the government and law enforcement. Lack of resources and corruption within police institutions may hamper efforts to combat crime. However, community initiatives such as the recovery of public spaces and collaboration between neighbors and authorities can contribute to improving security in specific areas. The implementation of strategies such as the “Sembremos Seguridad” program seeks to encourage citizen participation in policing and crime prevention, which could have a positive impact in the short term. In the medium term, if the authorities manage to establish a more

comprehensive and coordinated approach to address insecurity, there could be a gradual improvement in the situation. This would include the strengthening of public policies focused on crime prevention, as well as investments in infrastructure and basic services that foster a safer environment. The recovery of public spaces and the promotion of cultural activities could help restore a sense of community and reduce violence. However, success will depend on the state's ability to regain its authority and presence in the neighborhoods most affected by organized crime. In summary, although San José faces significant challenges in terms of security, there are opportunities to improve the situation through community efforts and effective public policies. Collaboration between citizens and authorities will be key to reversing current trends and building a safer environment in the future.

6. Recommendations

- Always maintain a high degree of situational awareness, which allows you to identify risks or threats derived from situations external to the place or areas where you travel.
- Taking into account the description of the Risk Level provided in this document, identify the neighborhoods and districts with a high risk level. This in order to foresee safety and self-care plans.
- In case of travel in a private vehicle, perform a route analysis and have alternate routes that allow you to resolve any new developments on the route.
- Do not transit or travel late at night.
- For the movement of expatriates or foreigners within San José, evaluate the likelihood of having systems to monitor their movements remotely from a Command Center.
- If you are in crowded places such as restaurants, shopping malls or bars, always take care of your personal belongings and avoid conversations with people who suddenly ask for favors or want to approach you.
- Avoid having detailed or sensitive information about your family members, as well as the organization you work for, on your cell phone.
- Be careful with the information you publish through your social networks, taking into account that the less privacy you have, the greater the exposure to the risk of extortion or kidnapping.
- If you are a victim of telephone extortion, do not hang up, try to take notes, do not give your name or your identity number and, if possible, record the call.
- If you are a victim of threats in any of its modalities, contact the authorities immediately and do not give in to the requests of the criminals.
- If possible, train yourself in defensive and evasive driving to increase your ability to save your life or that of your family in the event of an assault on public roads.
- If you are in a highly vulnerable situation and are likely to be a victim of robbery, mugging or carjacking, do not put up any resistance.

References

Altamirano, Y. (29 de Septiembre de 2024). Asesinatos cometidos por sicarios en moto aumentan en forma exponencial. Obtenido de La Nación : <https://www.nacion.com/sucesos/judiciales/asesinatos-cometidos-por-sicarios-en-moto-aumentan/HEHSZTP5EJGOZJNF662G7DXCQA/story/>

Arrieta, E. (23 de Agosto de 2023). Universidades lideran protesta nacional a favor de la educación y la agenda social. Obtenido de La República : <https://www.larepublica.net/noticia/video-universidades-lideran-protesta-nacional-a-favor-de-la-educacion-y-la-agenda-social>

Ballestero, R. (25 de Junio de 2024). Hieren con arma blanca a hombre por intento de asalto en el centro de San José . Obtenido de CR Hoy: <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/hieren-con-arma-blanca-a-hombre-por-intento-de-asalto-en-el-centro-de-san-jose/>

Ballestero, R. (4 de Septiembre de 2024). Buscan reducir incidentes por robos de contenedores en el país. Obtenido de CR Hoy: <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/buscan-reducir-incidentes-por-robos-de-contenedores-en-el-pais/>

Diario Extra . (30 de Julio de 2024). Reportan 1 asalto diario a turistas en San José. Obtenido de Diario Extra : <https://www.diarioextra.com/noticia/reportan-1-asalto-diario-a-turistas-en-san-jose>

El País . (28 de Enero de 2024). Costa Rica endurece sus políticas de seguridad ante un repunte en la tasa de homicidios. Obtenido de El País : <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-01-28/costa-rica-endurece-sus-politicas-de-seguridad-ante-un-repunte-en-la-tasa-de-homicidios.html>

López, Y. (19 de Abril de 2024). Arrestan a 3 sospechosos de secuestrar y torturas a una persona en vivienda de San José. Obtenido de TeleMundo : <https://www.telemundoareadelabahia.com/noticias/local/san-jose-secuestro-tortura-arrestos/2386264/>

Meléndez, A. (4 de Enero de 2024). Robo de viviendas en San José es más frecuente lunes y viernes. Obtenido de Monumental: <https://www.monumental.co.cr/2024/01/04/robo-de-viviendas-en-san-jose-es-mas-frecuente-lunes-y-viernes/>

Meza, A. (10 de Mayo de 2022). ¿Quiénes son Los Lara? Conozca la banda narco detenida por el OIJ en Sagrada Familia. Obtenido de AM prensa : <https://amprensa.com/2022/05/quienes-son-los-lara-conozca-la-banda-narco-detenido-por-el-oij-en-sagrada-familia/>

Municipalidad de San José. (2020). Objetivos Estratégicos 2020-2024. Obtenido de Municipalidad de San José : https://www.msj.go.cr/cant/Paginas/alcaldia_objetivos_estrategicos.aspx

Prensa Latina . (9 de Agosto de 2024). Costa Rica reporta ocho casos de secuestros virtuales extorsivos. Obtenido de Prensa Latina : <https://www.prensa-latina.cu/2024/08/09/costa-rica-reporta-ocho-casos-de-secuestros-virtuales-extorsivos/>

Siles, A. (9 de Agosto de 2024). Barrio Escalante y La California son los puntos de mayor incidencia de robos de vehículos en San José, según OIJ. Obtenido de AR: <https://ameliarueda.com/noticia/barrio-escalante-la-california-mayor-incidencia-robos-vehiculos-san-jose-noticias-costa-rica>

Solano, H. (27 de Septiembre de 2024). Atentado contra Joao Maldonado: OIJ pide ayuda para identificar a seis sospechosos. Obtenido de La Nación : <https://www.nacion.com/sucesos/crimenes/atentado-contrajoao-maldonado-oij-pide-ayuda/HYHTUR6KGJG25DDCRTCNGM4MG4/story/>

Solano, H. (2 de Agosto de 2024). De múltiples balazos matan a sujeto de 40 años en Pavas. Obtenido de La Nación : <https://www.nacion.com/sucesos/crimenes/de-multiples-balazos-matan-a-sujeto-de-40-anos-en/63PLUN4GKZCUVLLMPTEN753GMA/story/>

Unidad de Opinión Pública Participación Electoral . (8 de Mayo de 2024). INFORME DE RESULTADOS DE LA ENCUESTA DE OPINIÓN PÚBLICA. Obtenido de CIEP: <https://ciep.ucr.ac.cr/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/INFORME-DE-RESULTADOS-DE-LA-ENCUESTA-CIEP-UCR-Mayo-2024-V2.html>

Zúñiga, I. (20 de Abril de 2024). Esta es la nueva modalidad de extorsión utilizada por los delincuentes. Obtenido de Telediario: <https://www.telediario.cr/en-alerta/nueva-modalidad-de-extorsion-utilizada-por-los-delincuentes>