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U.S. Department of State

Average Rating ★★★★★

6/5/2024 |  OSAC Analysis

★ 4.50 Average rating

Our Two Cents: Petty Crime Basics and How to Minimize the Risk

Date Published: June 5, 2024

Summary

Petty crime—including pickpocketing, bag snatching, and street crime—is often one of the most common types of crime in a country. However, it may also be one of the most preventable incidents someone may face while traveling or living abroad. This report will outline a pickpocket’s team, their tactics, and provide tips on ways travelers, expatriates, and locals alike can help reduce their likelihood of becoming victims of petty crime.


How to Define Petty Crime

While definitions may vary, for the purposes of this report and for advice to your travelers, local staff, and expatriates, petty crime consists of non-violent theft of belongings (such as a wallet, bag, purse, passport, etc.) outside of one’s residence or accommodation.

Where Does Petty Crime Occur?

Petty crime can occur almost anywhere, from everyday places—like a transit station; airport; market, mall, or shop; on the street; at tourist attractions/sites—to one-off gatherings such as an event, sporting match, political/social rally, etc.

The Pickpocket’s Team & Tactics

Pickpockets and others who engage in petty crime vary in levels of sophistication. For example, pickpockets may operate in teams rather than solo; therefore, look for the [following](#)  (this can apply to trains, transit stations, ATMs, or other locations in public):

The Spotter: A spotter may seek out a target ranging from someone with luggage, people looking confused or uncertain, those engaged in conversation, or individuals who may come across as tourists.

The Distractor: This individual is in charge of diverting the target’s attention away from their belongings or their immediate surroundings. The Distractor’s behavior could be over-enthusiastic or animated, appear to be unstable, or come across as aggressive; anything out of the ordinary from your immediate environment may signal a Distractor.

The Petty Thief: This individual(s) carries out the theft while the target is distracted or unaware.

The Enforcer/Aggressor: This participant may prevent you from retrieving your belongings/items after they’ve been stolen. They may act aggressive or claim that you are the one causing trouble in trying to reclaim your things.

Separately, when traveling on public transportation or through transport stations, be mindful of individuals with large, empty bags. Pickpockets can use these bags to obfuscate their hands moving into your pockets/bag to take items.

****Always remember: valuables can be replaced, you cannot be. You are always more important than your items.****

Minimizing One’s Risk from Petty Crime: Tips and Tricks

While these tips may not wholly prevent one from becoming a victim of petty crime, they may help reduce the likelihood or subsequent impact from a petty theft incident or attempt. Consider the following for travelers, expatriates, and locals:

When out in public, limit distractions: reduce mobile phone use to only that which is necessary (i.e. establish a sense of a plan of direction prior to leaving your accommodation or residence); limit headphone use while out on the street or on public transportation; if reaching for a phone/camera or preparing to take photos, ensure that the contents of your bag and/or pockets are secure.

Minimize the amount of hard currency you travel with. If traveling in a location that relies predominantly on cash, limit the amount of cash on you to the minimum you'll need for a given time period.

In addition, consider a debit/bank/ATM card specific for travel that contains a balance less than that of your home country's debit/bank/ATM card. Countries also increasingly accept mobile wallet payments in lieu of credit/debit cards and cash.

If traveling to an unfamiliar location, consider wearing a [money belt](#) containing local currency, a passport/ID, and any other important documentation. If this is not an option, a zippered, secured compartment on the inside of a bag may be a suitable alternative.

Refrain from patting your pants or bag pocket holding your wallet or other valuables while in a crowded location to "check" to make sure you still have them. This may [alert](#) petty criminals to the location on your person/in your bag in which you're carrying them. Instead, before arriving at the crowded location, ensure you know exactly where your belongings are. Alternatively, swing your arms while walking and continuously make subtle contact with your front pockets or bag to ensure they are as you secured them.

When carrying an expensive item or an item with potentially expensive contents (i.e. a camera, phone, laptop, tablet, etc.), wear the item or bag on the front of your person, with the zippers as close to your upper body as possible—this may help prevent pickpockets from unzipping a bag near your hips/knees while on a crowded train or in a market. Consider a luggage/bag lock as well.

Consider a [cross-body bag](#) instead of a one-strap bag or backpack as it can be easier to maintain control of it in front of you and can be more difficult to steal.

If you find yourself the victim of a petty crime incident, consider drawing attention to yourself if you feel comfortable doing so. Also seek out local law enforcement to report the incident.

Consider the buddy system if traveling in an unfamiliar location. This person can assist you as a spotter when purchasing a train/sporting ticket, taking cash from an ATM, or at other times when your back is turned or you are purposefully distracted. As always, only use a reputable ATM; consult with your bank to help identify reputable ATMs.

See OSAC's Report, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#).

Leave expensive valuables at home (could be your residence or home country) and always remain cognizant of your surroundings, whether in a familiar or unfamiliar location.

Create copies of important travel documents (i.e. passport, visa, etc.) and keep a copy in your accommodation—or conversely, carry the copies with you and maintain the originals in an alternate location.

Additional Information

For more information on this topic, please contact OSAC's regional teams.

[Don't let them pocket it](#)

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