

# Safety and Security FAQs



## Is Peace Corps service safe?

The Peace Corps is absolutely committed to providing trainees and Volunteers with the best training, guidance, support and information they need to remain healthy, safe and productive throughout their service. The Peace Corps' broad and systematic approach to keep Volunteers safe during their service is based upon several fundamental tenets of Volunteer safety and security, including: building relationships, sharing information, training, site development, incident reporting and response, and emergency communications and planning. Still, the Peace Corps cannot eliminate every risk that Volunteers face.

Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as financially well-off are some of the factors that can put Volunteers at risk. Many Volunteers experience varying degrees of unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur. Precise information about reported incident rates, by country and crime type, is available in the Peace Corps' [Annual Statistical Report of Crimes Against Volunteers](#).

All Volunteers are strongly encouraged to report safety concerns or incidents to Peace Corps staff immediately. Staff are trained and prepared to provide medical, emotional and administrative support as needed, and respect Volunteers' confidentiality to the highest extent possible. The Peace Corps also maintains a strong, collaborative relationship with U.S. Embassies and host government officials to address safety and security concerns as they arise.

Based on feedback from the Annual Volunteer Survey, the vast majority of Volunteers feel safe in the areas where they live and work.

## What does Peace Corps do to protect Volunteers' safety?

The Peace Corps staff in-country are responsible for **assessing and approving the communities where**

**Volunteers live and work** to ensure that placements are appropriate and secure housing and work sites are available. Site selection is based on established safety and security criteria that reflect consideration of site history; access to medical, banking, postal and other essential services; access to communication, transportation and local markets; availability of adequate housing and living arrangements; and the potential for maintaining the acceptance and consent of host country authorities and the population-at-large. During their service, Volunteers are visited periodically at their sites by Peace Corps program managers and medical staff to monitor Volunteers' site assignments. If Volunteers' safety or well-being is at risk or compromised, Peace Corps staff will work to resolve the situation or move the Volunteer to another location.

The Peace Corps works in some of the least developed countries in some of the remotest parts of the world. These locations can be susceptible to natural disasters, transportation accidents, civil unrest, armed conflict and terrorism, and political unrest. **Peace Corps' security personnel conducts regular detailed assessments of hazards, vulnerabilities and potential impacts on Volunteers' well-being and operational continuity.** These assessments can result in adjustments to placement decisions, policies, training and emergency plans. Each Volunteer site is carefully selected to fulfill health, safety and programmatic criteria, and changing circumstances are closely monitored by both in-country and headquarters staff.

From the moment an applicant is invited to serve in a particular country, specific **information on what can be expected is provided from a variety of sources**, including a country-specific Welcome Book that is provided to invitees with detailed information about health, safety and crimes.

Once Volunteers arrive in-country, Peace Corps staff provides **thorough training and continuous detailed guidance** to keep Volunteers informed of security issues. For the welfare of Volunteers, Peace Corps policy also requires that Volunteers report their whereabouts when

they travel away from their sites or change residences, and that they obtain Peace Corps authorization if they intend to leave their country of assignment for any reason.

## What is the role of Peace Corps staff in protecting Volunteers' safety?

Every staff member at the Peace Corps is committed to providing Volunteers with the support they need to successfully complete their service. At each Peace Corps post, **a country director is responsible for the safety and security of Volunteers and for implementing the safety and security program.** A safety and security coordinator assists the country director in carrying out this responsibility. Program Managers work to ensure individual Volunteers integrate successfully into carefully selected sites. Each post also has at least one medical officer who is available 24/7 for emergencies and to coordinate medical care for Volunteers.

The Peace Corps' overall safety and security program is overseen by the **Office of Safety and Security** at headquarters in Washington, D.C. This office monitors security issues, advises country programs, develops training programs, provides crisis management support, coordinates with other U.S. government counterparts, and disseminates best practices.

The Peace Corps' Volunteer health program is administered by the **Office of Health Services.** The Office of Medical Services and the Counseling and Outreach Unit assist the medical officers at each post to provide the highest standards of care.

## Does Peace Corps train Volunteers on safety and security?

The Peace Corps takes an integrated approach to Volunteer training. Before assignment to the communities where they will live and work, Trainees participate in 8-12 weeks of **intensive pre-service training** in their country of service. Further in-service training occurs throughout Volunteers' service.

Activities often merge language, cross-cultural, health and safety instruction. During the pre-service phase, the Peace Corps typically places Trainees with local families to aid in cultural integration and language acquisition.

Trainees develop an awareness of their new environment, build their capacity to cope with the challenges they may face, and practice skills that will help them adopt a safe and appropriate lifestyle. Trainees are also instructed on Peace Corps policies and procedures and their associated responsibilities.

Training objectives include: understanding risks associated with serving overseas; coping with unwanted attention; promoting country-specific strategies and best practices to manage risks; recognizing local cultural norms; accessing services available to Volunteers who are victims of crime; safely utilizing public transportation; agreeing to follow Peace Corps policies and procedures; identifying emergency plans; reporting security concerns or crime incidents to Peace Corps staff; and fulfilling their role in Peace Corps' Volunteer safety and support program. Trainees are not sworn in as Volunteers unless they demonstrate proficiency in established objectives.

The Peace Corps provides this integrated safety training throughout Volunteers' tour of service to help them better understand their surroundings and develop personal safety strategies.

The Peace Corps takes an integrated approach to Volunteer training. Through language, cross-cultural, and health and safety instruction, training is designed to raise the Trainee's awareness of their new environment, build their capacity to effectively cope with the many challenges they will face, and provide the tools the Volunteers need to adopt a safe and appropriate lifestyle. Volunteers are also instructed in Peace Corps policies and procedures and the Volunteer's responsibility to abide by them.

## What can Volunteers do to protect their safety?

Being a Volunteer requires **changes in lifestyle preferences and habits in deference to host country cultural expectations** to minimize security risks. Choices in dress, living arrangements, means of travel, entertainment and companionship may have a direct impact on how Volunteers are viewed, and thus treated, by their communities. Navigating the differences in gender relations may be one of the most sensitive and difficult lessons to learn, but one that can have a direct impact on Volunteers' security and the level of protection provided by the local community. Mature behavior and the exercise of sound judgment will enhance personal security.

Like the Peace Corps mission, safety and security are predicated on the **development of interpersonal relationships** between Volunteers and host-country community members. Volunteers' daily safety is best assured when they are well integrated into the local community, valued and protected as extended family members, and viewed as contributors to development. To this end, the Peace Corps strives to build and maintain the support of host country governments, authorities, and local communities for Peace Corps' presence in country and the work of Volunteers. Volunteers are responsible for **learning the local language and integrating into their host community**, and are expected to build and maintain respectful relationships with sponsoring agency representatives, colleagues, and other community members. These relationships help Volunteers establish a presence in their new homes, pave the way for many work and social opportunities, and become the basis for their support systems in country.

### **What should Volunteers do when a crime or incident occurs?**

Volunteers are strongly **encouraged to report safety concerns and incidents to Peace Corps staff**. Staff has been trained and is prepared to provide medical, emotional, legal, logistical, administrative and advocacy support to Volunteers who are victims of crime. Staff discusses all available options with affected Volunteers, and strict privacy controls are in place to protect Volunteers' confidentiality.

### **How does Peace Corps support Volunteers who report a crime or incident?**

**Each Peace Corps post has a comprehensive program** to promote its paramount objective: the safety and security of Volunteers. This Volunteer safety and support program is codified in policy and defines the activities, procedures, training, and responsibilities of staff and Volunteers.

Depending on the circumstances, Peace Corps staff can, for example, care for injuries and emotional impacts, evaluate the ongoing security of a Volunteer's neighborhood, repair locks and household security devices, coordinate with local authorities to investigate a crime, ensure community members are fulfilling their

responsibilities to support Volunteers, connect Volunteers with a victim advocate or attorney, change a work site, medically evacuate a Volunteer, coach Volunteers on risk reduction strategies, along with a range of other support services.

If at any time a Volunteer feels unsafe in her or his site, Peace Corps will remove the Volunteer. Most Volunteers choose to continue their service after an incident or crime, though some may choose to end their service. The Peace Corps works with Volunteers to make decisions that are best for them.

The **key components of each post's Volunteer safety and security support program** are: risk analysis and reduction; training; transparent information dissemination; site selection and monitoring; partnerships in host communities; standards for safe housing; emergency communication, planning, and testing; and procedures for responding to security concerns.

The **Office of Victim Advocacy** is another resource to currently serving and returned Volunteers who have been victims of sexual assault, stalking and other crimes. A Victim Advocate ensures Volunteers have access to the full range of support services provided by the Peace Corps.

The Peace Corps also maintains a **collaborative relationship with the U.S. Embassy and host government officials** to respond to Volunteer safety and security concerns. Volunteers are urged to be aware of their environment, adopt a safe lifestyle, and exercise thoughtful judgment to reduce their exposure to risks.

### **What is Peace Corps doing to address incidents of sexual assault?**

The Peace Corps has established new policies and practices that reflect its absolute commitment to reducing risks for Volunteers and responding effectively and compassionately to those who are victims of crime, including sexual assault. There has been nothing short of a broad culture shift at Peace Corps, and the agency's new approach is Volunteer-centered every step of the way.

On September 1, 2013, the Peace Corps formally launched a new **Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program** that was developed in consultation with post staff and Volunteers worldwide as well as nationally recognized experts. The program is two-pronged,

designed to reduce risks through bystander intervention and other trainings, and ensure Peace Corps responds effectively and compassionately when incidents occur. The Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program reflects the agency's commitment to evidence-based best practices in the delivery of services to safeguard Volunteer health, safety and security, and to helping Volunteers who have been sexually assaulted heal and recover with dignity. Learn more [here](#).

## What does Peace Corps do to plan for emergencies?

Volunteers typically live and work in communities at some distance from the Peace Corps office in the capital city. Volunteers are expected to stay in touch with the Peace Corps office on a periodic basis to ensure they can be contacted in case of an emergency. They are required to report their whereabouts when they travel away from their sites, and are required to receive Peace Corps authorization if they intend to leave their country of assignment for any reason.

The Peace Corps addresses larger security concerns through **country-specific Emergency Action Plans** that are in place at each post. These plans are developed to address events such as natural disasters or civil unrest, and set forth the strategies developed by each Peace Corps office to prepare for, respond to, communicate, and recover from such crises. Each plan defines roles and responsibilities for staff and Volunteers, explains policies and procedures, and lists contact information for emergency resources. These plans are tested and revised annually, and Volunteers receive training to understand their roles and responsibilities.

The Peace Corps works closely with the U.S. Embassy and other international organizations to share information, monitor threats, develop strategies, and coordinate communication in a crisis. The agency also works in partnership with the State Department and host country officials to ensure emergency plans are comprehensive, current, realistic, rehearsed, and reflect best practices for the region. Volunteers' safety and well-being are paramount in rapidly identifying, evaluating, and reacting to potential problems. If a decision is made to evacuate Volunteers from a country, the Peace Corps will commit every resource at hand to safely move each and every Volunteer out of harm's way.

For more information on safety and security, visit Peace Corps' website at [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).