

Atlanta gets a bad rap for crime rate, criminology study shows

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A new study of crime statistics indicates that Atlanta's homicide rate may have a lot more to do with poverty than with problems at the police department.

Federal Bureau of Investigation ranked the city of Atlanta fifth-highest in the nation for its 2003 rate of 34 homicides per 100,000 people living here. But when taking socioeconomic factors into account, that ranking dropped to 40th, according to the study -- by a Georgia State University criminology professor and two experts at other universities.

That means violent crime in Atlanta -- a city image problem that business leaders want to fix -- is driven largely by factors like poverty and unemployment, the researchers said.

Adding police officers and improving department operations may help, but that's not the only solution. Improving things like social services and schools also would make a difference, said Robert Friedmann, the GSU professor who worked on the study.

"There isn't a very clear causal relation between what officers are doing and what the nature of the crime statistics are, because there are factors, like the economy, that are much bigger than anything else," Friedmann said.

"For the first time, this moves Atlanta away from the dubious honor of being among the top five or the top 10 crime cities in the nation," he said.

The study, released in May, is part of the Improving Crime Data project, an effort to adjust crime statistics so they more accurately reflect what's going on. Friedmann worked with Richard Rosenfeld, chairman of the criminology department at the University of Missouri - St. Louis, and Alfred Blumstein, an urban systems professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

The three professors used a formula to study the country's 67 largest cities, taking into account several factors that the FBI statistics ignore: among them poverty, unemployment, median family income and residential stability. People of lesser financial means are more likely to commit crimes to get what they need, the researchers said.

The study also took into account cities' overall populations and number of black residents, who are disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of crimes, Rosenfeld said.

The professors found their formula significantly altered the FBI's listing.

San Francisco's FBI ranking of 42nd leapt all the way to number one, according to the study.

Atlanta, meanwhile, fell from fifth to 40th.

As of 2000 census data used by the researchers, Atlanta's poverty rate was seventh-highest in the nation, with 21 percent of family incomes below the federal poverty line, Rosenfeld said. The city's male unemployment rate was third-highest in the nation in 2000, and out of about 417,000 residents, about 61 percent were black, he said.

Rankings for cities including Detroit, Cleveland and Newark, N.J., also fell significantly.

That indicates socioeconomic factors are driving up crime rates in those cities. On the other hand, San Francisco actually should have much less crime than it's experiencing, considering the income levels there.

"Atlanta has a lower homicide rate than one would expect, given its level of social and economic disadvantage," Rosenfeld said.

Some cities, meanwhile, didn't see their rankings shift much. New Orleans, ranked the number-one city for homicides by the FBI, fell to fourth, while Washington held steady as the city with the second-highest homicide rate.

That means, even taking socioeconomic factors into account, those cities have other problems that are driving crime up, Friedmann said.

So what does this all mean for Atlanta's police department?

Just a few months ago, a report by police consulting firm Linder & Associates Inc. pointed to low morale, inadequate equipment, underpaid police, poor record-keeping and a depressing police headquarters environment as some of the problems the force needs to fix.

The Atlanta Police Foundation, a nonprofit group that includes several board members from the business community, has raised about \$1.2 million for the police since the foundation was created in 2003. City Hall has authorized pay raises and some new weapons purchases for the police.

Alan Dreher, assistant chief of police, said that while the new study is interesting, he doesn't think it will change the department's efforts to improve.

"I'm concerned about, not necessarily how we rank [compared] to other cities, but how we reduce crime ourselves," he said.

Dreher pointed out that Atlanta leaders have long complained about other aspects of the FBI's statistics. For example, they don't take into account that many people visit the city daily but don't live here.

Police Foundation Executive Director Elizabeth Kelly said many of Atlanta's violent crime problems are related to drug trafficking, a specific issue that the police can tackle, regardless of the factors contributing to the problem.

What this does mean, though, is that Atlanta's image as a homicide-ridden city is unfair, GSU's Friedmann said.

We're doing pretty well, considering our situation, he said. And where there is violent crime, incident reports show that it's mostly in parts of the city other than the central business district, he said.

Referring to the FBI's scale, Friedmann said: "It lacks context and it lacks understanding, but more than anything, it lacks reasonable comparisons of apples to apples."

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