

REPORT: Detroit Leads U.S. In Danger

Atlanta shows up in 22nd place on the list, but the controversial analysis of FBI statistics has been attacked as 'irresponsible.'

DAVID N. GOODMAN - Associated Press Writer - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution - Nov. 19, 2007

DETROIT * In another blow to the Motor City's tarnished image, Detroit pushed past St. Louis to become the nation's most dangerous city, according to a private research group's controversial analysis, released Sunday, of annual FBI crime statistics.

The study drew harsh criticism even before it came out. The American Society of Criminology launched a pre-emptive strike Friday, issuing a statement attacking it as "an irresponsible misuse" of crime data.

The 14th annual "City Crime Rankings: Crime in Metropolitan America" was published by CQ Press, a unit of Congressional Quarterly Inc. It is based on the FBI's Sept. 24 crime statistics report.

The report looked at 378 cities with at least 75,000 people based on per-capita rates for homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and auto theft. Each crime category was considered separately and weighted based on its seriousness, CQ Press said.

Last year's crime leader, St. Louis, fell to No. 2. Another Michigan city, Flint, ranked third, followed by Oakland Calif.; Camden, N.J.; Birmingham, Ala.; North Charleston, S.C.; Memphis, Tenn.; Richmond, Calif.; and Cleveland.

The study ranked Mission Viejo, Calif., as the safest U.S. city, followed by Clarkstown, N.Y.; Brick Township, N.J.; Amherst, N.Y.; and Sugar Land, Texas.

CQ Press spokesman Ben Krasney said details of the weighting system were proprietary. It was compiled by Kathleen O'Leary Morgan and Scott Morgan, whose Morgan Quitno Press published it until its acquisition by CQ Press.

The study assigns a crime score to each city, with zero representing the national average. Detroit got a score of 407, while St. Louis followed at 406. The score for Mission Viejo, in affluent Orange County, was minus 82.

Detroit was pegged the nation's murder capital in the 1980s and has lost nearly 1 million people since 1950, according to the Census Bureau. Downtown sports stadiums and corporate headquarters - along with the redevelopment of the riverfront of this city of 919,000 - have slowed but not reversed the decline. Officials have said crime reports don't help.

Detroit police officials released a statement Sunday night disputing the report, saying it fails to put crime information into proper context.

"Every year this organization sends out a press release with big, bold lettering that labels a certain city as Most Dangerous, USA," Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings said in the release.

"It really makes you wonder if the organization is truly concerned with evaluating crime or increasing their profit," said Bully-Cummings, who noted the complete report is available only by purchase. "With crime experts across the country routinely denouncing the findings, I believe the answer is clear."

The mayor of 30th-ranked Rochester, N.Y. - an ex-police chief himself - said the study's authors should consider the harm that the report causes.

"What I take exception to is the use of these statistics and the damage they inflict on a number of these cities," said Mayor Robert Duffy, chairman of the Criminal and Social Justice Committee for the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The rankings "do groundless harm to many communities," said Michael Tonry, president of the American Society of Criminology.

"They also work against a key goal of our society, which is a better understanding of crime-related issues by both scientists and the public," Tonry said.

Critics also complain that numbers don't tell the whole story because of differences among cities.

"You're not comparing apples and oranges; you're comparing watermelons and grapes," said Rob Casey, who heads the FBI section that puts out the Uniform Crime Report that provides the data for the Qitno report.

The FBI posted a statement on its Web site criticizing such use of its statistics.

"These rough rankings provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region," the FBI said. "Consequently, they lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting communities and their residents."

Doug Goldenberg-Hart, acquisitions editor at CQ Press, said that the rankings are imperfect, but that the numbers are straightforward. Cities at the top of the list would not be there unless they ranked poorly in all six crime categories, he said.

"The idea that people oppose it, it's kind of blaming the messenger," Goldenberg-Hart said. "It's not coming to terms with the idea that crime is a persistent problem in our society."

The report "helps concerned Americans learn how their communities fare in the fight against crime," CQ Press said in a statement. "The first step in making our cities and states safer is to understand the true magnitude of their crime problems. This will only be achieved through straightforward data that all of us can use and understand."

The study excluded Chicago, Minneapolis, and other Illinois and Minnesota cities because of incomplete data.

Associated Press writer Jim Salter in St. Louis contributed to this report.

On the Net:

CQ Press: <http://www.cqpress.com>

American Society of Criminology: <http://www.asc41.com>

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