

# Georgia climbs crime rankings: A national survey ranks Georgia the 12th most dangerous state. But are the numbers trustworthy?

By Mark Woolsey – *The Sunday Paper* – February 13, 2007

An elderly Habersham County woman is robbed and brutally beaten by two men demanding that she pay them for roof work. Nov. 1, 2007: A woman's body is found in her burned-out home on Fayetteville Road in Jonesboro; a 42-year-old man is later arrested for what is determined to be a homicide. June 1, 2007: A man is arrested for the murder of a woman, her daughter, and her 2- and 4-year-old grandchildren, all found in their burning home in Hoschton.

Just a few bits of the mosaic that made up major crime in Georgia, circa 2007. Now a research outfit crunching the FBI crime stats that resulted from those reports paints a disturbing picture. An annual analysis report titled "Crime State Rankings 2009" released March 23 by CQ Press (formerly Morgan Quitno) ranks Georgia the 12th most dangerous state in the nation based on incidents in 2007, the latest year for which full numbers are available. The ranking moves Georgia up seven slots from the year before, when our state was a less worrisome No. 19. In three categories - murder, robbery and motor vehicle theft - Georgia ranked in the top 10.

But academics and police experts complain that CQ Press' raw numbers aren't controlled for socio-economic factors.

"I would be polite," says Robert Friedmann, criminal justice professor at Georgia State, "and just comment that the methodology of that data is severely flawed. I think what they are doing is using zip codes."

Friedmann is principal author of a homicide study of 63 medium and large U.S. cities - not states - released last week that shows Atlanta's unadjusted crime ranking at 8th highest. Once adjusted for the city's socioeconomic weaknesses, however, Atlanta comes out at 43rd among the cities Friedmann examined. The socioeconomic metric takes into account household income, poverty and percentage of single-parent families. Once one considers all that, says Freidmann, Atlanta - despite its problems - actually performs better than expected.

To be fair, even the authors of the CQ Press rankings say their newly released numbers don't tell the full story.

"The numbers in the book are a starting point, a reference point for further research," says Ben Krasney, spokesman for Scott and Kathleen O'Leary Morgan, the researchers who put together the CQ Press rankings.

Krasney says the stats come from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) which is compiled from police reports submitted by local jurisdictions. The raw numbers in six categories - murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and motor vehicle theft - are indexed to create a summary score, then calculated according to frequency, rate and percent change of reported crime.

Seems straightforward enough. But as Krasney carefully puts it: "I have heard in a number of calls from various places that there are potential differences in the way crimes are reported in different areas. My understanding is the UCR is supposed to have rules governing how things are reported. If some areas are not following the rules and changing things slightly, we admit there could be some flaws in the data."

## **AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE**

Frank V. Rotondo, executive director of the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police, says numbers alone paint an incomplete picture.

"Everybody will interpret the data in the way they want to," he says. "If they're not happy, they might say cops are writing too many traffic tickets and not arresting enough people. People who support law enforcement might say differently."

Rotondo says any examination of raw data on crimes in Georgia has to take into account the state's growth. According to the Census Bureau, Georgia has grown at twice the national average since 2000. It's the ninth-fastest growing state in the nation. And, Rotondo says, cops here make a lot of arrests in the face of the rising crime that comes with a booming population.

The Pew Center on the States reported in March that one in 13 people in Georgia are under some sort of justice system supervision, including parole and probation, compared to one in 31 nationally, putting Georgia at the top of the list for residents who've run afoul of the law. (Even the Pew Center acknowledges that its numbers vary according to the way states count their own supervised populations - which isn't a matter of uniform methodology.)

"With growth comes problems," says Rotondo, "and crime is one of those problems."

Elaine Weeks, director of criminal justice studies at the University of Georgia, agrees, and adds two factors: a more mobile population and a lot of single-parent households.

Another variable isn't an official factor: the ability of law enforcement to collect crime data. Weeks doesn't think local jurisdictions outright fudge crime statistics very often, "partly because of the publicizing of these incidents." But, she says, if a local department is understaffed, the numbers might not be gathered and reported efficiently.

That only exacerbates the well-known under-reporting of such crime categories as rape. It also piles more unreported crimes onto those that already go unreported by some among Georgia's immigrant population, who fear that police will arrest them for being in the country illegally.

Weeks cautions that any analysis has to take into account longer-term trends, not just a single-year snapshot. She says her look at violent crime rates, for example, shows a drop in Georgia between 2001-2005, followed by an uptick in 2006 and 2007.

And yes, she asserts, the economy may get some blame, but the 2007 figures were collected before the job market went into freefall.

CQ Press' Krasney views his firm's results - Georgia's 12th-place ranking - as a starting point for further research, community debate and action aimed at addressing crime and public safety issues. Rotondo agrees, and adds that it's a call for law enforcement to be adequately trained and staffed despite hard economic times.

"You have to invest in the system you put into place," he says, including not only police forces but corrections facilities and programs as well as indigent defense funding. Rotondo criticizes cuts in diversion programs, where people spend time in jail and then receive treatment for substance abuse problems. Without adequate correctional programs, he says, people continue cycling through the system.

"If you let people commit three, four, five burglaries, for example, before you put them in jail," he says, "the law is nullified." **SP**