

We're No. 1!

Martin Kuz / Feb 16, 2006

Nobody has ever mistaken Dog Bites for a sentient being, much less a prophet. Those slights aside, we feel pretty certain that the city's guardians won't launch a tourism campaign touting the 96 murders committed here last year, the highest total in a decade. "Blood in the Streets!" might work as a catchy slogan for Belfast, but San Francisco likes to pose as a more dignified metropolis.

Then again, maybe that's all it is: a pose. A new study by the Improving Crime Data Project shows that San Francisco had the highest homicide rate among the 67 largest U.S. cities in 2004, when our fair burg racked up 88 slayings. In effect, the study posits that with our generally boffo quality of life -- think fabulous ocean views and Gavin Newsom's hair -- we should have far fewer murders. Instead, we're the new Baltimore.

The project, coordinated by researchers at Georgia State University and funded by the National Institute of Justice, delves deeper into murder rates than the FBI's standard method of simply calculating the number of homicides per 100,000 residents. (Under that formula, San Francisco's murder rate ranked 30th nationwide in 2004, the most recent year examined in the study. New Orleans, with 265 murders, claimed the top spot.)

Researchers sought a "more meaningful comparison" of homicide levels in big cities by analyzing a range of demographic and social variables, including poverty, unemployment, and divorce rates; ethnic makeup; median household income; and population turnover. By calibrating those "crime-producing" influences, says Dr. Robert Friedmann, a criminal justice professor at Georgia State, "you get a better idea of what you would expect a city's homicide rate to be."

Indeed, among a few metro areas long regarded as chronically crime-infested, the study's findings may touch off a race to trademark the motto "Not as Deadly as You Thought!"

Detroit's 385 murders gave it the country's third-highest homicide rate two years ago, according to FBI figures. The Improving Crime Data report dropped Motown to 37th, taking into account its high unemployment and large minority underclass, factors that ostensibly should have pushed the number of murders even higher. Similarly, Atlanta plunged from seventh to 46th, while Cleveland tumbled a whopping 50 places, to 65th. (Los Angeles and Sacramento each fell five spots, to 29th and 36th, respectively.)

By contrast, a handful of cities might wish Friedmann and his cohorts would shut their data holes. San Jose jumped from 66th to 38th in the study's rankings, a reflection of 24 murders occurring in a city with a median income of roughly \$70,000, more than twice that of Detroit and an affluence that presumably should have stunted the homicide toll. Likewise, Santa Ana moved up 29 places, to 18th, and Charlotte rose to 16th, a leap of 24 notches. (Oakland ascended from ninth to seventh.)

And then there's San Francisco, with our inglorious surge to first.

"That's the price you pay for living well," quips criminologist Alfred Blumstein, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, who worked on the project with Friedmann and Richard Rosenfeld, a criminal justice professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Blumstein suggests that, given our relatively high median income of \$55,000, low unemployment rate, and stable residential base, the number of homicides ought to decline. "It's a problem you should be able to do something about."

A spike in slayings in the Western Addition, the Mission, and Bayview-Hunters Point over the last two years has fanned criticism of the police as unresponsive. Officers counter that a pervasive reluctance among

witnesses to talk about what they saw has enabled alleged killers to remain on the loose. Meanwhile, as discussions to hire 600 new cops begin to echo throughout City Hall, Friedmann cautions that, by itself, a thicker blue line won't stanch the bloodshed.

"You can't just treat community policing as a political buzzword," he says. "You need a comprehensive effort by the city, by public officials, by people in the community to create change."

Kevin Mullen, a retired deputy police chief and the author of three books on crime in San Francisco, puts it more succinctly: "Cops can't solve all the problems." That would seem true in the Bayview and Belfast alike.