



The United States Conference of Mayors

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The U.S. Conference of Mayors Challenges City Crime Rankings

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Conference of Mayors today sharply criticized the latest release of city-by-city crime rankings by CQ Press as “misleading and a disservice to the public.”

“These rankings represent a misuse of FBI data,” said Rochester, N.Y. Mayor Robert J. Duffy, a former police chief and Chair of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Criminal and Social Justice Committee. “The rankings have no real value -- they are misleading and completely out of context. You cannot grab raw data in a simplistic fashion and draw meaningful conclusions, yet that is exactly what this publication is doing. They do real harm to the reputations and economies of our cities. As we did last year, we are urging media outlets, which have long given these rankings broad coverage, to reconsider their approach and avoid biasing their audiences against our cities.”

Mayor Duffy was referring to an annual ranking of U.S. cities by “highest crime rate” and “lowest crime rate,” compiled initially by Morgan Quitno Press, but now by CQ Press, a division of Congressional Quarterly, Inc., which is owned by SAGE Publications, an independent international publisher.

The rankings received strong criticism last year, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), American Society of Criminology, and Criminal Justice Journalists, among others, joined the Conference of Mayors in pointing to a variety of flaws. Among the flaws:

- Cities differ in ways that have nothing to do with their crime risk, but that can greatly affect their ranking. Pure geographic happenstance — the location of the boundary line separating “city” and “suburb” — is one. Also, some central cities are geographically small and do not include as many middle-class areas as do larger central cities. If they did, the added population would lower their crime rate.
- Cities differ in the degree to which their citizens report crimes. How much of the difference between any two cities’ crime ranks is real and how much reflects measurement error is not known.
- Knowing the city in which a person lives reveals next-to-nothing about his or her crime risk, especially when compared with genuine risk factors such as age and lifestyle. The young and people who typically spend their evenings outside of the home are at far greater risk than the elderly and those considered ‘homebodies.’

In an apparent response to the criticisms, SAGE Publications said recently it will no longer call its lists “Most Dangerous Cities” and “Safest Cities.” The publisher said it will probably use the terms “Highest Crime Rate” and “Lowest Crime Rate.” It also noted it has included a new introduction to the book, which addresses some of the criticisms.

“These are welcome changes, which indicate to us that SAGE has clearly taken a second look at their presentation of these rankings,” Duffy said. “But that isn’t enough. Renaming the rankings doesn’t make up for the fact that the rankings are misleading in the first place. Adding an introduction that effectively concedes some of the criticisms doesn’t redeem the book that follows.”

The annual rankings are derived from the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) statistics. The UCR program, which dates from the 1930s, gathers crime statistics from thousands of U.S. communities for the purpose of helping individual communities track their own crime trends and detect national patterns.

Last year, the FBI posted a disclaimer about the rankings on its website where it posts the UCR figures: http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/about/variables_affecting_crime.html. The disclaimer reads:

Caution Against Ranking—Each year when Crime in the United States is published, some entities use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rough rankings provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region. Consequently, they lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting communities and their residents. Valid assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the range of unique conditions affecting each local law enforcement jurisdiction. The data user is, therefore, cautioned against comparing statistical data of individual reporting units from cities, metropolitan areas, states, or colleges or universities solely on the basis of their population coverage or student enrollment.

Also, the Conference of Mayors last year passed a resolution in opposition to the rankings: http://usmayors.org/resolutions/75th_conference/csj_05.asp. The resolution states that the Conference was committed to working with the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice to, “educate reporters, elected officials, and citizens on what the data means and doesn’t mean.”

“We’re disappointed that SAGE would persist in publishing these rankings,” Mayor Duffy concluded. “They simply are not valid, and they lead to false comparisons that are damaging to our nation’s cities.”

The rankings were also sharply denounced in a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology earlier this month. Members of the panel included two academic criminologists, as well as a statistician with the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports program. The discussion can be viewed at <http://usmayors.org/chs/crimepanel08.asp>.

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