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**For More Information Please Contact:**

Todd Clear, President  
(212) 237-8470

[tclear@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:tclear@jjay.cuny.edu)

or

Richard Rosenfeld, President-Elect  
(314) 623-0854

[richard\\_rosenfeld@umsl.edu](mailto:richard_rosenfeld@umsl.edu)

**Panel Criticizes City Crime Rankings**

**ST. LOUIS**, Nov. 13, 2008 — A much-publicized annual ranking of American cities according to crime rates misleads the public and unfairly harms cities that can least afford the damage, several members of a panel of experts at the American Society of Criminology (ASC) meeting here said today.

The rankings, which are compiled each year in a book now published by CQ Press, a Washington, D.C.-based division of SAGE Publications, ignore genuine risk factors in crime while hyping a false one, said Dr. Richard Rosenfeld, one of the panelists. The real risk factors, he said, are a person's age, lifestyle, and specific neighborhood of residence — not the city in which he or she happens to live.

"What the rankings do is hurt cities — unfairly — that can least afford the damage," Dr. Rosenfeld said. He is professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and is a longstanding critic of the rankings. He is also president-elect of the American Society of Criminology.

The rankings imply that crime is evenly spread across a given city, said another panelist, James Noonan. He is a statistician with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) Program, which publishes the statistics on which the rankings are based. In fact, "It (crime) is not a homogenous mix across a whole city," he noted.

Moreover, many "arbitrary factors," such as where the boundaries between city and suburb are drawn, greatly affect the rankings, Noonan said. Cities with expansive boundaries, encompassing neighborhoods that in other cities are suburbs, tend to have lower crime rates.

Noonan noted that the FBI carries a disclaimer on the website where it publishes the UCR data entitled "Caution Against Ranking." The disclaimer states in part:

Each year when Crime in the United States is published, many entities — news media, tourism agencies, and other groups with an interest in crime in our nation — use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rankings, however, lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting cities and counties, along with their residents.

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The panel, which met at the annual meeting of the ASC here, was entitled “Comparing City and Regional Crime Rates In the Media and Beyond.” It was moderated by Ted Gest, president of the Criminal Justice Journalists, which seeks to improve the quality of criminal justice reporting. Other panelists included Eric P. Baumer, professor of criminology at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla.; Jeremy Kohler, a crime reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; and Jeff Rainford, former chief of staff to St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay.

Doug Goldenberg-Hart, an editor at CQ Press who attended the discussion as a listener rather than a panelist, defended the rankings in a question and answer session afterwards. He contended that the annual book, entitled *City Crime Rankings*, gives the public helpful information that it would not otherwise have and has prompted some cities to address crime more aggressively. He cited Oakland, Cal. as one example.

But several panelists noted that most of the data, with the exception of the rankings, is already available for free on the FBI website. And they said the notion that cities needed the book to make them aware of the need to fight crime was absurd. SAGE’s real motives for publishing the data, two of the panelists asserted, were mercenary.

Goldenberg-Hart said SAGE had made at least one concession to critics this year. Its press release announcing the book’s availability, expected later this month, will no longer refer to the rankings as listings of the “Most Dangerous” and “Safest” U.S. cities. Instead, the release will use more neutral language: “Highest Crime Rate Rankings” and “Lowest.”

The entire panel discussion can be viewed at <http://usmayors.org/chs/crimepanel08.asp>.

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