



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.” A book containing the rankings was scheduled to be released today.

“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.

“For many years,” Mayor Duffy continued, “the media treated these rankings as if they were credible and gave them broad and uncritical coverage. For the last couple of years, however, we have urged the media to reconsider their approach, and we have been pleased to see an improvement in coverage. Last year most journalistic outlets either ignored the rankings or noted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the American Society of Criminology all considered them statistically worthless, not to mention damaging to some cities.”

Mayor Duffy was referring to an annual ranking of U.S. cities by “highest crime rate” and “lowest crime rate,” compiled by CQ Press, which is owned by SAGE Publications, an independent international publisher. The rankings were initially compiled by Morgan Quitno Press.

The rankings have received strong criticism for years. The FBI, American Society of Criminology, and Criminal Justice Journalists, among others, have joined the Conference of Mayors in pointing to a variety of flaws. Among them:

- 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 no longer calls its lists “Most Dangerous Cities” and “Safest Cities.” The publisher uses the terms “Highest Crime Rate” and “Lowest Crime Rate.” It also has begun including 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.

Three years ago, 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:

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, are merely a quick choice made by the data user; they provide no insight into the many variables that mold the crime in a particular town, city, county, state, region, or other jurisdiction. Consequently, these rankings lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting cities and counties, along with their residents.

In 2007 the Conference of Mayors year passed a resolution in opposition to the rankings. It is available at http://usmayors.org/resolutions/75th_conference/csj_05.asp. The resolution states that the Conference is 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.”

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