Posted 11/23/10

IS THE UCR BEING MUGGED?
AND IF SO, BY WHOM?

A mayors' group blasts a publisher for ranking cities by their crime rates

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. "A premeditated statistical mugging of America's cities." That's how a press release from the influential U.S. Conference of Mayors described the yearly CQ Press ranking of America's largest cities by their crime rates.

It's not CQ's methodology to which the mayors object. CQ gets its numbers from the UCR. It includes all Part I crimes excluding larceny-theft and arson (murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and motor vehicle theft) for metropolitan statistical areas and non-MSA cities with populations of 75,000 or more. CQ computes each locale's difference from the national average for each type of crime, and then summarizes the results into a single score.

Well, that seems pretty straightforward. So what's the problem? The mayors have three big gripes. One is that cities face unique circumstances so it's unfair to rank 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. Cities that are geographically small and that therefore do not include as many middle-class areas as larger cities get penalized, arbitrarily.

Cities *do* vary. Some are big, others are small; some are prosperous, others aren't. And yes, many have low-crime suburbs. Los Angeles (243/400 on the list, with smaller being better) would probably look a lot better if its score included peaceful communities such as Simi Valley (16/400), where many cops choose to live. (Simi also happens to be the place where four LAPD officers accused of beating Rodney King were tried and acquitted, touching off major riots in, naturally, Los Angeles.)

Who's "penalized" depends on whose ox is being gored. Whatever the reason for the L.A./Simi Valley demarcation line, families looking for a safe place to live in northern Los Angeles County might find CQ's information very useful. Apparently so does Simi Valley police chief Mike Lewis, whose website message brags that his community "consistently ranks as one of the Safest Cities in America."

Another argument is that city rankings can't predict the risk of being victimized:

> 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, lifestyle, and the neighborhood within a given city where that person lives.

Leaving aside the obvious — that even residents of safe areas must travel outside their neighborhoods — it's true that the risk of becoming a victim depends on many factors. West Los Angeles, for example, has far less crime than South or East L.A. Still, the effects of crime are felt citywide, straining the municipal

budget and impacting everything from libraries to street maintenance. Last July former mayor Richard Riordan predicted that without substantial additional reductions in expenditures (or without substantially increasing the property tax rate) the city could go broke in two years. While no aggregate statistic such as city crime rank can accurately predict whether a specific individual will get mugged, CQ's number is nonetheless a useful barometer of a city's overall health.

A third objection leaves behind the validity of the rankings to argue that the numbers used to create them are hopelessly unreliable:

> Cities differ in the degree to which their citizens report crimes and in how crime is reported. How much of the difference between any two cities' crime ranks is real and how much reflects differences in measurement and reporting systems is not known.

Indeed, just during this past year anecdotal reports suggest that many police departments have undercounted crime and minimized its severity:

- **Baltimore**: Rapes are up twenty percent, to 112 from 94 for the same period last year. Why? Because the local paper blew the whistle on a police practice of ignoring sexual assaults. Police have also been accused of classifying shootings with multiple victims as a single crime. They also reportedly jiggled the value of stolen property to keep thefts from reaching the felony threshold.

- **Dallas**: Reporting guidelines that were overhauled in 2004, causing aggravated assaults to plunge, were justified by the police chief, who says he follows State, not FBI classification rules. Dallas also stopped reporting vehicle burglaries, supposedly to keep from counting phony reports. Meanwhile a newspaper investigation reveals that police are only reporting half the crimes called for by FBI rules.

- **Detroit**: In a strange twist, the police are claiming that recent threats to punish officers who "miscode" lesser crimes as burglaries are only intended to reduce over-reporting (who knew *that* was a problem?) It may or may not be related, but former Detroit police chief James Barren was fired in 2009 after his department and the medical examiner got caught classifying homicides as self-defense and suicide.

- **Memphis**: Police proudly report an 80 to 90-percent homicide clearance rate. But using FBI reporting standards it dips to 69.3 percent, only slightly better than the national average.

- **Miami**: A 2009 report by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement attributed chronic under-reporting by Miami police to "a self-imposed pressure that certain [officers] felt as a result of the implementation of Compstat." One example was a carjacking that police downgraded to an "information report."

- **Nashville**: Police are accused of clearing domestic violence crimes as unfounded to improve the department's statistics and "[make] it look like crime has diminished." Officers also accuse former chief Ronal Serpas (now at New Orleans) of using CompStat to "manipulate" statistics and make it appear that crime had declined.

- **New Orleans**: Police are reexamining 30 sexual assault reports from 2009 that may have been improperly downgraded to non-criminal incidents. 146 such write-downs were made in 2008, versus 97 recorded as criminal.

- **New York City**: Managers pressed by Compstat allegedly monkeyed with reports to keep theft losses under the FBI's $1,000 threshold. To hold down the aggravated assault rate they also reportedly encouraged victims of violence to minimize what took place. A whistleblower complaint recently led to internal charges against five officers including a Deputy Inspector for suppressing crime reports in order to make their precinct look good.

- **St. Louis**: Police admit that at least some of the steep drop-off in crime was due to a change in reporting practices. They have also begun to report more assaults.

Fiddling with numbers may reflect a concern to not stand out during an era of falling crime rates. Undercounts may have other causes. As we've mentioned before, victims who reside in high-crime areas may be too scared to report crime. In Milwaukee, declines in patrol staffing that caused 911 response time to average *three hours* have so discouraged some residents and business owners that they simply stopped calling.

What does the FBI have to say about using the UCR to rank cities? In a word, "don't":

> Since crime is a sociological phenomenon influenced by a variety of factors, the FBI discourages ranking the agencies and using the data as a measurement of law enforcement effectiveness.

A more elaborate statement to the same effect, "Caution Against Ranking," pops up whenever users access the UCR. Yes, crime imposes unequal burdens. It's probably unfair to use crime rankings to compare the performance of police departments. Keep in mind, though, that the UCR does more than pass on numbers. Its yearly reports, which are relied on for a wide range of purposes, aggregate and analyze crime statistics for the U.S. as a whole. That crime has dropped steadily for nearly two decades is accepted as gospel. Really, if we trust UCR data that much, why should its use to rank cities be any different? Because it embarrasses?

Of course, if we *don't* trust the data – and there may be good reason not to – then we ought to be doing something more than just picking on the messenger.