

## Recasting the city's crime rank - Dallas fares better in analysis that shows impact of social makeup

Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - Monday, October 1, 2007

**Author:** JENNIFER LaFLEUR and TANYA EISERER, Staff Writers

Recent FBI crime figures once again put Dallas among the worst large cities for violent crime.

But that doesn't tell the whole story.

An analysis by The Dallas Morning News of crime last year in U.S. cities with at least 65,000 people found that Dallas has only slightly more violent crime than cities measured in the same way. Dallas ranks 58th among 436 cities analyzed.

The News used statistical tools that correct for the effect of factors such as poverty, unemployment, low homeownership, family structure and racial composition. While those factors don't change the amount of crime in Dallas, they do put it in perspective.

"I don't think that [demographics] should ever be an excuse," Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert said. "There are cities that do a better job or a worse job. We need to make sure that we do a better job."

But to do a better job, politicians and city officials must look more closely at the causes of crime because research shows that crime is a symptom of a city's social composition. Communities with more disadvantaged residents tend to have higher rates of crime - particularly violent crime - in spite of local law enforcement efforts.

To see major crime reductions, cities also must improve the quality of life for their residents. Among Dallas' biggest challenges are lowering poverty, improving education and expanding affordable-housing opportunities.

The demographic factors also show that the power to combat crime is not just in the hands of the local police department.

"The key to reducing crime is reducing poverty," said Dallas Police Chief David Kunkle.

"The Police Department's challenge is to try to make those neighborhoods as safe as possible and to get the area's residents to trust the police," he said. "All of those people deserve safety."

Rates dropping

Still, Dallas appears to be moving in the right direction.

The violent crime rate in Dallas dropped from 1,254 violent crimes per 100,000 people in 2005 to 1,206 in 2006. The rate of all crimes counted by the FBI dropped in Dallas from last year, except forcible rape, which was up slightly.

Crime statistics can be interpreted in many ways, and the FBI discourages comparisons among cities because crime reporting practices vary widely among local policing agencies.

It has been widely reported that Dallas is No. 1 in all crime among cities with more than 1 million people. Dallas ranks second to Philadelphia in violent crime among those cities.

But measure Dallas against cities with at least half a million people, and it drops to ninth in violent crime.

Look at all 436 cities in The News' analysis and adjust for demographics, and you get the No. 58 ranking.

"I don't know that our ranking amounts to a hill of beans as compared to our direction of travel," said Timothy Bray, a criminologist and director of the Dallas-based J. McDonald Williams Institute, a public policy research organization. "If we're getting better, we're doing something right."

Dr. Bray also warned that citywide rates camouflage very different trends within a city.

"We all know that there are neighborhoods in Dallas that are safe, and we know that there are neighborhoods in Dallas that really need our help," he said. "So the most important thing we can do is ask why we are there. ... And what neighborhoods are driving it?"

And while neighborhoods and city demographics track strongly with violent crime rates, their relationship with more volatile property crimes is not as strong.

Property crime is a crime of opportunity, so it tends not to be in the same neighborhoods with high violent crime. It also tends not to be concentrated in the same place over time, said Richard Rosenfeld, professor of criminology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

A look at Irving

For the rest of the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the story is about the same.

Most cities have violent crime rates that are in line with similar communities around the country. But four area cities - Irving, Denton, Garland and Grand Prairie - had much lower violent crime rates than their socioeconomic statuses would suggest.

While many factors could account for the lower crime rates, recent research might explain at least some of Irving's performance.

High immigration correlates with lower crime rates. Irving has the greatest proportion of foreign-born people among cities with at least 65,000 residents outside the West and East coasts. About a third of the city's population was born elsewhere.

And that runs counter to the common assumption that associates immigrants with crime, said Robert Sampson, professor of sociology at Harvard University. "The data just don't bear this out in any way."

Dr. Sampson points to several reasons why immigration correlates with lower crime rates. Immigrants, he said, often are motivated to improve their lives. Many immigrant families have more traditional family structures. And in many cities, immigrants have improved the economies of their communities.

Irving Police Chief Larry Boyd said he didn't know what effect immigration has had on crime.

"I have not seen any data or research that supports that there are any higher or lower rates of criminality among immigrants," he said.

Despite demographics, there are things that a police department can do to lessen crime.

Chief Boyd credited his city's violent crime rate partially to the Police Department's zero-tolerance policy for drug trafficking, particularly open-air drug sales.

"We simply do not tolerate any kind of open-air drug sales," he said.

From top to bottom, Chief Boyd said, the department stays aware of crime trends and statistics and seeks to deal with problems as they emerge.

The department also has worked more closely with a lot of other city departments, such as code enforcement, to deal with chronic neighborhood problems so that the police "aren't the only ones trying to address issues," he said.

Police efforts

In Dallas and around the country, policing programs that target crime "hot spots" often reduce crime.

Shortly after Chief Kunkle took the helm in June 2004, he created a task force that rapidly deploys dozens of officers to crime hot spots.

Earlier this year, the department formed a center that can quickly collect and analyze crime tips and other information.

"We've done better than most cities over the last two years. I'd like to think it's the result of better strategies," he said. "But I don't know that any of those are the reasons for the drop in crime."

Dallas is on pace to add about 160 new officers this year, which senior police commanders believe will give them greater flexibility to fight crime. Over the next four years, Dallas needs to add 800 positions to reach the city's goal of having three officers per 1,000 residents.

While Chief Kunkle believes having more boots on the ground will help in the department's crime-fighting efforts, he said he also recognizes that "it will never be enough. We will need to get help on the back side."

That help includes tougher prosecution and incarceration of repeat offenders, as well as effective parole and probation systems and job programs for offenders re-entering the community.

"Police can do some things in response to crime increases," said Dr. Rosenfeld, the University of Missouri criminologist. "But by and large, a police chief has about as much opportunity to do something effective about crime as a local hospital has to do something about the local cancer problem."

There are things that communities can do to improve neighborhoods.

"If you start investing in early-childhood initiatives in impoverished, disadvantaged neighborhoods so that when those kids hit school, they're ready to learn, they're less likely to become disengaged later in life," said Dr. Bray of the Williams Institute. "But you can't expect that crime's going to turn around tomorrow."

Dr. Bray and other experts say that the jury is still out on what the long-term success of those programs, where they exist, will be.

"It's going to take some serious investment in our inner-city communities in our inner-city residents and in their quality of life."

Mr. Leppert agrees that Dallas needs to take a short- and long-term approach to solving the demographic problems that contribute to the city's high crime rate.

One of the short-term solutions is to add more officers to create greater capacity for the department to handle chronic neighborhood problems. But in the long term, he said, he's working on ways to improve Dallas' educational system and housing situation and to provide job opportunities.

Mr. Leppert said he's working with business leaders to come up with a summer job program and to develop a privately funded scholarship program for disadvantaged youths. There's also funding in the city's budget for an early reading program, he said.

"Clearly, there are a lot of issues that contribute to crime," he said. "But it's still crime, and we've got to address it."

jlafleur@dallasnews.com;

teiserer@dallasnews.com

**Caption:** CHART(S): / GRAPH(S): 1. (TOM SETZER/Staff Artist) Comparing Crime Rates. 2. (SERGIO PECANHA/Staff Artist) Adjusted Demographic Rankings.

**Edition:** FIRST

**Section:** NEWS

**Page:** 1A

**Record Number:** 1180837952

