

# Understanding Crime Statistics

When choosing a new place to live, people are often concerned about safety. They will often want to know if a certain address is in a "safe" neighborhood and a "good place to live," based upon the level of crime in the neighborhood.

**There are problems with using crime data alone to judge if a certain address is a good place to live.**

Please consider the following:

- Comparing raw numbers of crimes in two areas to decide which is safer is difficult. The same number of incidents can mean different things in different areas. Some neighborhoods, such as those near downtown, have a lot of people moving through them every day. Other neighborhoods have relatively few people in them during the day. Three daytime assaults in a quiet, outlying neighborhood might be a major crime problem; three daytime assaults near downtown might be typical or even low. This makes it difficult to compare areas just on the number of crimes.
- No one can predict solely on the basis of past data exactly where crime will occur in the future. This makes it difficult to choose a house or a block that will always be "safe."
- Not all crime is reported to the police as much as 50 percent of some types of crime may go unreported. Some people don't report crimes they consider "minor," and that is an individual decision. Historically, some groups of people have been more likely to report crime to the police than other groups.
- People are often most afraid of crimes committed by strangers. However, many crimes are committed by friends, acquaintances, and family members. Both stranger and non-stranger crimes are included in most of the data we provide to you.
- Most importantly, many things that may make you feel unsafe don't get included in crime statistics. Everyone is different. You may feel uncomfortable in places that are poorly lighted at night, or where there is a lot of noise, or where people hang out on street corners and ask for money. None of this shows up in our crime data.
- What feels "safe" is different for each person. It's important to trust your instincts. Instead of relying on numbers of crimes reported, we suggest you do the following to determine if your new home will feel safe for you. Experience your new location. Go there several times at different hours of the day. Talk with neighbors, local businesses, religious institutions, etc. to see how people feel about living on the block.

# Variables Affecting Crime

## Consider other characteristics of a jurisdiction

To assess criminality and law enforcement's response from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, one must consider many variables, some of which, while having significant impact on crime, are not readily measurable or applicable pervasively among all locales. Geographic and demographic factors specific to each jurisdiction must be considered and applied if one is going to make an accurate and complete assessment of crime in that jurisdiction. Several sources of information are available that may assist the responsible researcher in exploring the many variables that affect crime in a particular locale. The U.S. Census Bureau data, for example, can be used to better understand the makeup of a locale's population. The transience of the population, its racial and ethnic makeup, its composition by age and gender, educational levels, and prevalent family structures are all key factors in assessing and comprehending the crime issue.

Local chambers of commerce, government agencies, planning offices, or similar entities provide information regarding the economic and cultural makeup of cities and counties. Understanding a jurisdiction's industrial/economic base; its dependence upon neighboring jurisdictions; its transportation system; its economic dependence on nonresidents (such as tourists and convention attendees); its proximity to military installations, correctional facilities, etc., all contribute to accurately gauging and interpreting the crime known to and reported by law enforcement.

The strength (personnel and other resources) and the aggressiveness of a jurisdiction's law enforcement agency are also key factors in understanding the nature and extent of crime occurring in that area. Although information pertaining to the number of Law Enforcement personnel can be studied it cannot be used alone as an assessment of the emphasis that a community places on enforcing the law. For example, one city may report more crime than a comparable one, not because there is more crime, but rather because its law enforcement agency through proactive efforts identifies more offenses. Attitudes of the citizens toward crime and their crime reporting practices, especially concerning minor offenses, also have an impact on the volume of crimes known to police.

## Make valid assessments of crime

It is incumbent upon all data users to become as well educated as possible about how to understand and quantify the nature and extent of crime in the United States. Valid assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the various unique conditions affecting each local law enforcement jurisdiction.

Historically, the causes and origins of crime have been the subjects of investigation by many disciplines. Some factors that are known to affect the volume and type of crime occurring from place to place are:

- Population density and degree of urbanization.
- Variations in composition of the population, particularly youth concentration.
- Stability of the population with respect to residents' mobility, commuting patterns and transient factors.
- Modes of transportation and highway system.
- Economic conditions, including median income, poverty level, and job availability.
- Cultural factors and educational, recreational, and religious characteristics.
- Family conditions with respect to divorce and family cohesiveness.
- Climate.
- Effective strength of law enforcement agencies.
- Administrative and investigative emphases of law enforcement.
- Policies of other components of the criminal justice system (i.e., prosecutorial, judicial, correctional, and probational).
- Citizens' attitudes toward crime.
- Crime reporting practices of the citizenry.

Population size alone is not enough to compare crime statistics. *The data user is, therefore, cautioned against comparing statistical data of individual cities, counties, metropolitan areas, states, or colleges or universities solely on the basis on their population coverage or student enrollment.*

Until data users examine all the variables that affect crime in a town, city, county, state, region, or other jurisdiction, they can make no meaningful comparisons.

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