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MAYORS AGAIN CITE DAMAGE TO CITIES
BY MISUSE OF FBI CRIME DATA

Washington, D.C. – In what has become a frustrating annual exercise for The U.S. Conference of Mayors, the organization has again denounced the expected CQ Press publication of city-by-city crime rankings that misuse Federal Bureau of Investigation crime data at the expense of the reputations and economies of individual cities across the nation. The publication containing the rankings is being released today.

“Since 2007 the nation’s mayors have been compelled to challenge CQ Press’s annual publication of city crime rankings which misuse the FBI’s crime data,” said Houston Mayor Annise D. Parker, who chairs The U.S. Conference of Mayors Criminal and Social Justice Committee “It’s troubling that the data continues to be misused to rank U.S. cities by crime rate, in defiance of the FBI’s warnings against the practice, and that for another year we’re forced to issue a public challenge.”

Parker says she is encouraged that, over the years, the Nation’s news media have become more skeptical about the CQ Press rankings, either ignoring them altogether or noting that the FBI, the Conference of Mayors, and other respected national organizations consider them to be misleading and damaging.

The publication in question is an annual ranking of “highest crime rate” and “lowest crime rate” cities produced by SAGE Publications, an independent international publisher owned by CQ Press. The rankings were initially compiled by Morgan Quitno Press, whose editor, Scott Morgan, once acknowledged that he would be “stunned if there is a criminologist out there who will support this.”

Over the years that the rankings have been published, 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 which have nothing to do with their crime risk, but which 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 do not include as many middle-class areas as larger cities may be arbitrarily penalized.

- 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.
• Compared with genuine risk factors such as age, lifestyle, and the neighborhood within a given city in which a person lives, simply knowing the city of residence reveals next to nothing about that person’s crime risk.

FBI Says Rankings Lead to Simplistic/Incomplete Analyses which Can Adversely Affect Cities

The annual rankings are derived from statistics contained in the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). 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.

In 2007 the FBI began posting a disclaimer about the rankings on its Web site where it posts the UCR figures: http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/about/variables_affecting_crime.html. The disclaimer reads, 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, 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 the actual meaning of the UCR data.

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