

NEWS from SafeStreetsDC.com

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DC IS AGAIN 'MURDER CAPITAL', NEW STUDY SHOWS

- District had Highest Big-City Murder Rate in 2002
- DC Murder Rate Soared as Other Cities Saw Decline

(Washington, DC) Washington, DC is once again the nation's "Murder Capital," according to a new study released today.

The study, conducted by SafeStreetsDC.com (www.SafeStreetsDC.com), a public safety watchdog group, compared the annual number of murders per 100,000 residents in American cities with populations greater than 500,000. This was the same standard used to determine DC's previous rank as murder capital. In compiling the data, the group relied on homicide statistics from the FBI and police department homicide units from around the country.

According to the numbers, DC outranked all major cities, and is again the nation's "murder capital."

Immediately following DC on the list were Detroit (the winner in 2001), Baltimore, Memphis, Chicago and Philadelphia (in that order).

Other notable rankings included: Los Angeles (9), Dallas (10), Boston (18), San Francisco (24), and New York (25). Last on the list was Honolulu, ranked 32d with only 18 murders, in spite of its population of nearly 900,000.

DC, by comparison, with nearly 600,000 residents, had 262 murders last year.

DC's soaring homicide rate also defied national trends showing a slight drop in murders. In spite of the fact that the number of total murders in all 32 cities dropped 1.2% in 2002 as compared to 2001, DC saw a nearly 13% increase in its murder rate in 2002, giving it the 6th-highest increase among the cities surveyed.

"Nationally the murder rate hardly changed, yet in DC it soared last year," said John Aravosis, cofounder of SafeStreetsDC.com and co-author of the study along with Matt Forman. "DC officials clearly can't blame the city's increasing murder rate on the worsening economy or other national trends since most other cities facing the same pressures did not see the same increase in homicides."

The largest jump in the 2002 murder rate was in Columbus, which saw a nearly 60% increase last year, immediately followed by San Jose (+27%), Tucson (+21%), Jacksonville (+20%), and Denver (+18%).

On the other end of the spectrum, El Paso had the greatest decline in its murder rate last year (-30%). The percentage change in the murder rate of other notable cities in 2002 include: Los Angeles (+12%), Detroit (+2%), Baltimore (-1%), Chicago (-3%), Philadelphia (-7%), Boston (-8%), New York (-10%), and Dallas (-20%).

The study also cast doubt on another factor often used by DC officials to explain the city's increasing crime rate: the demands of Homeland Security.

"We were surprised to find that New York had a 10% drop in homicides last year, as DC officials often blame the District's increasing crime rate on the demands of post-September 11 security," Aravosis said. "Yet New York, which surely faces as great a threat as Washington, has managed to improve its murder rate."

The study also found that in 2001 DC was the murder capital "runner up."

This year, according to the DC Metropolitan Police Department, murder in the District is up over 21% from last year, and at the current pace, Washington could see 325 murders in 2003 as compared to last year's 262. (Source: Washington Post)

"We were the murder capital runner-up in 2001, we won the title in 2002, and 2003 is already being heralded as a record year for death in the District," said Aravosis. "All of this proves that this year's 21% jump in homicides is hardly a temporary fluke. It's been building for years."

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DC Regains Title of “Murder Capital”

A Study by SafeStreetsDC.com

April 24, 2003

DC is Again the Murder Capital

Washington, DC had the highest number of homicides per capita in 2002 of cities with populations of 500,000 or more, making the District again the nation’s “murder capital.” (This was the same standard used to determine DC’s “murder capital” status in the late 1980s.) In 2001, DC was the “murder capital runner-up,” following Detroit which held the title that year. In 2002, however, DC’s nearly 13% increase in homicides over the previous year exceeded Detroit’s more modest increase of less than 2%. As a result, Detroit and DC switched places in the rankings for 2002, with DC taking the lead.

The Importance of Calculating the Per Capita “Murder Rate”

A word about the “murder rate” and per-capita calculations. While Los Angeles had the most murders in 2002 of any large city, Washington, DC gets the rank of “murder capital” because DC had the highest number of murders per capita. In 2002, Los Angeles had 3,763,486 residents and 658 murders, giving it a per capita rate of **17.5 murders** per 100,000 residents. DC had a population of 571,822 and 262 murders, giving it a per capita rate of **45.8 murders** per 100,000 residents. DC’s murder rate is therefore two and a half times larger than LA’s.¹

Top Ten Murder Rates in 2002

The following chart shows the ranking for the top ten cities in murders per capita for 2002:

Top Ten Rankings for 2002
(cities over 500,000 population)

| 2002 HOMICIDES | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| | CITY | POPULATION | NUMBER OF HOMICIDES | HOMICIDES PER 100,000 RESIDENTS |
| 1 | Washington, DC | 571,822 | 262 | 45.8 |
| 2 | Detroit | 956,283 | 402 | 42.0 |
| 3 | Baltimore | 860,826 | 253 | 38.3 |
| 4 | Memphis | 655,898 | 162 | 24.7 |
| 5 | Chicago | 2,910,709 | 647 | 22.2 |
| 6 | Philadelphia | 1,518,302 | 288 | 19.0 |
| 7 | Columbus | 712,748 | 129 | 18.1 |
| 8 | Milwaukee | 601,229 | 108 | 18.0 |
| 9 | Los Angeles | 3,763,486 | 658 | 17.5 |
| 10 | Dallas | 1,215,553 | 192 | 15.8 |

¹ “To find out if one city really is more dangerous than another, you need to determine a per capita murder **rate**. That is, the number of murders for each person in town. To find that rate, simply **divide** the number of murders by the total population of the city. To keep from using a tiny little decimal, statisticians usually multiply the result by 100,000 and give the result as the number of murders per 100,000 people.” – Project for Excellent in Journalism, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism underwritten by the PEW Charitable Trusts. <http://www.journalism.org/resources/tools/reporting/numbers/percapita.asp?from=online>

The top ten rankings for 2002 are similar to those of 2001, except that Columbus, Ohio entered the top ten in 2002 at number 7, having previously been number 16, and Phoenix, previously number 10 in 2001, moved off the list, dropping to number 11.

2002 Ranking Compared to 2001 Ranking

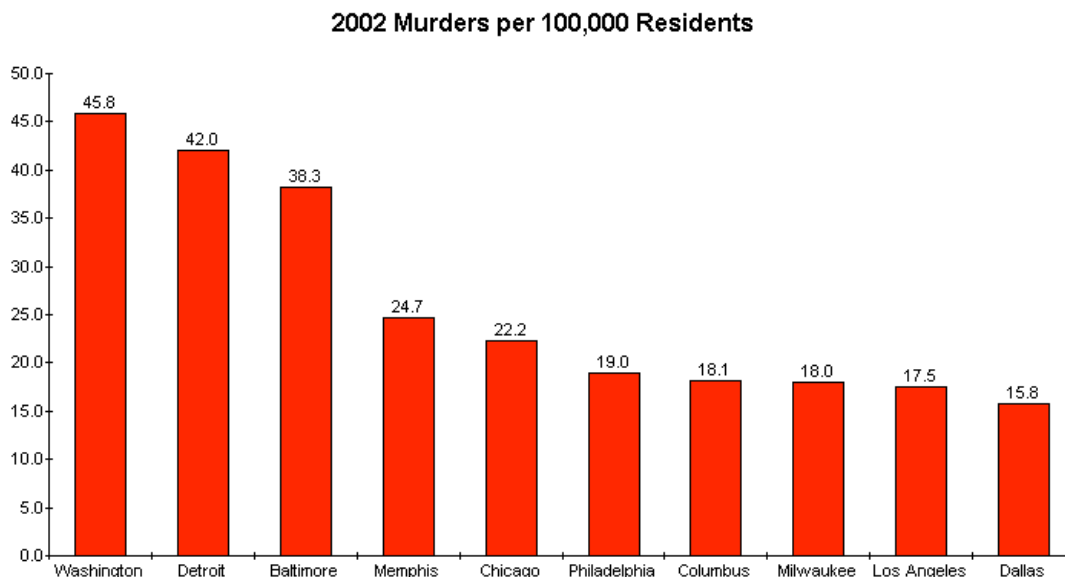
| CITY | HOMICIDES PER 100,000 RESIDENTS | 2002 RANKING | 2001 RANKING |
|----------------|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| Washington, DC | 45.8 | 1 | 2 |
| Detroit | 42.0 | 2 | 1 |
| Baltimore | 38.3 | 3 | 3 |
| Memphis | 24.7 | 4 | 4 |
| Chicago | 22.2 | 5 | 5 |
| Philadelphia | 19.0 | 6 | 7 |
| Columbus | 18.1 | 7 | 16 |
| Milwaukee | 18.0 | 8 | 6 |
| Los Angeles | 17.5 | 9 | 9 |
| Dallas | 15.8 | 10 | 8 |

The full list of the 32 cities with populations of 500,000 or more is shown below, in rank order, showing population, number of homicides for 2001 and 2002, and homicide rates for 2001 and 2002.

Data for All 32 Cities Surveyed

| RANK | CITY | POPULATION | 2001 HOMICIDES | 2002 HOMICIDES | 2001 HOMICIDES PER 100,000 RESIDENTS | 2002 HOMICIDES PER 100,000 RESIDENTS |
|-------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Washington, DC | 571,822 | 232 | 262 | 40.6 | 45.8 |
| 2 | Detroit | 956,283 | 395 | 402 | 41.3 | 42.0 |
| 3 | Baltimore | 660,826 | 256 | 253 | 38.7 | 38.3 |
| 4 | Memphis | 655,898 | 158 | 162 | 24.1 | 24.7 |
| 5 | Chicago | 2,910,709 | 666 | 647 | 22.9 | 22.2 |
| 6 | Philadelphia | 1,518,302 | 309 | 288 | 20.4 | 19.0 |
| 7 | Columbus | 712,748 | 81 | 129 | 11.4 | 18.1 |
| 8 | Milwaukee | 601,229 | 127 | 108 | 21.1 | 18.0 |
| 9 | Los Angeles | 3,763,486 | 588 | 658 | 15.6 | 17.5 |
| 10 | Dallas | 1,215,553 | 240 | 192 | 19.7 | 15.8 |
| 11 | Phoenix | 1,366,542 | 209 | 183 | 15.3 | 13.4 |
| 12 | Las Vegas | 1,117,763 | 133 | 145 | 11.9 | 13.0 |
| 13 | Houston | 1,997,965 | 267 | 259 | 13.4 | 13.0 |
| 14 | Jacksonville | 754,679 | 75 | 90 | 9.9 | 11.9 |
| 15 | Nashville | 555,059 | 64 | 63 | 11.5 | 11.4 |
| 16 | Charlotte | 636,459 | 66 | 67 | 10.4 | 10.5 |
| 17 | Indianapolis | 798,251 | 112 | 83 | 14.0 | 10.4 |
| 18 | Boston | 591,944 | 65 | 60 | 11.0 | 10.1 |
| 19 | Tucson | 503,461 | 42 | 51 | 8.3 | 10.1 |
| 20 | Ft. Worth | 546,828 | 67 | 53 | 12.3 | 9.7 |
| 21 | Denver | 569,653 | 45 | 53 | 7.9 | 9.3 |
| 22 | San Antonio | 1,170,622 | 100 | 100 | 8.5 | 8.5 |
| 23 | Oklahoma City | 507,517 | 45 | 43 | 8.9 | 8.5 |
| 24 | San Francisco | 791,168 | 62 | 58 | 7.8 | 7.3 |
| 25 | New York | 8,023,018 | 649 | 584 | 8.1 | 7.3 |
| 26 | Seattle | 572,345 | 25 | 26 | 4.4 | 4.5 |
| 27 | Portland | 537,081 | 21 | 21 | 3.9 | 3.9 |
| 28 | San Diego | 1,246,136 | 50 | 47 | 4.0 | 3.8 |
| 29 | Austin | 671,462 | 26 | 25 | 3.9 | 3.7 |
| 30 | San Jose | 913,513 | 22 | 28 | 2.4 | 3.1 |
| 31 | El Paso | 576,453 | 20 | 14 | 3.5 | 2.4 |
| 32 | Honolulu | 885,605 | 20 | 18 | 2.3 | 2.0 |

While the average homicide rate for the 32 cities was 13.73 homicides per 100,000 residents for both 2001 and 2002, the top three cities in the rankings had rates significantly higher than the average, with Washington at 45.8, Detroit at 42.0, and Baltimore at 38.3. This disparity is illustrated in the following graph:



DC Homicide Increase Not Explained by Economy, Homeland Security

While several cities had significant increases in the number of murders from 2001 to 2002, other cities experienced major declines, as shown in the chart below, arranged by order of increase.

For the 32 cities with populations of 500,000 or more, the average change in homicide rates from 2001 to 2002 was zero – no change. Comparing the total numbers of homicides in the 32 cities for 2001 to 2002 showed a total nationwide decrease of 1.2%. So, as a whole, the 32 cities showed little change in the homicide rate from 2001 to 2002.

Washington, DC, by comparison, had the 6th highest increase in homicides from 2001 to 2002, with homicides increasing nearly 13% last year as compared to the year before. As the national trend was for the number of murders to stay the same from 2001 to 2002, DC's significant increase suggests that outside variables facing the entire nation (such as the worsening economy) do not adequately explain DC's unique increase.

Another factor often used to explain the District's worsening homicide rate is that the increased demands of federal Homeland Security have led to a weakening of police presence in DC's neighborhoods, thus causing an increase in crime. But this also appears an insufficient explanation for DC's 2002 homicide increase. New York City, which faces the same Homeland Security risks and demands as Washington, DC (including terrorist threats, the defense of key buildings and landmarks, and anti-war protests), saw a 10% drop in homicides in 2002.

Finally, when looking at the percentage change in homicides, it is important to note that some cities have a relatively small number of homicides, so even a small increase in the number of homicides in those cities can result in a large percentage increase. For example, San Jose had only 6 more homicides in 2002 than 2001, but this resulted in a 27.3% increase. Eliminating the cities with less than 50 homicides per year in 2001, i.e., San Jose, Tucson, and Denver, would result in Washington, DC having the 3rd highest increase from 2001 to 2002.

Percent Change in Murders, 2001-2002

| CITY | 2001 HOMICIDES | 2002 HOMICIDES | PERCENT CHANGE |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Columbus | 81 | 129 | 59.3% |
| San Jose | 22 | 28 | 27.3% |
| Tucson | 42 | 51 | 21.4% |
| Jacksonville | 75 | 90 | 20.0% |
| Denver | 45 | 53 | 17.8% |
| Washington, DC | 232 | 262 | 12.9% |
| Los Angeles | 588 | 658 | 11.9% |
| Las Vegas | 133 | 145 | 9.0% |
| Seattle | 25 | 26 | 4.0% |
| Memphis | 158 | 162 | 2.5% |
| Detroit | 395 | 402 | 1.8% |
| Charlotte | 66 | 67 | 1.5% |
| San Antonio | 100 | 100 | 0.0% |
| Portland | 21 | 21 | 0.0% |
| Baltimore | 256 | 253 | -1.2% |
| Nashville | 64 | 63 | -1.6% |
| Chicago | 666 | 647 | -2.9% |
| Houston | 267 | 259 | -3.0% |
| Austin | 26 | 25 | -3.8% |
| Oklahoma City | 45 | 43 | -4.4% |
| San Diego | 50 | 47 | -6.0% |
| San Francisco | 62 | 58 | -6.5% |
| Philadelphia | 309 | 288 | -6.8% |
| Boston | 65 | 60 | -7.7% |
| Honolulu | 20 | 18 | -10.0% |
| New York | 649 | 584 | -10.0% |
| Phoenix | 209 | 183 | -12.4% |
| Milwaukee | 127 | 108 | -15.0% |
| Dallas | 240 | 192 | -20.0% |
| Ft. Worth | 67 | 53 | -20.9% |
| Indianapolis | 112 | 83 | -25.9% |
| El Paso | 20 | 14 | -30.0% |
| Total | 5237 | 5172 | -1.2% |
| Average | | | 0.0% |

Methodology

2001 data on the number of homicides is from the “Offenses Known to Law Enforcement - By City 10,000 and Over, 2001” section of the FBI report “Crime in the United States – 2001.” This report is available at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/01cius.htm>. The report is missing data for San Francisco, so we substituted the data from the FBI’s “Return A Record Card” for that city for 2001. The data from the Return A Record Cards are in most cases identical to the Crime in the United States report, with a few exceptions, notably Washington, DC. Washington, DC reported 231 homicides on its Return A Record Card for 2001, but it reports 233 homicides on its MPD website. The 232 figure is from the Crime in the United States report. From conversations with MPD, we understand that the difference between the 231 and the 233 is a result of the 2 anthrax-related deaths at the Brentwood post office. The Crime in the United States report and the Return A Record cards also provide the 2001 population for each city, which we used for the analysis in this report. For New York City, the Crime in the United States report indicated 3,472 murders for 2001, but a special FBI report on the same Web site reported that 2,823 deaths resulted from the World Trade Center bombings, resulting in 649 murders not related to the bombings.

For 2002, to determine the number of homicides for each city, we used either the data from the official police department Web sites or from telephone interviews with the homicide units of those police departments. (Houston did not return our calls. For Houston, we extrapolated the 2002 homicide figure from the already-known 2001 figure, based on the Houston mayor’s January 16, 2003 “State of the City” address which detailed a 3% drop in murders in 2002.) We used the 2001 population figures to calculate the 2001 and 2002 homicide rates since the 2002 population estimates are not yet available from the Census Bureau. (Washington, DC is the exception, as it is considered a state for estimation purposes. The state estimates have been released). Although some cities have released their own 2002 population estimates, they were not available for each of the 32 cities. Where available, we substituted 2002 population estimates during our preliminary analysis, and found no significant change in the rankings, if any. Thus we used the 2001 population numbers which are the latest accurate numbers.

Finally, had we included all of the cities reporting to the FBI, i.e., those with populations of 10,000 or more, several small cities had the highest number of homicides per capita in 2001. For example, Fairfield (Alabama), Gary (Indiana), and Opa Locka (Florida) would have taken the top three slots in 2001, with populations of 12,429; 103,325; and 15,338, respectively. (We did not obtain their homicide numbers for 2002.) Of larger cities, New Orleans, would also have beat DC in the rankings for 2001 and 2002 if it had a population exceeding 500,000, which it does not.

This report was researched and written by Matt Forman and John Aravosis of SafeStreetsDC.com. Questions may be addressed to John@SafeStreetsDC.com.