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## **City is No. 1 in homicides**

### **Despite fewest killings in 20 years, Baltimore's rate is highest among the nation's largest cities**

By Justin Fenton | [justin.fenton@baltsun.com](mailto:justin.fenton@baltsun.com)

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Baltimore saw fewer killings last year than any other in the past two decades, but data released this week show the city's homicide rate ranked the highest among the nation's cities with a population of more than 500,000.

Despite recording its lowest number of killings in 20 years, Baltimore experienced 37 homicides per 100,000 residents last year, ahead of Detroit, which had 34 per 100,000 residents, according to data compiled by the FBI.

While the District of Columbia was not included in FBI data, it appears to rank third, with about 31 killings per 100,000 residents. No other city with a population of more than 500,000 came close; Philadelphia had the next highest rate, with 22 homicides per 100,000 people.

When smaller cities with a population of at least 100,000 are included in the analysis, Baltimore ranks No. 3, trailing New Orleans (57) and St. Louis (47).

Baltimore's appearance at the top of such lists is nothing new, but the placement was disappointing for city officials who cheered last year's declines.

Taken alone, last year's statistics were encouraging, with some of the most traditionally troubled neighborhoods seeing major decreases in crime. Officials say initiatives to prioritize warrant service and protect at-risk juveniles have paid off, and so far this year, while homicides have jumped 17 percent, fatal and nonfatal shootings are down 14 percent, and overall crime is down 8 percent.

Baltimore leaders are struggling to combat a perception that the crime rate has not improved, and national figures show that relative to other large cities, progress is less dramatic. Last year's figures came amid a national trend that has seen violent crime fall across the country, including a 4.4 percent decline in homicides.

Police say many of the killings have ties to the city's persistent drug trade, and victims and suspects are likely to be young black males with criminal records.

Mayor Sheila Dixon said she was "disappointed" to see Baltimore's place in the rankings and acknowledged that much work remains. She said that short prison sentences are hurting the city's ability to keep dangerous people off the streets.

"I know that our police are working extremely hard, as well as many of our partners" in law enforcement, Dixon said. "But some of our other partners have got to step up. Folks that commit these crimes, particularly gun violence, we can't just slap them on the hands and let them out on probation. These are not random acts."

The FBI cautions against using its data to rank cities, and Baltimore's status at the top among the largest cities may be in question. In January, the Detroit News reported that there were 344 killings there in 2008, but the total submitted to the FBI was 306.

That gap translates into a difference between first or second place for Detroit, a city of about 905,000. Baltimore's population was estimated at 634,000. Officials with the Criminal Justice Information Services Division in West Virginia, which prepares the data, said it was unaware of the discrepancy and could not comment. Detroit police did not return phone calls seeking comment yesterday.

Daniel W. Webster, co-director at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, said boundary lines can play into some of the differences between cities; he said cities such as Baltimore and Washington have boundaries drawn tightly around their urban core, while Philadelphia and Los Angeles benefit from large suburban areas inside municipal boundaries that temper their crime statistics.

But Webster said Baltimore also continues to suffer from comparatively high rates of poverty, unemployment and drug addiction, problems that are not easily reversed.

"All of those things consistently correlate to high homicide rates," Webster said.

Webster said that despite its ranking, Baltimore officials should be proud of drops in violent crime.

"Yes, Baltimore is a violent place, but we can make things safer; we have in recent years," Webster said. "We shouldn't expect miracles in a short period of time."

Asked about recent attacks in Baltimore, Gov. Martin O'Malley said yesterday that the city's violent reputation is undeserved. The former mayor said that Baltimore's long struggle with crime, chronicled in popular television shows, continues to overshadow declines achieved in recent years.

"It's one of the things we labor under," O'Malley said.

Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III said in a recent interview that too much stock is put in the homicide rate.

"One of the things we live with in Baltimore that's almost like a self-creation is this incredible focus around the homicide number, and we made great gains [in 2008] as a city working collectively," Bealefeld said. "That sends a message across the community, that with all of our partners it's possible to make inroads around that issue."

Bealefeld pointed to declines in gun crimes, specifically robberies, which he said often lead to shootings.

There were 95 homicides in Baltimore in 2009 as of yesterday, compared with 82 at the same time last year.

A man was found dead from a gunshot wound to the upper body in the Brooklyn area yesterday morning, near the Anne Arundel County line, the 12th killing in 11 days.

Among the victims were Joseph Woah-Tee, a Liberian immigrant who hoped to run for president of his home country, who was killed at his Pen-Lucy social club in an attempted robbery, and an 18-year-old woman who was shot in the back of the head.

At a rally in Northwest Baltimore about 50 people listened last night as speakers made pleas to stop the violence.

A 26-year-old man who asked not to be identified said the killings stem from wars over drug turf and kids who are left to fend for themselves.

Another man, Lauren Taylor, 31, said youths are disaffected because of a lack of family structure. "There's nobody you can lean on," he said.

"Our city is in trouble. Blood is streaming in the streets every day," said Anthony McCarthy, a former City Hall spokesman who hosts a radio show. "We've grown so cynical. We've lost our way."

#### **Where Baltimore ranks**

Homicide rate among cities with 100,000 population or more (rate per 100,000 residents):

New Orleans: 64

St. Louis: 47

Baltimore: 37

Birmingham, Ala.: 36

Jackson, Miss.: 36

Detroit: 34

Baton Rouge, La.: 30

Source: FBI annual crime report

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