Crime State Rankings 2009

The Data and Their Limitations

Although some data in this volume are from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Census Bureau, and the Drug Enforcement Administration, a significant amount of the data featured in *Crime State Rankings 2009* comes from the FBI publication *Crime in the United States*, which is available every fall and presents information for the previous year. This report is based on data collected through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, which provides national standards for the uniform classification of crimes and arrests (for further details, visit the FBI's Web site at www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm). Notably, the UCR crime definitions are distinct and do not conform to federal or state laws; however, they provide systematic data on types of crimes that are often of the most concern. More than 17,000 city, university and college, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies voluntarily provide information representing 94.6 percent of the population (in 2007) to their respective states, which then provide the information to the FBI.

There are well-documented criticisms of the UCR data that must be considered when using the data for any purpose, but these criticisms should not preclude officials, practitioners, and others from using the data to understand increases and decreases in crime and to guide policy decisions. The UCR data consist of both aggregate counts of selected crimes (Part I crimes only) and aggregate counts of all arrests (Part I crimes as well as all others). The selected crimes that are known as Part I crimes include murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larcenytheft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The FBI does not report the counts of Part II crimes—such as simple assault, fraud, prostitution, and DUI—only the arrests. Thus, when statistics about reported crime are provided in this or another publication, they are primarily based on the Part I crimes. In addition, UCR procedures require that individual police departments use a hierarchical coding system for Part I crime, which means if two crimes Introduction and Methodology xiii happen during one incident, only one is counted. For example, if one person is the victim of both rape and robbery, only the rape will be counted.

Another, and likely the most important, consideration when interpreting crime statistics based on UCR data is that these data contain only those crimes that have been reported or are known to law enforcement, not all crime that has occurred. In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey that 40–50 percent of violent crime is reported and that 30–40 percent of property crime is reported (BJS, 2008). Therefore Part I crime statistics represent only a portion of the actual crime that has occurred.

Additional criticisms of the UCR data include inaccuracy due to inputting errors and handling of missing data (Maltz, 1999; Lynch & Jarvis, 2008); pressure on some law enforcement agencies to "doctor" the numbers; and the use of aggregate numbers that mask other factors such as time of day, location, and circumstance of the crime. Yet, the UCR data are the most comprehensive and consistently collected data on crime in the United States. Examining these data at the state level provides only a bird's-eye view of crime as states themselves are diverse in their characteristics (such as population density, rural vs. urban areas, and topography) and levels of crime vary within states. In most cases, analysis of UCR data begins the conversation about crime issues, and additional in-depth analysis in metropolitan areas, cities, and neighborhoods is required to truly understand the nature and context of crime problems (Boba, 2008).