

Is Columbus the Most Dangerous City? Untangling the Tangled Web of Crime Statistics

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Reports describing Columbus as one of the nation’s most dangerous cities recently caused a stir among those living in the community. City officials faced a multitude of questions from local residents about the truthfulness of the report. In the end, the initial report published by LiveWatch.com/SafeMart.com was shown to only include property crime, was based on two year old crime statistics, and included data from the entire metropolitan statistical area comprised of Muscogee, Harris, Marion, and Chattahoochee counties in Georgia and Russell County in Alabama. As a result, the “most dangerous city” claim was largely discredited.

Being able to refute the claims of being “the most dangerous city” is important for a variety of reasons. Economic developers have long known the importance of lower crime rates on attracting business and visitors to an area. As one developer recently stated “Having high crime rates or even the reputation of high crime raises the cost of living and doing business...”¹ Real estate professionals also know the impact that crime rates have on real estate values. High crime rates can have a detrimental effect on real estate prices. This effect promises to become even more important as an increasing number of prospective homeowners use the internet to research housing options. Most of the major real estate search engines now include local crime statistics and even crime maps as part of the information provided in their search results. Reports of high crime rates can deter potential buyers and lead to a decline in home values as noted in a 2011 headline “Online crime maps could drive down house prices, warn property analysts.”²

Simply refuting the claim that Columbus is the most dangerous city is not enough; important questions still remain. How dangerous is Columbus? Is our local crime rate high or low? Has it improved or gotten worse? The purpose of this article is to provide some answers to these questions.

Current Crime Statistics for Columbus

Table 1 presents the most recent annual crime statistics for the City of Columbus as reported in the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report. Included are statistics for four types of violent crime: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, and three types of property crime: burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. In addition to the number of offenses reported in 2012 for each type of crime we also present the crime rate, defined as the number of offenses per 100,000 persons.

Table 1. 2012 Crime Statistics for the City of Columbus

2012 Crime Statistics	Type of Crime Reported	Number of Crimes Reported	Crime Rate (incidence per 100,000 persons)	
Violent Crime	Murder and Non-Negligent Manslaughter	17	8.7	Violent Crime Rate 506.7
	Forcible Rape	31	15.8	
	Robbery	423	215.6	
	Aggravated Assault	523	266.6	
Property Crime	Burglary	2,709	1,380.9	Property Crime Rate 5,742.7
	Larceny-Theft	7,711	3,930.6	
	Motor Vehicle Theft	846	431.2	

¹ <http://www.mackinac.org/16877>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2011/feb/01/police-crime-website-house-prices>

In 2012, Columbus had an overall violent crime rate of 506.7 per 100,000 residents. The majority of violent crime was either aggravated assault or robbery. The incidence of property crime was over 10-times as great, over two-thirds of which was larceny-theft.

How Does the Crime Rate in Columbus Compare with Other Communities? Is Columbus More or Less Safe Than Other Places?

Caution must be exercised when making comparisons of crime rates across communities because the numbers do not account for the variety of factors that affect crime within each of those communities such as population, the makeup of the community with regard to age, race, ethnic group and education levels, local economic conditions, climate, and a whole host of other factors.³ However, even though comparisons can be misleading, they can also provide communities with valuable information by pointing out areas of success and areas that may need particular attention. In order to make the most valid comparisons we need to focus on communities of *similar size*. Comparing crime rates in communities with vastly different populations leads to very misleading results. For example the property crime rate in Helen, GA (population 518) was nearly twice the rate in Atlanta, but one would be hard pressed to conclude that living in Helen was any less safe than living in Atlanta. As a result, we limit our comparison of crime in Columbus (pop. 192,000) to crime in Savannah (226,000), Athens-Clarke County (117,000), Atlanta (426,000), and Macon (93,000). Even though it has only about one-sixth the population of Columbus, we also include Phenix City (33,000) due to its close proximity. Table 2 presents the 2012 crime statistics for each of these areas.

Table 2. 2012 Regional Crime Statistics

2012 Crime Statistics Reported by Local Police Department	Violent Crime Rates (per 100,000 residents)				Property Crime (per 100,000 residents)		
	Murder and Non-Negligent Manslaughter	Forcible Rape	Robbery Rate	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny-Theft	Motor Vehicle Theft
Columbus	8.7	15.8	215.6	266.6	1,380.9	3,930.6	431.2
Athens-Clarke	4.3	40.9	134.5	207.7	978.2	2,732.9	206
Atlanta	19	25.9	520.8	813.4	1,416.8	3,938.3	1,178.4
Macon	22.6	44.2	260.7	300.5	1,969.1	4,708.3	538.6
Phenix City	5.9	50.1	209.2	465.5	2,050.7	4,057.2	621.7
Savannah	9.9	10.8	212.3	146.6	900.6	2,413.9	284.9

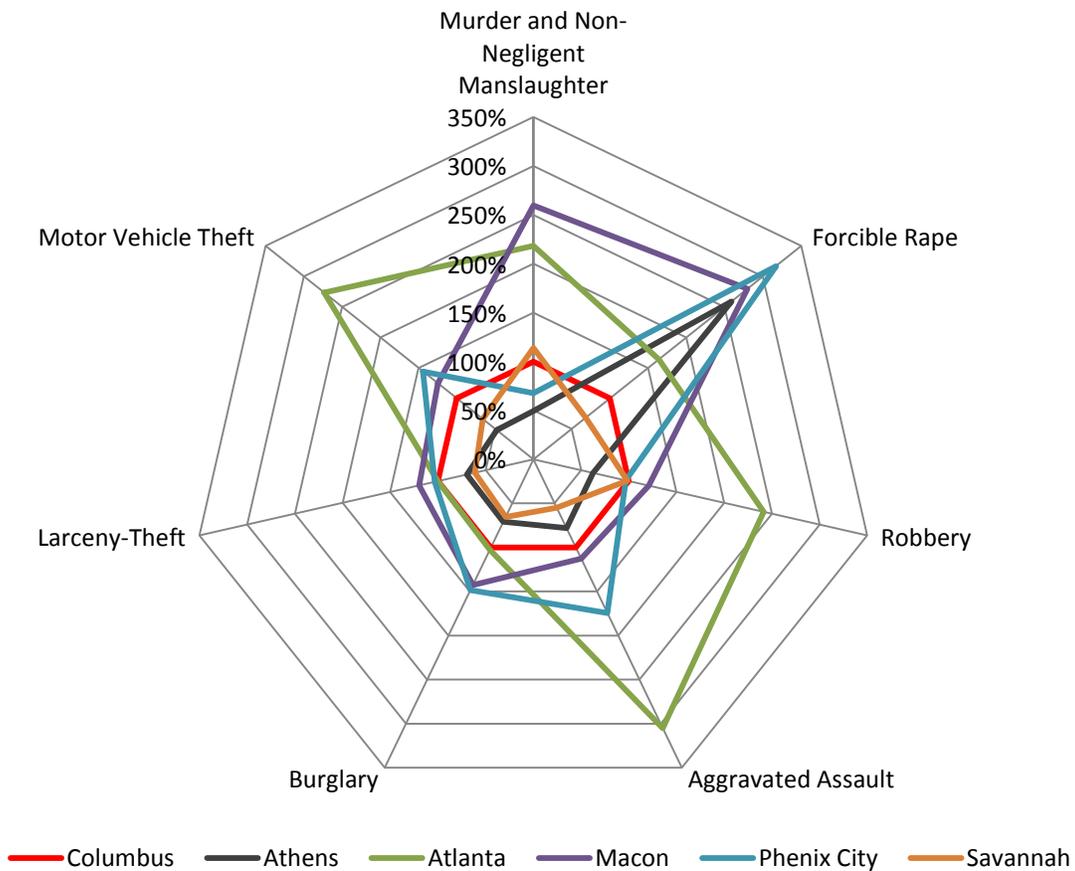
When compared to this set of peers, Columbus ranks near the middle of the pack. None of the communities is clearly the “safest” or “most dangerous” in the group. Savannah has the lowest rate of rape, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny-theft, but has a higher rate of murder than Columbus and a robbery rate nearly 60% greater than Athens.

³ <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/caution-against-ranking>

Drawing conclusions about the safety of a community using a single crime statistic can be very misleading. A better comparison would be to include all categories of crime. One way to make this comparison is with a “spider web” chart. A spider web chart is a very simple way to illustrate differences between communities across a wide range of crime statistics.

In the chart below, each “spoke” measures one of the seven types of crime as a percentage of the crime rate in Columbus. The Columbus benchmark is illustrated by the bright red ring with a value of 100% in each direction. By plotting each city’s crime rates in this “web” one can easily see how the crime rates in Columbus compares. If a city’s crime rate along any of the dimensions is greater than that in Columbus it will lie outside of the Columbus benchmark web. If a city has a higher crime rate than Columbus for every type of crime, such as Macon, then that city’s web will lie entirely outside the Columbus web. A lower crime rate than Columbus would be represented by a point on the inside of the Columbus web.

Figure 1. Crime Webs for Columbus and its Peers



The crime web also illustrates how crime patterns differ across communities; note the spikes in the web with regard to rape for Phenix City and Athens and the relatively low rates of crime in Savannah.

How has the Crime Rate in Columbus Changed Over Time? Has Columbus Become More or Less Safe?

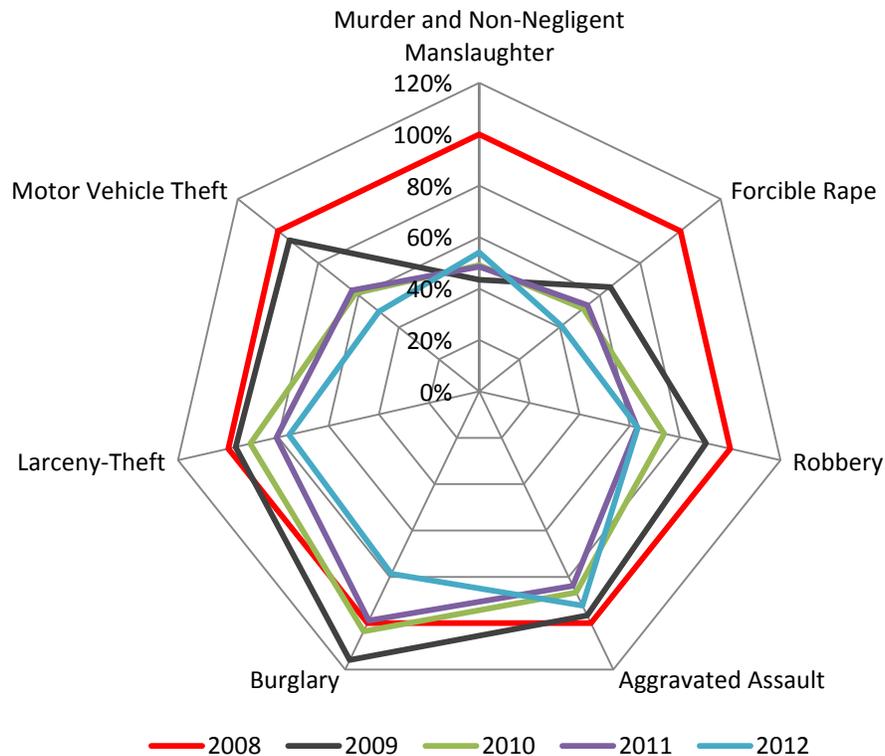
Table 3 presents the crime statistics reported by the Columbus Police Department from 2008 through 2012. In general, crime rates have been declining but it is difficult to grasp the changes in overall crime just by looking at the table.

Table 3. Crime Statistics for Columbus 2008-2012.

Crime Statistics Reported by the Columbus Police Department	Violent Crime (per 100,000 residents)				Property Crime (per 100,000 residents)		
	Murder and Non-Negligent Manslaughter	Forcible Rape	Robbery Rate	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny-Theft	Motor Vehicle Theft
2008	16.1	38.7	341.0	288.4	1,756.6	5,185.3	864.6
2009	7.0	25.2	308.2	278.7	2,036.3	5,033.7	815.1
2010	7.9	20.0	251.2	250.2	1,819.0	4,729.7	530.3
2011	7.8	20.8	214.7	241.7	1,737.1	4,189.0	545.3
2012	8.7	15.8	215.6	266.6	1,380.9	3,930.6	431.2

A clearer picture emerges by presenting the crime statistics in a web chart. In Figure 2, the 2008 crime statistics are used as the benchmark and are represented with the bright red ring with a value of 100% in along each dimension. Every other year's crime statistic is measured against this benchmark.

Figure 2. Crime Webs for Columbus 2008-2012.



Looking at the statistics this way illustrates some clear trends in crime over time.

- Large reductions in the murder and non-negligent manslaughter rates and forcible rape rates since 2008.
- An increase in the rate of burglaries from 2008 to 2009, a trend that has since been reversed.
- All crime rates in 2012 are below their 2008 levels, with significant reductions in the rates of rape, murder, and motor vehicle theft.

The overall reduction in crime rates since 2008 is noteworthy. One obvious reason that might explain this reduction is the increased number of law enforcement officers. The number of law enforcement officers per 100,000 residents increased from 216 in 2008 to 238 in 2012. However, a less obvious, but perhaps more important reason may be the revitalization of the downtown area with the addition of the Riverpark Campus, the growth of businesses along Broadway, and the transition of vacant warehouse space to residential living space.

We began our analysis by describing the importance that crime rates have on economic development, but many communities are realizing the importance that economic development has on reducing crime. As one community in Minnesota put it, “busy streets are safer streets”⁴. Put another way, economic development equals crime reduction and vice versa. Increasing foot traffic, especially during evening hours results in lower levels of crime which in turn can result in increases in economic activity.

Our goal in this article was to shed light on questions regarding crime in Columbus. We introduced a new way of depicting crime statistics using spider web charts. The web charts allow the viewer to easily visualize several dimensions of information at once. Using the webs we presented evidence that Columbus is not “the most dangerous city” and that Columbus has become a “safer” place in recent years.

⁴ <http://www.communityprogress.net/minneapolis--mn--promoting-economic-development-through-crime-prevention--pages-87.php>