

NEW MEXICO SENTENCING COMMISSION

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Summary

- “The publicized state rankings created by O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) lack sufficient information to be of use to the public and to government entities. “
- “The FBI strongly advises against using their UCR Program’s data to rank states, counties, cities, colleges, and universities.”
- “The FBI itself states: *These rough rankings provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region.*”
- In their publication of Crime State Rankings 2010, O’Leary Morgan et al. used the crime data in exactly the way the FBI advises against.
- The methodology used to produce the rankings published in Crime State Rankings 2010 lacks the necessary rigor urged by the FBI. Criminal justice professionals should view them with a healthy skepticism.”

The 2010 National Crime Ranking of New Mexico: A Caution Against Trusting Crime Ranking Publications

Introduction

On April 7, 2010 members of the New Mexico Sentencing Commission convened. One of the topics discussed was the ranking of New Mexico as the U.S.’s second most crime ridden state in the recent publication Crime State Rankings 2010 by O’Leary Morgan, Morgan and Boba. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the state rankings created by O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) lack sufficient information to be of use to the public and to government entities. First, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program will be introduced. Then, the methodology used by O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) will be explained. Lastly, a brief discussion of how O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) rankings present an inadequate picture.

Uniform Crime Reporting:

Since 1930 the UCR Program has been managed by the FBI. Law enforcement agencies throughout the nation collect and voluntarily send crime data to the UCR Program. The UCR Program provides reporting law enforcement agencies with quality assurance reviews to ensure accurate reporting. There are 29 crimes the UCR Program classifies and scores. The 29 crimes are classified and separated into two groups, Part I and Part II offenses. Part I offenses consist of 4 violent crimes and 4 property crimes: Criminal Homicide,

Forcible Rape, Robbery, Aggravated assault, Burglary, Larceny-theft, Motor Vehicle Theft, and Arson. Part II offenses consist of the remaining 21 non-violent, property crimes (we will forgo listing all 21 Part II offenses due to the exclusion of Part II offenses in the ranking of states by crime statistics). The FBI publishes 3 annual reports on crime statistics based on their findings: Crime in the United States, Hate Crime Statistics, and Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted. The FBI strongly advises against using their UCR Program’s data to rank states, counties, cities, colleges, and universities:

“Each year when Crime in the United States is published, some entities use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rough rankings provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region. Consequently, they lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting communities and their residents. Valid assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the range of unique conditions affecting each local law enforcement jurisdiction. The data user is, therefore, cautioned against comparing statistical data of individual reporting units from cities, metropolitan areas, states, or colleges or universities solely on the basis of their population coverage or student enrollment.” – FBI’s Website

Methodology used by O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010):

O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) used the data collected by the FBI’s UCR Program to create their state crime rate comparisons. Of the 29 crimes the UCR Program collects, O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) chose 6 crimes, all classified as Part I offenses, on which to focus their rankings: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. The two Part I offenses excluded from this list are larceny-theft, and arson. In 2004 an advisory board of criminologists along with the FBI concluded that the numerous larceny-theft crimes were artificially inflating the crime index. Due to this finding, larceny-theft crimes are not considered a true indicator of crime and are excluded from the crime index. Arson is excluded due to the low frequency of reporting arson to the FBI from reporting agencies. Typically, arson is reported by fire departments. The 5 steps O’Leary Morgan et al. (2010) used in their methodology are:

- 1) For each of the 6 categories of reported crime, the crime rate per 100,000 residents of each state is calculated.
- 2) 2) The percent difference between the state rate and the national rate for each of the six crimes is then computed.
- 3) The number is then scaled to be one-sixth (.1667) of the index to make it comparable to scores in the previous editions of this book. The previous editions weighted the scores from the greatest being the crimes the public thought would most likely happen to them (i.e. burglary), to the least being crimes the public thought would most likely never happen to them (i.e. murder) based upon a public opinion survey.
- 4) The final comparison score for each state is the sum of its individual scores for the six crimes.
- 5) The comparison scores are sorted from highest to lowest to produce the rankings.

Conclusion

In their publication of Crime State Rankings 2010, O’Leary Morgan et al. used the crime data in exactly the way the FBI advises against. O’Leary

Morgan et al. (2010):

- Did not take into account the wide, and varying range of unique conditions each law enforcement jurisdiction is affected by,
- used only 6 of the 29 crimes provided by the UCR program, and
- based their comparison of states on crime rate and population figures.

As noted previously, the FBI strongly advises against using their UCR Program data to produce crime rankings for states, counties, cities, colleges and universities. Such rankings are “...simplistic and/or incomplete” (FBI’s Website: <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel107/cius092407.htm>). Additionally, the U.S. Conference of Mayors has stated that such rankings “distort and damage cities’ reputations” (Rosenfeld & Lauritsen 2008). Finally, the Executive Board of the American Society of Criminology has declared that the rankings are “invalid, damaging and irresponsible” (Rosenfeld & Lauritsen 2008).

In conclusion, the methodology used to produce the rankings published in Crime State Rankings 2010 lacks the necessary rigor urged by the FBI. Criminal justice professionals should view them with a healthy skepticism.

References

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