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Hooray, we're not No. 1! - Camden thrilled to shed 'most dangerous' title

Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA) - Sunday, October 29, 2006

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Here is one No. 1 Camden will be glad to be rid of.

The beleaguered city will likely shed its infamous two-year title as America's Most Dangerous City when national crime rankings are released tomorrow by a Midwestern research firm, according to an Inquirer analysis.

This year's top honors are expected to be awarded to two places that at least have a World Series to brag about: St. Louis and Detroit.

In Camden, rarely has there been such rejoicing about the prospect of being named, perhaps, the fourth or even fifth most dangerous city in America.

"It makes investment in the neighborhoods more attractive," waterfront developer Carl Dranoff said. "And I think the statistics will only get better."

An Inquirer analysis of 2005 crime data provided by the FBI found that Camden will rank No. 5 under the formula that Morgan Quitno, the Kansas publisher, used last year. Philadelphia will be No. 29.

Crime in Camden, though high, is bucking national trends. It's dropping while in other cities - Philadelphia, in particular - it's spiking.

But, acting Camden County Prosecutor James Lynch cautioned, "we need to reflect on this in a sober manner and not pop the champagne corks. There are still people who are losing family members to guns."

Like the Badlands label that stuck to parts of North Philadelphia, America's Most Dangerous City has grown into a curse that Camden could not shake.

It was a potent, snappy catchphrase, quickly spread by international media. It had no regard for Camden's low-crime waterfront or downtown.

And it laid the city low at a vulnerable time, when it was trying desperately to rebound and attract developers.

Initially, it was venom.

Rutgers University-Camden reported a drop in enrollment last year, which it partly blamed on the title. The waterfront-headquartered defense contractor L3 Communications had to convince prospective employees they would be safe.

A downtown hotel proposal died. The line of real estate developers who had been interested in Camden slowed. Speculators who stayed found it difficult to attract national

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retail and restaurant chains.

City residents fielded calls from family and friends wondering if it was safe to visit.

But "ultimately, the ranking had a positive effect," said city physician Jeffrey Brenner: "bringing much-needed attention to a range of issues that needed reform within the Police Department."

Scott Morgan of Morgan Quitno, the firm that issues the ranking, admitted he won't "be on anybody's Christmas card list" in Camden, but defended the rankings.

"What is missed," Morgan said, "is how much Camden has used this to point out to the state and the rest of the area how much assistance they needed, and how much they got in return."

Morgan said the firm changed its methodology after The Inquirer printed it last year. He declined to elaborate and wouldn't say which cities would top this year's list. But the Camden County Prosecutor's Office and officials at **CAMconnect**, a nonprofit organization that analyzes data about Camden, said that no matter how the statistics are crunched, Camden will not come out on top.

An Inquirer analysis of violent crime ranks Camden even worse than Morgan Quitno's old formula did. In The Inquirer's analysis, Camden's violent-crime rate ranks fourth highest in the nation. The city ranked second in robberies, seventh in homicides, and 11th in aggravated assaults among cities with more than 75,000 people.

The Inquirer's violent-crime index measures only homicides, aggravated assault, rape, and robbery, which reflects how the FBI catalogs crime in its annual report.

Morgan Quitno's index of the most dangerous cities in prior years added motor-vehicle theft and burglary into the calculations.

The new leader of Camden's police, Arturo Venegas Jr., said Morgan Quitno's rankings had indeed been a powerful mobilizing tool.

Still, he realized how deeply the label had scarred the city when he agreed to take command of Camden's 430-member police force on Aug. 1.

"People told me I was crazy," said Venegas, who took the job for the challenge of helping rebuild the police force. "I was leaving Sacramento, which everybody has a vision of being sunny, and coming to the 'most dangerous city in America.' People kept asking why would I want to do that."

Joe Papa, who has lived in the elegant Victor waterfront condominium since it opened in 2003, got shocked reactions when he decided to open a grocery store in the building. Some construction workers he hired fretted about parking their trucks in America's Most Dangerous City - but were pleasantly surprised when they saw the pristine neighborhood.

"It discourages people from even looking at the city," Papa said of the most-dangerous label. "I think it's unfair."

The label meant that Rutgers-Camden freshman Ayla Maldonado, 18, of Williamstown, had to find her own way home from a summer visit. Maldonado and her best friend drove over with her friend's mother.

One look at the downtown campus and Maldonado's friend was not permitted to leave the car. Maldonado got out and is glad she did. Now, she says, she feels safe.

Michael Sepanic, a Rutgers-Camden spokesman, said that while the label hurt last year's enrollment numbers, it had little effect on this year's class. He credits an organized public-relations campaign mounted when the title was renewed last year. City boosters pointed out that Morgan Quitno's rankings are based on year-old data, which ignore recent crime-fighting progress.

"We think people heard the message we put out," he said.

There has been much grumbling about how Morgan Quitno arrives at its most-dangerous conclusion. In years past, the firm has given equal weight to all six categories of major crime. Burglaries have the same significance as homicides.

"The way they define danger is wacky," said Jon'a Meyer, a professor of criminology at Rutgers-Camden. She says Camden's violence is targeted, not random, so "unless you go to the drug dealers, you're unlikely to get robbed."

A few blocks from Rutgers, at Fifth and Grant, Richard Grisolia, 36, knows he might be part of the problem. He says he has been addicted to heroin for 11 years. Drug dealing on the corner is as busy as ever.

Grisolia says crime in his world is increasing and forcing him into detox. And he says crime in the city is actually undercounted because people like him don't report it.

"I got jumped this year, four times already. People get messed up and killed around here."

However great Camden's problems, city leaders are confident they are on their way out of being the national poster child for crime.

"There's nothing more important for the reality and the image of the city than getting off the top of that list," waterfront leader Thomas Corcoran said.

"I may be celebrating quietly with a glass of white wine. I would hope when the next survey comes out, we'll no longer be in the top 10, and the day will come we're no longer in the top 50."

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Inquirer staff writers Dylan Purcell and Alletta Emeno contributed to this article.

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Find The Inquirer's complete ranking of America's 380 most violent cities at <http://go.philly.com/crime2005>

Caption: PHOTO AND CHART

APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer "It makes investment in the neighborhoods more attractive," said waterfront developer Carl Dranoff, referring to the loss of the "most dangerous" label. "And I think the statistics will only get better." Arturo Venegas Jr., the new leader of Camden's police, says the "most dangerous" ranking was a mobilizing force for officers. CHART Most Dangerous Cities in 2005 (SOURCES: FBI Uniform Crime Report 2005; Inquirer analysis; The Philadelphia Inquirer)

Edition: CITY-D

Section: LOCAL

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Index Terms: CAMDEN ; CITIES ; CRIME ; NJ ; PHILADELPHIA ; RANKING ; STATISTIC ; US

Record Number: 7006662986

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