

Which is 2nd-safest? City or area?

Buried in a recent two-column story in the national Parade Magazine section of the Sunday newspapers and nearly obscured by the advertisements that took up most of the two pages, John Tepper Marlin's headlined story, "The Safest Places To Live," was designed to grab one's attention. And that it did, especially if your city is ranked second in the nation.

The media was quick to pick up on the story and quoted the mayor of Providence who would proclaim that the city is the "safest in the continental United States." The mayor is quick to pick up on these potential public relations stories, even when the city comes in second. Honolulu, in our 50th state, was listed as the safest city in the country.

As great as all of this might sound for the capital city, one would be well-advised to know the limitations of this study as well as the definition of what is meant by "Providence."

Marlin's study covered only the 75 largest metropolitan areas in the country (Providence ranks 35 on this list) which leaves the question as to why he did not include the other 209 that were identified from the 1990 census.

One can understand why Marlin would have used murder and robbery rates to determine "safety" in metropolitan areas, but one can certainly question why infant mortality (death in the first year of life), overall death rates (heavily weighted toward an elderly population), motor vehicle fatalities and clean air criteria would measure the security of an area.

It is perfectly proper to use metropolitan areas in making comparisons among these urban agglomerations and, in fact, it is common to use metropolitan areas for such studies because of the wealth of information that the U.S. Census Bureau compiles for these areas in which 77 percent of American live.

Further, metropolitan areas are used by the Census Bureau to define our major cities (more than 50,000 residents) and the suburbs, those surrounding areas that are socially and economically linked to those cities. The boundaries of these metropolitan areas are demarcated by county lines, except in New England where city and town boundaries are used.

This is where Providence shines, for this middle-sized city of 160,000 residents, which gives its name to the metropolitan area, now becomes one of the 39 major league metropolitan areas of this country with a population exceeding 1 million. In the case of Providence, that figure is 1.1 million.

Because there are other sizable cities within the orbit of Providence, each with its own area of influence, the Census Bureau also assigns their names to the metropolitan area. The result is that the official name for this area is the Providence-Fall River-Warwick Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area. Just think what a mouthful this is every time one talks about the Providence area, so, as most would do and as the newspapers do, the name Providence simply is used.

The Providence-Fall River-Warwick Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area consists

of 33 cities and towns in Rhode Island, including Foster, Coventry and Charlestown, and eight communities in Massachusetts, such as Seekonk and Rehoboth. The area covered by this "Providence" is 1,141 square miles, approximately equal to the area of the state.

So when the newspapers report that in a study of metropolitan areas the following cities are ranked, one must remember exactly what those cities entail — it means a city and its suburbs. And when the mayor hits the road with the blessing of the Chamber of Commerce to tout the second-ranked safety of Providence, he would be well-advised to couch his story in a manner that accurately portrays the situation.

The crime picture and "safety" have improved in the city of Providence, as was indicated by a piece recently written by the chief of police. Citing the 17.5 percent drop in the serious crime rate over the 1991 and 1992 years, the chief went on to cite the safety of the downtown with regard to the proposed relocation to the

Shepard Building of the University of Rhode Island Continuing Education Program.

The recent sale of the old City Hall Hardware store on Washington Street to Roger Williams University will increase the student population in the downtown, further adding to the numbers of people on the street and increasing the safety factor.

Given this information from the chief of police and heightened activities in the downtown, the mayor has plenty of ammunition with which to impress visitors and prospective clients to relocate to the city. And he could even cite Providence as "the safest metropolitan area on continental United States," but watch out, mayor, if you call Providence the mainland's safest city because Marlin's study did not make that determination.

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