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## **THE ONCE AND FUTURE HOMICIDE CAPITAL**

*By Jay Howell*

In a particular year, Chicago had the doubtful distinction of having the most homicides - New York City, with almost twice the population of Chicago had fewer murders than did the windy city. A commentator wrote in a New York City insurance journal, "Our murder record . . . each year is a most serious indictment of American civilization, and evidence of lawlessness which has no counterpart in any other country in the world."

Detroit, ranked in 13<sup>th</sup> place that year. Its paper, The Detroit News offered its own observation that, "There are far too many murders in the United States every year, and this disagreeable prominence among the nations of the earth is pretty sure to continue until some drastic readjustment is effected in our administration of criminal justice."

Birmingham, Alabama ranked near the top of the homicide charts and its local paper, The Birmingham News, reported, "The announcement that Birmingham ranks 4<sup>th</sup> among American cities in proportion of homicides to population is a summons to serious thinking and sound action which this community should not fail to heed."

In an article written that same year in the Providence Journal, the Rhode Island Newspaper exposed a bitter and surprising truth about the murder rate in America, "It will

probably astonish most readers, to learn that in the matter of homicides, Jacksonville, Florida headed the list of American cities, having a rate of 75.9 per 100,000 population.”

During the year in question, Jacksonville had more homicides per 100,000 residents than did Detroit, Houston, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Dallas.

The research results which were tabulated concerned 118 American cities. The combined homicide death rate of those cities was 10.1 per 100,000, as compared with 10.5 for the previous year.

Jacksonville’s homicide death rate was **76.9 per** 100,000 population. Some cities, including Hoboken, New Jersey; Gloucester, Massachusetts; Lansing, Michigan; Newport, Rhode Island; and Pasadena, California, had **no** homicides during that year.

The New York World paper commented, “Just why there should be 104 homicides in Jacksonville, a city of 137,000, and but 2 in Grand Rapids, a much larger city, is a question worth a good deal of study.”

These published homicide rates shocked many readers and forced local papers around the country to defend their violent communities.

In response to the “homicide capital” distinction, the Florida Times Union offered its own optimistic, but weak, defense, “Jacksonville’s rate is going to be better the next time an inquiry is made. Already, within the present year, there has been a noticed speedier handling of criminals, and juries have been found that would convict, and judges unafraid to rule for the safety of the people and against the wrong-doers who have violated laws of God and man. A movement is under way to reduce crime in Florida.”

All of the above information, including the homicide rates, was reported by the Literary Digest, a national weekly news magazine. The article was published on July 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The year was 1927!