

# On Crime Rate Reporting

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By Chief Steve Watson / October 24, 2018

*"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."*

~Popularized by Mark Twain in the United States who attributed the saying to nineteenth-century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli

## **Just How Dangerous is Eureka Really?**

With this being an election year, there has been an uptick of interest and discussion concerning crime rate statistics. Opinions, prognostications, and pontifications abound. After recently seeing a December 2017 article posted by FINANCEOPEDIA

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(<https://financialhub.co/20-dangerous-cities-california/14/>) listing Eureka as #2 among the “20 Most Dangerous Cities in California” cited on social media, I thought some illumination on the topic was in order. I’ve also heard the same persistent misleading statistical conclusions quoted elsewhere several times over the past few years. In September 2014, Ryan Burns of the Lost Coast Outpost wrote a story addressing this subject (<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2014/sep/11/eureka-misleadingly-named-second-most-dangerous-ci/>). The original source material appears to be an online article by a company called Home Security Shield (<http://www.homesecurityshield.org/news/most-dangerous-cities-in-california/>) that peddles home security systems, equipment and monitoring. The ranking in the 2014 story was based on the FBI’s 2012 Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data and it assessed the overall total crime rate (combining property crimes and violent crimes) for all California cities with populations over 20,000 (per capita - crimes per 1,000 residents).

The **FBI/UCR 2017 Crime in the United States** report has now been released (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017>). The Eureka Police Department’s crime analyst, Brittany Powell, prepared the crime rate data included at the end of this post using the same formula Home Security Shield used for their 2014 story (based on the FBI’s 2012 UCR report). It covers the years 2015-2017. When the analysis is done this way, it misleadingly makes Eureka appear worse (more dangerous) than a more circumspect scrutiny of the data would indicate. However, it is true Eureka has trended toward the top of the overall charts for years now. For California cities with populations over 20,000, Eureka ranked #11 in 2017 for violent crime per capita (8.96), #6 for property crimes (51.41), and #4 overall when both property and violent crime UCR data are combined. (Santa Cruz is listed at #3 overall by this formula.) We appear to be heading in a better direction (as compared to our former #1 and #2 rankings) but clearly still have a lot of work to do.

When interpreting crime data for Eureka one should consider these crimes per capita rates are based on Eureka’s census population (27,230 for 2017). However, our actual estimated daytime service population is around twice that number and the population of the Greater Eureka area is over 45,000. As the county seat and regional hub for government, services, commerce, healthcare and the arts (plus Highway 101 runs through the middle of the city transporting tens of thousands of motorists daily), our population is practically much

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higher than the 27,000 that our per capita crime rate data is based on. Many of the cities Eureka is being compared to do not have our unique dynamics in play.

It would be interesting to recalculate the per capita crime rate for Eureka based on a working population of 45,000 and see what that arguably more practical picture would look like. However, this would be manipulating the numbers without also doing the same for other cities who also likely have higher daytime populations so the results would be imperfect and somewhat skewed. *(For those who are curious, with a population of 45,000 and using the same formulas [populations over 20,000, per capita 1000, and adding property crime and violent crime together] Eureka would be ranked 52 out of 297 cities: violent crime rate [5.4] and property crime [31.1].)*

## **Are Crimes Being Underreported?**

The reasons why some victims choose not to report crime are myriad. Some argue the actual crime rate is higher than what the UCR reporting data shows because people have adopted a “why bother” mindset and are underreporting crimes. This is true, at least to a certain extent, across virtually every jurisdiction. UCR data is based on an actual “crime report” being generated and contained within an agency’s records management system (RMS) versus the mere act of relaying a crime to law enforcement which might only be captured by an agency’s computer-aided dispatch system (CAD).

*(To fully understand crime statistics, one must first understand the dynamic data and systems upon which they are based. Law enforcement organizations commonly maintain two data systems, CAD and RMS, in which calls for service, crime, arrests and other associated data are warehoused. RMS is a searchable digital database in which police records are tracked, stored, and maintained. CAD is a specialized software system, including telecommunications and geographic display technology, used to track and support public safety emergency response operations. Calls for service that are dispatched to (or initiated by) police officers are recorded in the CAD system along with all associated activity and information. Crime reports refer to individual crime incidents that are reported to law enforcement and contained within the agency’s RMS.)*

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With serious violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault), the police reporting rate is generally high and quite consistent due to the nature and severity of the incidents. However, property crimes are much more commonly under-reported (apart from more serious offenses like vehicle theft, residential and commercial burglaries).

For example, a victim might call their local police department to report that sometime overnight an unknown suspect broke into their parked vehicle and took a few items. If there are no suspects, evidence, or investigative leads with which to follow up, an actual crime report might not consistently be taken unless the victim specifically requests one. The incident might be recorded in CAD only (from which UCR data does not pull). However, if the same victim discovers their vehicle has been stolen they will almost certainly report it and a crime report will be generated and reflected in the UCR data. As long as crime reporting/documentation practices remain generally consistent year-to-year, the overall UCR data is still useful for identifying overall crime trends. However, one should heed the FBI's caution against ranking locales "because there are many factors that cause the nature and type of crime to vary from place to place."

(<https://ucr.fbi.gov/ucr-statistics-their-proper-use>).

Other factors that influence law enforcement crime reporting levels (which may vary from agency to agency) include workload and calls for service volume, staffing and resource limitations, policies and procedures, state law (such as mandated reporting of domestic violence), technology and ease of reporting (e.g. citizens' online crime reporting systems). For instance, a department that also employs Police/Community Service Officers may be more likely to routinely take cold, no suspect theft reports than one with only sworn officers available to "ping-pong" from one crime in progress to another.

## **Trends and Conclusions**

This following crime reporting data analysis was generated the same way the 2012 Home Security Shield article was created. Only cities with populations over 20,000 were included. Property crime and violent crime were totaled and then computed per capita based on 1000 residents.

### **2012**

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1. Oakland

2. *Eureka (chances of being a victim of property crime, 71 in 1000 and chance of being a victim of violent crime, 6 in 1000)*

3. Stockton

## **2015**

1. *Eureka (property crime 67 in 1000, violent crime 6 in 1000)*

2. Oakland

3. Palm Springs

## **2016**

1. Oakland

2. *Eureka (property crime 66 in 1000, violent crime 9 in 1000)*

3. Santa Cruz

## **2017**

1. Oakland

2. San Francisco

3. Santa Cruz

4. *Eureka (property crime 60 in 1000, violent crime 9 in 1000)*

In summary, it appears Eureka has consistently been near the top of the charts for overall property and violent crime rates reportable under the UCR, though property crimes are trending downward. Since 2012, violent crime has jumped from 6 in 1000 to 9 in 1000. The national opioid epidemic is one suspected causal factor for this increase, coupled with changes to California laws on crime and punishment and the resulting overcrowded local jails. While per capita statistics can be misleading and should come with a disclaimer, this

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is how the data has frequently been presented. Framed in the proper context, however, historical crime rate data can still have value in identifying trends.



