

The Most Dangerous States in America

You might think that going to California, Texas or New York exposes you to a lot of crime. But in fact it was Tennessee that had the nation's highest violent crime rate last year.

The FBI's latest statewide statistics offer a snapshot of the underside of the 50 states: where violent crime is most likely to occur. According to the FBI, violent crime includes murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. 24/7 Wall St. reviewed the states with the highest rates of violent crime in the country.

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While violent crime rose just under 1% nationally in 2012, the trend for the past 20 years has been steady decline. Crime peaked in the late 1980s, fueled by the crack cocaine epidemic. Beginning in the early 1990s, crime began to decline. Although the exact cause remains unclear, experts have pointed to factors such as better policing, demographic changes, higher incarceration rates, a drop in cocaine use and the introduction of a variety of social programs.

In an interview with 24/7 Wall St., Urban Institute senior fellow John Roman pointed out that the crime decline has not been uniform. It has improved markedly in some large cities, like New York, Dallas and Washington, D.C. However, the decline has been less impressive in cities like Baltimore and Detroit, where economic and racial segregation limit the ability of the poor to move into the middle class.

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The more the population is integrated, Roman explained, the greater the chances of sizable crime declines. Most crime is committed by people at the bottom of the economic totem pole, he said.

The apparent relationship between low income, low education and higher crime rates has been well documented, although identifying the cause and effect is still a matter of debate. It is clear, though, that these states for the most part match the national trend. Of the 10 states with the highest rates of violent crime, eight have lower rates of adults with bachelor's degrees, and most of them had median income levels below the national figure in 2012.

There are notable exceptions to the national trend, however. Alaska, Delaware and Maryland all have higher educational attainment and higher income, but they still make the list. In Maryland and Delaware, this likely has to do with pockets of very high crime in the largest urban areas.

While Maryland has the ninth-highest violent crime rate in the country, it also has the third-lowest poverty rate, the highest median income and one of the highest proportions of adults with a college degree. The reason for this discrepancy is likely the concentration of high crime in Baltimore. The Baltimore metropolitan area also had the ninth highest violent crime rate in the country last year and accounted for nearly a third of all the incidents in the state that year.

On its website, the FBI instructs readers to avoid comparing state violence because rankings tend to be simplistic and ignore factors that influence crime, as well as the different ways crimes are measured and reported. For this reason, Roman cautioned against directly comparing states based on their individual crime rates. However, because the states with the highest and lowest violent crime rates have remained consistent for many years, he believes comparing state ranks was useful. "This exercise is worth doing. I don't know how you make policy without doing this kind of thing."

24/7 Wall St. identified the 10 states with the highest rates of violent crime per 100,000 residents. Using estimated populations and crime incidents from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, which measures incidents of eight types of violent and nonviolent crime for 2012, 24/7 Wall St. calculated the incidence of the four types of violent crime per

100,000 persons for that year: murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault. In addition to crime data, 24/7 Wall St. reviewed income, poverty and education statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2012, the most recent available year.

These are the most dangerous states in America.

10. Oklahoma

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 469.3
- > **Poverty rate:** 17.2%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher:** 23.8%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,401.0 (9th highest)

The number of aggravated assaults in Oklahoma grew by 3.8% in 2012, while they increased just 1.1% nationally. The rate in 2012 came to 337.3 assaults per 100,000 residents, ninth highest among the states. The largest cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, have struggled with poverty and gang issues. Like many of the states with high crime rates, postsecondary educational attainment is low in Oklahoma. Only 23.8% have bachelor's degrees or higher, one of the lowest rates in the country. Oklahoma reported a sharp increase in forcible rape in 2012. FBI data show 1,588 reported rapes, up 12.6% from 2011 and the most since 1994. The incidence of rapes per 100,000 residents reached 41.6 last year, the sixth highest rate in the country.

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9. Maryland

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 476.8
- > **Poverty rate:** 10.3%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher:** 36.9%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 2,753.5 (25th lowest)

Compared to the national trend, Maryland's violent crime ranking should be lower. It has a low poverty rate and a high percentage of people with bachelor's degrees or more. For the most part, the situation has improved recently. The number of violent crimes in the state has fallen for seven straight years. Crime in the city of Annapolis, for example,

was up slightly in 2012 but is still at low levels not seen since the mid-1970s. There were 369 homicides in the state in 2012, down 7.5% from the year before. But the homicide rate — 6.3 per 100,000 in population — is still the seventh highest in the country. A big issue for the state is the heavy concentration of violent crime in and around Baltimore, the largest city. Baltimore’s murder rate — 35 per 100,000 — is the sixth highest in the country. A total of 217 murders occurred in Baltimore in 2012, up 10.2% from 2011.

8. Florida

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 487.1
- > **Poverty rate:** 17.1%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor’s degree or higher:** 26.8%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,276.7 (15th highest)

Supporters of the state’s controversial “stand your ground” law, passed in 2005, believe it is the reason crime in Florida has been falling. But crime rates have fallen steadily for 20 years, dropping 43% since peaking in 1993. Reported rapes have fallen 28.5% since 1993, to levels last seen in 1979. There were just over 1,000 murders in 2012, up 2.5% from 2011, but the total is down 28% from a 1989 peak. High-school graduation rates have risen sharply as crime has dropped, hitting 74.5% in the 2011/2012 school year, up from 56.5% in 2003, according to the Orlando Sentinel. But it is still a laggard nationally, ahead of only a handful of states.

7. Louisiana

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 496.9
- > **Poverty rate:** 19.9%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor’s degree or higher:** 22%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,540.6 (5th highest)

The stark reality of crime in Louisiana is reflected in its murder rate: 10.8 per 100,000. That is the worst in the country and 45% ahead of neighboring Mississippi, which has the second-highest rate at 7.4 per 100,000. Louisiana also has among the highest rates of violent crime and property crime, and the second highest rate of larceny-theft in the nation. The high crime rates are a reflection of the state’s high poverty rate. At 19.9%, it is the third poorest state, ahead of only Mississippi and New Mexico. Of the 495 murders in Louisiana in 2012, 193, or about 40% of the total, occurred in the city of New Orleans

alone. Gun violence is prevalent in the city; some 427 people in New Orleans were shot in 2012, unchanged from 2011.

6. Delaware

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 547.4
- > **Poverty rate:** 12.0%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher:** 29.5%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,340.9 (13th highest)

Delaware cannot be proud that it had the sixth worst violent crime record in 2012. Most of that ranking is due to high crime rates in the poorest neighborhoods of Wilmington, its largest city. But that is not the only problem. Its aggravated assault rate of 342 per 100,000 was the eighth worst nationwide in 2012. Its property crime rate was fifth worst. The high rate may surprise residents, as Delaware is an outlier on many of the trends seen in high crime areas. It has a relatively low poverty rate, as well as one of the highest median household incomes in the country.

5. South Carolina

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 558.8
- > **Poverty rate:** 18.3%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher:** 25.1%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,822.2 (the highest)

South Carolina's 18.3% poverty rate is the ninth worst in the country, and well above the U.S. average of 15.9%. Though it has been transforming itself into a hotbed of manufacturing, with companies such as Boeing and BMW opening manufacturing facilities, South Carolina has the nation's fifth highest violent crime rate. Its murder rate of 6.9 per 100,000 is the fifth worst in the country. Its aggravated assault rate is the third worst. Roughly 25% have bachelor's degrees, among the nation's lowest figures.

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4. New Mexico

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 559.1
- > **Poverty rate:** 20.8%

- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher: 26.1%**
- > **Property crimes per 100,000: 3,600.7 (4th highest)**

For many Americans, New Mexico is Taos, Santa Fe and the big nuclear laboratory at Los Alamos. It is also a poor state. Its violent crime rate is the fourth worst in the country; its forcible rape rate is also fourth worst. It has among the highest rates of drug use in the country, which is known to encourage criminal activity. Its burglary rate is second worst. "We dare not pretend this does not have an effect on our economy or our overall quality of life," former New Mexico legislator Dennis Kintigh wrote in the Albuquerque Journal earlier this year about the levels of violence in the state.

3. Alaska

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000: 603.2**
- > **Poverty rate: 10.1%**
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher: 28.0%**
- > **Property crimes per 100,000: 2,739.4 (24th lowest)**

It may seem incongruous that Alaska, which has a low poverty rate and high levels of high school and college graduates, would be among the states with the worst crime rates. It has among the worst violent crime rates in part because of its forcible rape rate: 79.7 per 100,000 residents, the nation's highest rate. (Next is South Dakota, with a rate of 70.2 per 100,000.) Also disturbing, a 2010 study suggests that 37% of women who live in Alaska say they've "suffered some form of sexual assault in their lives," the Anchorage Daily News reported. Alaska is also second in aggravated assaults. While rape and assault rates are high, other crime levels are average.

2. Nevada

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000: 607.6**
- > **Poverty rate: 16.4%**
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher: 22.4%**
- > **Property crimes per 100,000: 2,809.4 (23rd highest)**

Nevada ranks among the worst in the country for its robbery rate, motor-vehicle theft rate and aggravated assault rate. It also ranks high in categories like burglaries and forcible rape. Much of the crime, state officials maintain, comes from the swarms of

tourists who visit Las Vegas, Reno and other cities with casinos and related entertainment. Factor out the casino traffic in Reno, and local crime rates are similar to the rest of the nation, Emmanuel Barthe, a criminal justice professor at the University of Nevada Reno, told the Reno Gazette-Journal. Nevada also has among the lowest high school and college graduation rates.

1. Tennessee

- > **Violent crimes per 100,000:** 643.6
- > **Poverty rate:** 17.9%
- > **Pct. of population with bachelor's degree or higher:** 24.3%
- > **Property crimes per 100,000:** 3,371.4 (10th highest)

Tennessee has the dubious distinction of having the worst violent crime rate in the country. The state was among the top 10 in the country for murders and robberies and was first for aggravated assaults, with an estimated 479.6 for every 100,000 residents. Tennessee's 41,550 violent crimes in 2012 were up 6.8% from 2011 but down 10% from 2007, when there were 46,380 violent crimes. There were 388 murders in the state in 2012, up for a second straight year. To be fair, Tennessee's violent streak is concentrated in some of the major metropolitan areas. Memphis's violent crime rate was the nation's fifth worst, while Nashville's was the 18th worst. Like many states with high violent crime, poverty in Tennessee is acute, and high school and college graduation rates are lower than most of the country.