

Washington DC More Dangerous than Iraq?

The statement below has been circulating on the internet since about 2007. Because of the odd periods and numbers quoted, one cannot be sure of the period being considered, but it seems likely to be 2003 to 2005:

"If you consider that there has been an average of 160,000 [US] troops in the Iraq theater of operations during the past 22 months, and a total of 2112 deaths, that gives a firearm death rate of 60 per 100,000 soldiers.

The firearm death rate in Washington, DC is 80.6 per 100,000 for the same period. That means you are about 25 per cent more likely to be shot and killed in the U.S. capital, which has some of the strictest gun control laws in the U.S., than you are in Iraq.

Conclusion: **The U.S. should pull out of Washington."**

Unravelling the Statistical Illusion

The reality is that this intriguing claimed end result (that Washington DC is/was more dangerous than Iraq) was achieved through several tricks:

- partly by mixing cause of death (e.g. explosion was a very substantial cause in Iraq, while knives, strangling and bludgeoning play a substantial role in Washington);
- partly by using time periods other than 1 year;
- but, above all, by treating the average number of US troop in Iraq as a monthly average and so effectively boosting the "population" by a factor of 12 – and thus "reducing" the violent death rate per 100,000 by a factor of 12.

The **total** murder rate, i.e. not just firearm murders, claimed for Washington, of 80.6 per 100,000 is of the right order for a 22 month period at that time, as it equates to an annual murder rate of about 44/100,000. The population of Washington DC is about 550,000.

Washington DC has had the dubious distinction of vying for the Champion Murder City title in the US for many decades, certainly since long before I started studying the subject in '79. It was reported as 35/100,000 in 2005, the lowest that it had been for 20 years. 15 years before it was running at double that.

Washington DC's murder rate is both horrific and statistically interesting. The city has had a total ban on civilian ownership of pistols and an effective ban on every type of firearm, since 1975. As soon as the ban was introduced the murder rate started climbing rapidly, reaching a peak in about '91, when it was about 8 **times** higher than the US average and 40 or so **times** higher than, e.g. Vermont. Vermont has never had any licensing or registration (like the UK pre-1903); so it is perfectly legal to carry a firearm, concealed or otherwise, without permissions or paperwork of any kind – and they consistently enjoy lower murder, rape and assault rates than most of the US, or the UK, or Europe.

In 2008 the Supreme Court of the USA struck down the firearms ban in Washington DC and in 2009 the murder rate dropped 25%, to the lowest rate that its citizens have enjoyed for over 40 years. The brilliant result of a perception that victims might fight back?

The Real Comparative Violent Death Rates

Returning to Iraq, the violent death rate for US soldiers over the 22 months period was about 768/100,000 pa, or about 20 times the rate in Washington DC.