



## Continuing Trend, Dade Crime Rate Falls Again Police Director Calls County 'Safest'

By: Arnold Markowitz

Crime rates are still going down in Miami and Miami-Dade County, with fewer serious offenses – homicide and holdups in particular – committed last year than at any other time since the 1960s and '70s, city and county police departments announced Tuesday.

The decline generally follows recent Florida and nationwide patterns of year-to-year reductions in crime, but county Police Director Carlos Alvarez said there is more to it than that:

"What I am here to tell you is that the trend in unincorporated Dade County is greater overall for Class One crimes than in the nation or the state. We are surpassing national trends ... this isn't just movement that occurred overnight. We've been working very hard to keep these crime rates down. I would compare unincorporated Dade County with any other area of the same size and demographics, and I would say we're the safest."

Class One crimes are homicide, sexual battery, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and auto theft, and all declined in both the county and the city of Miami. Violent crimes – the first four on that list – dropped in the county from 18,808 in 1996 to 12,676 last year, a four-year fall of nearly one-third. In the city the same offenses dropped even more: 36 percent – from 11,994 crimes in 1996 to 7,611 last year.

For the average person, that means a better chance to get through a year without becoming a victim.

Unincorporated Miami-Dade's estimated population in 1999 was 1,114,000, or about three times as many people as Miami's 389,000. Both are growing. Yet the county's '99 score for homicide – murder, manslaughter and other killings – was 106, the lowest since the 1976 count of 41.

"Our population was a lot different

then," said county Mayor Alex Penelas, who announced the Dade data at a press conference in police headquarters. "In 1976 the population of unincorporated Miami-Dade County was 659,000, roughly half of what it is today. Yet we see this continuing decline. In 1999 the homicide rate per 100,000 residents was 9.5. In 1976, it was 12.3."

On Tuesday, the city of Miami released more data that generally mirrors the countywide trend of fewer serious crimes year by year. For example, robberies in the city declined 16 percent from 1998 to '99, to 3,183 cases, the lowest since 1978. Burglaries dropped 7 percent to 7,283, the fewest since before 1970. Aggravated assaults were down 23 percent.



In Miami-Dade police jurisdiction, robberies in 1999 were down 13 percent from 1998; burglaries slipped about 15 percent.

"This is the lowest we've seen since 1979," Penelas said. "In 1979, you had 433 robberies per 100,000 people. In 1999 the rate was 324 per 100,000 people. Yet the population of the unincorporated area in 1979 was 35 or 40 percent less than it is today."

Penelas cited FBI reports showing robbery rates are higher in Orlando, Los Angeles, New York, Houston and Washington, D.C.

Alvarez said his department devotes a lot of effort to robberies, because "robbers are the most violent criminals

in this community. Robbers will shoot you for your watch, they'll shoot you for \$5 in your pocket. You're addressing homicides by addressing robberies. If you concentrate on robbers, I think you have a definite impact."

Sex crimes, ranging from lewd acts to rape, also decreased. The county reported a three-year decline from 1,040 cases in 1997 to 935 in '98 and 895 last year, a three-year drop of 14 percent.

Penelas' report emphasized crime decreases since 1996 when he helped to secure \$32 million for Operation Safe Streets, Clean Sweep and other crime-fighting schemes.

For Miami, City Manager Donald Warshaw and Police Chief William O'Brien credited crime prevention plans like "Do The Right Thing" and "The Non-Violence Project." Both city and county departments also attribute crime decline to the revival of 'community policing,' a good-old-days patrol style that put neighborhoods and beat cops on close terms. ■

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