

Comparison of Violent Crime Rates at Sea and on Shore

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Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) requested that I update my previous analysis of allegations of serious crime statistics related to cruise lines sailing in and out of U.S. ports. Specifically, my task was to compare the cruise industry with the U.S. mainland in terms of the rates of homicide, sexual assault and assault resulting in serious bodily injury between January 2015 and June 2017. While I use the same general approach as in my earlier work, certain data limitations require slight modifications to the method for performing the calculations

All reports of missing U.S. nationals and allegations of serious crimes that occur aboard cruise ships originating from or ending in U.S. ports are required to be reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under the Cruise Vessel Security & Safety Act of 2010 (CVSSA). Pursuant to the CVSSA (Title 46 U.S.C section 3507(g)(4)(A)), quarterly statistical tabulations of incident categories (specifically, homicide, suspicious deaths, missing U.S. nationals, kidnapping, assault with serious bodily injury, firing or tampering with vessel, theft of over \$10,000, and sexual assault) are now published on the U.S. Department of Transportation website. The quarterly reports through 2015 reflect only those incidents for which the investigation has been completed, while reports for 2016 and 2017 include all incidents regardless of investigation status.

The specific crime categories of interest include homicide, sexual assault, an assault resulting in serious bodily harm (e.g., aggravated assault) because these three have exact or similar parallel measures in FBI crime statistics pertaining to law enforcement agencies within the U.S. For calculating crime rates, the five cruise lines that reported consistently in 2015 and the eight that reported consistently in 2016 and 2017 were used. These companies represent 90 percent of the cruising population.

For the present analysis, it was not possible to obtain data on passenger counts and crew figures directly from the cruise lines for the timeframe. As an alternative, published itinerary data from 2017 were employed and adjusted for changes in the industry since 2015. Total counts of passengers and crew across all sailings were

adjusted by an estimated average cruise length of 6.38 days in order to annualize the overall cruise population. The final estimates of the annualized population of passengers and crew were very close to figures used in earlier years based on data obtained directly from the cruise lines, providing validation of the alternative approach employed here.

As with previous analyses, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports were used to benchmark the calculated rates of violent crime aboard cruise ships. The aggregate rates of homicide, forcible rape and aggravated assault for U.S. cities with populations between 250,000 and 499,999 were used for the comparison. This population grouping was chosen, as before, so as roughly to match the overall annualized population for the cruise industry (of approximately 375,000 passengers and crew).

Whereas the CVSSA and FBI definitions for homicide and serious/aggravated assault are comparable, the CVSSA sexual assault classification is much broader than the FBI’s forcible rape category. However, based on the analytic results below, the conclusions are unaffected by the misaligned definitions. In fact, if identical measures of sex crime were available, the gap between sea and land would only be widened.

The table below displays the cruise and mainland rates of homicide, sexual assault/forcible rape and aggravated assault by year. Clearly, the rates for the cruise industry are much lower than for land for all three offense categories. Note that the cruise crime figures increased from 2015 to 2016 (e.g., a fourfold jump in the rate of sexual assault and aggravated assaults) because of the move to include all reported incidents rather than just those for which the investigation had been completed. Even with this shift in approach, the rates of victimization onboard cruise ships remain a small fraction of the counterpart statistic for land.

Violent Crime Rates per 100,000 Population for the Cruise Industry and U.S. Mainland Cities

Time Period	<i>Homicide Rate</i>		<i>Sexual Assault Rate</i>		<i>Aggravated Assault Rate</i>	
	Cruises	Land	Cruises	Land	Cruises	Land
Jan-Dec 2015	0.0	10.9	3.5	56.1	0.9	412.6
Jan-Dec 2016	0.0	12.3	16.6	61.6	3.8	431.6
Jan-June 2017	0.0	NA	18.0	NA	4.0	NA

As demonstrated once again, travel by sea aboard commercial cruise ships is exceptionally safe in terms of the risks associated with violent criminal activity. This level of safety is particularly noteworthy given the high density of passengers and crew in relatively small space, the large number of closed quarters and the consumption of alcohol, all elements that are ordinarily considered risk factors. It would appear, therefore, that the cruise lines do an exceptional job of securing and providing surveillance in addition to screening their populations and generally providing a high level of security aboard ships. Finally, the population of Americans who choose to vacation on cruise ships is demographically distinct, contributing to a safer environment onboard ship. And, of course, the confined perimeter of a cruise ship, particularly when at sea, would make it difficult for an individual who is contemplating an aggressive act to make an escape. While no vacation destination is completely free of risk, cruising is clearly a relatively safe option.