

## MICHAEL OLESKER

# Murder rate overshadows Baltimore's accomplishments

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On that July morning when Frederick Bealefeld was handed control of the Baltimore Police Department, the blood ran heavy through a lot of city streets.

The homicide count was already up to 180, and only the

routine miracles performed in hospital emergency rooms kept the figure that low.

Now, as we head toward the closing days of 2007, the body count has reached 277.

Meaning, since Bealefeld took over, only — the word “only” is used ironically, but still — only 97 killings have occurred.

And the number of nonfatal shootings is down dramatically from a year ago.

In the city of Baltimore, this is known as progress.

We take our bows wherever we can.

But what's heartening in this final week of the year are measures far broader than the killing rate and far wider than the growing sense of general civility that the dipping homicide number implies.

In a State of the Region study released recently by **The Greater Baltimore Committee**, the Baltimore metro area looked remarkably healthy in a lot of areas, as compared with 20 regions around the country.

In 105 benchmark categories measuring quality of life, business vitality and economic health, the Baltimore region scored Top 5 rankings in 24 categories.

And Bottom 5 in 15 categories.

You can guess where the city's homicides landed the region.

But look at some of the good news: Academic research and development expenditures topped \$1.8 billion.

That's tops in the country — for the second straight year — and it underscores the growth of bioscience and technology.

Where are they creating a lot of the new biotech labs in the city? In the very shadows of Johns Hopkins Hospital, in East Baltimore.

You look at the modern history of so many of those mournful streets, you've seen poverty, and houses falling down, and drugs and gunplay, and people standing on street corners in the middle of the day because they have no jobs.

Now you see the organized destruction of entire blocks of those rotting old houses, and plans for new housing, and the arrival of the biotech labs.

And those labs bring a wide variety of jobs, technical and otherwise, and a sense of hope where little has existed for a long time.

What a concept: jobs, instead of guns. Livable housing, instead of rot.

The new report also calls the Baltimore region Top 5 in per capita personal income growth, in household income, in home ownership rates — and in the price of houses.

Not all of this is the city's gain, but plenty of it is.

And what's particularly striking is the overall ratings come after a long, long siege where all suburban gains seemed to reflect a simultaneous drop in the city's fortunes.

That's no longer the case.

We are becoming a region where we share similar triumphs and similar troubles.

The report comes at a time when Baltimore City has finally stopped its half-century population slide.

Who's moving in?

People who can afford to pay the high prices on all those new houses that are being built. And people who are employed in education and health services.

Those two fields are also Top 5 categories for the Baltimore area in the new study.

So are these: entrepreneurial dynamism, physicians, minority-owned firms, air quality improvement and a low number of government units.

The region ranked third in percentage of violent crime reduction and 10th for property crime reduction over the past three years.

All of which is heartening news for the entire metro area but leaves us with the enduring bad news.

For all its improvement in crime, the area still ranks 19th out of 20.

Also in the Bottom 5: Manufacturing employment and growth, housing starts, overall air quality, leisure and hospital employment, information em-

ployment and infant mortality rate.

But the homicide count continues to bring headlines.

That it's confined mainly to certain neighborhoods is incidental. That it's heavily drug-related is no consolation. That it's sometimes mindless, hopeless teens going after other teens in fits of rage is a constant source of heartache.

It says to all those outside the city limits: That place isn't like our own. That place is dangerous.

But now, as we enter the last days of the year, maybe the message begins to change.

The **Greater Baltimore Committee** report says the whole region's doing better — including the city.

And the homicide figures since Commissioner Bealefeld's arrival, dreadful as they are, heartbreaking as they are, might be a hint of better news to come.

