

## Downtown Atlanta crime falls 19%

By RHONDA COOK

Atlanta is once again on the defensive, trying to dispel the perception that its downtown is rife with crime.

The effort comes as the city's Police Department prepares to announce today that major crime in Atlanta overall — murder, armed robbery, rape, burglary and larceny — dropped 12 percent last year. Crime in the downtown area declined 19 percent last year from 2003.

"It's time that people's perception of crime in downtown gets replaced with facts and the truth," said A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress and the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District. "The folklore needs to go."

Robinson and others in the city criticized a Cobb County lawmaker's suggestion Thursday that people who visit Atlanta may need to carry guns.

State Rep. Bobby Franklin (R-Marietta) has proposed legislation that would permit anyone with a concealed-weapons permit to carry a handgun into any Georgia restaurant that generates more than 50 percent of its income from food. Franklin pointed to Atlanta as being one of the places where such a law would be justified.

"What if someone comes to Atlanta to stay at the Ritz-Carlton [hotel] and they have to walk a couple of blocks to a restaurant?" Franklin asked. "They'd like to be able to carry that gun in downtown Atlanta at night."

But year-end preliminary statistics for Atlanta, especially for the downtown area, show a steady decrease in crime.

"Downtown gets an unfair reputation for being unsafe," said Maj. Lane Hagin, commander of the Atlanta Police Department's Zone 5, which encompasses parts of downtown and Midtown.

"It's really a much safer place than it's given credit for," Hagin said. "The people that come to Atlanta, if they are victimized, it's going to be a property crime."

One common crime is car break-ins, but even that category was down last year.

Citywide, there was a slight increase in the number of aggravated assaults, from 4,360 in 2003 to 4,414 in 2004. (Aggravated assault is a broad category that can include anything from threatening remarks to striking someone.) But even with the increase in aggravated assaults, overall crime in all major categories fell 12 percent.

Franklin said he was not picking on Atlanta but used the city as an example because the state Capitol is downtown.

"Crime might be down, but it's not gone," the legislator said. "I have no way of verifying what their crime stats are for any particular block of downtown."

City officials credit the decline to an increased police presence downtown. For example, Hagin said three precincts — at Underground Atlanta, on Auburn Avenue and in Midtown — were staffed around the clock with more officers who can be deployed to deal with problems.

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Late last year, Morgan Quitno, a Kansas firm that has ranked cities based on their crime rates for 11 years, put Atlanta in third-worst place, behind Camden, N.J., and Detroit.

In 1996, with the Summer Olympics approaching, then-Georgia Attorney General Mike Bowers said Atlanta's streets were more dangerous than those in war-torn Sarajevo, Bosnia.

And in 1989, a Washington, D.C., study described Atlanta as the nation's most dangerous city, with 217 murders reported the year before.

Atlanta police data show that there were 113 homicides last year — 24 percent fewer than the number recorded in 2003.

"There are facts and there are perceptions, and what you're dealing with is perceptions," said Robert Friedmann, a professor of criminal justice at Georgia State University.

"It [crime] has been dropping for the last 10 years," Friedmann said. "But generally in Georgia, crime is starting to bottom out. Atlanta may be an exception."

— Staff writer Jim Tharpe contributed to this article.