

DOWNTOWN ADVOCATES PAINT PEACEFUL PICTURE

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When the Georgia Aquarium opens this fall, A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), expects that many tourists will come downtown for the first time since the 1996 Olympics.

While he has them in the neighborhood, he wants them to realize that crime is not as big a problem as common stereotypes might indicate. As part of its "Imagine Downtown" campaign, CAP is releasing downtown crime statistics every six months. Robinson said they will release the data, even if it's negative, to communicate more accurate information about downtown's crime.

"I'm tired of listening to [the stereotypes of high downtown crime] as an excuse for people who use it to say bad things," he said.

So far, the data has painted a picture that might debunk some common fears. CAP's research indicates that while downtown holds as many as 200,000 people during the daytime, it accounts for 8 percent of overall city crime. The data also finds that while 113 homicides were committed throughout the city in 2004, only 3 were committed downtown. There were also 266 rapes citywide, 16 of which occurred downtown. While those crimes are considered violent, CAP's data shows that 88 percent of downtown's crime is nonviolent, including crimes such as burglary, larceny and car thefts. Robinson said this data allows leaders and police to more effectively target their efforts.

"That's the beauty of these statistics. We shine a light on where the problems are. We can really target our efforts when we have good data," he said.

CAP's data differ from previously released crime statistics, most of which consider data from the police department's Zone 5, which includes an area much larger than downtown. To find more specific data, CAP researched crime statistics for Beat 506, which covers downtown in Zone 5.

The findings come at a pivotal time for Atlanta's central business district, which will open itself later this year to tourists visiting the Georgia Aquarium. Tourism is expected to increase even more in 2007 when the World of [Coca-Cola](#) opens next door to the aquarium.

"Our hope is that when people come to visit, their perception of their city and their region will be more positive than the myths," Robinson said.

But the myths may be harder to play down than Robinson expected. On March 11, Brian Nichols opened fire in downtown's Fulton County Courthouse, killing three and wounding a deputy. A series of carjackings downtown by Nichols terrorized the city. The national media set up shop on a downtown corner to tell the story to the country. Meanwhile, thousands of tourists were in town for the SEC tournament at Phillips Arena, just blocks from where the crime spree began.

With so many tourists in town, the incident could have the potential of giving the city a black eye, just as it prepares to launch numerous major attractions. But Robinson said he thinks the long-term impact will be minimal.

"In the short term, there's probably going to be fallout. But people around the nation realize that this is a freak and tragic thing that doesn't happen often," he said.

Later, Nichols assaulted two people and killed a U.S. customs agent in Buckhead before taking a female hostage in Gwinnett County and surrendering to police.

While crime has gone down in downtown, it has also decreased in Zone 5. Rapes decreased by 25 percent in 2004 while robberies decreased 16 percent. Major Lane Hagin, the Zone 5 commander, said that the decreases in Zone 5 and downtown are simply the result of better policing.

"The department has a system of accountability for all commanders and we've also received additional officers and extended our hours at Underground," Hagin said.

Police will also introduce mounted officers to help manage crowds.

Robinson said he understood some fears of downtown are deeply held.

But Hagin said he hopes the image of a safer downtown is beginning to click with the public. "We still have problems but there has been tremendous progress made."