

Okinawa crime statistics contradict community perceptions on Guam

By David Allen, Stars and Stripes
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CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Americans on Okinawa under the status of forces agreement continue to commit fewer crimes per capita than the Okinawan community, according to statistics provided by Okinawa Prefectural Police.

But that's not the perception among the people of Guam, where 8,000 Marines and their families are expected to move from Okinawa by 2014.

In 2005, 6,675 felonies resulted in arrests on Okinawa. Only 66 cases involved Americans here under the SOFA. And of the 4,346 people arrested for those felonies, just 65 were U.S. servicemembers, their dependents or civilian workers.

“According to statistics provided by the Okinawa Prefectural Police for 2005, the number of crimes committed by U.S. personnel, consisting of servicemembers and military dependents, continues to remain proportionately low compared to the overall crime rate on the island,” said Marine spokesman 1st Lt. Clint Gebke.

Of the 1,407,613 people living in Okinawa prefecture, 42,570 — or about 3 percent — are Americans connected with the U.S. military. Gebke pointed out that the 2005 statistics show 0.98 percent of the total serious crimes on Okinawa were linked to Americans and 1.5 percent of the people arrested were SOFA status personnel.

Despite the statistics, some Guam residents, citing news reports of high-profile crimes by Americans on Okinawa, say they are afraid that a large influx of Marines to their small island will increase Guam's crime rate.

Their fears are fueled by newspaper stories on the realignment of

U.S. troops in Japan that routinely carry paragraphs like this one in a recent Associated Press report: "Okinawans have long complained of crime, crowding and noise associated with the Marine bases."

It's enough to prompt Debbie Quinata, a leader of the indigenous Guam group Chamorro Nation, to come out strongly against the transfer of Marines, claiming, according to press accounts, that the Marines will "have a negative impact on our society."

"Crime rates will increase," she told Kyodo News in May.

Meanwhile, anti-base group Okinawa Women Acting Against Military Violence said the Marines being transferred to Guam will be mostly administrative personnel and not the combat troops they claim commit most of the off-base crimes.

"We are not sure whether [the move will be] a good impact to Okinawan society because all the crimes committed by U.S. soldiers — 80 percent of those crimes, including rape — is conducted by young soldiers," Suzuyo Takazato, a former Naha City Council member and chairperson of the Okinawa group, told Radio Australia recently. "But they are remaining."

Nevertheless, she predicted a rise in crime on Guam because of the influx of Marines, citing fear in the Okinawa community because of "just a countless number of rape crimes."

But the statistics released by Okinawa police tell a different story, at least for the recent past. Of 143 crimes listed as heinous — murder, robbery, rape, arson, abduction and sexual assault — in 2005, just four involved SOFA personnel, resulting in two arrests. All four involved robbing Okinawa cab drivers.

And for the first six months of this year, the crime rate involving SOFA personnel has remained steady, with 28 crimes resulting in 30 arrests, compared with 26 crimes resulting in 27 arrests during the first six months of 2005. Only one case was classified as heinous — an armed cab robbery by two Marines on Camp Foster Jan. 7.

Marines, in particular, commit an even lower proportion of crimes, the statistics indicate. Just more than half of the active-duty servicemembers on the island — 12,520 of 22,470 — are Marines.

"SOFA status personnel include civilians and servicemembers from other branches of service, not just the Marine Corps," Gebke said. "So the crime rates for Marine Corps personnel are even lower."

“Marines are taught from the first moments of basic training to abide by our core values of honor, courage and commitment,” he added. “By far, the vast majority of Marines respect and abide by both the Uniform Code of Military Justice and civilian and local laws. Those Marines who break the law are few and far between, and they are dealt with in an appropriate manner by the chain of command and the Marine Corps.”

Chiyomi Sumida contributed to this report.

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