



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Safe at sea

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment August 7, 2013 11:00 AM

The cruise industry has been a favorite target for Congress and the media whenever bad things happen on the high seas, even though these occurrences are fairly rare. The latest attack from Washington, and [Sen. Jay Rockefeller](#) (D-WV) in particular, focuses on the risk of criminal victimization on board cruise ships that carry millions of vacationers every year.

As a consultant to the [Cruise Lines International Association](#) (CLIA), I recently examined [crime incident data](#) for the three largest cruise companies, which together represent nearly 90 percent of the industry, along with their crew and passenger counts adjusted for time on-board ship. I compared the rate of violent crime aboard cruise ships for 2010-12 against benchmarks for dry land drawn from FBI crime statistics for the only three offense categories for which comparable data are available--homicide, rape and serious assault.

As it happened, there were no homicides aboard the vessels operated by the cruise companies that combined had served nearly 45 million passengers during the three-year time frame. There were 74 reported rapes over the three-year period; but without minimizing the seriousness of any of these incidents, the rate per 100,000 was less than one-quarter the rate for the U.S. overall. Finally, the assault rate on cruise ships was a small fraction of that on land.

Several factors appear to contribute to the low rate of violence on cruise ships:

1. Cruise passengers are hardly a cross-section of the U.S. population. The age distribution and socioeconomic standing of the cruise line clientele tend to limit the number of passengers with criminal intent.
2. In addition to passenger self-selection is the type of screening performed by the cruise lines themselves. While most vacation venues do background checks on prospective employees, cruise lines also submit passenger manifests to both U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the U.S. Coast Guard for screening.
3. Passengers and crew are searched for weapons and other contraband every time they board ship. In fact, except for only extraordinary circumstances (e.g., security details protecting certain dignitaries), passengers are not permitted to carry guns, even off-duty police personnel.

4. Although cruise ships do not have immediate access to law enforcement while at sea, the level of security and surveillance provided by the cruise lines is relatively high compared to that of many other types of vacation destinations.
5. Last, and certainly not least important, the confined space on cruise ships limits the opportunity for would-be offenders to attempt a quick getaway. They certainly can't escape apprehension by jumping overboard or making off in a stolen lifeboat.

By any measure, travel by sea aboard commercial cruise lines is quite safe in terms of the risks associated with criminal activity. This level of safety is particularly noteworthy given the high density of passengers and crew in relatively small spaces, the large number of closed quarters and the level of alcohol consumption -- all elements that are ordinarily considered risk factors.

Virtually no tourist destination can offer an ironclad guarantee of immunity from criminal activity, of course. Tourists should always maintain a certain degree of care and common sense wherever they go, be it sailing around Caribbean aboard a luxury liner, relaxing at an all-inclusive island beach resort in the Mediterranean, or enjoying a weekend get-away in Las Vegas or Orlando. Among the many vacation options for families and travelers of all ages, however, cruising appears to be one of the safest.