

# Miami — A Vision of Our Future?

by Ellen Sugarman

According to *Travel and Leisure* magazine it is “the most unfriendly city in America.” *Fodor’s International* says it’s the country’s “most unsafe” destination. And *George* dubbed it the “most corrupt city in America.” Judging from these and other “Wish you weren’t here!” postcards, America’s long honeymoon with Miami seems to be over, a casualty of the city’s serial political scandals, a history of corruption in high places, rampant crime and a chilling climate of alienation and violence.

Unless you’re living or traveling there, none of this might seem to matter except that Miami also may be the nation’s capital of multiculturalism, a showcase for the demographic bouillabaisse the country seems destined to become — and a harbinger of the consequences of dramatic change.

Former Miami city commissioner Humberto Hernandez recently pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bank, wire and mail fraud — crimes for which he could be sentenced to as many as 14 years in

prison. In March, Mayor Xavier Suarez was booted out of office after just four months when a state investigation found extensive voter fraud. Suarez was dubbed “Mayor Loco” by some for his occasional erratic behavior, including his onetime threat to sue the *Miami Herald* if it didn’t improve its coverage of him. Replacing Suarez with Joe Carollo didn’t end the high jinks at city hall: Carollo launched an aggressive campaign to rid the place of Suarez cronies by firing the city manager — three separate times — even as the city commission kept reinstating him.

State and federal corruption fighters have real job security in Miami, thanks to the nearly 300 city or Dade County officials already indicted, a list that seems to grow longer daily. This year and last, entire city departments have come under scrutiny. For instance, the Miami-Dade building department has been cited by a grand jury for failing to enforce the building codes, taking kickbacks for permits and ignoring serious flaws in a large construction project. Director Lee Martin, Chief Inspector Carlos Valdez and Assistant Director Rewinaldo Villar have been indicted (all three deny the charges) and removed from their positions. Valdes also was charged with operating his own construction business while on the county payroll and greasing the skids by inspecting

his own jobs.

Last November, a *Miami Herald* team investigating county road projects discovered that more than \$1 million had been paid for “phantom road work” which never was performed. The paper also found “staggering overcharges” for other work, including one six-figure bill that had been paid twice. Moreover, *Herald* reporters found that no inspections had been performed on some work and that records had been falsified. As a result of the revelations, officials were fired and an audit was conducted. Contractors blamed unreliable subcontractors; the county blamed “computer glitches.”

Little wonder that the city boasts the lowest credit rating in the country next to Washington. A year ago, Standard & Poor’s responded to the city’s \$69 million deficit by giving its debt the equivalent of junk-bond status. [The late] Florida Democratic Governor Lawton Chiles placed Miami’s finances under the control of a state oversight board. And [in August 1998], with a city deficit hovering at \$30 million and a budget proposal dismissed by members of the control board as “an insult to our intelligence,” the oversight panel gave Miami an ultimatum: Clean up your act or the state will take over city operations!

Everyone complains, yet so far no one has come up with a solution

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to the political corruption and greed that critics say are gripping Miami. A few are breaking the politically correct silence to blame at least some of the problem on the city's ethnic divisions. Dario Moreno, a professor of political science at Miami International University, incurred the wrath of fellow Hispanics when he went on the CBS News magazine *60 Minutes* in January [1998] and criticized Miami's Cuban community for the city's corruption. Today Moreno believes the situation is getting better, crediting the *Herald*, in part, for motivating the change.

"After years of denial, now with all the indictments and the thing with

crook."

Miami's Cuban community, which pulls most of the city's political strings and a lot of the purse strings as well, has been vocal of late in calling for an end to the corruption. In June, Cuban business leaders held a *mesa redonda* (round table) to try to find a solution. And Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Panellas recently appointed Paul Phillips as "ethics czar" to polish the county's tarnished image with ethics training for county employees and stricter controls on lobbyists.

But Miamians are skeptical. Elena Diaz, a Cuban-American whose parents immigrated to Miami

when she was a baby says, "This is the way it was in Cuba before Fidel Castro. I heard my parents talk about it: that country was so corrupt. Corruption's what actually destroyed it and now they're doing the same thing

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the mayor, the city has come to the decision that it does have a problem with corruption," Moreno tells *Insight*. "After years of silence, the business community is beginning to create a civic culture of no tolerance. If people take a cynical view, then politicians will no longer be able to play the ethnic card." Moreno is referring to Cuban officials who've gone on Hispanic television and radio to claim they're victims of racial prejudice. "One of the reasons people supported corrupt politicians was ethnic loyalty," according to Moreno: "He may be a crook, but he's *our*

here."

Martin L., a business man who spent most of his 60 years in Miami, doesn't agree that the city's corruption began with the exodus from Cuba. "The rednecks running the city in the old days were just as corrupt," he says. "When the Cubans came here the accents changed and the names changed — the corruption didn't. Miami was always that kind of place," he recalls, "a city where anything could be bought; a frontier city, new and dynamic, build it quick and get rich."

And as for voter fraud?

"Nothing new there either," says Martin L. "It was well known that there were men in the black community, very powerful people, who made a living just buying votes."

Meanwhile, other residents complain that the quality of life has eroded because of the sea change in demographics. Retirees and "snow birds" who came here 30 or 40 years ago, lured by the city's climate and conviviality, find themselves in a dramatically different place — one they say often seems to have more in common with a banana republic than a great American city.

Mary Cohen, a woman in her seventies who has lived in Miami for 30 years, puts it this way: "My God! I no longer live in America. Would you believe it, in Miami I'm a minority." Today Miami is 55 percent Hispanic, 21 percent black, and 24 percent white, a largely segregated melting pot that often seems on the verge of boiling over.

"Everybody's angry here, everyone wants to fight," says Naomi Wood, a 35-year-old painter who moved to Miami three years ago. "The roads are impossible. Did you see the way people drive? They're so hostile!"

Language barriers may be further dividing the city. English-only speakers complain that often they can't be understood. Bilingualism frequently is required to get a job. The *Herald* publishes a Spanish-language edition, and Spanish-language radio and TV stations recently eclipsed the English stations in overall ratings.

In addition, economic factors almost certainly are exacerbating

demographic tensions. The pay scale in Miami is one of the lowest of any major city, according to Department of Labor statistics, and wages there have gone down in the last decade, while most of the rest of the country's pay was increasing. Thus, working-class blacks, Hispanics and whites are locked in a bitter struggle over jobs. One often hears the complaint that "these people" (meaning newly arrived aliens) will work for nothing.

Yet reducing the city's socioeconomic tensions, and bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots often seems a low priority. Miami has a dozen municipal swimming pools, for example, but 10 of them are open during only two months of the year. That is because its parks and recreation budget is just \$7 million — in a city that just budgeted \$200 million for a new performing arts center.

As the gulf deepens between the haves and have-nots, and communications break down between blacks, whites, Hispanics,

etc., the city becomes more volatile and dangerous. By now its violent crime rate is legendary, highlighted by brutal attacks on tourists, and so wanton that Miami's perps" have helped add new crimes — including carjacking, drive-by shootings, home invasion — to the national police argot. According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, in 1997 Dade County had 305 murders, 1,274 rapes, 12,809 robberies and 21,592 aggravated assaults — that's an increase of 4,282 crimes from 1996 to 1997.

Writer Hillary Hemingway was born in Miami and had every intention of raising her daughter there, until one day she pulled up to a stop sign and a crack addict forced his way into her car. Hillary escaped the attack by driving into a tree, but the incident prompted the Hemingways to put their house on the market and move to a safer place on Florida's west coast.

It's no secret that drugs contribute heavily to Miami's crime

problem. Since the 1970s, the city has been numero uno in drug trafficking, and for three decades Miamians have enjoyed an era of "trickle down" economic benefits based on narcodollars. "Ask any officer on the street who answers calls for domestic violence, assault, battery, violent crimes, and they'll tell you there's a nexus to drug use," explains Jim Chambliff, chief investigations in the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Miami office. "Because of our geographic location, Miami is a prime transshipment site in the U.S. Just the fact that these drugs are coming through our community is a factor" in the corruption.

If Miami is to clean up its image, observers say it will have to address just about every problem in the book: corruption, racism, poverty and drugs. And if it fails? The implications are ominous not just for Miamians, but for all Americans who may see in this city's turmoil the dark mosaic of a troubled future.