

Karachi Nightmare: A killing quotient

Govt began Rangers operation in Sept 2013; a peer reviewed spatial study of killings in Karachi recorded a 12 percent decline in 2014, followed by declines of 50 percent in 2015 and 42 percent in 2016; the number of locations reporting killings also contracted; World Bank says between 55 and 80 percent of women in Karachi experienced sexual harassment on public transport

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Karachi led Dhaka by 25 points on infrastructure, 12 on healthcare and eight on education in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index 2026. These advantages added 8.2 points to Karachi's overall score. Dhaka was 25 points ahead of Karachi on stability and 5 points ahead on culture and environment. After weighted aggregates, Karachi finished only 0.7 points ahead of Dhaka: 43 against 42. It ranked 170th among 173 cities, one place above Dhaka.

Karachi received the same stability score when organised violence was rising in 2011, when it fell sharply in 2014 and more recently in 2020 and 2026. Its overall score rose from 40.9 in 2011 and 2014 to 43 this year. The larger sample makes rank comparisons less reliable. EIU assessed 140 cities in 2011 and 2014 and 173 in 2026.

The security conditions behind those scores changed substantially. Political groups, gangs, sectarian organisations and militant networks once used

violence to control territory, collect extortion, enforce shutdowns and attack opponents. A study counted 2,006 violent deaths in 2013. These included 1,628 target killings and 165 deaths from terrorism.

The Federal and Sindh governments began the Rangers operation in September 2013. A peer reviewed spatial study of killings in Karachi recorded a 12 percent decline in 2014, followed by declines of 50 percent in 2015 and 42 percent in 2016. The number of locations reporting killings also contracted. The study measured timing and geography rather than the operation's causal effect. Political agreements, intelligence work, arrests and changes within armed groups may also have contributed. The figures still establish a large fall after 2013.

EIU places five risks under stability: petty crime, violent crime, terrorism, military conflict and civil unrest. It rates each one as acceptable, tolerable, uncomfortable, undesirable or intolerable. Its analysts and contributors in each city assign the qualitative ratings. EIU then converts and weighs them to produce the stability score. The public report provides the category total. It withholds the five ratings and the evidence used for each judgement.

This method limits what can be

inferred from Karachi's near-static stability ranking, which stands at 20, over the years. A fall in terrorism may have been offset by street crime or civil unrest. An improvement may also have remained within the same rating band. A city can record fewer killings without moving from "undesirable" to "uncomfortable." Different combinations of the five ratings can produce the same category total. A reader cannot identify which explanation applies to Karachi.

The index measures conditions during its survey period. It gives no separate credit for improvement from an earlier baseline. Karachi must, therefore, be assessed against conditions in 2026 rather than against its own violent peak. The decline in target killings provides historical context. It cannot by itself secure a higher current rating.

Terrorism would still have affected the recent assessments. A bombing near Karachi airport killed two Chinese nationals in October 2024. EIU also includes military conflict, yet the public report does not say how regional military tensions affected Karachi's rating.

Street crime provides a more persistent explanation. Karachi Police recorded 71,105 street crime cases in 2024 and 64,323 in 2025. The 9.5 percent fall left an average of 176 recorded incidents each day. More than 46,000 residents lost cars or motorcycles in 2025. More than 17,000 lost mobile phones while over 70 people died during street crime incidents. The CPLC recorded another 24,195 incidents during the first five months of 2026, including 4,671 in May.

These totals provide a floor. They exclude offences that victims never report or police never record. They also say little about recovery, prosecution or conviction. A lower annual total will produce limited reassurance if residents expect police to refuse an FIR, fail to recover stolen property or lose the case before trial.

The state can disrupt an armed network through a concentrated operation. Street robbery requires dozens of mundane routine decisions across several institutions. Police must answer calls, register FIRs, obtain camera footage and other evidences, trace stolen phones and vehicles, identify suspects and make lawful arrests. Prosecutors must prepare cases that survive trial. Courts must decide before witnesses withdraw or evidence disappears.

Failure at any stage returns offenders to the street and discourages victims from reporting the next offence.

The risks also fall unevenly.

The World Bank cites estimates that between 55 and 80 percent of women in Karachi have experienced sexual harassment on public transport. Unsafe journeys restrict the hours and locations in which women can work or study. Armed robbery adds another threat to the same trip, making city living undesirable.

Karachi lacks a comparable annual survey of residents' perceptions from 2013 to 2026. Available evidence cannot show whether residents feel safer than they did during the peak of target killings or for that matter any other reference year. It shows that exposure has spread across different places and routines. Political and gang violence concentrated heavily in contested neighbourhoods and among identifiable groups. Street robbery affects all and sundry. EIU's contributors may capture this wider exposure, although the published data cannot confirm it.

Civil unrest adds another source of disruption. Sit-ins in December 2024 blocked major roads for four days and disrupted traffic across all seven districts. EIU may count such events under civil unrest.

Dhaka exposes the same information gap. EIU gave Dhaka 55 for stability in 2020 and 45 in 2026. Karachi remained at 20. The ten-point fall suggests that EIU registered some deterioration (most likely the recent political violence) in Dhaka.

EIU designed the index partly for companies deciding where to post staff and how much hardship allowance to pay. Karachi's score, therefore, affects the cost and perceived risk of doing business in the city. As we want to attract foreign firms and expatriate professionals, the authorities should treat such rankings as evidence for action.

Before EIU's May 2027 survey, Pakistan should launch its own Karachi Liveability Index. This index should contain scores for the five GLI categories; use surveys of residents and expatriates; identify the agency responsible for each deficit; and set annual targets for improvement. Sindh's chief minister and Karachi's mayor should publish the first assessment by March 2027 and require corrective plans from agencies that miss their targets.

