

PUBLIC CORRUPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

A REPORT
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In Connecticut, Governor John Rowland's administration is being threatened with the worst public corruption scandal in the state's history.

Three Connecticut mayors and the state's treasurer already have been sent to prison.

The Governor's former deputy chief of staff pled guilty to accepting gold coins in return for government contracts.

He reportedly buried the gold coins in his back yard.

Governor Rowland has confessed that he allowed private corporations to renovate his cottage in Litchfield.

He first told the citizens of Connecticut that he paid for the hot tub and the cathedral ceilings – but later admitted that he lied.

He didn't pay for them, the state contractors paid for them.

The state legislature has organized to investigate the Governor for a possible impeachment.

Bill Curry, the Democratic gubernatorial nominee who lost to Rowland in 1998 and 2002, now calls Connecticut "the most corrupt state in the nation."

"We were the Constitution State," Curry told the Hartford Courant last month. "We were the home of New England town meeting democracy, and now we're Louisiana with foliage."

Lolis Eric Elie, a columnist for the *New Orleans Times Picayune* sought to defend his state. It wasn't an easy task.

True, Elie said, Louisiana's last three insurance commissioners were sent packing to prison.

And, Louisiana's agriculture commissioner is under indictment for allegedly receiving bribes in exchange for fixing a warehouse contract.

In light of the scandal brewing in Connecticut, it's difficult to say that Louisiana is any more corrupt than Connecticut.

Maybe Connecticut is the most corrupt state in the nation.

But the thing that alarmed Elie was the implication from up north that Louisiana was deficient in foliage.

"Our greenery is abundant and obvious," Elie wrote.

So, is Connecticut the most corrupt state in the nation?

Has Louisiana been overtaken by an intruder from the north?

The states with perhaps the worst reputations for corruption have historically been Louisiana, Illinois, Rhode Island and New Jersey.

Are they in fact the most corrupt?

Which states are the least corrupt?

To help us answer this question, we turned to the Justice Department Public Integrity Section.

The Justice Department under Attorney General John Ashcroft is perhaps the most secretive Justice Department in recent years.

Our experience in trying to get officials at the Public Integrity Section to speak with us about this report was not encouraging. Even though officials at the Public Integrity Section expressed an interest in helping us out, Ashcroft's police at the Justice Department's Office of Public Affairs repeatedly put the kibosh on any interviews.

Fortunately, the Public Integrity Section puts out an annual report documenting the number of prosecutions and convictions of individuals nabbed in public corruption investigations. And there is nothing Public Affairs can do to restrict access to the information in that report. (Report to Congress on the Activities and Operations of the Public Integrity Section for 2002).

The attorneys at the Public Integrity Section prosecute selected cases involving federal, state, or local officials, and also provide advice and assistance to prosecutors and agents in the field regarding the handling of public corruption cases.

Public corruption cases focus on crimes involving abuses of the public trust by government officials.

In an effort to determine which were the most corrupt states and the least corrupt states in the nation, we turned to the Public Integrity Section's 2002 report.

In the 2002 report, the government published a compilation of all federal corruption convictions by district over the past decade. (See Table III, Federal

Public Corruption Convictions by District Over the Past Decade)

We added up the total convictions for each state from 1993 to 2002.

We then found the 2002 population for each state, and calculated a corruption rate for each state, which we define as the total number of public corruption convictions from 1993 to 2002 per 100,000 residents.

Before we get to the findings, a couple of caveats.

First caveat: The Justice Department is reporting only public corruption convictions that result from a federal prosecution. Convictions that result from a prosecution pursued by state district attorneys or attorneys general, for example, are not included in the Justice Department statistics.

The recent prosecutions of the leadership of the Wisconsin legislature is being brought by two state district attorneys in Madison and Milwaukee. If convictions result from trials later this year, they will not be included in the Justice Department's report.

But the vast majority of public corruption prosecutions – perhaps as many as 80 percent – are brought by federal officials.

Second caveat: Public officials in any given state can be corrupt to the core, and if a federal prosecutor doesn't have the resources or the courage or the sheer political will to bring the case and win a conviction, the public corruption will not be reflected in the Justice Department's data set.

Third caveat: There has been much public corruption revealed in the

past year. But the Department has yet to release its report for 2003. If history is a guide, the 2003 report won't be released until the end of the year, or early in 2004.

In any event, we calculated the corruption rate for each state and ranked the states from most corrupt to least corrupt.

As it turns out, Bill Curry was wrong. Connecticut is not the most corrupt state in the nation, but as he says - it's gaining fast.

Louisiana on the other hand is not the most corrupt state in the country, as its reputation might indicate. It comes in third. Illinois, living up to its reputation, comes in fifth. New Jersey, believe it or not, comes in 16th. Rhode Island is even less corrupt than New Jersey - it comes in 20th.

The most corrupt state in the country is Mississippi (7.48).

According to our survey, the ten most corrupt states in the country are:

1. Mississippi (7.48)
2. North Dakota (7.09)
3. Louisiana (7.05)
4. Alaska (6.06)
5. Illinois (5.26)
6. Montana (4.95)
7. South Dakota (4.86)
8. Kentucky (4.59)

9. Florida (4.58)

10. New York (4.56).

And which are the cleanest states in the country – the least corrupt?

Nebraska is the least corrupt state in the country (0.52). Both New Hampshire and Iowa make the top five least corrupt – maybe that’s why they get early primaries.

According to our survey, the ten least corrupt states in the country are:

1. Nebraska (0.52)

2. Oregon (0.59)

3. New Hampshire (0.86)

4. Iowa (0.95)

5. Colorado (0.97)

6. Utah (1.03)

7. Minnesota (1.11)

8. Arizona (1.22)

9. Arkansas (1.32)

10. Wisconsin (1.47)

A note here about the District of Columbia.

We calculated the District’s corruption rate as 79.33.

This is more than ten times what Mississippi’s corruption rate is – and

Mississippi is the most corrupt state in the country. But we didn't include the District in the list for one obvious reason – the District is the seat of the federal government, and because of this, there are more criminal prosecutions for public corruption than anywhere else in the country.

It can be said that the District is the most corrupt political entity in the nation – but that's only because it's the seat of an apparently actively corrupt federal government – with 453 public corruption convictions over a ten-year period.

This is the first ever such corruption ranking of the states that we know of.

In 2002 in Chicago, the Better Government Association (BGA) released what it called the first independent, comprehensive report on integrity in the 50 states – a ranking of all fifty states based on the relative strength of laws that protect against corruption and promote integrity in the operations of state government.

The top five states in the BGA Integrity Index were Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Kentucky, Hawaii and California. The bottom five were Louisiana, Alabama, New Mexico, Vermont and South Dakota.

At the time, BGA Executive Director Terrance A. Norton said: "In light of all the recent scandals that have engulfed many institutions in the United States, one lesson has been drawn clearly, loose standards, secretiveness and

the lack of accountability are a recipe for disaster. We wanted to determine which states are best prepared to fight corruption and which are vulnerable."

The BGA Integrity Index is an in-depth analysis of five laws that play a direct role in ensuring integrity and combating the corruption of government.

The group analyzed freedom of information laws, whistleblower protection laws, campaign finance laws, gifts, trips and honoraria laws, and conflict of interest laws.

"We chose those laws because they reflect three principles that are central to open and honest government – transparency, accountability and limits," Norton said at the time.

Norton said that one reason for the corruption in Illinois is the fact that the political and governmental environment is like that of the Wild, Wild West with weak or virtually non-existent laws regarding integrity or ethics.

Unfortunately, our review of public corruption convictions in the states indicates that there is apparently little correlation between strong laws and integrity – if a public official wants to violate his or her trust, the laws don't stand in the way.

For example, Kentucky was judged by BGA to have third best integrity score – that means its campaign finance, conflicts of interest, and whistleblower protection laws were stronger than 46 other states.

But in the Corporate Crime Reporter Corruption Ranking, Kentucky

lands in the top ten with 188 convictions over a ten-year period for a 4.59 corruption rate – worse than 42 other states.

Perhaps what matters more than strong laws is a strong political economy – reporters, citizen groups, prosecutors, judges, religious leaders – who are willing to speak out about the rampant corruption in our midst.

Connecticut, for example, has a strong economy and an educated citizenry. But its political economy has historically been weak, with little public debate about the level of corruption around it – until federal prosecutors at the U.S. Attorney's office in Hartford decided to force the issue into the open.

Transparency International is an international organization based in Berlin dedicated to combating corruption around the world. Every year, Transparency puts out a corruption perception index. They survey businesspeople about the perceived corruption in 133 countries. They ask the business people to rank the countries from most corrupt (0 score) to least corrupt (10 score).

Finland (9.7), Iceland (9.6), Denmark (9.5), New Zealand (9.5) and Singapore (9.4) were perceived as the least corrupt.

Bangladesh (1.3), Nigeria (1.4), Haiti (1.5), Paraguay (1.6) and Burma (1.6) were perceived to be the most corrupt.

The United States came in 18th out of 133, tied with Ireland at a 7.5 score.

Because the Justice Department's statistics on corruption in the United States have rarely been publicized, the world might not understand the true extent of the decay here in the United States.

The Justice Department could go a long way to help combat public corruption in the United States if it not only increased the budget of its strapped prosecutors, but actually sought to publicize the good work that they do.

Unshackle the attorneys at the Public Integrity Section and let them speak with reporters and the public about the scourge of public corruption in the United States.

THE FIFTY STATES
RANKED BY
CORRUPTION RATE

STATE	CORRUPTION RANK	CORRUPTION RATE	BGA SCORE
Mississippi	1	7.48	18
North Dakota	2	7.09	12
Louisiana	3	7.05	5
Alaska	4	6.06	28
Illinois	5	5.26	10
Montana	6	4.95	6
South Dakota	7	4.86	1
Kentucky	8	4.59	48
Florida	9	4.58	33
New York	10	4.562	22
Ohio	11	4.561	37
Hawaii	12	4.26	47
Delaware	13	3.96	13
Pennsylvania	14	3.78	11
Alabama	15	3.67	4
New Jersey	16	3.57	39
Idaho	17	3.35	9
Missouri	18	3.29	16
Tennessee	19	3.24	7
Rhode Island	20	3.08	49
Virginia	21	2.86	23
Oklahoma	22	2.80	26
Georgia	23	2.757	25
South Carolina	24	2.751	44
California	25	2.69	46

STATE	CORRUPTION RANK	CORRUPTION RATE	BGA SCORE
Massachusetts	26	2.67	36
Wyoming	27	2.61	14
West Virginia	28	2.44	43
Texas	29	2.41	42
Maine	30	2.39	27
Connecticut	31	2.16	38
Nevada	32	1.88	21
Kansas	33	1.87	30
Indiana	34	1.802	17
Michigan	35	1.800	19
Vermont	36	1.78	2
Maryland	37	1.57	41
North Carolina	38	1.51	29
New Mexico	39	1.50	3
Washington	40	1.49	40
Wisconsin	41	1.47	50
Arkansas	42	1.32	20
Arizona	43	1.22	31
Minnesota	44	1.11	34
Utah	45	1.03	24
Colorado	46	0.97	35
Iowa	47	0.95	8
N. Hampshire	48	0.86	15
Oregon	49	0.59	32
Nebraska	50	0.52	45

STATE	PUBLIC CORRUPTION CONVICTIONS 1993 TO 2002	POPULATION 2002	CORRUPTION RATE - CONVICTIONS PER 100,000
Alabama	165	4,486,508	3.67
Alaska	39	643,786	6.06
Arizona	67	5,456,453	1.22
Arkansas	36	2,710,079	1.32
California	948	35,116,033	2.69
Colorado	44	4,506,542	0.97
Connecticut	75	3,460,503	2.16
Delaware	32	807,385	3.96
DC	453	571,822	79.33
Florida	767	16,713,149	4.58
Georgia	236	8,560,310	2.75
Hawaii	53	1,244,898	4.26
Idaho	45	1,341,131	3.35
Illinois	663	12,600,620	5.26
Indiana	111	6,159,068	1.80
Iowa	28	2,936,760	0.95
Kansas	51	2,715,884	1.87
Kentucky	188	4,092,891	4.59
Louisiana	316	4,482,646	7.05
Maine	31	1,294,464	2.39
Maryland	86	5,458,137	1.57
Massachusetts	172	6,427,801	2.67
Michigan	181	10,050,446	1.80
Minnesota	56	5,019,720	1.11
Mississippi	215	2,871,782	7.48

STATE	PUBLIC CORRUPTION CONVICTIONS 1993 TO 2002	POPULATION 2002	CORRUPTION RATE - CONVICTIONS PER 100,000
Missouri	187	5,672,579	3.29
Montana	45	909,453	4.95
Nebraska	9	1,729,180	0.52
Nevada	41	2,173,491	1.88
N. Hampshire	11	1,275,056	0.86
New Jersey	307	8,590,300	3.57
New Mexico	28	1,855,059	1.50
New York	874	19,157,532	4.56
North Carolina	126	8,320,146	1.51
North Dakota	45	634,220	7.09
Ohio	521	11,421,267	4.56
Oklahoma	98	3,493,714	2.80
Oregon	21	3,521,515	0.59
Pennsylvania	467	12,335,091	3.78
Rhode Island	33	1,069,725	3.08
South Carolina	113	4,107,183	2.75
South Dakota	37	761,063	4.86
Tennessee	188	5,797,289	3.24
Texas	527	21,779,893	2.41
Utah	24	2,316,256	1.03
Vermont	11	616,592	1.78
Virginia	209	7,293,542	2.86
Washington	91	6,068,996	1.49
West Virginia	44	1,801,873	2.44
Wisconsin	80	5,441,196	1.47
Wyoming	13	498,703	2.61