



## Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

GUNS AND GUN LAWS , YOUTH VIOLENCE

# Boston's murderous weekend - causes and cures

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The recent spate of homicides over the weekend, in Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan, has community leaders demanding action and grieving families asking Why? □ As senseless and shocking as these murders may be, they have occurred, ironically, just as the FBI announced a stunning 7.2% decline in murder for 2009 nationally, which included a nearly 20% drop in Boston.

Although welcomed and widely applauded, the news about declining rates of murder contrasts sharply with the experience of countless Americans living (and some dying) in violence-infested neighborhoods--those for whom the frightening sound of gunfire is a far too frequent occurrence. It is not that the FBI figures tell an inaccurate story about crime trends in America. Rather, they obscure the divergent tale of two communities--one prosperous and safe, the other poor and crime-ridden. The truth behind the fears

and concerns of the nation's underclass's about crime and violence lies deep beneath the surface of the FBI statistical report.

As I noted in a [report](#) released over a year ago, trends in homicide are very different across various segments of the population. Murders among whites, among adults, and among females have declined in recent years, contributing to the overall low crime levels existing today. However, murders by and against young black males--especially involving guns--have not abated, and in fact have risen during the past decade.

Of course, when placed in a long-term context, today's crime problem is not exactly out of control. The recent increase in homicide among young black males, here and elsewhere, falls far short of the extraordinarily high levels witnessed during the crack-related street gang wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s affecting major cities around the country. In essence, the apparent spike in violence indicates that we are a victim of earlier success. Were it not for the 1990s downturn following the crack epidemic, recent figures would hardly stand out as cause for alarm.

Though there is no debating the grim figures, the causes and solutions are hotly contested. Many experts suggest that the fundamental problem among black youth lands right at the doorstep of home and family. Underage parents, single mothers, absent fathers and disinterested caretakers all contribute to a continuing cycle of despair. While outspoken leaders, from Bill Cosby to President Obama, talk about change that must come from within the black community, these core issues cannot explain why the crime problem has grown so dramatically in just a few years.

Whatever the underlying causes might be, reinvesting in the policing and prevention programs that worked successfully in the past can help reverse the current spate of street and gang violence. Specifically, we should:

- Increase police presence in high-crime neighborhoods
- Expand the availability of youth enrichment and after-school programs
- Tighten controls on illegal gun markets and lift federal curbs on gun-tracing information

Of course, today's economic picture makes it difficult to invest adequately in crime control and prevention initiatives. However, addressing the concerns of youngsters growing up in violence-ridden neighborhoods cannot wait years until the recession subsides. After efforts to bail out the banks and automakers, we need a bailout for at-risk youth.