



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS , GUNS AND GUN LAWS

War against gun crime: Mission not accomplished

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The recent spike in violence, including today's massacres in Mattapan, is not cause for alarm, although a healthy dose of concern would certainly be in order. Of course, each life young and old sacrificed to the scourge of gang and gun violence is tragic in itself. Still, the death toll is hardly close to the bad old days of the early 1990s when the Boston homicide tally topped 150.

To some extent, this year's rate of murder constitutes an uptick only because of the relative calm of the past couple of years. There are natural and random fluctuations in annual crime rates: What goes up generally comes down, and what goes down generally rebounds.

Notwithstanding the statistical backdrop, the recent spate of gun violence should not come as a surprise. The welcome news from the FBI about the large decline in crime last year overlooks a grim reality for many Americans. Violent crime may be down overall, but not for some segments of the population and in some neighborhood of urban America. In communities like Mattapan, Dorchester and Roxbury, as in sections of Baltimore, Detroit and many other cities, the downturn in crime seems like an illusion. Actually, it is trend happening in other people's neighborhoods.

The persistent level of gang and street violence implicates our inability to make headway in combating the flow of illegal guns into high crime neighborhoods. Of course, opponents of gun control argue that cities or states with the toughest gun restrictions often have higher rates of murder. Of course, the restrictiveness of gun regulations may be more a reaction to gun violence than the cause of it.

More important, the seemingly ineffectiveness of certain gun laws to curb violence says less about the adequacy of local gun laws than it does about the inadequacy of restrictions elsewhere, fostering a profitable market in illegal gun trafficking from low restriction states to high restriction ones. In fact, a [new report](#) from the Mayors Against Illegal Guns demonstrates quite clearly how the relative strictness of state gun laws are associated with whether states serve as exporters or importers in the illegal gun trade.

Any city's or state's initiatives to control illegal access to guns are only as good as the weakest link in the nation landscape. Until such time as the federal government gets involved in setting the bar higher, states

like ours will remain vulnerable to the policies and practices in neighboring states like New Hampshire or more distant high-exporter states like Mississippi, West Virginia and Kentucky. Sadly, given the present political climate in our Nation's capital, the likelihood of seeing sensible gun legislation is next to zero.

Finally, many gun advocates suggest that the key to curbing gun crimes is to punish the criminals who commit them more strongly. Yet we do that. The penalty for killing or maiming with a gun is substantial already. More to the point, punishment, even stiff sentences, fails to deter offenders, and comes too late to prevent harm to victims like those who died in the Mattapan shooting.

Given the sensitivity surrounding today's tragedy in Mattapan, I have disabled comments out of respect for the grieving family members and friends.