



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Is Mass. really #1 in violent crime?

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No news is good news, □ they say. But when it comes to media coverage of crime figures, it is more that bad news is big news. □ This explains why a modestly cautionary alert about local rates of violence was so prominently featured in recent headlines tied to a mostly positive report on trends in health indicators.

Earlier this week, the Massachusetts Health Council released its biennial compendium on health, "Common Health in the Commonwealth: Massachusetts Trends in the Preventable Determinants of Health," which includes statistics on everything from tobacco use to obesity, and from asthma to violence. The authors of the report, drawing upon FBI crime counts, note that Massachusetts has the unenviable distinction of leading all states in the Northeast in the rate of violent crime: "At a rate of 457 violent crimes per 100,000 population, the Commonwealth was once again, as in multiple previous years, statistically the most violent state in the Northeast region (comprised on the six New England States plus NY, NJ, and PA)."

Almost in lockstep, the local press relayed this disturbing conclusion about a perilous state of affairs. The *Globe* tagged its coverage with the headline, [Mass. still leads Northeast in violent crime, survey shows](#). □ In the *Herald*, the headline read [Report: Massachusetts most violent state in Northeast](#). Meanwhile, the *Patriot Ledger* emphasized a similar theme, [Report: State no. 1 in Northeast for violent crime](#).

And the concern over violent crime rates wasn't limited to the local papers. For example, NECN announced, [Massachusetts is most violent of nine Northeast states](#), □ contextualizing its story with video of recent murder cases.

Despite the remarkable consistency in press coverage, the fact is that Massachusetts' top-ranking on violence isn't exactly accurate, at least in terms of suggesting that we are more at-risk than residents of other states in the region.

The violent crime category combines homicides, forcible rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults into a single calculation without any adjustment for their relative severity. As an aggregate statistic, therefore, the overall violent crime rate can be extremely misleading. This is because aggravated assault, the least serious among the four component offenses, represents the heavy majority of all violent crimes. In essence, the violent crime rate largely measures aggravated assault with only minimal attention to

murders and rapes. Unfortunately, nowhere in the Massachusetts Health Council report is Massachusetts compared with the other states in terms of murder or the other separate crime types.

The table below displays rates of violent crime, individually and in combination, for the nine New England and Middle Atlantic states. As shown, Massachusetts is *below* average in homicide, forcible rape and robbery. In fact, the homicide rate in Massachusetts is lower than all urban states in the Northeast; only Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have lower homicide rates.

At the other extreme in seriousness, Massachusetts does indeed top of the list in terms of aggravated assault, which results in the top ranking in the combined rate. Of course, were the four violent crime categories weighted by their severity, Massachusetts would enjoy a relatively low ranking, certainly not anywhere near the top of the list.

State	Homicide	Forcible Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Total
Connecticut	3.0	18.5	113.4	163.7	298.7
Maine	2.0	28.5	30.3	59.0	119.8
Massachusetts	2.6	25.8	112.6	316.0	457.1
New Hampshire	0.8	30.2	34.4	94.3	159.6
New Jersey	3.7	12.0	133.7	162.2	311.5
New York	4.0	13.2	144.0	223.5	384.7
Pennsylvania	5.2	29.0	138.9	207.4	380.5
Rhode Island	2.9	27.3	74.6	147.7	252.6
Vermont	1.1	19.9	17.9	92.5	131.4
Massachusetts rank	6	6	5	1	1

Aside from the concern for distortion in the overall violent crime rate, it is extremely risky to compare or rank states without understanding their differences in demography and geography. In fact, on its website, the FBI explicitly warns against such comparisons:

Each year when Crime in the United States is published, some entities use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rough rankings provide no insight into the numerous variables that mold crime in a particular town, city, county, state, or region. Consequently, they lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting communities and their residents. Valid assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the range of unique conditions affecting each local law enforcement jurisdiction. The data user is, therefore, cautioned against comparing statistical data of individual reporting units from cities, metropolitan areas, states, or colleges or universities solely on the basis of their population coverage or student enrollment.

Among the nine states in this corner of the U.S., Massachusetts ranks second (behind New Jersey) in terms of the percentage of population living in urbanized areas. Any attempt to compare Massachusetts to other states without taking this into account is seriously flawed.

In the final analysis, I would concur with the authors of the Massachusetts Health Council report that more needs to be done in terms of violence prevention. Yet, let's not be misled by seriously flawed statistics as a foundation.