



Crime & Punishment

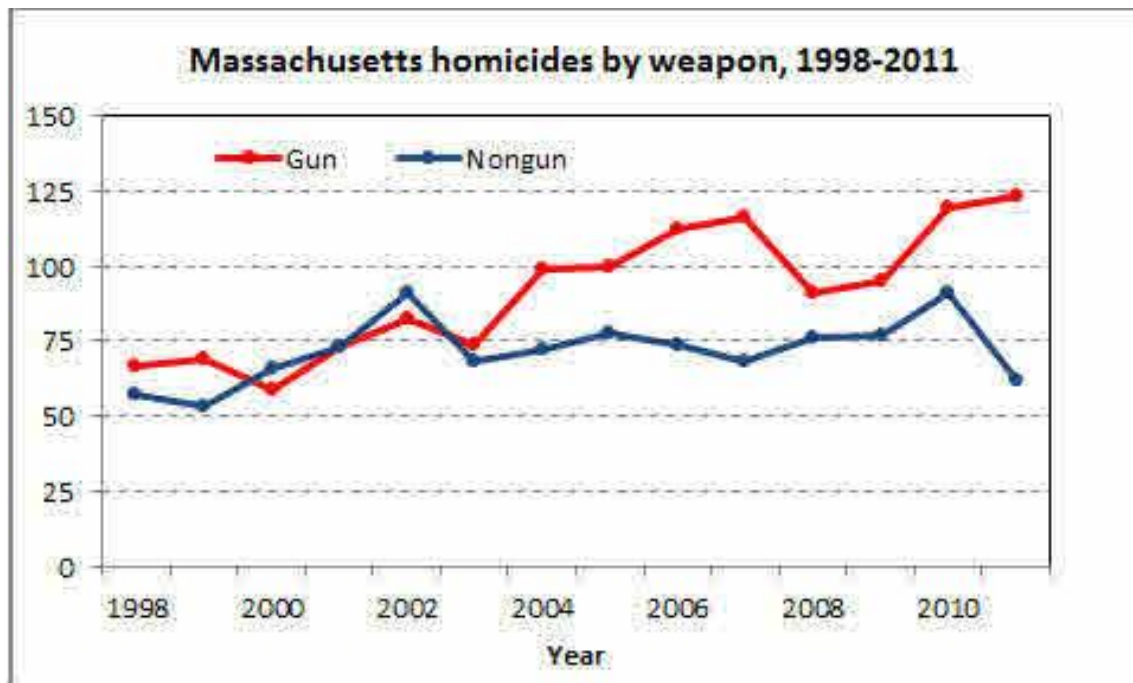
James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Clear sight on gun crimes

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment February 4, 2013 09:30 AM

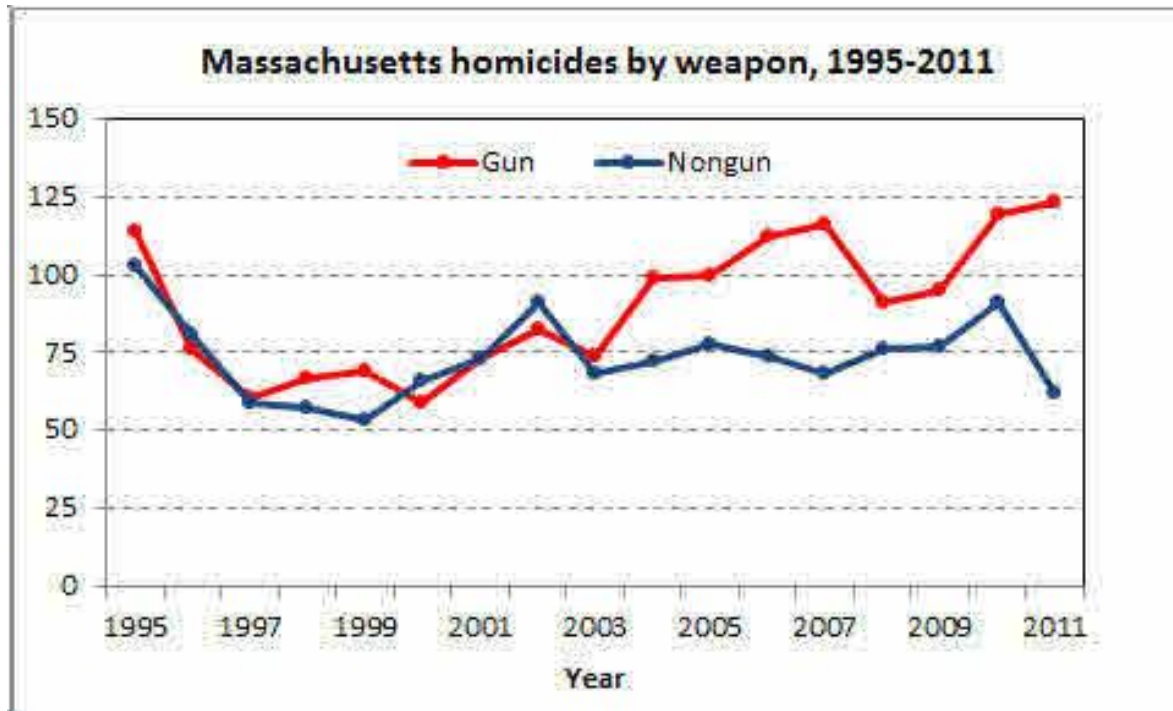
Today's [front page story](#) from Brian MacQuarrie about trends in gun crime in Massachusetts raises some important questions about the efficacy of gun control. Indeed, how can a state, like Massachusetts, witness such a disturbing surge in gun homicide and other firearms-related crimes after enacting one of the nation's strictest gun control packages? On the other hand, if the situation has grown so dire, how is it that the Commonwealth can still lay claim to having the second lowest gun fatality rate in the nation? The answers to these (and perhaps other) questions come from taking a broader view of the relevant statistics.

Based on the FBI data shown below, it is quite true that homicides with a firearm have nearly doubled since the 1998 gun control package. What makes the increase even more striking is that the volume of homicides involving all other weapons remained fairly level over these same years.



Before jumping to the conclusion that gun control is a futile approach to crime control, or even that it does more harm than good, we should consider what had happened just prior to implementing the new

set of laws. The following figure extends the data back just three years, revealing a rather different view of the trend in gun homicide. While the number of gun homicides did indeed increase over the past decade, the death toll at the start of the decade was at a level that had been dropping for several years in a row. Were it not for the pre-1998 decline, we might not have endured an increase since that time.



Although MacQuarrie's fine piece leads with the headline, Gun-related crimes on the rise in Mass., his comparison to other states would seem to put our concerns to rest: Despite the threat posed by out-state guns and the increase in firearms deaths, Massachusetts still had the second-lowest rate of such fatalities in the nation in 2010, according to the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC.

Although Massachusetts truly does well compared to other states, this exceptional ranking needs some further clarification. Much of this good standing is because of our extremely low rate of suicide, an issue somewhat tangential to the gun trafficking angle behind much of the Globe story. In 2010, based on these same CDC data, Massachusetts had the nation's lowest gun suicide rate, but the eleventh lowest gun homicide rate.

Gun Fatalities in 2010

Cause	Mass.	US	Rank
All causes	4.1	10.3	2nd
Homicide	1.9	3.6	11th
Suicide	2.1	6.3	1st

Source: CDC data

As the legislature considers possible gun control responses to the recent massacres in Connecticut and Colorado, it should be clear on the current statistical state of affairs in the Commonwealth. And should we someday look back at a gun control package passed in this legislative session, hopefully it will be a sound perspective on crime trends.