



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## The Next Target of Terror?

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Now that the controversy over Tamerlan Tsarnaev's burial is over, it is time to move on to matters far more critical to our safety and security than where to put a dead body. In the wake of the Marathon bombings, law enforcement and security specialists have had to consider other events or locations -- sporting events and various gatherings of large crowds -- that could serve as attractive targets for terrorists.

One critical site that immediately comes to mind for me and many of my South End neighbors does not involve a crowd, but could threaten the lives of thousands, if not millions, should it be struck by a terrorist attack: the Boston University Biolab on Albany Street, just off of the Southeast Expressway.

This high-tech facility was constructed with support from the National Institute of Health to conduct Level-4 biological research on deadly pathogens like SARS and Ebola. While work with less dangerous infectious diseases has been ongoing for some time, push back from the neighboring communities has delayed the plan to upgrade to the highest security-level activity.

Strategically, the biolab opposition got off on the wrong path by focusing too heavily on the issue of race and class. Even though the closest neighborhoods are heavily minority, should human error or malicious acts cause toxic agents to be released, many more than those living or working in the few blocks of Roxbury and the South End surrounding the location would be affected and potentially placed under quarantine. Airborne germs would certainly not respect boundaries between the South End/Roxbury and Back Bay/Beacon Hill. The radius of impact could be as wide as five miles, which would include most of the city, its transportation hubs and medical facilities. Who would come to the rescue if all the local first responders are under lock down?

I respect and appreciate the hard work involved in preparing the NIH-sponsored impact [analysis](#) which concluded that the risk of mishap was be minimal. The assessment team did its very best to estimate the likelihood and impact of such threats as a Sandy-sized hurricane and an accidental airplane crash at the site. However, when it came to acts of terror, the group had no direct way to determine the probability or evaluate the consequences. Much of the threat assessment concerning malevolent threats from within and without was based on expert opinion and speculation.

The possible breaches of security are numerous and varied. Of course, there is the potential for direct attacks upon the facility involving explosive devices. But there is also the opportunity for some sinister or deranged insider to wreak havoc with dangerous biological material within his or her reach.

What if someone with ties to terrorist cells, perhaps even the devoted brother of some fanatic extremist, were hired to work inside the facility? Although we would be assured of an in-depth screening process for all employees, can we be assured that the investigation would be sufficiently thorough? Might there be misspellings of names or misplaced documents that would overlook an internal threat? Could we be certain that some individual with top security clearance would not suffer a sudden medical condition that would alter his or her behavior without warning?

Up to this point, the level of scrutiny concerning the project coming out of City Hall has been inadequate. Of course, with his name on a building over at BU Medical Center, Mayor Tom Menino is in a compromised position. We now have at many as two dozen men and women hoping to become the city's next mayor come November. We Bostonians, and indeed everyone in the surrounding cities and towns, should expect clear answers from each candidate concerning their position on the BU Biolab. What is their priority: the financial interests of BU Medical or the safety and well-being of residents?

No one denies the importance of conducting scientific research on deadly viruses. However, as always, security comes first. For this reason, the City of Cambridge, despite its deep commitment to research, had the good sense to [banned Level-4 activity](#).

It is not just nearby residents who are alarmed: A recent [report](#) from the Federal Government's General Accounting Office outlined its own concerns over safety and security at the nation's expanding array of Level-3 and Level-4 biolabs.

There are two factors that argue against permitting the most deadly of viruses to be held at the Albany Street facility -- the population density at this location and last month's Marathon bombings. Clearly, this is neither the place nor the time for a Level-4 biolab.