



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Chicken Little and Boston Murders

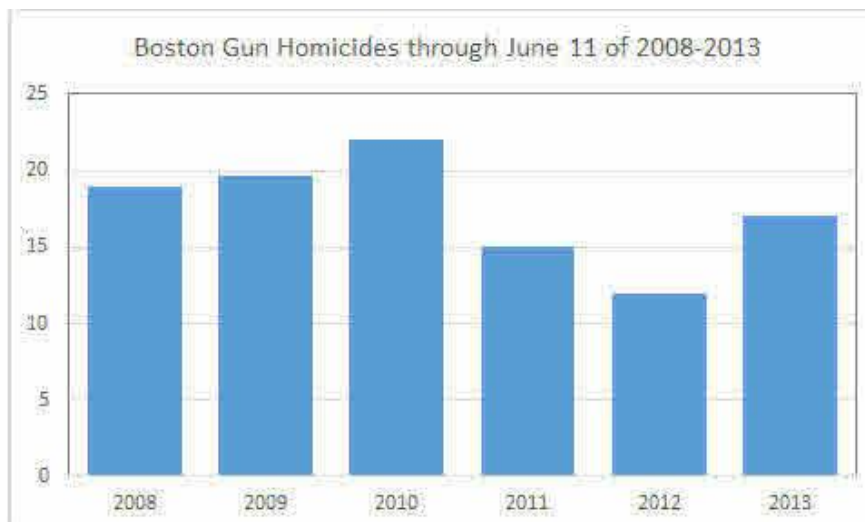
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"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" proclaimed Chicken Little famously. Along her journey to inform the king, the frightened fowl convinced her friends Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey, and Turkey Lurkey that their lives were in danger.

Well it seems that Chicken Little is alive and well, busily spinning local news stories. A Globe report earlier this week as well as a column in today's paper noted a disturbing surge in gun deaths in Boston. As of June 11, there had been 17 gun homicides so far this year, compared to only 12 last year at the same time. That's nearly a 50% jump.

In the children's tale, Chicken Little met up with Foxy Loxy, who knew better than to get carried away. As far as this Professor Foxy Loxy is concerned, the apparent surge in killing reflects two statistical problems: focusing too heavily on a short-term change, and failing to consider a more reliable benchmark.

The figure below shows the number of gun homicides in Boston through the first-third of June for each year since 2005 (in years for which only monthly counts were available, the partial June figure was estimated by extrapolation).



Without minimizing the suffering and anguish associated with any of these crimes, it is clear that 2013 has not been anywhere near as problematic as would appear upon first glance. The jump from last year to this is more about last year's figure being unusually low than this year's being especially high. In fact, the 17 gun homicides for this year is just below the average for the previous five years.

This doesn't mean that we should ignore recent homicides or consider them par for the course. Rather, we should continue with the successful crime fighting strategies that have helped keep Boston's murder rate low relative to other cities around the country.