

City on track for record low homicides

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By Dan Glaun, Niki Griswold and Anjali Huynh Globe Staff, Updated December 27, 2024, 6:47 p.m. Email to a Friend Share on Facebook Share on Twitter Print this Article View Comments 111



Boston is on track to end 2024 with the fewest number of homicides in nearly seven decades, mirroring a national trend of decreased violent crime and bolstering its status as one of the safest large cities in the United States.

City officials on Friday hailed the drop in killings as validation of years of work to improve policing, social services, and violence intervention outreach in the city.

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“In the entire time that I’ve been a police officer, going back since when I came on, the city has never been safer, period, when it comes to crime, particularly violent crime,” Police Commissioner Michael Cox said at a news conference.

There were 24 homicides in Boston through Dec. 22, according to Boston Police data — a 33 percent decline from 2023 and the fewest in 67 years. Boston is an outlier among similarly sized US cities: In 2023, there were 150 homicides in Louisville, Ky.; 132 murders in Las Vegas; 73 homicides in Portland, Ore.; 85 in Denver; and 38 in El Paso, Texas.

* A Flourish chart

Firearm violence in Boston, too, “remains at historic low levels,” Cox said, noting that 2024 saw the lowest instances of gunfire since 2011, when the city began “reliably tracking the statistics.”

Mayor Michelle Wu attributed the lower crime rates primarily to “strong, coordinated leadership,” pointing to investments in areas such as the city’s data collection and analysis of crime stats, police recruitment and retention, youth job programs, and community safety initiatives geared toward young people.

“It really has been an all-hands-on-deck effort,” she said. The numbers aren’t a cause for “a victory lap,” but instead a “reflection of the type of results we see when we all understand community safety to be a collective responsibility that we share, and that everyone has a part in,” Wu said.

Not all crimes here have seen sharp decreases this year. As of last Sunday, the number of shootings across Boston declined 7 percent. Reports of aggravated assaults increased 3 percent and property crime reports ticked up 2.3 percent, driven by larcenies and commercial burglaries, though the city saw substantial declines in auto thefts and residential burglaries.

Christine Cole, a public safety and community engagement consultant with around four decades of experience in Boston, said the data in part reflect the progress the city has achieved in reducing violence by working closely with a range of community partners to provide “a comprehensive set of services.”

“The police don’t act alone, nonprofits don’t act alone,” she said. “They work in partnership, and that’s a hallmark of the culture of this city.”

Despite a general perception nationally that the violent crime rate has skyrocketed, many cities have seen significant decreases in homicides and have been trending downward over the years. According to an analysis of homicide data by the consulting firm AH Datalytics, the homicide rates in cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, for example, have all decreased this year.

Still, while Boston’s latest crime stats fit into the overall national trend, this year’s numbers are notable, said Jeff Asher, cofounder of AH Datalytics.

“There’s a few days left in the year, but assuming that you see that trend continue for the next four or five days, that would put Boston with the fewest murders and lowest murder rate that the city’s recorded since 1957, which is obviously an achievement,” Asher said.

Still, Asher emphasized the ultimate goal of bringing the city’s annual homicide count to zero, echoing remarks Cox and Wu made Friday.

“You’re talking about a daily tragedy that we still have work to do to draw down,” he said. “If Boston had zero murders, then you’d say, ‘OK, job well done, everybody.’ But I think that, given the seriousness and given the the immensity of the challenge remaining ... it’s early to be kind of celebrating.”

For example, not every neighborhood benefited from the city’s overall drop in violent crime. South Boston saw two homicides in 2023, and four so far this year, according to the data. And there have been seven homicides in Dorchester, compared with four over the same period last year.

District 3 City Councilor John FitzGerald, who represents most of Dorchester, said the concentration of violence has been “jarring” — particularly in the neighborhood of Meeting House Hill in Dorchester, which at one point this summer accounted for a third of the city’s homicide total.

“This is something I’ve sort of been preaching all year,” FitzGerald said. “It’s great that stats are down across the city. But not necessarily for the entire city.”

The Dorchester community has appreciated increased efforts to control violence, FitzGerald noted, including the deployment of additional officers to walk beats and increase police visibility. But he said additional efforts are still needed, particularly to address trauma among survivors and witnesses of violence.

“We could be doing a lot more,” he said.

Cox pointed to the Safe Shopping Task Force initiative launched this year as one way the department aims to combat that uptick in the future. As part of the initiative, the police partnered with the district attorney’s office and business leadersto share access to information and technology such as security camera feeds, as well as coordinate strategy.

The drop in homicides follows decades of effort by the city, police, and community organizations. In 1990, the city’s most violent year on record, there were 152 homicides. Nearly half of the victims were minors.

Bishop William Dickerson II, the pastor of Greater Love Tabernacle in Dorchester, was part of the original group of church leaders who worked with the city to reduce violence, in what came to be known as the “Boston Miracle.” He said this year’s numbers are encouraging but warned against complacency.

“I think there’s been some progress this year in terms of anti-violence efforts, but I don’t want people to rest on their laurels,” Dickerson said. “As soon as you start praising stats, something happens.”

Dickerson credited an array of community programs with helping keep kids off the streets and preventing violence — youth sports leagues, Boys & Girls Clubs, housing and training programs for people returning to their communities from prison, and mentoring by former gang members who had cleaned up their lives.

He said the city still has work to do ensuring that at-risk kids don’t fall through the cracks, and providing social services to gang-affiliated youth.

“We need a better tracking system. We also need a better way of communicating with the ones that are causing the violence,” Dickerson said. “You can’t scare the kids straight these days. You need to give them hope and a future.”

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