



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## Calm down when crime's up

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It is about time that we take a calmer approach to short-term fluctuations in crime figures, especially when they are based on a narrow time span. It is surely important for the Globe's readers (as well as non-readers living or working in the city) to be informed of the [sudden spike](#) in murders since the beginning of the year -- specifically, 8 or maybe 9 this month so far compared with very few over the past couple of Januaries. But such trends can also be rather misleading.

Although only a limited number of years was available for today's Globe piece, the longer time span displayed below tells us that January 2014 isn't all that unique. More important, although the spike is unacceptable in terms of the pain and suffering it brings to many families, in all likelihood better days are ahead, no matter what the City's strategic or programmatic response to the recent killings.



It is rather easy to [get carried away](#) with short-term upticks or downturns. For example, just last June, a Globe article, followed days later by concerned piece from one of its columnists, noted a disturbing surge in gun deaths in Boston. As of June 11, according the story, there had been 17 gun homicides during the year, compared to only 12 at the same juncture in the previous year. That's nearly a 50% jump. Of course, we all know how things ended for 2013: 40 homicides for the year (33 of them involving firearms), making 2013 one of the lowest tallies in recent decades.

There are countless other examples here in Boston and elsewhere in which news coverage adopted a Chicken Little approach: a sudden uptick in crime is assumed to signal a trend, but subsequently turns out to be more an aberration.

Borrowing off an often-used comment about the weather, I can suggest this level-headed approach to sudden changes in crime counts: If you don't like the crime rate, then wait a month.