United States | Wicked safe

How Boston became the safest big city in America

Murder is declining across the country, but Boston has led the way

ILLUSTRATION: RYAN CHAPMAN

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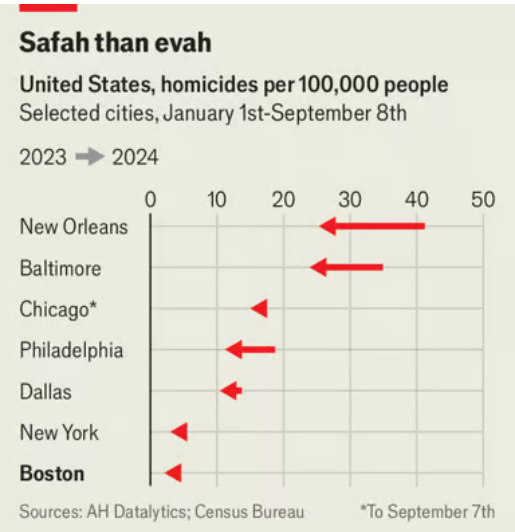
IN THE BASEMENT of Charles Street AME, a church in Roxbury, a historically black neighbourhood in Boston, Haseeb Hosein, the captain of the local police district, delivers the good news. "We've had no homicides in B2, year to date," he says. "Keep on praying," he says, to a chorus of "Amens". "I can tell you, the district is going really well when we're focusing on barbershop music, when we're focusing on cars blasting music," he says. "Music is my biggest community concern and I am a happy camper."

It is not just B2. Across the whole city of Boston, by the beginning of this month there had been just 13 homicides this year. That is a 50% reduction on the same point last year—which was already a record low. This year, Beantown is on track to become the safest big city in America.



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Nationwide figures do not yet exist. But according to AH Datalytics, which collects real-time crime data from 277 American cities, the number of murders recorded so far this year is down by 18% on the same period last year. Some very violent cities, such as Philadelphia and Baltimore, have experienced improvements almost as big, in proportional terms, as Boston. In Philadelphia there have been 111 fewer homicides this year than last.

Yet Boston is worth looking at, precisely because it shows how safe American cities could be, and what it would take to achieve that. Even with the improvement, America remains a stunningly violent country. The national homicide rate is 14 times higher than it is in Italy. Some of this is the inevitable result of guns being more freely available than elsewhere. But much of what makes America's overall figures so big is the terrifyingly high level of murder among young black and Latino men. Nationwide, a black teenage boy has a roughly one in 100 chance of being shot to death before he reaches the age of 30. Boston shows it is not inevitable.

Some suggest that Boston is safe because it is rich. The median household income is $86,000, compared with a national average of $75,000. Thanks to the tech and finance industries, once-rough neighbourhoods like South Boston are now among the most expensive places to live anywhere in America. Perhaps the criminals have been gentrified out? Another popular claim is that there are still shootings—it is just that more people survive because of advancing medical care. "What you hear is, 'It's all, we're gentrifying, or

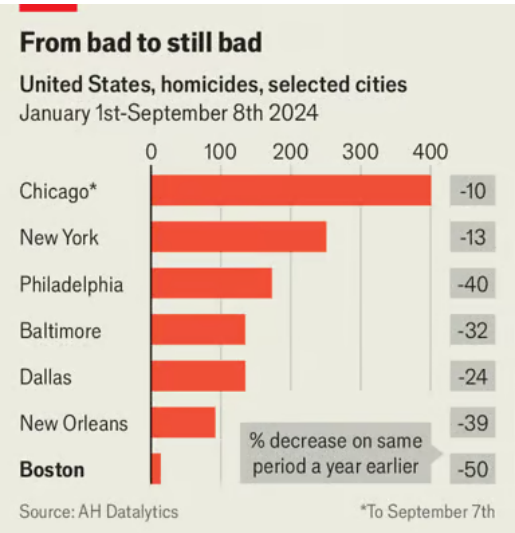

CHART: THE ECONOMIST

The data back Professor Winship up. According to the Census Bureau, despite gentrification, Boston's black population has not shrunk in recent decades: black Bostonians continue to make up a fifth of the city's population, roughly the same share as in 1990. As for wealth, whereas median incomes have grown, the poverty rate, at around 17%, is almost exactly the same as in Chicago. If wealth alone could explain the fall in the murder rate, Washington, DC, a city even more gentrified, with a similar-size population, would be as safe as Boston. Instead, in 2023 the capital suffered seven times as many murders. As Reverend Eugene Rivers, an anti-violence activist in Boston, puts it: "What does white folks getting richer do if all of the murders are committed by poor blacks?"

So what does explain the improvement? Across America, high murder rates among young black men are the result of a lack of trust. In segregated neighbourhoods people are reluctant to call the police because they do not expect them to take their complaints seriously. Young men join gangs to get protection against being robbed or otherwise victimised. Extreme violence is a way of signalling that you should not be messed with. In Boston, when teenagers with guns are arguing, Boston's police usually know how to stop it.

Patient progress

This trust was built over decades. In 1998 Reverend Rivers was among those who started the weekly get-togethers between police and community groups, known as the "Baker House" meetings. To visit is to get a sense of how it works. On September 4th those in the room included three district commanders; the Suffolk County district attorney, Kevin Hayden; senior probation officers; staff from various crime-focused NGOs; several churchmen; a few members of the public; Professor Winship; and your correspondent. Over the course of an hour the officials delivered reports on crime (or the lack of it) during the past week, and took questions.

How does having meetings reduce violence? The explanation, argues Professor Winship, lies in the way they have changed policing. Thirty years ago Boston's police department worked much as many American departments still do—targeting entire neighbourhoods indiscriminately. In one noticeable incident, in 1995, a young black officer was viciously beaten by his own colleagues who mistook him for a suspect during a foot chase. Afterwards, when his assailants realised their mistake, he was abandoned in the street. The officers responsible covered up their crime.

That culture has changed. Today the officer once attacked by his colleagues, Michael Cox, is the city's police commissioner. The police department is far more trusted. As Mr Cox puts it, "Through that trust, we're able

crime, he says. The important thing is to know who those young men are, and what they are arguing about, including on their social media.

One of the more prominent community bodies that attends the meetings is Roca, a "violence-interruption" group that works with nearly 300 young men (and a few women) in Boston who have been identified as especially likely to get involved in violence. Their goal is to persuade these youngsters to change their ways, using cognitive behavioural therapy and offers of training and job placements. Carl Miranda, the director of Roca's Boston office, describes how young men in a gang are put under intense emotional pressure to "strap up" and "spin the block" (that is, to take part in a drive-by shooting) in response to slights. With help, he says, they can learn to "interrupt those cycles".

Such groups exist all over America. Indeed, funding for them has exploded since the surge of violence after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020. Yet rarely do they work as closely with police as they do in Boston. In many cities, violence-interruption groups avoid interacting with police at all, because cops are so hated that it would undermine their ability to reach young gang members.

What this adds up to is a criminal-justice system that works preventively. As Mr Hayden, the district attorney, puts it, to change the behaviour of violent people, you need to be able to offer them a choice: get help, or get locked up. The help part is as important as the locking up. "If you don't have a real carrot then it's all a waste of breath," he says. His chief of staff is a former social worker; and social workers operate in police stations.

Can such lessons spread elsewhere? It would probably be hard to recreate what Boston has done. Since the 1990s, when the idea of a "Boston Miracle" first gained traction, hundreds of American police departments have visited the city to learn. Robert Sampson, another Harvard professor, argues that even in the roughest parts of black Boston, "you do not find the same deep level of cynicism towards the law and towards institutions that you find in, for example, the South Side of Chicago." Boston's police have not shot an unarmed person in two decades. Nor have they suffered scandals like those that have hit police departments in Chicago or Baltimore.

Yet there is no alternative but to try. "The more officers actually go and talk to the community and hear from them, the more that they feel better about their job," says Mr Cox. Police officers who feel valued solve more crime. It is more like ending a bitter civil war than tweaking government policy. Cops have to remember that they got into the job to help, and that even places with very high crime rates are home to good people and can improve. As Captain Hosein argues, "Police with dignity and everything comes together." ■

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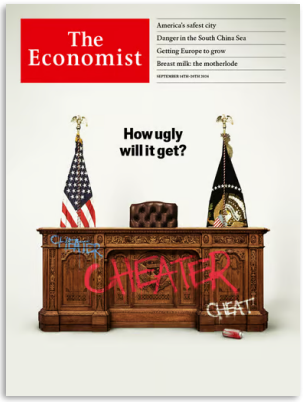

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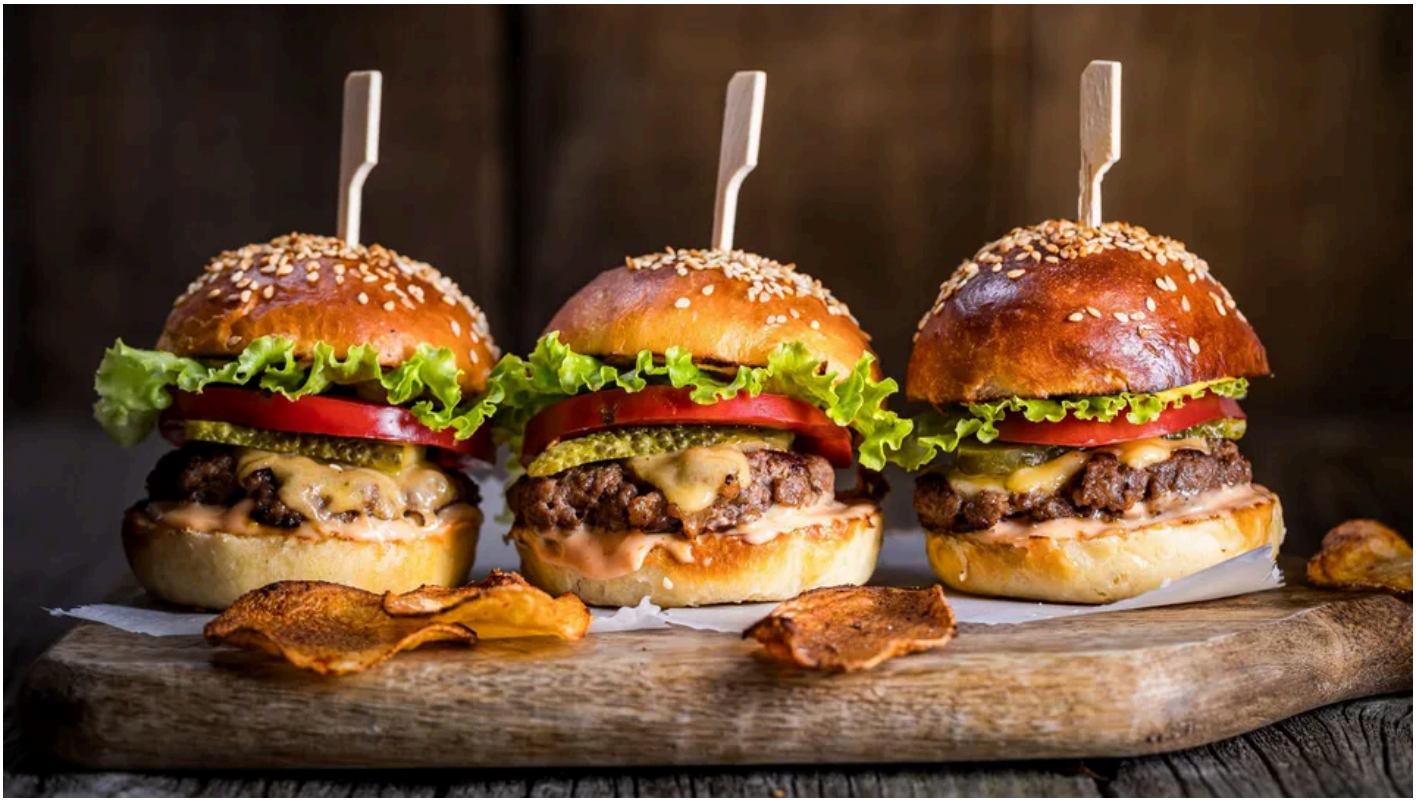

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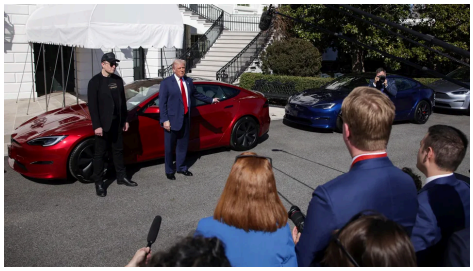

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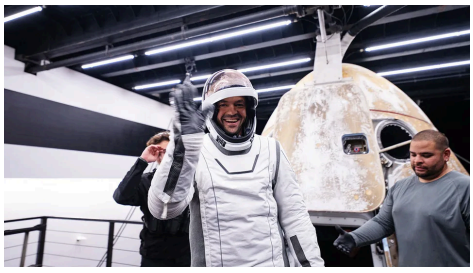

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