

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Are we witnessing a Baltimore Miracle in fight against crime?

GUEST COMMENTARY



Gov. Wes Moore and Ivan Bates, State's Attorney for Baltimore City, survey houses in the Four by Four neighborhood during a Community Walk with Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, officials and community members. (Kim Hairston/Staff)

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PUBLISHED: July 2, 2025 at 2:43 PM EDT

By the mid-1990s, Boston was in a constant state of tumult. While homicides had been high since 1980, the six years from 1989-1995 would prove to be among the city's deadliest, with [710 murders](#) — 75 more than the preceding six-year period. Racial strife and police abuses riled the city after the 1989 murder of Carol Stuart — a pregnant white woman from the suburbs — whose murder was blamed on a young Black man by her husband, the actual killer.

For the foreseeable future, Boston was to be a place of violence, chaos and disorder. Only, that's not what happened. Thanks to a team composed of the Boston Police Department, researchers from Harvard University and local religious leaders, an innovative approach called "Operation Ceasefire" dramatically reduced violent crime in the city. Over the next four years, [youth homicides decreased in the city by 63%](#), and Boston has become one of the [safest large cities](#) in the country.

Governments and the media hailed that initial decrease as the "Boston Miracle." Nearly three decades later, similar reductions in Baltimore deserve the same praise — if not more.

Baltimore has struggled with crime, especially drugs and violent crime, in both reality and in the imaginations of the American people for decades. Routinely in the top of the "most violent" or "least safe" city rankings, Baltimore has only had fewer than 200 murders three times since 1970.

In line with national trends, murder totals began increasing in the 1960s and then decreasing in the 1990s through 2014. Then, also in line with national trends, murder rose sharply in 2015 and remained elevated. Baltimore did not have fewer than 300 murders again until 2023, when a mix of best practices produced one of the most impressive declines in deadly violence in the nation's recent history. Murder declined nearly 22% in 2023, and then another almost 23% in 2024 — erasing all of the post-2014 increases. Through May 1, 2025, homicides were down another 31%, putting Baltimore on pace for its fourth sub-200 murder year since 1970, and the city's lowest total since the mid-1960s.

What happened?

The short answer is a lot. The city, in partnership with the state's attorney and nonprofit partners, employed a whole-of-government approach that pulled multiple levers simultaneously, but a few of them deserve special attention.

First, in January 2022, Mayor Brandon Scott's office launched its Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS). GVRS is a focused deterrence policing

strategy that focuses on violent groups driving violence. It does so by credibly delivering three messages. Respected members of the community convey that violence is unacceptable and must stop, optional services are offered for those who wish to desist from shootings and other gun violence, and finally, predictable, swift, and certain consequences are promised to those whose groups continue to engage in gun violence.

This is the same approach that was pioneered in Boston in the mid-1990s and now operates in cities large and small all over the country. It has been particularly successful in Baltimore, reducing group-involved homicides by 26% in its first year and [showing no evidence](#) of crime displacement. In the years since, Baltimore has developed one of the most robust focused deterrence approaches in the nation — doling out significant social support and robust consequences. From 2022-2024, GVRs referred out 201 cases for services and 355 for prosecution.

And that prosecution component has ramped up considerably since 2023. With the election of Ivan Bates as Baltimore City state's attorney, prosecutions of serious gun violence rose dramatically. In 2023, his first year in office, felony gun cases [increased](#) 12% over his predecessor's final year in office, while incarcerations for those charges were up nearly 121%. Homicide convictions increased 70% over that period.

Finally, Baltimore is home to a site of one of the most effective [violence intervention organizations](#) in the country. Roca, a GVRs nonprofit partner, utilizes cognitive behavioral therapy and relentless outreach to young people at the center of Baltimore's violence. In 2023, [Roca served](#) 417 young people in the city. For those enrolled for more than 18 months, 91% had improved behavioral health, and 95% had improved emotional regulation. For those enrolled for more than 24 months, 72% had no new arrests and 94% had no new incarcerations.

Taken together, these efforts — and others — have produced nothing short of a miracle, a “Baltimore Miracle” that has seen a dramatic reduction in violent crime in one of the most difficult public safety environments in the nation.

While no one should be spiking the football, and serious work lies ahead, serious people have taken on a serious issue — and seen incredible progress. Leadership in other crime-ridden cities would do well to take notice.

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