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# Baltimore homicide numbers are dropping more than in other areas of the country. Law enforcement experts explain why

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The drop in homicides in Baltimore City over the past two years has significantly outpaced the decrease in the country as a whole, a shift that academic and law enforcement experts largely credit to the work of two men: Baltimore City State's Attorney Ivan Bates and Mayor Brandon Scott.

Baltimore City recorded 201 homicides in 2024 — a 40% decline over 2022, when police logged 336 homicides. During the same two-year period which followed the return of some normalcy after pandemic lockdowns, homicides declined nationally 25%, with available data through October 2024, according to a Real-Time Crime Index published by AH Datalytics.

“You have to have a lot of things working at the same time — stronger prosecutions, policing and prevention,” to produce such a decline, said Daniel Webster, a violence prevention expert at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Among the factors contributing to the decrease in homicides, Webster and others who spoke with The Baltimore Sun said, are efforts by Maryland U.S. Attorney Erek Barron, city police, community members and the state, which has contributed financially. But tougher prosecution of handgun offenses under Bates and increased crime prevention strategies under Scott have been the real game changers.

## ‘Grab your toothbrush’

Ivan Bates kicked off his tenure as state's attorney with a warning to people carrying illegal handguns in his [January 2023 inaugural speech](#): “Grab your toothbrush,” because you'll be going to jail.

Since then, his office has focused heavily on prosecuting handgun offenses, specifically offenses involving felons in possession of handguns and handgun carriers who also possess drugs that they intend to sell.

“Those are the trigger-pullers. Those are the individuals that are repeat violent offenders,” Bates told The Sun.

A big difference between Bates' administration and that of his predecessor, Marilyn Mosby, is the frequency of requests prosecutors have made for the mandatory minimum prison sentence of five years without the possibility of parole, he said.

Under Mosby in 2021 and 2022, there were 2,186 cases involving handgun drug trafficking and felon-in-possession charges. Prosecutors called for the mandatory minimum sentence in 781 cases, or 35.7% of the

time.

Under Bates in 2023 and 2024, that rate doubled. Out of 2,443 total cases, prosecutors asked for the mandatory minimum sentence in 1,723 cases, or 70.5% of the time.

The threat of spending a minimum of five years in prison can significantly deter crime, as opposed to probation or a lighter sentence, Bates said.

“One of the things that we constantly were hearing on jail calls, on wiretaps, is that, ‘Oh, my god, they’re not playing over there. They’re sending us to jail now,’” he said.

## Holding individuals accountable

Cases are also less likely to be dropped now, Bates said, with 19% of cases dropped under his administration, compared with 34% under the last two years of Mosby’s tenure. Bates attributes this to better use of the state’s attorney’s victim witness division and a state grant for the evidence review unit to examine body camera footage.

Mosby could not be reached for comment after multiple attempts.

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Bates also credits others for contributing to the homicide drop, including Baltimore police, federal law enforcement and City Hall. But he said in his view, it is the prosecutor who is the most important piece of the criminal justice system.

“If the prosecutor decides they’re not about holding individuals accountable, an individual will decide that they can do whatever they want,” Bates said.

Former U.S. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein agreed, saying that although many deserve credit, the state’s attorney is the most significant factor in reducing crime in Baltimore City.

“Violent crime — it’s not like the weather. It’s not random,” Rosenstein said. “You actually do have control through your attitude toward enforcement.”

But while Bates has been clear about his efforts to be “tough on guns,” there may not be a direct connection between his strategy and the homicide drop, said John Cox, a criminal defense attorney who worked in the Baltimore State’s Attorney’s

Office until 2007.

“I think it’s probably more the police department being more proactive out there, trying to find the guns,” he said.

## Group Violence Reduction Strategy

Another factor in the homicide reduction, experts say, is the Group Violence Reduction Strategy launched by the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) in 2022.

GVRs focuses on groups of at least three people — not necessarily gangs — who are willing to inflict violence on one another’s behalf, said Stefanie Mavronis, MONSE’s director. The idea is to look for opportunities to intervene in potentially imminent retaliations, she said.

Since the program started in 2022, Mavronis said 201 people have been enrolled in “intensive life-coaching services and wraparound supports”; just 12 of them have recidivated. Services can include helping a participant relocate, get groceries and put together a resume.

Mavronis said GVRs has seen a lot of success for those enrolled in services. “We are reaching the right people,” she said.

Mayor Scott credited a confluence of factors in helping to bring down violent crime in the city, including GVRs, which he said has become “a national model.”

“When you focus in on the individuals who are the most likely to be the victims or perpetrators of violence ... then you can have the desired impact,” Scott told The Sun.

Scott also credited the police department for targeting those who traffic and carry guns, saying gun seizures have increased by 22% since 2019.

[A study](#) by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania showed GVRs reduced homicides and shootings by about a quarter in the Western police district in the first 18 months.

Gov. Wes Moore also noted financial resources that the state has provided for law enforcement, including the state’s attorney and U.S. attorney’s offices.

“The state is in the game, the state is on the field, and the state plans on making sure that Baltimore wins,” Moore told The Sun.

## **Why homicides were so high for so long**

Understanding why homicides dropped so low requires understanding why they got so high in the first place, spiking 62% in 2015 and not dropping below 300 homicides per year for eight consecutive years.

The big factors, academic and law enforcement experts told The Sun, were community outrage against abusive and excessive policing, the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, and the tenure of Bates’ predecessor, Marilyn Mosby, in the State’s Attorney’s Office.

In the early 2000s, Baltimore was over-policed and over-incarcerated, said Dave Moynihan, a recently retired Baltimore City homicide detective who served 31 years with the police department.

“They were pushing numbers, citations,” he said. “It got to the point I was watching cops give citations to people drinking beer on their front stoop.”

The excessive policing practices had the effect of “turning the public against the police,” he said.

Trust was strained, and police were violating people’s constitutional rights.

It came to a boiling point in April 2015, after Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man, sustained fatal injuries while in police custody. His death sparked massive unrest and violence in the city.

The following year, the U.S. Department of Justice released a [lengthy report](#) outlining how the Baltimore Police Department had for years engaged “in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the Constitution or federal law.” A [consent decree](#) between the department and DOJ soon followed, giving the court system oversight in remedying the wrongs within the BPD. Progress has been made, though the agreement is still in effect.

Despite the consent decree, homicides remained high for several years, academic and law enforcement experts said, as a result of continued distrust of police, a demoralized police force and less proactive

policing, lax prosecutorial policies at the State's Attorney's Office, and a contagion of violence resulting in an overwhelmed criminal justice system

Though Moynihan emphasized he has “no ill will towards [Mosby] at all,” he said the homicide numbers speak for themselves, pointing out that they sharply rose the year Mosby entered office and sharply declined the year she left.

“To see such a sharp increase and then such a sharp decrease, you’ve got to ask, ‘What changed?’” he said. “I think the obvious answer to that is what’s right in front of us.”

In 2020, Mosby announced her office would no longer prosecute low-level crimes, including minor drug possession and prostitution, in order to reduce exposure to COVID-19. She said at the time that statistics show locking people up for drugs and minor crimes doesn’t make the city safer.

“We stopped prosecuting marijuana for the past two years. Has that been an attributable factor in the homicide rate? Absolutely not,” she said at the time. Mosby later made permanent her policy of dismissing criminal charges for drug possession, including heroin.

But some people interpreted that as she wasn’t prosecuting crime in general, Bates said.

“People live on the quick sound bite. All they heard was, ‘I’m not going to prosecute crimes anymore,’” Bates said. “Now, that’s not what she meant, but that’s what they heard.”

To East Baltimore resident and Mosby supporter Wesley Hawkins, punitive government measures aren’t the answer. He’s an adjunct criminal justice professor at Coppin State University and created The Nolita Project, a mentorship program for city youth who grew up in difficult conditions like he did.

“The reason why people loved Marilyn Mosby was they felt like Marilyn Mosby understood where they were coming from,” Hawkins said.

‘Stronger partnership’

West Baltimore City Councilman James Torrence says Mosby was not responsible for the rise and fall of homicide numbers. The real explanation for the decline is that people are “holding their neighbors accountable,” he said, talking about ways they can make areas safer through things like increased street lighting in addition to violence prevention work.

To City Council President Zeke Cohen, the key element is a “stronger partnership” between the mayor, police department, state’s attorney, governor’s office, U.S. attorney and community organizations.

“People are sick and tired of not feeling safe in their city, and so I think we’re seeing a higher degree of collaboration coordination with law enforcement, with non-law enforcement partners, and with residents and neighbors.”

When asked about Bates’ impact, Cohen said he’s done an “outstanding job of rebuilding an office that was fundamentally broken when he inherited it,” noting in particular the numerous vacancies before Bates entered office. “His focus on going after violent criminals has been absolutely outstanding,” Cohen said.

But the credit for the homicide reduction doesn’t go exclusively to Bates or Scott, or any other individual, he said.

“I think they both deserve credit, as do all of our law enforcement partners, as do our communities,” he said. “This is a moment where Baltimore needs to stand in unity and in collaboration.”

The homicide decline comes as Baltimore makes progress on fulfilling requirements of the federal consent decree, which went into effect following police abuses of the past, notes Chuck Wexler, executive director

of the Police Executive Research Forum in Washington, D.C.

“There were those who said you can’t have constitutional policing and also have impact on crime — that they were in conflict,” he said. “Well, what it shows is that you can do both.”

*Alex Mann contributed to this report. Have a news tip? Contact Brooke Conrad at [bconrad@baltsun.com](mailto:bconrad@baltsun.com), 443-682-2356 or [@conrad\\_brooke](https://twitter.com/conrad_brooke) on X*

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