



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

POLICE

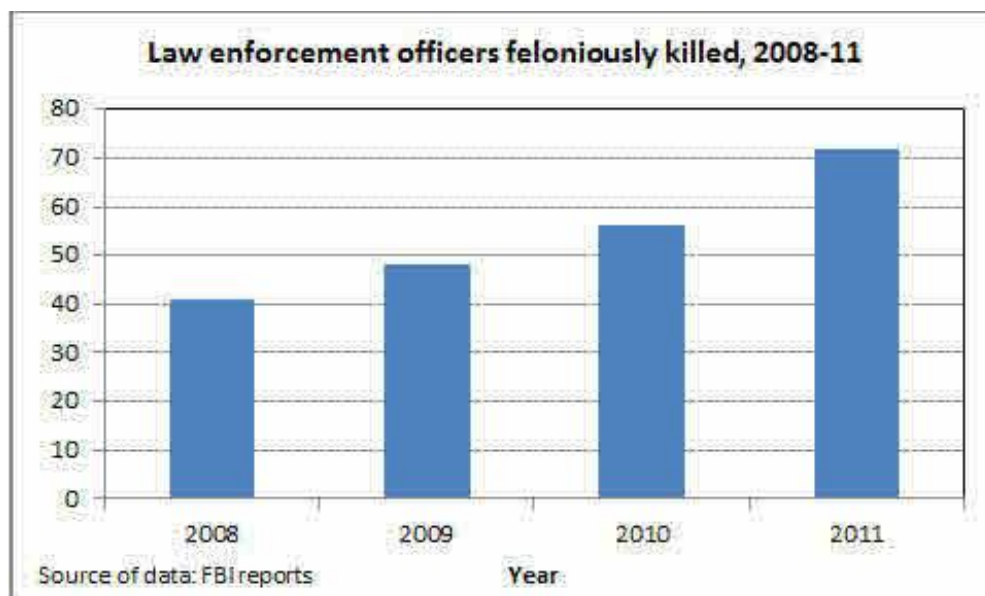
Are police fatalities on the rise?

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 13, 2012 05:15 PM

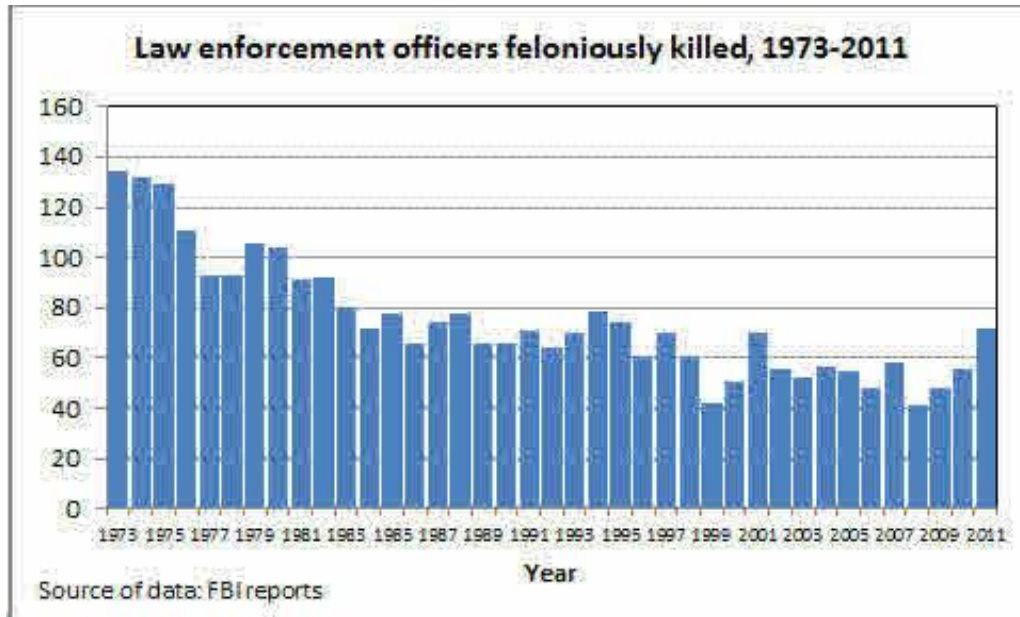
Thursday night's deadly shoot-out in Greenland, N.H., occurring on the same day as a fatal stand-off in Modesto, Calif., has some observers around the country wondering if the job of a police officer is perhaps getting appreciably more dangerous. And, oddly enough, a [story](#) in last Monday's *New York Times*, under the ominous headline Even as Violent Crime Falls, Killing of Officers Rises, would seem to confirm the impression:

"As violent crime has decreased across the country, a disturbing trend has emerged: rising numbers of police officers are being killed. According to statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 72 officers were killed by perpetrators in 2011, a 25 percent increase from the previous year and a 75 percent increase from 2008."

There is more to the matter than the *Times* noted in its suddenly and sadly relevant story. These are the FBI figures on the number of police officers feloniously killed (as opposed to those killed accidentally) that the *Times* would have used for its report, data which show a sharp rise in fatalities.



Unfortunately (if you're at the *Times*) and fortunately (if you're concerned about the safety of law enforcement personnel), this three-year trend is an aberration a short-term rise following decades of decline. In fact, the benchmark for the 75-percent increase used by the *Times* happens to have been the lowest level in almost four decades. Here is the fuller picture:



I don't mean to dismiss the 2011 spike in officers killed as being unimportant, nor do I wish to minimize the tragic shootings that occurred this week. However, it is premature to suggest that the threat level is rising, notwithstanding Thursday's sad outcomes. The short-term surge in police killings, which partly resulted from a few multiple-victim incidents during 2011, will likely reverse itself in 2012.