



Crime & Punishment

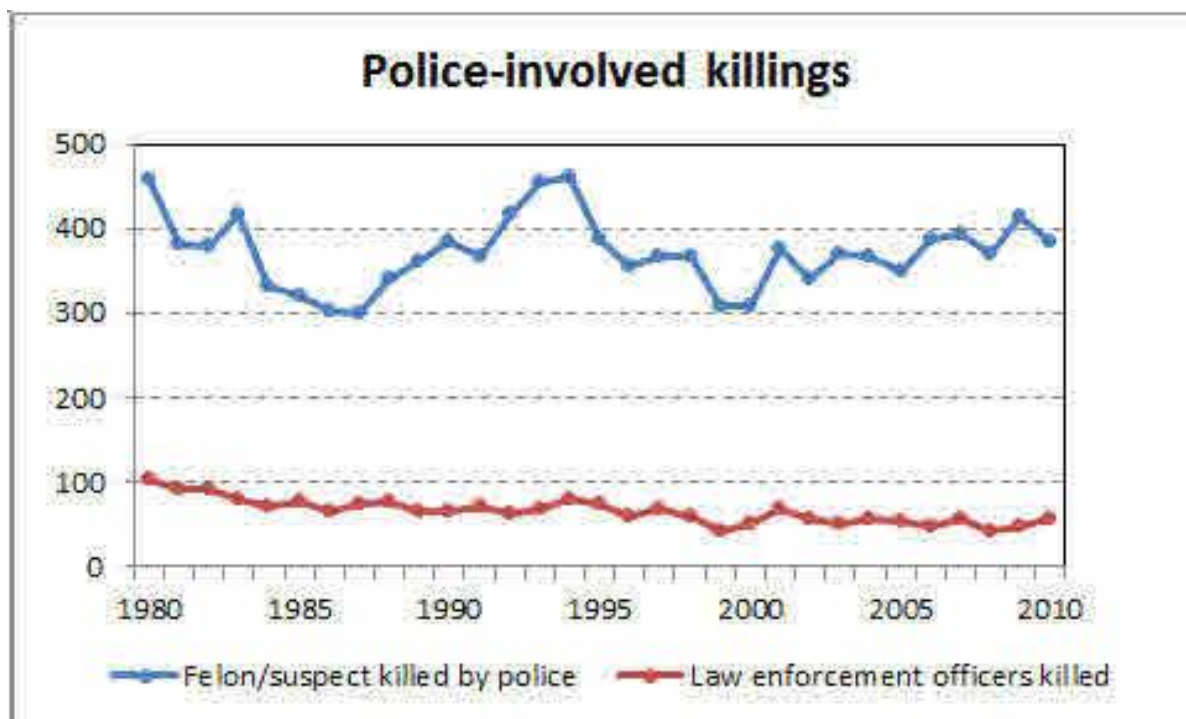
James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

POLICE

Justifiable homicides by police on the rise

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment August 22, 2012 10:30 AM

Yesterday's lethal shooting by the Boston Police of an armed man in the South End (or Back Bay by some people's definition) reflects a curious pattern that has emerged over the past decade. Even while crime rates have remained relatively level, the number of felons or suspects killed by the police in America has risen fairly steadily (see figure below). Although not quite as frequent as in the violence-peak years of the early 1990s, since 2000, the incidence of justifiable homicides, as they are classified, of felons/suspects by the police has grown nationally by about one-third, from approximately 300 to 400 per year.



The justification for these incidents often comes in the form of a police officer shooting an armed suspect rather than to be shot. In fact, more than a quarter of the justifiable homicides by the police involve a suspect who had attacked (or threatened) an officer. All too often we hear stories about law enforcement officers being killed in the line of duty -- dedicated professionals who had put themselves in harm's way in order to protect us. While these cases are both sad and infuriating, they are occurring less often.

No one would dispute the need for the police to protect themselves or others by using lethal force. At the same time, it is important that each and every episode receive full and transparent investigation of the circumstances that result in someone's untimely death.