



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## Murders of school teachers - A sad aberration

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They used to say that bad things come in threes. Well, apparently in today media-driven culture, two tragedies are enough to trigger inquiries about whether something is trending.

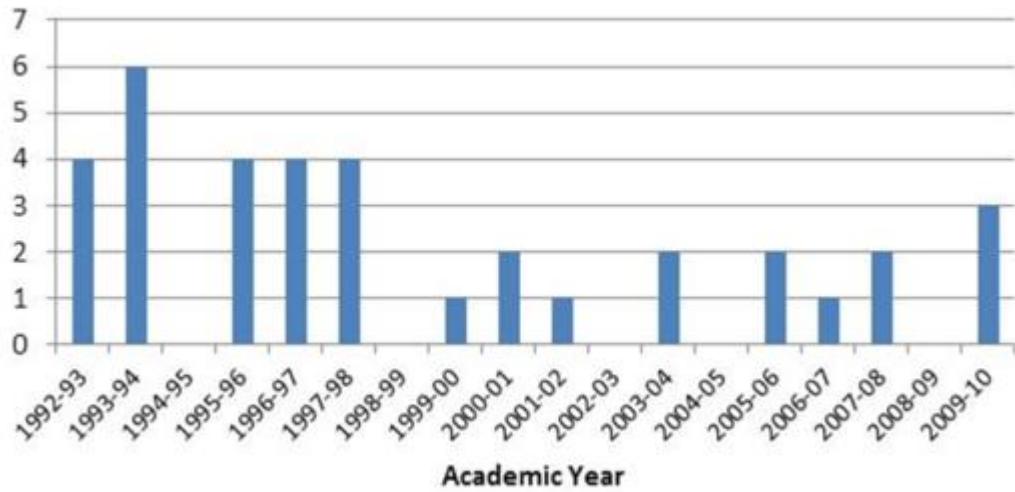
This past week has witnessed two particularly disturbing episodes of school-related violence. Two school teachers, both highly regarded by their students for their skill and dedication, were murdered allegedly at the hands of young teenage students. In Sparks, Nevada, 45-year-old Michael Landsberry attempted valiantly, yet unsuccessfully, to convince an armed 12-year-old middle school student to put down his gun and surrender. His heroism cost him his life. And locally, in Danvers, Massachusetts, Philip Chism, age 14, has been charged with the murder of 24-year-old Colleen Ritzer. Reportedly, Ritzer had volunteered to stay after school to help the student prepare for an upcoming test.

We are all saddened by the violent deaths of these two dedicated educators. But, despite the close timing, the world's most noble profession is not the deadliest-- far from it. Without minimizing the terrible and senseless loss of life, that two of the more than 7 million schoolteachers were murdered in the same week does not signal an epidemic or suggest that it is suddenly open season on educators. Unfortunately, headlines like, Two teachers killed this week: How safe are US schools?, that appeared in Wednesday's *Christian Science Monitor* (hardly a news outlet prone to tabloid journalism), tend inappropriately to scare the American public.

The chart below displays the number of teachers and other staff members murdered each year at school. Over the nearly two decade time frame, there has been an average of 2 such killings a year in the United States. Moreover, the frequency in recent years is lower than in the early and mid-1990s when gang violence spilling onto school grounds was especially problematic.

Two schools have lost talented and committed educators. But any notion that schools and teachers are under siege is hardly justified.

## Teachers and staff murdered at school



Extracted from National School Safety Center, School-Associated Violent Deaths Report