Increase in police deaths isn't what it seems

By Abbie VanSickle, Center for Investigative Reporting

In his remarks at the funeral of slain New York police Officer Wenjian Liu, FBI Director James Comey told those gathered that 2014 had been an unusually deadly year for law enforcement officers.

"We had 115 officers killed in the line of duty last year, a shocking increase from 2013," he said.

Comey's remarks suggest that officers are dying at the hands of criminals at a higher rate than in the past. But do the statistics support this "shocking increase?" Not really.
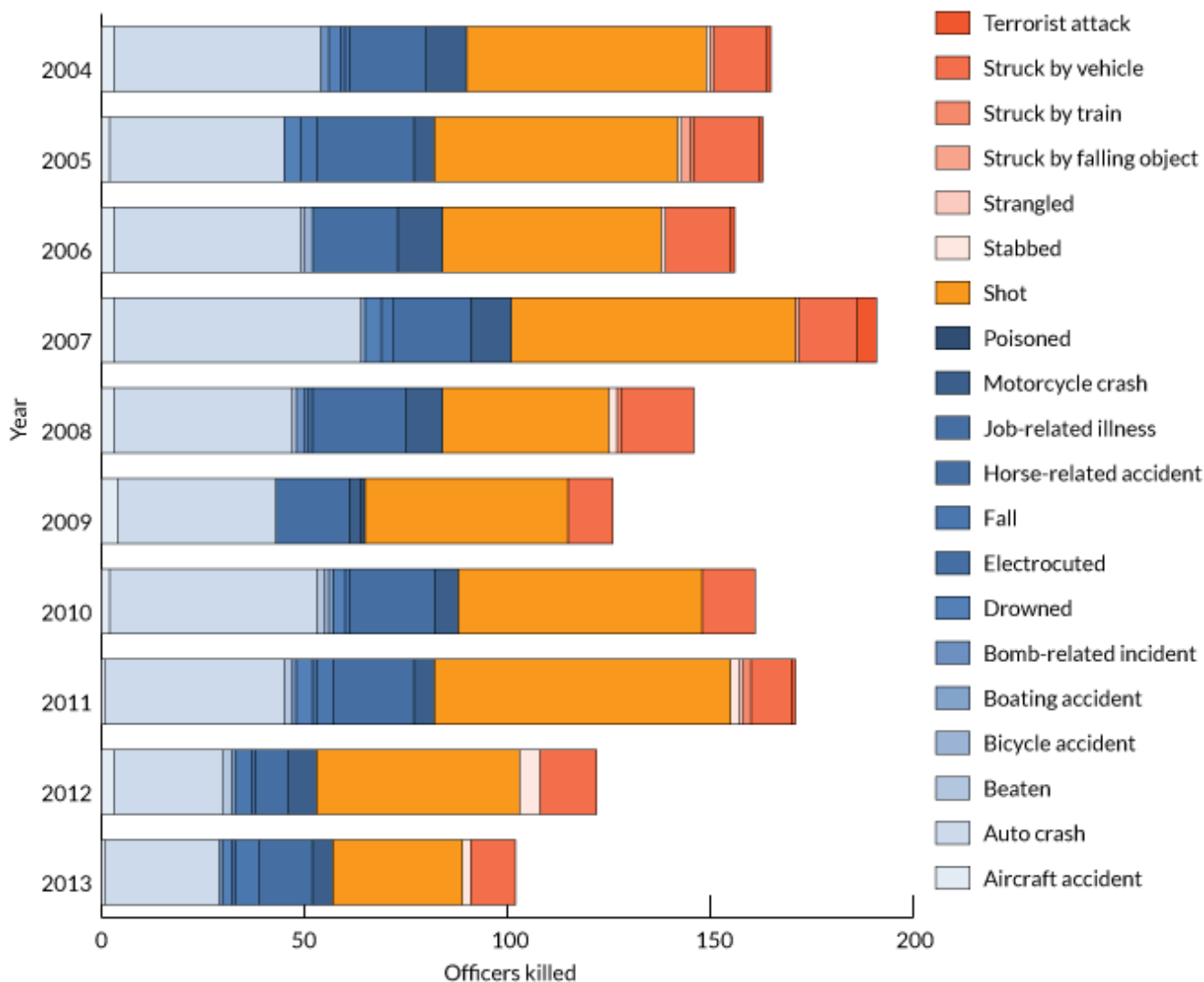
While newly available data show that law enforcement deaths did rise from 2013 to 2014, a closer analysis shows that 2013 may have been the aberration, with an unusually low number of police deaths, while 2014 marked a return to the recent norm.

"It was not far out of line from the other years," said Steve Groeninger, spokesman for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. "I think it was troubling in that I think that we as a community had hoped that we were turning a corner on law enforcement safety, and, boy, they just jumped back up again."

The memorial fund, a Washington-based nonprofit that tracks nationwide law enforcement deaths, compiles a database widely used by researchers. Its preliminary data for 2014 show that 126 law enforcement officers in the U.S. died in the line of duty, up 24 percent from 2013, when 102 officers were killed. In 2012, 122 officers died. But in 2011, 171 officers lost their lives, and in 2010, the figure was 161.

The biggest news in the 2014 statistics may be that firearms deaths surpassed traffic-related fatalities as the leading cause of death among law enforcement officers.

Causes of law enforcement deaths, 2004-2013

Source: National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund

Firearms-related fatalities among law enforcement officers have decreased each decade since the 1970s, according to the memorial fund's data. In the 1970s, an average of 127 officers were killed with guns annually. That dropped to an average of 87 officers a year in the 1980s. Last year, firearms deaths

rose from 32 officers in 2013 to 50 in 2014 — a 56 percent increase, but still below this decade's average of 53 officers a year.

This data is largely in line with related sources. The FBI tracks deaths of law enforcement officers each year and publishes an annual report, "Law Enforcement Officers Killed or Assaulted," also known as LEOKA. This data differs slightly from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund's data because it does not include some types of law enforcement officers, such as prison guards, and relies on voluntary reporting by agencies.

While the 2014 FBI report is not yet available, prior data show that 2013 was an exceptionally safe year for police. According to the FBI, 26 officers were killed with firearms in 2013, a sharp decline from 2012, which saw 44 officers killed with firearms, and 2011, when 63 officers killed.

Interested in how many people were killed in 2014 by law enforcement? That's much a harder question to answer. No national government database tracks deaths at the hands of law enforcement. Instead, local police departments can self-report information to the FBI on what it calls justifiable homicides, but that data is widely considered to be unreliable, according to recent media reports including Nate Silver's ESPN website FiveThirtyEight and the *Washington Post*.