



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

Obsessing over record victim counts

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Long before Guinness published the first edition chronicling various world pace-setting achievements in virtually every walk of life and death, Americans have been obsessed with records -- the good, the bad, and the deadly. It certainly does seem that events and accomplishments, from the trivial to the tragic, take on special significance if they can somehow be cast as the best or the worse of their kind.

As if the recent shooting spree at an Aurora, Colo. movie theater, which resulted in 12 killed and another 58 injured, wasn't horrible enough, many news outlets felt compelled to declare it as a record of sorts -- thereby blurring the fine line between awful and awesome. Although the Aurora shooting spree wasn't nearly record-breaking, certain members of media tried hard to describe it as a superlative nonetheless.

Two days after the shooting, for example, I was chatting with a news reporter/anchor from one of the local television affiliates when she asked if it was accurate for her to identify the shooting as a record for mass murder. I reminded her of the 168 killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the 87 who died in New York City's Happy Land arson fire of 1990.

She then questioned whether Aurora was perhaps the largest massacre *involving guns* as the weapon. I responded that 32 were fatally shot five years ago at Virginia Tech. I added that the Aurora shooting wouldn't even be in the "Top 10" in terms of death toll, as if it really mattered or was of any consolation to the 12 families who mourned the loss of a loved one in the rampage.

Undeterred, the newswoman followed-up by asking about the total number of victims: those killed *and* those wounded. I had to concede that this was indeed a record for mass shooting victims -- but *only within the U.S.*, not worldwide. She was finally satisfied and prepared for Monday's newscast.

Unfortunately, this exchange did not represent an isolated search for "murder maximus." Media from around the country pondered the relative enormity of the massacre. It was reported that the Aurora shooting was the largest since the Ft. Hood massacre; of course, that wasn't very long ago -- less than 3 years. Other news sources noted that the theater mass murder was the largest in Colorado -- since Columbine in 1999, that is.

Curiously, not one media outlet contrasted the latest Colorado mass murder to the 44 who were killed in 1955 when a man placed a bomb inside his mother's suitcase that was then loaded on a flight leaving from the Denver airport. Apparently, our look back in time can be somewhat myopic.

Notwithstanding the cruel absurdity of treating human suffering as any sort of achievement worthy of measuring in such terms, there is little positive that can be derived by keeping or highlighting such ignominious records. But there is one significant negative: records are made to be broken.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of Americans who watched the news and listened to the recorded sounds of terror would have identified with the pain and suffering of the victims, their families, and the entire Aurora community. However, a few would instead have identified with the power of the perpetrator, not to mention his instant but undeserved celebrity. Therein lies the danger, and the challenge for copycats to outperform their role models.

We are all painfully aware of the enormous proportions to the Aurora massacre. It serves no purpose to focus on record victim tolls. Instead, we should focus on how not to turn murderous madmen into cult heroes for the few like-minded folks on the fringe.