



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

## Mass murder -- Horrible enough without hype

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I have grown accustomed to the massive media attention and frantic search for breaking news developments associated with mass murder. However, the seemingly insatiable need for some journalists to create a context for tragedy is mystifying.

Barely two hours after Tuesday's shooting at a Portland, Oregon shopping mall, I received several calls from points far west inquiring whether mass shootings were on the rise. Following high profile massacres in Aurora, Colorado and Seattle, Washington earlier this year, reporters and news editors wanted to confirm their perceptions with reality. They also wanted to know whether the Oregon shooter may have been modeling the Colorado theater massacre.

I assured all those who asked that such tragedies were not a sign of an upward trajectory. Rather, our collective memories seem to forget or move past other anxious times when mass shootings have clustered in time, for the most part out of sheer coincidence. Although there have been cases in which mass gunmen have derived inspiration from others who preceded them, and perhaps wanted a share of the notoriety that follows, the impact of copycatting is often overstated.

Curiously, the response from those who called about such a trend was more disappointment than relief. Innocent people were killed senselessly, and that wouldn't be any worse or better were it part of an emerging pattern.

Then, of course, came the Newtown, Connecticut shooting which claimed that lives of more than two dozen victims, mostly young children. As the tragedy was unfolding and before any perpetrator or motive was identified, scores of journalists, from all forms of media and from here and abroad were phoning to ask whether this was the worst school shooting in history. It didn't matter that deadlier episodes had happened overseas (the 2004 school siege in Russia), at a college setting (Virginia Tech in 2007) or involving means other than gunfire (the 1927 school explosion in Bath, Michigan), reporters were eager to declare the Sandy Hook massacre as some type a new record.

There isn't a Hall of Fame for criminals. There is no purpose in looking for record-setting. Does the pain and suffering associated with the Sandy Hook school shooting change in anyway if it is the largest? Would that make it any more important? I trust I need not answer these rhetorical questions.