Another mass shooting sears deep into our collective consciousness, but it is hype and hysteria on the rise, not violence.

Another mass shooting sears deep into the collective consciousness of the American people. Another school — this time a community college in an otherwise peaceful town in rural Oregon — is devastated by a young man taking aim at students trapped in classrooms. Nine are murdered, and many others wounded, before the gunman is killed in a shootout with the police.

Within a few hours, President Obama appeared before the camera, reinforcing the notion that America is under siege. “Somehow this has
become routine,” noted Obama with obvious emotion. “The reporting is routine.”

Although the sense of urgency may be overstated, Obama is certainly correct about the almost formulaic media response. The Oregon shooting had countless news outlets flooding the airwaves and the Internet with questionable statistics on the incidence of mass shootings along with sidebar listings of the deadliest shooting sprees in U.S. history. In the usual rush to offer up some breaking information, news reports were embellished with unconfirmed details about the massacre and the assailant that did little but fuel a contagion of fear.

For context, media folks reminded us of the unforgettable, high profile shootings that have taken place over the past few months, hinting of a problem that has grown out of control. They lumped together rather different types of incidents (the hate-inspired church killing in Charleston, the random shooting at a Louisiana movie theater in which two victims were slain, and the targeted killing of two employees of a Virginia television station by a disgruntled former co-worker seeking payback for perceived mistreatment) as if there is a pattern emerging.

Further adding to the state of alarm and confusion, headlines featured scary yet conflicting statistics from various sources. By reducing the standard threshold in defining a mass shooting (four or more killed by gunfire, not including the perpetrator), the incidence can reach incredible proportions. For example, the “Mass Shooting Tracker” website redefines a mass shooting as an incident in which at least four people (including the assailant) are shot, but not necessarily killed. By this criterion, there have been nearly 300 thus far this year.

Notwithstanding the sadness caused by each of these tragedies, nothing has really changed in term of risk. One can take virtually any period of months or years during the past few decades and find a series of shootings that seemed at the time to signal a new epidemic. The ‘80s were marked by
a flurry of deadly postal shootings, which gave rise to the term “going postal.” The ‘90s witnessed a string of mass shootings in middle and high schools carried out by alienated adolescents with access to borrowed guns, prompting the venerable Dan Rather to declare an epidemic of school violence.

More recently, the “active shooter” has become the new boogeyman armed with a gun. Of course, there were shootings in public places long before this frightening catchphrase was created. Nowadays, any time someone shows up with a gun in a school, a church, a movie theater, a shopping mall or a restaurant, twitter becomes alive with messages of alarm.

I certainly don’t mean to minimize the suffering of the Oregon victims and their families, but the shooting spree is not a reflection of more deadly times. Consider the facts.

According to a careful analysis of data on mass shootings (using the widely accepted definition of at least four killed), the Congressional Research Service found that there are, on average, just over 20 incidents annually. More important, the increase in cases, if there was one at all, is negligible. Indeed, the only genuine increase is in hype and hysteria.

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