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Is a weapons-screening strategy for public schools good public policy?

By

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As Professor Ronald V. Clarke of the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice points out, it is easier to prevent a crime by making the crime target inaccessible than to change the motivation of the potential offender. Thus, locks on steering columns reduce auto thefts, and burglar alarms reduce household burglaries. This is what Professor Clarke calls "situational crime prevention," and he has shown in many studies that it works (Clarke 1997). A situational crime prevention strategy is essentially the basis for hopes to prevent a recurrence of terrorist attacks on airliners. But is this strategy appropriate for "preventing lethal violence in schools" (Mawson et al.)? Can "entry-based weapons-screening" cope with the problem of school violence effectively?

I have doubts that it can. School violence has certainly become a problem in American public schools, especially secondary schools, but the violence is mostly nonlethal and a humdrum extension of adolescent aggressiveness: a shakedown in the boys' toilet or an enemy punched (Toby 1998). I call it "everyday school violence" to distinguish it from an irrational massacre like the one that took place in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Irrational lethal violence in schools is very rare -- and motivated quite differently from the everyday violence that is the bane of inner-city schools (Toby 2001). Everyday school violence can turn lethal, but weapons screening cannot easily prevent such an outcome; a great many objects found in schools for legitimate purposes can be used aggressively, as happened in the following case:

At the high school of suburban Surrattsville, Maryland, on January 23, 1986, eighteen-year-old Eric Hawk, a popular student planning to attend college that fall, was waiting in the school parking lot to board his bus at the end of the day. Another 18-year-old student, John Rideout, who had quarreled with Eric on other occasions, challenged him
to a fight, and, while Eric was removing his coat, stabbed him in the head with a screwdriver that John had stolen earlier in the day from the art room. Eric went into convulsions and died almost immediately, causing consternation at Surrattsville High School; fights do not ordinarily result in severe injuries, much less a death. (Toby 1995a)

In short, the line between lethal weapons and nonlethal tools or eating utensils is not as clear as one might think. This problem is the same one that airport and aircraft security personnel have to deal with. Banning knives poses problems for passengers who may require them to cut their meat. But in the wake of the 11 September terrorist capture of four airliners, passengers now accept inconveniences aboard aircraft; a ban on useful utensils seems a small price for added safety from hijackers. On the other hand, school shops, laboratories, and cafeterias cannot operate in the future in any way like they have in the past if similar bans were put in place. That being so, students, staff members of schools, and elected boards of education are reluctant to accept great inconvenience and expense in order to obtain marginally better safety. After all, schools are essentially a fairly safe environment. Very few homicides occur in the nation's 20,000 secondary schools and 60,000 elementary schools, most of them public schools. Victimization statistics gathered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice show that young people are at far greater risk of lethal violence outside of schools than inside of schools (Kaufman et al. 2001). We don't want to use a meat ax to kill a spider.

A further complication is that some school violence, including lethal violence, takes place in areas around the school, in school buses, or on the streets used by students coming to or going from school rather than in school buildings. One explanation for guns and knives that students carry in school stems from their fear that they will be attacked or robbed on the way to or from school. Some wag made the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that private entrepreneurs in tough inner-city neighborhoods might rent lockers to students so that they could check their weapons before entering school buildings and retrieve them when school lets out. The serious point beneath this witticism is
that students believe -- correctly, in view of the evidence -- that they have more to fear outside of school buildings than inside.

In short, students might well entertain reasonable fears about the streets, schoolyards, and parking lots outside of school buildings that screening for weapons at school entrances would not help. Recall the following case: In January 1989, an alcoholic drifter named Patrick Purdy walked onto the playground of the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, and, without warning, began spraying bullets from his AK-47 assault rifle. Five children died and twenty-nine persons were wounded, some critically (Toby 1995b).

Patrick Purdy might have been kept out of the Cleveland Elementary School if he had attempted to enter it with his assault rifle. A brave teacher or security guard might have challenged him even if weapons screening was not in place. His age showed that he was not a student in the school. But school security guards are not armed, and neither are teachers. Furthermore, a mentally ill adult is not the usual security problem. The usual problem is a student, a former student, or a suspended student, and these categories of possible predators are extremely difficult to distinguish from run-of-the-mill students coming for an education. This might be considered a good argument in favor of entry-based weapons screening. However, as I will try to demonstrate presently, students and former students have ways to evade entry-based weapons screening that a stranger to the school, including an angry parent or older sibling, does not usually have.

Cases like that of Purdy, where the lethal violence is associated with the school but does not occur in the building itself, is an obvious limitation of entry-based weapons screening. But even for violent acts that take place within school buildings, screening for weapons would not necessarily protect students and teachers. Why not? Because schools are not fortresses. Fire regulations require many doors. True, all but the front entrance can be locked from the outside, but the other doors must be openable in emergencies, such as a fire. If a student wishes to bring a knife, a gun, a box cutter, a plastic dagger, or a hammer into a school, all he or she needs is a friend willing to open a side door. Consider the following case:
In April 1998 a fifteen-year-old female student at Roosevelt High School in Yonkers, New York, was upset because her social studies teacher, Dawn Jawrower, had telephoned her parents to express concern over her poor academic performance. The student packed a hammer into her bookbag, entered Ms. Jawrower's class a little after 8 AM, and attacked Ms. Jawrower in front of the class, fracturing the teacher's skull in two places before other students in the class managed to restrain her. (Toby 1998)

The female student in this case probably did not need an ally to bring her weapon into Roosevelt High School. At the present time very few schools have the walk-through screening for weapons that airports have now and that the Mawson et al. article recommends for schools. What the more violence-prone school systems have are relatively untrained and low-paid security guards who check randomly selected students with a wand-type metal detector; to contain costs, the teams of security guards with metal detectors go unannounced from school to school within the system. This is obviously an ineffective way to keep out lethal weapons, as Mawson et al. point out. Walk-through detectors would be better and worth the cost and inconvenience in schools where the level of everyday violence is high. But unless walk-through detectors were placed in every school, they could not prevent irrational lethal violence; the Columbine murders were as unpredictable as the attack on the World Trade Center.

It would be wonderful if the principle of situational crime prevention were a practical solution to the school violence problem. Walk-through detectors attract interest because they offer a technological fix for what is otherwise an intractable problem. Let me recapitulate the reasons why I doubt that it is a practical approach for all schools and all school systems:

1. Lethal school violence as opposed to nonlethal everyday school violence is comparatively rare in most school systems. The cost involved in setting up a system that may prevent such rare events is very great.

2. Schools are architecturally unsuited to perimeter defense. Most schools have too many doors and windows through which a student friend in the school can admit former students (or enrolled students) with weapons. Magnetic door
locks with alarms attempt to deal with this problem -- but they do so imperfectly.

3. It is extremely inconvenient to keep out of schools everything that can be turned into lethal weapons because (a) school shops and classrooms use tools that are in effect weapons and (b) quite ordinary objects like nail files and cutlery can be utilized as weapons. Who thought before September 11 that a jumbo jet could become a lethal weapon?

Is a weapons-screening strategy for public schools good public policy? It is not a cost-effective strategy. Technological fixes are too expensive, inconvenient, and marginally efficient to cope with the problem well. But an imperfect and costly strategy may be better than no strategy at all. I myself would choose another imperfect strategy. On the assumption that currently enrolled students perpetrate most attempts at lethal violence, prevent some murders at school by giving more options to kids miserable at school for whatever reason. For those old enough to drop out and go to work, make it more socially acceptable to stop school for a while and try a job in the real world. If this option had been available to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, perpetrators of the murder-suicides at Columbine High School, they might have simply dropped out and taken jobs in a nearby ski resort. (The Swedes speak of kids being "school-tired" and do not stigmatize those who leave for a time-out; most eventually return a year or two later.) For unhappy younger children too, more options are possible. Alternative schools, charter schools, and private and parochial schools available through voucher programs are already in place for the sake of educational effectiveness, and this development should help with the school violence problem also. The guiding principle should be: Try not to trap kids, because trapped kids can become dangerous to their classmates, their teachers, and themselves. School massacres are rare, and even nonlethal, everyday violence is the exception, not the rule; increased options for unhappy kids could make school violence rarer still.

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References:


