



MAKING SCHOOLS SAFER?

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF GOOD INTENTIONS

IT IS NOW OVER TEN YEARS since the shootings at Columbine High School in April 1999. While Columbine was not the first school shooting in the United States, or the last, it remains the most important. For many people, but especially for parents, the name 'Columbine' has become a one-word summation of fears and concerns about the condition of modern youth. In particular – and not surprisingly – the events in Columbine have concentrated public attention on school safety and school-based crime.

On the face of it, these concerns are well justified. Research that Scot Wortley and I conducted in Toronto several years ago confirms that school is a significant site of student victimization, though most of the incidents described to us did not involve serious violence.¹ American research also shows that neighbourhoods, businesses, and shopping malls bordering high schools experience more crime than their more isolated counterparts.² This research also shows that the journey to and (particularly) from school affords more opportunities for – and fewer constraints against – crime than the schools themselves. Other American research indicates that schools are not the principal places where violence by or against adolescents occurs.³ Such incidents are more likely to take place in or near the victim's home or in the community than in the school itself. By any reasonable standard, schools themselves are, as they have always been, relatively safe places for young people.

Needless to say, this is not how schools are commonly viewed. In the wake of Columbine, most school boards in North America have embarked upon various safe school and anti-bullying policies and programs, in response to real public anxiety about safety in schools. Many of these initiatives have never been properly evaluated; of those that have, some have been found to be ineffective and others have been found to produce effects that were presumably unintended. I want to focus on two such high-profile initiatives.

SCHOOL UNIFORMS

When I was growing up and going to school in England, I was required to wear a uniform. I hated it: hated the uniform, hated the rule. The official and often-repeated justification for the policy was an egalitarian one: requiring pupils to wear uniforms masked otherwise invidious class and status distinctions among them.

Apparently, similar motivations once informed school uniform policies where they existed in North America.⁴ However, the post-Columbine rationale for school uniforms is much more likely to emphasize safety and disciplinary issues. As explained to me by one high school principal several years ago (and, I suspect, probably accepted by many in the teaching profession as common knowledge), school uniforms make it easier for school personnel to spot unwanted intruders in the hallways and prevent the impor-



EN BREF Pressés de calmer la peur du public face à quelques incidents graves de violence scolaire, nous courons le risque de négliger les stratégies éducationnelles bien établies qui améliorent les comportements scolaires, pour adopter des panacées qui n'ont pas fait leurs preuves et qui pourraient même avoir des conséquences négatives imprévues. Bien que la logique d'une politique d'uniforme scolaire puisse laisser croire qu'il s'agira d'un outil efficace dans la campagne contre les problèmes de comportement à l'école, les preuves qui existent indiquent tout le contraire. De même, les politiques de tolérance zéro à l'école semblent avoir engendré ou exacerbé le profilage racial. De façon générale, les caractéristiques des bonnes écoles (par opposition aux écoles mauvaises ou médiocres) sont les mêmes que celles qui servent à prévenir ou à réduire les crimes et autres comportements perturbateurs.

tation of some of the most obvious signs and symbols of gang culture into the school setting.⁵

Findings from Southern California provided early support for claims about the positive effects of school uniforms.⁶ The Long Beach School District was one of the first large school boards in North America to introduce a mandatory uniform policy. The initiative attracted a large amount of media attention – even more when statistics were published showing that the incidents of school crime declined between the 1994-1995 and 1995-1996 school years, immediately after the implementation of the uniform policy.

However, more recent and better designed longitudinal research, also from the United States, has punctured

these claims. In a large, national survey, Brunnsma and Rockquemore report that, when other factors were taken into account, school uniforms had no impact upon substance use (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana), school attendance, or behavioural problems (in-school suspensions for skipping classes and getting into trouble).⁷ Intriguingly, they also report that a uniform policy seems to have a suppressive effect upon educational attainment. They proffer no explanation for this important reversal of the usual argument about the benefits of school uniforms. Perhaps it is because, as in the case of my own school days, young people object to a uniform policy, and that objection translates into a weakened commitment to schooling.

Certainly, there was resistance to the uniform policy in Long Beach. Emanating, in part, from the ranks of high school students, it resulted in high schools (as opposed to elementary and middle schools) becoming exempt from the policy. Ironically, this created a situation in which a policy conceived primarily as a school-based anti-gang initiative was never applied to older students, among whom gang activity might reasonably have been expected to be most prevalent.⁸

How might we explain the original, optimistic findings from Long Beach, California? Brunnsma and Rockquemore suggest that school uniforms were, in fact, but one part of a larger package of reforms introduced by the school board. Other 'big ticket' items included curriculum reform and a reconsideration of pedagogical strategies. Brunnsma and Rockquemore suggest that while uniforms received all the attention, credit for the improvements in student behaviour belonged to those other, considerably more substantive, changes.⁹

IT HAS BEEN FOUND THAT ONE OF THE STRONGEST PREDICTORS OF WHETHER OR NOT THE SCHOOL HAS A ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY IS THE PROPORTION OF MINORITY STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE SCHOOL.

ZERO TOLERANCE

American research indicates that zero tolerance policies increase the number of suspensions and expulsions from school, and not just for violent offences. Moreover, these increases have been occurring at a time when rates of violent youth crime in the United States have actually been declining. Findings also indicate that zero tolerance policies do not make schools safer. What is more, there is some evidence to suggest that zero tolerance policies are most likely to be applied to visible minority students, at least in the United States.¹⁰ It has been found that one of the strongest predictors of whether or not the school has a zero tolerance policy is the proportion of minority students enrolled in the school (the larger the proportion of minority students, the more likely the school is to have a Zero tolerance policy).¹¹

Why are minority students at particular risk from zero tolerance policies? One obvious explanation is that they are more oppositional and rebellious than other students and commit more serious classroom offences. American research does not support this argument. It finds that, among students suspended or expelled from school, White students had, in fact, committed significantly more serious offences than Black students.¹²

Black students are much more likely to find themselves punished for what have been referred to as 'subjective offences' – those involving situations that classroom teachers find uncomfortable and/or threatening. The inference is that teachers are more likely to interpret ambiguous behaviour as threatening, dangerous, or disruptive when the students involved are Black. There is also the suggestion that the teachers most likely to invoke zero tolerance sanctions are White females.¹³

While no equivalent research has been conducted on the racial correlates of school suspensions in Canada, Canadian research does confirm that students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds perceive more injustice in school disciplinary practices than their White peers.¹⁴

MORAL PANICS AND PANACEA SOLUTIONS

Why has reasonable concern about orderliness and safety of schools produced public policies that don't work very well? I want to suggest that moral panics about young people create a context in which quick fix, or 'panacea,' solutions become the order of the day. Moral panics involve an exaggerated or disproportionate response to an event or a condition in society that is viewed problematically. Moral panics often centre upon the activities, real and imagined, of young people, and have involved drugs, the harmful effects of the media, gangs, and violence in schools. Many students of youth violence think that our concern with violence in schools, and particularly school shootings, qualifies as a moral panic because the best available evidence

indicates that, over time, there has been no significant upward trend in their incidence. They remain exceedingly rare of events.

Despite evidence to the contrary, however, many more people consider school violence to be an ever-worsening problem, requiring urgent remedy. This is the climate in which safe school policies in North America have been formulated and implemented. They have all the hallmarks of what James Finchenauer has coined a 'panacea solution'.¹⁵

IN THE HASTE TO INTRODUCE AND IMPLEMENT 'PANACEA SOLUTIONS', THE POSSIBILITIES OF INEFFECTIVENESS OR UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES ARE DISCOUNTED.

He first used the term to describe a seemingly innovative program for dealing with the problem of juvenile delinquency in the United States at the end of the 1970s. 'Scared straight' was a program devised by long-term inmates of Rahway prison in New Jersey to discourage high school students from embarking upon a life of crime. Groups of adolescents would visit the prison and participate in encounter sessions with 'lifers', who would regale them with stories about the miseries of prison life. The assumption was that they would be 'scared straight' by the experience. Extravagant claims were made for the success of the program (which featured in an award-winning documentary film shown on national television in the United States in 1979). Claims that delinquent adolescents could be 'scared straight' were not, however, supported by the subsequent evaluation research carried out by Finchenauer.

Panacea solutions, according to Finchenauer, have two defining characteristics. First, they are premised on the assumption that doing something about crime is always better than doing nothing about crime. Second, new ideas about preventing crime are always assumed to be superior to older ones.¹⁶ In the case of the Scared Straight program, exposing impressionable adolescents to hardened convicts was assumed to be a more effective anti-crime strategy than more familiar techniques of prevention and rehabilitation.

One of the problems with panacea solutions is that they create unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved with the resources available. Furthermore, in the haste to introduce and implement them, the possibilities of ineffectiveness or unintended consequences are discounted. While the logic of a school uniform policy might dictate that it will be an effective tool in the campaign against school disorder, the best available evidence seems to suggest the opposite, as we have just seen. Likewise, zero tolerance policies in schools appear to have introduced or exacerbated racial profiling.

Finally, some attention needs to be paid to the latest initiative aimed at reducing school-based youth crime. In the aftermath of the shooting of Jordan Manners, a student at CW Jeffrey's high school in Toronto, and the subsequent Falconer inquiry, a number of public high schools now have police officers stationed on their premises. Clearly, their presence is intended to deter crime. However, the officers are also expected to engage with students, become role models and mentors, and contribute to the school community by coaching sports teams, and so forth. These activities are also presumably intended to improve relations between young people, and help strengthen pro-social attitudes and behaviours.

Although it is too early for the effectiveness of this experiment to have been properly evaluated, it has already received favourable media coverage. Both the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*¹⁷ have published similar stories using school board data, showing a decline in suspensions and expulsions in those schools with a police presence. (Comparisons with schools without a police presence over the same time period were not included in either report.) But these figures do not necessarily show that students are behaving any better in school; or, if they are, that it is because of the police factor. Other changes conceivably introduced

into the schools in question at the same time may have been responsible. Another possible interpretation of the same correlation is that a lecture or a dressing down from a police officer now substitutes for suspension or expulsion. The Youth Criminal Justice Act, introduced in 2003, recommends just such diversionary strategies for dealing with minor young offenders in the community. Is it possible that similar principles are being applied to school-based policing?

While there may well be real benefits, for schools and students, of having police officers become part of the community, there may also be a number of hidden costs associated with the policy.

Doubtless some people are reassured by the visible presence of police officers in their community. Others, however, might be left to speculate about the reasons for a police presence: because of a spate of robberies or car thefts? Because of acts of violence on the street? Rather than assuaging people's fear of crime, the sudden appearance of police in the neighbourhood may create anxieties that hitherto did not exist.

THE FEATURES THAT MAKE SCHOOLS GOOD ONES ARE THE SAME FEATURES THAT SERVE TO PREVENT OR REDUCE CRIME AND OTHER DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR AT SCHOOL IN THE FIRST PLACE.

The same argument can apply to schools. Students may welcome, or come to accept, police patrols in the corridors; they may appreciate the contributions that individual officers make to the running of sports programs. But at the end of the day, police officers are part of the system of criminal justice, not the public education system. Is it in the long-term interests of students to have their schools thought of as potential crime scenes, rather than institutions of learning? Similarly, what impact to these punitive strategies – zero tolerance policies, random locker searches, intrusive security measures (closed circuit TV cameras), and 'lock down' procedures – have on educational achievement? How wise is it to turn schools into institutions that in design and atmosphere resemble prisons? Is this the most appropriate environment for students to be pursuing their education?

CONCLUSION

Does my concentration on unproven or failed safe schools school projects mean that all strategies for improving the well-being of students at school are doomed to failure? Not necessarily. Generally speaking, the features that make schools good ones (as opposed to poor or mediocre ones) are the same features that serve to prevent or reduce crime and other disruptive behaviour at school in the first place.¹⁸ Schools that are able to elicit the support and commitment of the student body as a whole (and not just the academically talented) are less likely to become sites of crime than schools that fail in this regard. For instance, schools that encourage a love of learning and minimize a sense of failure among students are, at the same time, decreasing the risks of criminal behaviour. On the other hand, deviance of all sorts is encouraged by the absence of clear rules about

appropriate behaviour in school or the inconsistent enforcement of rules.

Early findings from the Canadian Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth support the conclusion that schools can modify student behaviour and reduce the incidence of violence. Collecting information from students between ages 12 and 13, and then again two years later, when they were 14 or 15, Sprott finds that supportive classrooms (and teachers that provide that support) have a reductive effect upon levels of aggression and violence; she also finds that classrooms that emphasize academic study (and the teachers who provide that focus) have a similar effect on property offences.¹⁹

In our rush to assuage public fears based on a relatively few dramatic incidents of school violence, we run the risk of ignoring well-established educational strategies that improve student behaviour in favour of panaceas that are not only unproven, but may in fact have unintended and negative consequences. |

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Notes

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