

Reading One: Do School Security Measures Make Schools Safer?

Following the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, some commentators have called for increased security on school campuses, with proposals ranging from more metal detectors to increased police presence, and even to arming teachers. These calls for greater security at schools are part of a pattern of increasing school policing and security following acts of violence, dating back at least to the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, in April 1999, in which 12 students and one teacher were killed.

In an October 16, 2000, article for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, reporter Bill Dedman [noted](#), “After the carnage last year at Columbine High School, the nation’s schools have been bombarded with ways to ‘prevent’ school shootings: metal detectors, SWAT teams, profiles, warning signs, checklists, zero-tolerance policies, even software to compare a student’s actions with past attacks.”

Other journalists used stronger language to describe the results of increased school security. In an April 20, 2009, article for *CNN*, reporter John D. Sutter [explained](#) how schools in the U.S. responded to the Columbine shooting, ten years on:

In the wake of the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, some schools across the country turned themselves into near-fortresses.

They installed metal detectors and security cameras, banned backpacks, required students to carry IDs and posted police in the hallways – all in the name of keeping students safe.

Dedman reported that many experts thought that such measures might do more harm than good:

These approaches are “unlikely to be helpful” and could be dangerous, warn the Secret Service researchers who have studied school shootings. In the draft of an academic paper shared with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the researchers and their academic colleagues warn of over-reliance on quick fixes....

The researchers encourage principals and teachers to listen to children, improve climates in schools, and investigate thoroughly whenever a child causes concern.

Why rely on SWAT teams, they ask, when most attacks are over before police arrive? Why focus on which kids fit a profile or show warning signs, when there is no profile that fits all those who kill? Why expel students immediately for the most minor infractions, when expulsion was just the spark that pushed some students to come right back to school with a gun? Why buy software to evaluate threats, when the killers rarely make direct threats, and the software isn’t based on a study of school shootings? Why rely on metal detectors and police officers in schools, when the shooters often make no effort to conceal their weapons?

Despite an increase in security measures, mass shootings have increased in the two decades since Columbine, with highly publicized tragedies in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Parkland, Florida. The

persistence of mass school shootings, despite increased security measures, has led many to question their effectiveness.

In an April 20, 2013, article for *Think Progress*, reporter Aviva Shen [described](#) how measures such as increased security personnel have failed to reduce school violence, and may even have a role in exacerbating it:

While every effective gun regulation introduced in response to Columbine failed to become law, the massacre did transform another area of policy: school security. Schools dramatically beefed up their use of security cameras, metal detectors, and guards after the Columbine shooting, even though a Secret Service report conducted a few years after the massacre found that these measures were “unlikely to be helpful” in preventing violence. Indeed, more school security guards have done little to combat violence, but student arrests for minor infractions shot up with the increased presence of these guards after Columbine.

In a separate article, Shen [reported](#) more specifically on “school resource officers” – law enforcement personnel stationed at schools – and their effect on school safety. She wrote:

...[The National Rifle Association’s] proposal to put more armed guards in schools has become one of the most popular ideas in the gun violence debate. According to a new NYT/CBS poll, 74 percent of Americans believe more security guards would help prevent mass shootings in public places like schools, movie theaters or malls. President Obama’s comprehensive plan to prevent gun violence also called for hiring as many as 1,000 more “school resource officers,” or law enforcement officers with the power to arrest students.

About a third of all public schools already have armed security guards, and the demand for schoolpolicing has made it the fastest growing area of law enforcement. But studies have been unable to show that armed guards make schools any safer. Two of the most deadly shootings in U.S. history, at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, occurred on campuses with security guards.

While no discernible link between safer schools and armed guards has been established, there is one clear impact. Student arrests shot up when school resource officers became more prevalent in schools after the Columbine shooting.

Following the Parkland shooting, academics who study school violence assembled an eight-point ["Call for Action To Prevent Gun Violence In The United States of America"](#) that has since been endorsed by about 200 universities, national education and mental health groups, and school districts. It argues that the scientific evidence supports a “public health” approach to increasing school safety that includes ensuring a safe and positive school climate that discourages bullying and harassment; a ban on assault-style weapons; staffing that includes adequate counselors; health services for those at risk; and reform of school discipline to reduce exclusionary practices and foster positive social, behavioral, emotional, and academic success for students.

Reading Two: What are the Unintended Consequences of School Security?

Whether increased school security measures have actually helped improve safety is a debatable question. But, apart from this, the measures may have had separate outcomes that are not desirable. Some education advocates argue that efforts to increase school security by using equipment such as metal detectors and by increasing the presence of security personnel have reduced trust between school administrators, teachers, and students, and have led to increased numbers of student arrests.

UCLA education professor Pedro Noguera spoke about the downsides of increased school security in a March 7, 2018, interview with radio station WBUR. He [argued](#):

The purpose of school is to create an environment where kids can learn, where they are able to develop and explore and, hopefully, to grow, and you don't do that in an unsafe atmosphere, for sure. But you also don't do it in an atmosphere where there's a hyper sense of security. Security tends to actually make us feel more stressed and less able to relax when there are people around with guns who are patrolling. So, I think it's something we need to be very careful about. The real work we need to do has to take place in our society to make our society safer than it is right now.

Some students report having to wait in line outside in the snow and rain to get through metal detectors before school. The security bottleneck can make students late for school. Other students say they feel disrespected by security officers and by the security process in general. All these factors can lead to an altered school environment, especially for black and brown students: A ProPublica [survey](#) found that high school students of color are nearly three times more likely than white students to have to get through a metal detector at school.

Furthermore, increased security measures have often been accompanied by stricter school rules, and tighter rules are not always applied evenly to all students. Claudio Sanchez, national education correspondent for National Public Radio, [wrote](#) in a February 22, 2018 opinion article:

Not long after Columbine, school districts across the country rushed to adopt "zero tolerance policies" which were devised in the mid-1990s to deal with kids accused of drugs, weapons possession, and making threats. But they did little for troubled, depressed, angry students in need of help. Instead, zero tolerance veered off into a discussion about how blacks, Latinos, and kids with disabilities were disproportionately punished, not just for drugs or guns but for violating school codes of conduct and dress.

In other words, zero tolerance policies did little to help schools, law enforcement, and mental health experts identify deeply troubled students who are out there, like ticking time bombs. All that these policies did was create the illusion of school safety.

The public, of course, has demanded tougher school safety policies; more armed school cops, anonymous telephone tip lines, more metal detectors, TV cameras and costly high tech surveillance gadgets, leaving little or no money for school psychologists and counselors who today are far outnumbered by school cops.

Similarly pointing to harmful consequences of increased school security measures, reporter Aviva Shen [wrote](#) about the effects of school resource officers in a January 17, 2013 article for *Think Progress*:

Student arrests shot up when school resource officers [SROs] became more prevalent in schools after the Columbine shooting. Even controlling for poverty level, schools with armed officers have nearly five times the rate of arrests for disorderly conduct. As states beef up their security... more students are at risk for being treated like criminals. One Pennsylvania county immediately hired armed guards who are reportedly searching children's' lunch boxes....

A new influx of SROs into schools... will only worsen the nation's already robust school-to-prison pipeline. Shortly after Mississippi Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves announced a \$7.5 million plan to hire law enforcement officers to patrol schools, several civil rights groups released a [harrowing new report](#) detailing Mississippi students' abuse at the hands of these types of officers:

The report, which is to be released Thursday, found that in one Mississippi school district, 33 of every 1,000 children were arrested or referred to juvenile detention centers; that in another, such referrals included second and third graders; and that in yet another, only 4 percent of the law enforcement referrals were for felony-level behavior, the most often cited offense being "disorderly conduct." [...] In addition to statistics, the report described episodes in which a child was taken home by the police for wearing shoes that violated the dress code, and a school where misbehaving students were handcuffed for infractions as minor as not wearing a belt.

Black students were far more likely to be punished by these officers, even in racially mixed schools.... Still, [lawmakers] are rushing to send in more armed guards who will likely make the problem even worse.

Whether intended or unintended, the additional consequences of increased school security measures are important to take into consideration. From the creation of a more stressful learning environment, to harsher policies and increased arrests by school resource officers that disproportionately strike students of color, measures designed to increase safety may not be producing the outcomes that educators and students are looking for.