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Trends. Illusions of Security: School Shootings as Mirrors on the World

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In the United States, the killing of 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School has precipitated calls for more and better weapons detectors, security guards, and formal and informal information grapevines. The first two are intended to serve the functions of deterrence and, when deterrence fails, the minimization of violence and its consequences. The last is intended to identify those at risk and, secondarily, to serve as a deterrent. All three recommendations are founded on specious assumptions.

Even weapons detectors with perfect sensitivity and specificity can be evaded. Weapons can be brought into schools at other entry points during or after school. Because there are no "perfect" detectors, human judgment as to depth of search and choices of calibration can be exploited by willing executioners. So can motivational, cognitive, emotional, and fatigue factors of detector operators.

Security guards rarely will be able to adequately cover an entire school. Even if they could, a consensus about school shooters who are students suggests that a significant number are hoping to die. As security guards increase in number, these shooters can be drawn to a lethal event as a moth to the flame. Moreover, some social psychological research suggests that guards may act as violence triggers by their mere presence.

Formal and informal networks will generate a large degree of rumor and innuendo. Signal to noise rations will be very low. Individuals who are statistically deviant in social indicators and behaviors will likely be the preponderant killer referrals. The social science literature yields a pessimistic stance on predicting most kinds of individual violence in specific situations. Moreover, networks--like guards--may serve as triggers of violence.