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

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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.

The bottom line is that the imperfect, salutatory efforts to induce respect, dignity, love, and altruism within, between, and among students is the best bet to deter and minimize school violence. Inside and outside school confines, weapons detectors, guards, and networks largely give solace to those craving a secure world, a world existing only in dreams. (See Astor, R.A., Behre, W.J., et al. (1998). School social workers and school violence: Personal safety, training, and violence programs. Social Work, 43, 223-232; Baker, J.A. (1998). Are we missing the forest for the trees? Considering the social context of school violence. Journal of School Psychology, 36, 29-44; Chisholm, J.F. (1998). Understanding violence in the school: Moral and psychological factors. Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, 7, 137-157; Dedman, B. (June 21, 1999). Secret Service is seeking pattern for school killers. The New York Times, p. A10; Dykeman, C., Daehlin, W., et al. (1996). Psychological predictors of school-based violence: Implications for school counselors. School Counselor, 44, 35-47.) (Keywords: Interpersonal Relations, School Shootings, Security.)