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Policing Kentucky's School Children: Issues and Trends

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RESEARCH TOPIC

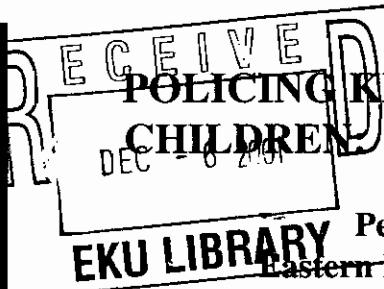
The purpose of this research bulletin is to document the scope and nature of an important dimension of the school safety movement--the degree to which schools in Kentucky are being "policed" by public police agencies. A shift toward having an active police presence in our public schools, an unprecedented and significant development, should be examined carefully.

RESEARCH ISSUES

This bulletin details the types of activities in which the police are engaged through quantitative data and information derived from in-depth interviews with Kentucky police officials. These data provide us with an academic and police practitioner view of the issues and trends surrounding police activities in schools.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We are likely in the midst of a profound change in Kentucky schools and Kentucky policing. These data demonstrate that we are well on our way to establishing a constant and strong police presence in Kentucky public schools--at the high school, middle school, and perhaps even elementary school levels. With drug crackdowns, school lock-downs for K-9 searches, zero-tolerance policies for fighting and verbal threats, and an aggressive police response to other acts of student wrong-doing, this shift brings into our schools the same sort of get tough on crime and drugs approach that characterizes the rest of society.



POLICING KENTUCKY'S SCHOOL CHILDREN: ISSUES AND TRENDS

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INTRODUCTION

The news media report that our nation's public schools are in the midst of sweeping reforms. They are not referring to "educational" reforms designed to bolster the curriculum or improve teaching effectiveness. Rather, the war on drugs and the recent focus on school violence have converged to trigger a crescendoing call for reforms that revolve around enhancing the "security" and "safety" of our schools through an array of high-tech devices and unprecedented security measures. It appears that some schools are resorting to full video-surveillance, bar-coded I.D. tags for all students, full-time armed police or security officers, zero-tolerance policies on "violence speech," routine random searches for drugs and weapons, and mock counter-attack drills conducted by local SWAT teams.¹

A leading educational expert raises the issue: "Schools are creating conditions that are comparable to prisons. Where else are people searched every day and watched every minute. They want to clamp down and they want control."² Of course wanting control is an understandable reaction given the tragic events that have occurred in Paducah's Elementary School and Columbine High School. Clearly, the public, media, and politicians have serious and sincere concerns about school safety and violence.

However, as with most political reactions to a perceived crisis, the story is more complicated. It is questionable, for example, whether the vast majority of our nation's schools actually has a "security crisis." Statistics on school violence demonstrate about a 30 percent decrease in its incidence over the last 10 years, rather than an increase.³ Moreover, children at school are at significantly less risk of being a victim of violence when compared to being in their own homes or neighborhoods.⁴ In fact, there is only a one in 2 million chance of a youth being killed in one of America's schools; they are three times more likely to be killed by lightning.⁵

It is also unclear whether public schools are significantly altering their physical landscape and institutional practices in order to enhance securi-

ty and safety. Criminologists have studied other highly-publicized crime control "movements" that on closer inspection are more rhetoric than actual substantive change.⁶

As opposed to merely head-nodding to claims made by the media, government officials and politicians, it is oftentimes the role of the research community to examine carefully and highlight issues about movements such as school safety and violence. The purpose is to examine whether these types of drastic measures are actually occurring, whether they are justified, whether they will accomplish their stated objectives or be counterproductive, and to uncover potential negative consequences that may arise due to their use. In short, researchers help to make sure that the measures taken are necessary and that they will do more good than harm.

The purpose of this research bulletin is to provide baseline information which documents the scope and nature of one important dimension of the school safety movement--the degree to which schools in Kentucky are being "policed" by public police agencies. A shift toward having an active police presence in our public schools, an unprecedented and significant development, should be examined carefully. This bulletin in addition provides a picture of the types of activities in which the police are engaged. This picture is enhanced throughout by incorporating information derived from in-depth interviews with Kentucky police officials, providing us with a police practitioner view of the issues and police activities in schools.

DRUGS, VIOLENCE, AND COPS IN SCHOOLS: THE LITERATURE

Researchers know little about the use of public police in schools. We do know that only 20 years ago the presence of police in our nation's schools was almost unknown.⁷ Although students certainly hurt each other physically, took mind-altering substances, and at times broke the law, these problems were generally handled internally within the school's disciplinary system and incidents were only rarely defined formally as a "crime" requiring the intervention of the criminal justice system.

It was not until the 1980's "war on drugs" that some schools resorted to a routine police presence, usually as part of either an undercover drug operation or as part of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program.⁸ During the mid to late 1990s our nation's attention began to focus less on illegal drug activity and more on violence.⁹ The concern over juvenile violence became particularly acute with calls to wage war on gangs and to make the juvenile justice system more punitive.¹⁰ This punitive turn, along with the drug war, and several tragic acts of gun-related violence in select schools, has resulted in strong calls to bolster school security, including calling in the police.

Some evidence suggests that only a small minority of schools routinely use police in schools. Of the 1,400 schools across the nation responding to a survey conducted for the years 1996-1997, 87 percent employed no security measure other than controlling access to the school building. About 10 percent of surveyed schools used public police or armed guards at least periodically during a one-week period.¹¹

The data cited above were collected from educational researchers. Police researchers have yet to examine the extent of police involvement in school security. Jacobs has conducted qualitative studies on the use of young police cadets operating as undercover drug agents in high schools.¹² These studies give us no indication, however, of the prevalence of this activity.¹³

Most recently, it appears that the federal government is at the forefront of placing full-time police officers into public schools. The Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) has developed a "Cops in Schools" program. It is spending \$175 million to fund the hiring of local police officers to work in public schools.¹⁴

RESEARCH METHODS

Given our lack of knowledge, this bulletin reports on some important and unique information. Data collected in late 1999 through early 2000 provides the first glimpse at the scope and nature of police involvement in public schools--concentrating specifically on the state of Kentucky. These data were collected using a mail-out survey to all law enforcement agencies operating in Kentucky (n = 427)--the bulk of which are small departments serving rural communities. With 54 percent of those departments surveyed responding, the data provide an adequate overview of this phenomenon.¹⁵

The purpose of this bulletin is to document the degree of police involvement in Kentucky schools. In order to supplement this quantitative data with views, opinions, and insights from the practicing world, we also collected in-depth interview data from 25 police officials who responded to the survey. The survey included an item which allowed respondents to divulge contact information in order to obtain follow-up interview data. Over 85 percent of respondents provided this information. Twenty-five respondents were selected at random and provided interviews on a range of issues related to the survey and issues related to school security. These semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to 1 hour--the average being around 40 minutes.

POLICING KENTUCKY'S SCHOOLS: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Of the responding departments, 60 percent characterized the jurisdiction they serve as "rural." The average Kentucky police agency served jurisdictions with 20,599 citizens and employed 18 officers. For the most part, high ranking supervisors answered the survey questions. Over 70 percent of the surveys were completed by the chief or sheriff, 19 percent by other supervisory personnel, and the remaining 11 percent were completed by either administrative assistants or patrol officers. Ninety percent of all respondents indicated a moderate to high level of emphasis toward community policing goals and strategies.

Almost 70 percent (n=152) of the departments surveyed claimed to have specific programs and activities aimed at drug and crime enforcement in schools. Of those 30 percent of

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departments that do not have such programs, almost 25 percent are planning to implement police-based programs in the near future.

Routine Police Presence

Of those 152 police departments with school programs, almost half (46 percent) assign police officers to work at public schools within their jurisdiction (see Table 1). Of those departments that provide police presence, 76 percent (n=54) employ an officer full-time and 24 percent (n=16) devote a part-time officer. These data document an important trend well underway.

In-depth phone interviews revealed that the aforementioned federal program, "Cops in Schools," is at least one catalyst for this shift. As part of their emphasis on "community policing," 17 out of the 25 departments interviewed had in place what they termed, "School Resource Officers (SRO)." These officers provide a constant security presence, responding to all disturbances on school grounds ranging from classroom disruptions to fighting. They are expected to be a "major stakeholder" in the school through either teaching classes, designing drug or violence prevention programs, or coaching sports.¹⁶ Most interviewees said that their officers were placed in high schools and middle schools, but some were also starting to focus on the elementary level. To get a better understanding of the real-world application of this type of police presence consider a few quotes from Kentucky police officials:

- "Our deputy sheriff is paid for by the feds. The school is the SRO's community; he acts as though he is patrolling the community, just like I used to patrol the streets. He has a free hand in the school to ensure total behavioral compliance. We handle all violence formally and press charges as long as we can convince an administrator to press charges" (Respondent #12).
- "We primarily handle disruptive or unruly students. The SROs do whatever is necessary to handle the situation" (Respondent #1).
- "It is real important that students get comfortable with having us in their schools. We are there to keep order and enforce the law but we still make sure we talk to the students when walking the halls and parking lots. We do have a zero-tolerance policy for all acts or threats of violence - they are all handled formally" (Respondent #2).
- "We have a "Cops in School" grant. We're fully involved in all school functions. We attend faculty meetings, teach classes. At first the officer will wear their uniform to provide a deterrent effect. Eventually we switch them to khaki pants, sports shirts, and an ankle holster" (Respondent #9).
- "We police juveniles in the school. We are now making probably 20-25 arrests a month; mostly for disorderly

conduct and drug possession" (Respondent #13).

- "We're in the school full-time. Out-of-control students are our problem. They don't listen to their teachers, they disrespect a teacher, they disrupt class, sometimes make verbal threats to students. In these situations we charge the student with abuse of a teacher, disorderly conduct, or whatever it happens to be. Any threat of violence must end in a formal criminal charge--this is included in our contractual agreement with the school" (Respondent #21).

These quotes, and the statistics cited earlier, suggest that Kentucky police agencies, with help from the federal government, are moving toward integrating the institution of policing into the everyday operations of our public schools. For better or worse, routine police presence is "criminalizing" our response to the same types of disruptive and rebellious behaviors that were, until recently, handled by school administrators and parents.

Table 1.

Police Activities in Schools

	Percent	Frequency
Assign patrol officer to school(s)	46.0	70
Employ a DARE officer	59.9	91
Routine searches with K-9 unit	56.6	86
Random locker searches	42.8	65
Students as informants	24.3	37
Conduct undercover operations	18.4	28
Respond to positive drug tests	17.8	27
Buy and bust operations	9.9	15

Let us next examine a few more statistics on the kinds of law enforcement activities taking place in the schools beyond routine patrol work. The data indicate that a central focus is drug law enforcement (see Table 1). Forty-three percent of the departments surveyed, for example, conduct routine random locker searches for drug contraband and weapons. Almost 60 percent search lockers, students, and parking lots using drug-sniffing dogs. About 25 percent use students as drug informants and officers as undercover agents, 10 percent conduct buy and bust operations, and almost 20 percent respond to positive random drug tests. The following quotes bring these data to light.

- “As part of our contractual agreement, we give the school administration 15 minutes notice before conducting a school-wide K-9 search. The dogs are brought in during class changes so that all the students can see us and the dogs and that we are serious about this, and it makes them think twice about bringing that stuff to school. We lock down the entire school and parking lot. The dogs first hit the cars, then we hit the lockers, then we have the kids put all their belongings in the hall and we hit all that stuff. The dogs have not found many drugs, but they do hit a lot of jackets and purses that have had drugs in them. We keep those kids on a list so that we can keep an eye on them” (Respondent #6).
- “We will question a student who has tested positive on a drug test and will call the court designated worker to determine the appropriate action. The school leads the investigation into contraband in lockers. Of course, there is an officer present, and if the kids have drugs, knives, guns, or anything like that, we are going to arrest that kid right there on the spot, no questions” (Respondent #1).
- “When we do K-9 searches for contraband, we have the school officials either lock the kids in the classroom or take them to the gym for an assembly. All students must carry clear bags and they must be left at the principal’s office” (Respondent #23).
- “The school has a big box in front of the gym so the students can put any illegal stuff they have and not get in trouble for it. After we search the rest of the school we then search each student. We have made four or five arrests in the last three canine searches” (Respondent #21).
- “The canine searches are done at the request of the principal. No arrests have been made; the dogs are used more for a deterrent effect than anything else. . . . No student comes in direct contact with a dog” (Respondent #10).
- “We do not use juveniles as formal informants very often. There are tight legal restraints. However, we do

get a lot of information from the DARE officer” (Respondent #12).

- “Most information for drug cases is volunteered by students. We have had some kids get permission from their parents and we wire the kid to get more information. We’re careful, though; we had one informant get beat up. We are also establishing a “crime stoppers” program in the school” (Respondent #15).

Justifications and Raising Questions

We wanted to know more, from a police practitioner perspective, about the rationale behind this type of police presence. The first set of quotes provides insight into police officials’ justifications for entering this new “crime fighting” venue.

- “Originally school administrators wanted us there only to direct traffic, but we balked at that. We are there to enforce the law, solve problems, and develop long-term solutions. We have to let people know that there is a lot of crime in schools today, and we are there to help solve these problems” (Respondent #17).
- “The reason we’re there is a lack of discipline and schools’ inability to discipline. If only parents would sign off to have corporal punishment; students don’t have any respect for teachers or administrators; they just have a bad attitude; with all that crap hanging down around their knees--a dress code could help a lot” (Respondent #3).
- “We don’t have any other choice but to be aggressive. Even though we work in a small community, we still have big problems. We are applying for federal grants to get more police in the schools. The biggest change in students over the past ten years has been that people are realizing the reality of potential violence from middle and high school kids. We have taken away the ability of schools to discipline kids on the spot, so they have to call us” (Respondent #1).
- “These kids don’t respect nobody [sic] like we used to when I was a kid. The schools don’t have control. We need to get a strict dress code in the schools to get these kids out of those baggy pants and that other stuff they are wearing” (Respondent #2).
- “We were instrumental in getting a strict dress code in place and our officers enforce it. Schools are used to handling problems internally and letting the kids off easy. Now they must report all instances that might involve law infractions to the police. We have problems with school administrators trying to do things the old way to avoid publicity. If we catch a faculty member trying to flush a student’s drugs they can be prosecuted” (#22).

This last quote highlights an unexpected yet important finding--there is apparently a degree of friction between some police departments and schools. Moreover, it seems that not all police administrators agree about the desirability of the shift toward strong law and order measures in our schools. We first present a few quotes from those more skeptical police officials.

- "I remember in the 1970s when lots of kids had knives and many brought shotguns in their trucks. Now if a kid has this stuff, they are immediately arrested, expelled, and everyone is making a big deal out of something that only a few years ago was nothing. I wonder if we have gone too far with zero-tolerance in our schools. There is a fine line that many departments are crossing and the media has been a big part of the push" (Respondent #10).
- "We have tapped into the federal money but I still have my doubts. It seems that we now need the police for the typical stuff that has gone on for a long time in schools--vandalism, being disruptive, fighting, mouthing off to a teacher. I'm not sure about turning us [the police] into hall monitors and assistant principals" (Respondent #24).
- "Our SRO is probably answering too many calls that teachers used to take care of. Now that they have a uniform in the school they want to use the deputy to handle many of the little things. We have an open door policy so he will take care of whatever they want him to. We make about one arrest per week for minor infractions" (Respondent #15).
- "We [the police] are the fall-back solution for everything. Now we have been handed another one in this school violence thing. I'm not sure we're the right ones to handle discipline problems - but we'll sure be blamed if something goes wrong"(Respondent #25).

Each of these Kentucky police officials, although participating in this trend, apparently has reservations about its appropriateness. Each police interviewee questions his/her encroachment into handling formally what used to be seen as student transgressions dealt with informally by school teachers and administrators. The next few quotes illuminate the potential for conflict between police and school officials. Each quote illustrates again the issue of the appropriateness of criminalizing our response to student misbehavior.

- "We have a contractual agreement that forces the reporting of all fights, threats, and suspected drug activity. If we didn't have this rule, an officer on school grounds full-time we would have to prosecute some of the teachers and administration for failing to report stuff. They often don't want to get the students into trouble" (Respondent #3).

- "Getting teachers and school personnel to report all infractions has been tough. We're willing to prosecute a faculty for possession if they try to hide the fact that a student had drugs" (Respondent #9).
- "We've had problems with surprise K-9 searches because somehow they have not been a surprise.... We tried to run an undercover drug operation in the school this year but the principal became completely uncooperative with us" (Respondent #17).
- "We want more cooperation on assaults. Some teachers still see them as schoolyard scuffles. A while back we had a fight in the elementary school and a teacher was injured. The school went ahead and let it go, but I tried to file charges. I say let the chips fall where they may" (Respondent #18).

This emerging institutional arrangement between police and schools has some potential sticking points. These quotes demonstrate the potential for conflict due to the existence of differences in how to define and respond to student wrong-doing. The existence of conflict should not be a surprise considering the obvious bureaucratic and cultural differences between the teaching and law enforcement professions.

CONCLUSION: CREATING SAFE HAVENS OR PRISONS?

We are likely in the midst of a profound change in Kentucky schools and Kentucky policing. It is probably safe to say that we are well on our way to establishing a constant and strong police presence in Kentucky public schools--at the high school, middle school, and perhaps even elementary school levels. With drug crackdowns, school lock-downs for K-9 searches, zero-tolerance policies for fighting and verbal threats, and an aggressive police response to other acts of student wrong-doing, this shift brings into our schools the same sort of get tough on crime and drugs approach that characterizes the rest of society.

The first question that is often asked in the literature is whether or not our schools and children have deteriorated to the point where permanent and strong police presence is justified. Apparently, some police officials believe that there is a security crisis in our schools while others perceive much of the reaction as over-reaction. Statistically, there does not appear to be evidence to support the "security crisis" notion; even those in favor of criminalizing the school environment admit that the response has little to do with worsening statistics.¹⁷ Alternative explanations might be that, much like other crime control initiatives, new policies are based on the rare yet tragic case--such as we have seen with school homicides. Another might be that our society is becoming increasingly intolerant of disorder and crime no matter where it is occurring or who is doing it. Some theorists believe that our norms and values are changing with regard to safety, security, and risk.¹⁸ A society hypersensitive about being safe and reducing risks, will likely support calls for

placing police officers in our children's schools, regardless of its more discomfiting implications.

Is the criminal justice system the right approach for dealing with the aforementioned concerns? Two polar views are forming. Both views see it as unfortunate that more school children will likely grow up under the direct eye of the public police, and that we are now defining "student misconduct" as "crime" requiring an aggressive criminal justice response.

For many, however, particularly those instrumental in making public policy decisions, an aggressive criminal justice approach may indeed be unfortunate but it is still necessary. Drastic measures must be taken to prevent future acts of horrifying school violence, and to better control the school environment overall. After all, the school is public property, and crimes such as assault and drug possession do take place. Schools should be policed with no different standard than the rest of society. A strong and constant police presence in our schools creates a safer environment more conducive to learning.

The alternative view is more concerned with whether this is an irrational, knee-jerk reaction based on tragic, yet extremely rare anecdotes. Public policy is being formulated out of a panic sustained by media and governmental officials. We are rapidly putting a solution in place that will search out a problem for itself. The result is a program of well-intended action that is unnecessary, counterproductive, and will result in an array of negative consequences. The Justice Policy Institute and the Children's Law Center¹⁹ are typical in their charge of needlessly criminalizing normal student misconduct and transforming our school environment into something that more resembles a prison.

Our report offers a great deal of hope for parents, school administrators and young people. The data reminds us that our young people are neither schoolhouse assassins nor the kids on the other side of the yellow tape, weeping over the deaths of their classmates. Our kids are the ones playing soccer, going to dances and doing the other normal things kids do. They don't need us to turn their schools into prisons, they need our constructive support to live healthy, happy lives.

Interestingly, the quotes from Kentucky police officials demonstrate that these divergent positions also occur within the police institution and among teachers and school administrators. In other words, these two polar views are not merely academic. They are instead played out in the real world of schools, teachers, police departments, school resource officers, the juvenile justice system, students, and their families.

We need to be careful, though, in thinking of this issue as either one of "safe havens" or "prisons." Rather, an issue-oriented approach, as used above, should be seen as an instructive tool which teases out and highlights the costs, benefits, advantages, and disadvantages of this approach. Approaching school safety, violence, and our response as an issue, can help us more clearly identify and guard against the potential pitfalls of a criminal justice approach, devise alternative solutions such as

prevention-based programs, and in the end, hopefully, avoid doing more harm than good.

Please send any comments about this article to:

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