The Post-Columbine Era: Risk Perception, Criminalization, and Securitization in American Public Schools

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Post-Columbine School Practices:

Punitive Discipline & Amplified Security:
• Zero Tolerance Policies
• Surveillance via School Resource Officers and Cameras
• Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design
Explaining School Criminalization (Neo-Liberal Penality and Culture of Control in Risk Society)

• Larger theoretical work on culture of control (Garland 2001) and governing through crime (Simon 2006) – assuage insecurity through crime fighting measures


• Culture of control and actuarial mindset in school disciplinary and security practices (Casella, 2006; Lyons & Drew 2006; Simon, 2006)
Explaining School Criminalization (Sociology of Fear)

- Fear of Youth and Subsequent Moral Panic (Burns & Crawford 1999; Devine 1996; Giroux 2003; Hagan et al. 2002)

**The Columbine Effect** (Muschert & Peguero 2010):
- Has come to characterize general understanding of youth social problems (Muschert & Madfis 2012):
  - Immense symbolic leverage
  - Debates framed through Columbine lens
- Discipline and security aimed at preventing extreme violence (Muschert 2007)
Sample

- In-depth interviews with 41 people (22 administrators, 5 counselors, and 14 security and police officers) at 12 public schools:
  - 9 high schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 JR/SR high school
  - 5 Northeastern states (2 in PA, 1 in NY, 3 in NJ, 3 in MA, and 3 in CT)
  - All majority white suburban communities
Support for Prior Theoretical Notions

• Governing through Crime/Culture of Control/Neo-Liberal Penalty:
  - Increased police control
  - Law enforcement mindset - viewing student misbehavior as a crime problem
  - Police presence as comforting

• Youth Moral Panic and Columbine Effect:
  - Policies implemented with rampage in mind
  - Focus on preventing rampage via deterrence and target hardening
“This is the biggest thing, when I drive into work in the morning, I say to myself, I hope nothing like [Columbine] happens today, meaning it’s always in the back of my mind, always in the front of my mind, and I’m always ready for something like that. And with that I’ve done all I can to keep our staff and our teachers and our students equally prepared and ready.”

- Principal Anderson
“Having an officer in the school is critical, and I think you’re gonna start seeing it in middle schools and elementary schools. Not for the rapport, not for DARE, not for the parking problems out front, but more than anything, I’m here to protect the kids there. And if you’re thinking about doing something stupid, Joe Blow, who’s going through a divorce, or to go Columbine style, you’ve got to come through me now. Even just having a black and white [police car] outside the school, what does that do? That sets some type of level of deterrent, right? I’m a bad guy, I want to go to Eastern High School and kill everyone. But geeze, there’s a black and white right up front, what does that mean? It means there’s an armed person in there who’s authorized and will use force to stop me, crap!”

- Officer Stone
Motives for Enhanced Discipline and Security

Support for prior theoretical notions:

• Youth Moral Panic and Columbine Effect
• Neo-Liberal Penalty and Culture of Control
• Not contrasting explanations, but two components of the same process – The Columbine Effect: fusion of fear and neo-liberal policy, much like *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein 2007)
Enhanced Risk Perception: Happening Everywhere at Random

What Columbine did once and for all was that it at least straightened people’s heads out about school violence, that it wasn’t solely an urban problem.” – Principal Lapolla

“I truly believe that [rampage plots] could happen anywhere…Don’t think it couldn’t happen in your town.” – Officer Dudley

“There used to be a day where people would say, ‘Well, that’s not going to happen in my town.’ And we all know now you can't say that anymore.” – Principal Schwartz
Enhanced Risk Perception: Happening Everywhere at Random

• New threats for communities, but events not evenly distributed and occur almost exclusively when particular social circumstances arise (Kimmel 2008; Newman et al. 2004)

• Random trope distorts risk, distracts people from the genuine causes and consequences of violence (Best 1999)
Exaggerated Risk Perception and Increased Desire for Risk Control

“This kind of thing can happen anywhere and so there’s no room for complacency.”
– Principal McGann

“[Columbine] made people vigilant and in some cases hyper-vigilant…99% of the time, it’s nothing, but you only have to be wrong once, you know, so it’s better to overreact than under-react.” – Principal Walsh
Implications

• Contemporary rates of youth and school violence low relative to the early 90’s (Fox & Blumstein 2010), yet punitive discipline and security remain
• School safety still crafted through Columbine lens with exaggerated risk perception
• Solutions to alleviate larger anxieties and present safety – but broad based implications for school culture, mass incarceration, and racial disproportionality
The End
“We were used to handling things as a school. For example, when a student brought in a weapon or a student had drug paraphernalia or drugs, we were used to handling that on our own and not necessarily reporting every single incident that came across our desks. We used to keep things within the school community and not sound the alarm bells every single time a student had a small quantity of marijuana or a pot pipe or something like that. Those were relatively minor things and we didn't always feel it necessary to call in the cavalry…but it evolved over time where that wasn’t really good enough for law enforcement. And they made it clear that whenever we encountered paraphernalia or weapons or that sort of thing they wanted to know about it immediately. And to immediately step in and get involved.”

- Principal Lapolla
“We call [SRO’s] in all the time because they’re in our building. It’s so much easier here…we call them in all the time even if there’s no crime. We call them in all sorts of instances just because we need their advice and they’re going to be able to tell us if there’s something that’s a crime, and they’ll help us with the investigation.”

- Principal Flaherty