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“It’s Better to Overreact”: School Officials’ Fear and Perceived Risk of Rampage Attacks and the Criminalization of American Public Schools

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Abstract In recent decades, highly-publicized school rampage attacks with multiple victims have caused widespread fear throughout the United States. Pulling from in-depth interviews with school officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers), this article discusses officials’ perceptions of fear and risk regarding rampage shootings and how this relates to their justification for and acquiescence to the expansion of punitive discipline and increased security. Data collected in this study provide additional understanding of the causes of enhanced discipline and security from the perspective of those tasked with administering school safety in the wake of Columbine. Utilizing insight from moral panic theory, the findings suggest that, when the genuinely high potential cost of school massacres fused with an exaggerated perception of their likelihood and randomness, school rampage attacks came to be viewed as a risk that could not be tolerated and must be avoided at nearly any cost.

> “There’s really been a fairly big swing in the way that we respond to things compared to the past. There is definitely education in a post-Columbine era.”—Mr. Sacco,[1] principal of an affluent New England high school.

School discipline and security in American public schools have dramatically transformed since the turn of the twenty-first century. Over the last two decades, school safety policies have been driven, at least partially, by reactions to extreme events, especially the fear of multiple-victim rampage attacks with guns and explosives. Some scholars have argued that the 1999 massacre at Colorado’s Columbine High School, in particular, has had a profound impact upon public perceptions and policy debates surrounding school crime

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and safety (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013). Just as politicians, pundits, and policy makers refer to our contemporary climate as the *post-9/11 era*, many practitioners of school discipline refer to the *post-Columbine era* in schools, meaning that everyone must now think about school safety in an entirely new manner. This new way of thinking entails a disciplinary regime which has expanded zero-tolerance policies that dictate mandatory suspensions, expulsions, and arrests of students alongside enhanced surveillance through the proliferation of police officers and security cameras in schools. These developments, which Hirschfield and Celinska (2011, p. 39) have collectively referred to as school criminalization, represent a swift and widespread "penetration of law enforcement personnel and technology into urban, suburban, and rural schools." This article explores school and police officials' fear and perceived risk of school rampage violence in order to better outline the impact that these rare but devastating events have had upon contemporary school policy.

Numerous authors (such as Burns and Crawford 1999; Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert and Madfis 2013) have attributed many recent disciplinary and security developments as a response, at least in part, to the school rampage at Columbine High School and those similar attacks which preceded and followed it. However, prior analyses have lacked an understanding of exactly how this cultural transition towards school criminalization was facilitated and, in particular, any consideration of the agency and perspectives of those tasked with transforming educational institutions in the aftermath of these highly-publicized attacks. Additionally, scholars (such as Bracy 2010; Kupchik 2010; Nolan 2011; Weiss 2010) have spoken with teachers and students about their perspectives regarding the increasingly criminalized climate of schools, but none have focused upon the administrators tasked with decision-making. Through in-depth interviews with school and police officials, this study reveals the administrative perspective that is crucial if one is to understand how and to what extent the fear and anticipated risk of school rampage have transformed contemporary school security and disciplinary practices in the post-Columbine era.

Though scholars have been describing the changing features of school discipline and security for decades, theoretical insight into the causes of this process has been slower to emerge. Specifically, Hirschfield and Celinska (2011, p. 7) point out that prior scholarship fails to "fully explain[s] why school professionals, who often espouse progressive rather than neo-liberal ideals, are generally complicit in school criminalization." Utilizing insight from moral panic theory, the present study works towards remedying this deficit by revealing how school officials articulate their perceptions about the need for enhanced discipline and security.

Explaining School Criminalization: Moral Panics and the Columbine Effect

Cohen (2002, p. 1) defined a moral panic as occurring when:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people…Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.

Moral panics describe the reaction to a behavior or group based on the false or exaggerated perception that certain people or phenomena are sufficiently dangerous as to threaten social order. Thus, people often base their fears not on the actual extent of the objective phenomenon but upon feelings and emotions stirred up by a few powerful or particularly vocal and concerned people (Glassner 2010).

One of the defining features of moral panic scholarship is the focus upon what Cohen (2002, p. 19) labeled “exaggeration and distortion” and what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) called “disproportionality,” both of which refer to an overreaction to the actual threat. Numerous scholars (such as Aitken 2001; Altheide 2009; Best 2002; Burns and Crawford 1999; Frymer 2009; Maguire et al. 2002) have emphasized the disproportionality inherent in much of the reaction to school rampage. The events at Columbine High School amounted to the most followed story for the entire year of 1999 (Pew Research Center 1999). As a result, fear of schoolyard killers became commonplace throughout the United States (Gallup 1999; Kiefer 2005; Newport 2006), though the rate of juvenile offending and victimization (particularly violent crimes) declined precipitously from 1994 onwards (Butts 2000). As youth were becoming less violent in general, schools were also becoming safer—the percentage of teachers threatened or physically attacked by their students similarly declined (Fox and Burstein 2010). More generally in terms of probability, “only about 1 in 2,000,000 school-age youth will die from homicide or suicide at school each year” (Muschert 2007, p. 61) and “any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6000 years” (Borum et al. 2010, p. 27). This background knowledge was lost on many Americans who consumed a wave of school rampage coverage which greatly exaggerated their prevalence and potential risk (Aitken 2001; Burns and Crawford 1999; Cornell 2006).

Glassner (2004, p. 820) described this phenomenon as a fear mongering narrative technique called “the christening of isolated incidents as trends.” Indeed, after the attack at Columbine, 30 % of students polled said that “there [were] groups at their schools that remind[ed] them of the infamous ‘Trenchcoat Mafia’ at Columbine High School,” while 36 % stated that there were individuals at their schools who were “potentially violent enough to cause a situation such as the one that occurred at Columbine High School” (Gallup 1999). A year after Columbine, Nagy and Danitz (2000) discovered that 71 % of parents felt that the event changed their perspective about how safe their children’s schools actually were, with only 40 % of respondents stating that they regarded them as “very safe.” The Gallup survey conducted immediately after Columbine found that two thirds of Americans believed that a similar shooting was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to occur in their own community (Saad 1999), while the same poll conducted right after the March 2005 school shooting incident on the Red Lake reservation in Minnesota revealed that nearly three-fourths of Americans believed that a similar attack was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to happen in their communities (Kiefer 2005). Over the years, parental fear has dissipated somewhat. While polling conducted shortly after Columbine discovered that 55 % of parents with school-aged children expressed concern about their children’s safety while in school (Newport 2006), only 26 % of parents expressed the same fear in 2009 (Gallup, n.d.). Though widespread fear of school rampage has lessened to some extent in recent years, various scholars still assert its significance in terms of shaping current school disciplinary policy (Muschert et al. 2013; Muschert and Peguero 2010).

In his description of a moral panic, Cohen (2002, p. 1) pointed out that, “Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten…at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.” Many academics (such as Aitken 2001; Best 2002; Burns and Crawford 1999) writing at the time when the media and public response to school rampage shootings was most intense discussed the phenomenon as a contemporary exemplar of moral panic. More generally, scholars have written a great deal about moral panics with fairly high levels of what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) referred to as volatility, that is, their tendency to disappear as quickly as they first emerge when public interest and concern wanes. Cohen's "serious and long lasting repercussions" of the school rampage moral panic, however, warrant additional attention, for the enduring consequences upon school policy have received far less consideration.

One of the few exceptions to this gap is the emergent literature on "The Columbine Effect" (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013), which describes "the leveraging of anxiety about youth social problems in the expansion of school discipline, particularly punitive measures aimed at preventing extreme forms of violence" (Muschert and Madfis 2013, p. 14). Coming out of a constructionist social problems framework, the notion of the Columbine Effect fits in the moral panic tradition by emphasizing the exaggeration among much of the reaction to rampage, but also how the specter of Columbine has, to continue with Cohen's (2002, p. 27) language, achieved long lasting "symbolization" where various words or objects come to symbolize complex negative emotions and meanings.

Cohen (2002, p. 27) specifically addressed the manner in which place-names like Pearl Harbor or Hiroshima attain such problematic symbolization wherein "it became meaningful to say 'we don't want another Clacton [the infamous location of a street fight between the Mods and Rocker youth subcultures] here.'" In this vein, Muschert and Madfis (2013, p. 14) point out the manner in which:

> [T]he term *Columbine* has taken on a life of its own. Thus, in reference to discipline and security in schools we hear such statements as *pulling a Columbine* (meaning when someone undertakes a Columbine-style rampage attack), journalists refer to more recent rampage attacks on high schools as *another Columbine* that takes place in the *Columbine-style* (meaning all subsequent attacks rhetorically refer back to Columbine), and we hear about the *pre-Columbine* and *post-Columbine* eras (meaning that Columbine changed things so much that we now have to think about school crime and safety in entirely new ways).

Due to its notoriety as a problem-defining event, Columbine came to characterize the general understanding of youth misbehavior, and the fear of rampage violence still exerts significant leverage on decisions about school safety (Lawrence 2001). From this perspective, the United States has seen so much school criminalization and securitization because many recent measures were directly designed to prevent rare but extreme cases of violence, rather than ordinary student misbehavior.

Numerous studies of the media have focused upon how fear of school rampages is constructed and propagated (Altheide 2009; Frymer 2009; Maguire et al. 2002), yet research reveals little of substance about the manner and extent to which contemporary school personnel fear and anticipate multiple-victim homicide events. The moral panic literature as a whole has long been critiqued for emphasizing research on media coverage rather than on moral entrepreneurs or policy makers (McRobbie and Thornton 1995), and such criticism is just as warranted among the scholarship that depicts school rampage as a moral panic. The work of Muschert and his various collaborators have provided a much-needed explanatory framework regarding the significant changes in school safety discourse and policy. However, the majority of these insights were gleaned through the analyses of school rampage media coverage, and thus the field lacks an understanding of the agency and perspective of those school authorities tasked with transforming educational institutions in the aftermath of Columbine.

More than a decade after Columbine, rates of youth violence and school violence in particular remain lower than the early 1990's (Fox and Burstein 2010), yet most of the policies and procedures formed in the initial wake of public anxiety over school rampages remain in place (Madfis 2014a). It is vital to understand the current state of fear and perceived risk surrounding school rampage because, while surveys indicate that fear of school rampage remains somewhat high (though rates often increase immediately after an event and then slowly decrease), these data lack depth, and prior studies leave it entirely unknown to what extent school personnel still craft school safety policies and procedures with the problem of school rampage in mind. Ultimately, the causes of enhanced discipline and security are myriad and complex. As such, it is vital to fully comprehend the thought processes and motives of the school and police authorities who have undertaken the project of post-Columbine school safety and reframed the way discipline operates in school settings.

Methods

Data collection entailed conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with school and police officials about their fears and perceptions about violence and security at public schools. To make the project a manageable size, and to facilitate as many face-to-face in-person interviews as possible, the sample was limited to public schools in the Northeastern United States (a geographical area that includes the New England states, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware). The sample was similarly limited to schools located in predominantly white middle class or affluent suburban areas, as these communities share geographic and demographic similarities to those which have disproportionately experienced school rampage attacks (Schiele and Stewart 2001; Wise 2001; Kimmel and Mahler 2003) as well as averted threats of rampage attacks (Madfis 2014a, c).[2] Further, as punitive school criminalization has a far longer and deeper history in impoverished and minority communities (Hirschfield 2010), it is school and police officials working in predominantly white and relatively affluent areas who, according to scholars of the Columbine Effect, would have witnessed the greatest transition in recent years. Though these communities have always and continue to experience extremely low crime rates in and outside of their schools, they share many characteristics with Jefferson County, Colorado (or the locales of other infamous school attacks) and, accordingly, best illustrate how the specter of Columbine has dramatically changed officials' outlooks regarding how public schools ought to discipline, punish, and surveil students.[3]

[2] In fact, mass murder, of which school rampage violence constitutes a subset, is the only form of homicide that is committed by non-Hispanic whites in numbers disproportionately high relative to their share of the population (Fox and Levin 1998; Madfis 2014c). While it is certainly not the case that all school rampages have been committed by whites (for example, the Red Lake Senior High School killer was Native American, the Virginia Tech shooter was Korean American, and the shooter at the Tasso da Silveira Municipal School was Brazilian), the vast majority of rampage killers have in fact been white. As a result, some (Schiele and Stewart 2001; Madfis 2014c; Wise 2001) have linked theoretically white racial identity and privilege to rampage killing.

[3] Much of the data addressed in this article was culled as part of a larger project investigating not only officials' attitudes about school rampage threats and the response to them, but knowledge about incidents of school rampage that were planned but ultimately averted (please see—source removed so as to maintain the author's anonymity). Particular schools were chosen for this study so as to enable comparisons between geographically and demographically similar schools that both have and have not experienced substantial threats of rampage violence. Though the author conducted many interviews with officials at schools that successfully averted a rampage (and who, as a consequence, might be thought to have especially exaggerated

In all, I spoke to 65 people (26 administrators, 10 counselors, 16 security and school resource officers, and 13 teachers) associated with 20 distinct schools in 9 states. Fourteen were high schools, five were middle schools, and one was a junior/senior high school. Of these, 38 interviews were conducted in person at respondents' schools or police departments, and the other 27 interviews took place over the telephone when this was the respondent's preference or when on-site interviews could not be coordinated. As the interviews were shaped by each respondent's experiences and willingness to talk, they varied in length from 26 min to nearly 3 h. Utilizing data in a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), typological categories and themes emerged through the process of coding and content analysis using the ATLAS.ti software program.

Findings

The Post-Columbine Era

First, it is vital to get a clear sense of just how significant the Columbine event itself continues to be in the minds of school officials and how, as a result, educational institutions have been altered since the late 1990's. As scholars of the Columbine Effect (Muschert and Peguero 2010; Muschert and Madfis 2013) suggest, many respondents discussed the radical transformation of school discipline and security over the last ten years, frequently referring to the rampage at Columbine as a decisive transition point. Some of them looked back at a bygone era where various transgressions were perceived as trivial. One high school principal from an affluent suburban community stated that, when he was a student in the 1960's and later when he taught high school in the late 1970's into the 1990's, students frequently called in bomb scares in an attempt to cancel school during months with warm weather. This principal, Mr. Sacco, noted that:

> You'd get bomb scares in the spring, and there was a cavalier attitude even among kids. Now, they don't happen, but when you have one, you're mopping up for days and you have to do press releases and you have to do everything….Back in my time, if I said I don't want to go to school because there was a bomb scare yesterday, my parents would say, "Shut up, you know?"…And I think if you talk to baby boomers, they'll say, "Yeah, we had bomb scares." Of course we did, especially in the spring when it was nice outside.

Similarly, another principal from a suburban high school pointed out the significant change in how schools respond to threats. Principal Walsh said that:

> There's really been a fairly big swing in the way that we respond to things compared to the past, I always joked that the greatest weapon in a school is a pen because simply writing something on a bathroom wall can shut the whole school down. So,

Footnote 3 continued
fears and anticipated risks associated with that particular type of event), the findings from this article were culled almost exclusively from the perspectives of respondents who had not experienced a significant threat of rampage in their own schools. Ultimately, the data indicated that, while differences between schools which had and had not nearly avoided a violent tragedy were certainly discernable, these dissimilarities were far less significant than anticipated, as school officials discussed their fears and perceptions regarding rampage attacks in remarkably similar ways. This speaks to the impact that the moral panic over Columbine (as opposed to any individual experience with a similar incident) has had upon American public schools as a whole. For more details about the sampling strategy and data analysis, please see (Madfis 2012).

> during [Massachusetts State] Exams, there will sometimes be threats and other things written that, depending upon how you respond, could shut the school down, while 20 years ago the custodian would go in and wipe it off. That was the response. And now we’re at a point where you have some really critical judgments to make.

No longer can anything be taken for granted. Mr. McGowan, the principal of a middle class suburban high school, expressed this sentiment when he declared that, “Welfare, safety, and security is always the top priority. That’s the change that happened with Columbine.” Likewise, the principal of another suburban high school, Mr. Waits, noted that at his school, “Even though we’d [himself and the vice principal] like to say that education is our number one priority, it really has to be the safety and security of the school, the students, of the teachers and of the staff, and of our visitors.” The notion that safety and security, as opposed to education, would be the top priority of principals at schools in low crime middle class suburban areas is a fairly new development, and likely one seldom present before the influence of Columbine. Though Simon (2006, p. 201) correctly notes that, in contemporary American schools, “[p]unishment and policing have come to at least compete with, if not replace, teaching as the dominant modes of socialization,” his analysis of broad socio-political change underemphasizes the crucial role that school rampage shootings have had upon the process of school criminalization.

This change towards risk aversion and constant diligence with regard to student threat has taken place not only at the high school level, but also in middle schools. The principal of a suburban middle school, Mr. Anderson, said:

> We’re getting more and more incidents [and] each year we take more and more steps to educate. Gone are the days where you can bring a toy gun to school. Some of these look real and if you get a kid outside the school that’s got a toy gun that’s pretending to shoot people and an Officer drives by, he has to make a split decision that’s life or death. So you have to let these kids know ahead of time, you can’t do that, you can’t even bring fake guns or knives or things like that…we didn’t have to worry about that 15 years ago.

In the Post-Columbine Era, bomb scares and bathroom graffiti are no joke, while toy guns might very well get students shot and killed. This is a remarkable transition from only a decade or two ago when such actions were mostly deemed as fairly innocent childish pranks. Not only did the vast majority of respondents refer to Columbine as a decisive transition point, but in their discussions of the emergent regime of school discipline and security, the prevention of and preparation for rampage shootings were frequently mentioned as a significant part of their decision making process.

The Columbine Effect and the Fear of School Rampage

The data from the present study support the argument put forth by scholars of the Columbine Effect that school rampage shootings, and the specter of Columbine in particular, has dramatically altered the discourse surrounding school safety. Rampage shootings continue to exert immense symbolic leverage and frame debates over school safety. As Principal Anderson stated:

> 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.

Many respondents used various rhetorical arguments emphasizing the need for enhanced discipline and security that were justified specifically through the lens of Columbine. That is, they often suggested the need to perform a specific procedure or implement a certain policy in preparation and anticipation of a future rampage shooting incident. This suggests the veracity of Muschert and Madfis' (2013) assertion that school officials frequently craft policy and make decisions regarding broader issues of school discipline and security with the problem of school rampage in mind, despite the fact that the vast majority of student misbehavior is far less serious or violent.

Respondents assured me that many of the current features of school criminalization were in place to prevent future school rampages. This was often discussed through an appeal to deterrence wherein school resource officers (hereafter, SRO's) and security cameras would scare off potential killers. An SRO for a suburban high school, Detective Brown, put this best when he noted that:

> 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 D.A.R.E., 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 planning to go out 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 Jeez, 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, shit! Right?

Detective Brown shares his faith in the deterrent value of SRO's to prevent school rampage with a recent report presented to the 2011 National Association of SRO's Conference where Chief Ronald Glidden argued that:

> Armed uniformed officers (like SRO's) are the simplest form of deterrent. While other security measures may serve as a deterrent, none will work as well as an armed presence. Remember, none of the school shooters were looking for a confrontation. They were looking for a body count.

It is worth noting that the presence of SRO's and university police did not deter the rampage shootings at Columbine, nor at Virginia Tech or many other tragic incidents (Madfis 2014a, b; Seibert 2000; Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007). The more pertinent point here, though, is that a substantial number of school and police officials justify the presence of armed police on school grounds specifically as preparation for extremely rare incidents of rampage shooting. This stands in contrast to the myriad traditional rationales used to explain police presence in schools, such as for improved rapport between students and police officers as a community-oriented policing goal, for drug prevention programming like D.A.R.E., or for traditional policing duties like controlling traffic. Though the assertion that SRO's (or zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, and security cameras, for that matter) actually work as deterrents for multiple homicide lacks any empirical basis (Madfis 2014a, b), the pervasiveness of this rhetorical argument indicates a widespread fear and concern with school rampage that is rooted in a gross exaggeration of the extent of the problem.

Enhanced Risk Perception: Rampage Happening Everywhere at Random

It must be noted that a crucial reason that school rampage shootings have had such a powerful impact upon American consciousness, and accordingly, school discipline and security, is the demographic characteristics of many of the offenders and victims in these incidents. For example, the Columbine killers, Harris and Klebold, were Caucasian males from respectable middle class families, and their victims were also by and large similarly privileged students at a respectable suburban school. Thus, the fascination with (and subsequent media and public attention devoted to) rampage shootings resulted not only from the fact that they were cold-blooded teen murders on a massive scale, but also because they were multiple homicides that occurred in middle and upper class school districts previously thought to be "safe havens, free of the dangers of street crime" (Lawrence 2007, p. 147). Principal Sacco noted just this sentiment when he stated that, "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." Likewise, the superintendent of an affluent suburban community, Dr. Stone, shared her belief that, "before Columbine, I think people would attribute violence to inner-cities and say it won't happen here. But I think what Columbine made us all realize is that it can happen anywhere at any time."

As these quotes indicate, administrators, teachers, and parents in predominantly white middle class and affluent areas were previously able to disassociate themselves from school violence as a social problem by relegating the issue to different locales and populations. Suburban and rural Americans understood the nation's school violence problem as one of another class of people—namely, racial/ethnic minorities living in impoverished urban neighborhoods with high rates of poverty. However, the shootings of the late 1990's changed the problem awareness of school violence in such a manner that even predominantly white suburban and rural communities were no longer able to disassociate from the potential threat posed by cases of extreme violence. Further, as an apparent widespread phenomenon, these types of communities no longer perceived school violence as an unfortunate problem unique to distant urban areas.

In addition to the expansion of the school violence problem into communities which had previously felt more or less immune to the phenomenon, rampage violence has become generally socially constructed as a broad universal threat that is possible, and even likely, to plague any school at any time. The contrasting reality is that schools are the safest location that exists for American children, school shootings are rare events, and rampage attacks in the infamous model of Columbine where multiple victims are killed are even less likely (Borum et al. 2010; Donahue et al. 1998; Muschert 2007).[4] Despite this actual rarity, the risk perception of school rampage has vastly increased since the turn of the 21st century. For example, Principal Anderson stated that, "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." Likewise, Officer Dudley, an SRO who was stationed at a suburban high school, informed me that he "truly believe[s] that [school rampages] could happen anywhere…Don't think it couldn't happen in your town." In the 30th anniversary edition of his seminal text, Cohen (2002, p. xii) wrote that "the slide towards moral panic rhetoric depends less on the sheer volume of cases, than a cognitive shift from 'how could

[4] Additionally, student deaths resulting from homicide in schools averaged 31 per year in the period from 1992 to 1999 (pre-Columbine). This contrasts with the post-Columbine period where the average was only 19 per year from 1999 to 2011 (Robers et al. 2014).

it happen in a place like this?' to 'it could happen anyplace.'" Thus, many school officials continue to exhibit a perspective which almost perfectly exemplifies the reaction of a moral panic.

Such a perspective also reflects what Tversky and Kahneman (1986, p. 49) refer to as the "anchoring" heuristic whereby people identify harm and estimate likelihoods by basing their knowledge on a particular starting point that may not reflect reality. As the media disproportionately focus on particularly sensational and violent events such as school shootings, these types of occurrences are misperceived to be more commonplace. Certainly rare but devastating events must be taken seriously (as Posner 2004 points out), but it is not necessarily a given that high potential costs (even the lives of innocent youth) automatically supersede low probabilities. Given the current news/entertainment environment in which media conglomerates capitalize on the most rare and sensational events in order to use fear to maintain viewership (Kappeler and Potter 2005), however, the perception that a series of school rampage shootings at the turn of the twenty-first century constituted a full-fledged crime wave became rather commonplace.

The above quotations and the many more similar assertions made by school administrators in this study echo what Best (1999) critiques as the problematic construct of patternless and pointless "random violence." The pervasive misperception that school rampages are random acts of violence not only distorts the level of risk and increases fear such that they seem more likely to occur than in reality, but it also encourages people to think that there are no recognizable patterns in terms of who the victims and offenders of this crime are, nor that any real identifiable causes exist. As Best (1999) points out, crime is not patternless, as victimization and offending patterns vary substantially by gender, race, class, and age (see Robers et al. 2014 for how this plays out in the school context). The trope of randomness perpetuates the misleading notion that violence is equally likely to happen to anyone and similarly that anyone can equally become a perpetrator. Secondly, the idea of random violence inaccurately depicts crime as pointless, though even the most seemingly irrational misdeeds typically have a purpose in the mind of the offender.

It is true that suburban and rural schools that were not used to having to deal with much violence of any kind were suddenly forced to contend with a particularly terrifying threat specific to their types of communities. However, it is vital to recall the frequently overlooked facts that these events are still unevenly distributed across suburban and rural schools (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Kimmel 2008; Madfis 2014a) and that they do tend to occur in the context of particular social circumstances (Levin and Madfis 2009; Newman et al. 2004). School rampage shootings occur almost exclusively in less populated homogeneous communities in ideologically conservative districts (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Newman et al. 2004). This fact has led various scholars to locate the cause of these events in a pervasive gun culture (Glassner 2010; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Webber 2003) and the stultifying closeness and pressure to conform in small towns (Newman et al. 2004; Madfis and Levin 2013). Rampage shootings also tend to occur more often when particular social circumstances arise, such as when the school staff and student body are intolerant of differences (especially regarding gender nonconformity) and when issues of bullying and marginalization are not addressed or taken seriously by teachers or administrators (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Levin and Madfis 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Madfis and Levin 2013; Vossekuil et al. 2002).

Finally, while school rampage perpetrators lack a single unifying profile (Vossekuil et al. 2002), they do tend to share various troubling life experiences (Levin and Madfis

2009; Madfis and Levin 2013) and are often motivated by the desire to attain vengeance and lasting recognition via a masculine display of power asserting violence (Larkin 2009, 2010; Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein 2006b; Madfis 2014c; Neroni 2000; Tonso 2009), while females have been heavily disproportionately represented among the victims (Klein 2005, 2006a). Despite these fairly consistent patterns, the way that many school administrators, taking their cue from members of the media, utilize the random trope (i.e. the notion that school rampages are happening everywhere at any time in a pointless and patternless random fashion) distorts the meaning and magnitude of the threat, in the same manner that depicting violence more generally as random distracts people from its genuine causes and consequences. Best (1999) argued specifically that the problematic rhetoric of randomness is useful for mobilizing social concern while eliminating the need to explain crime patterns and causes. As a result of the fact that school and police authorities mistake school rampage as random meaningless patternless violence, we can understand their use of a risk control approach that stresses punitive discipline, target hardening, and preventative deterrence rather than solutions to alleviate underlying problems and tensions.

Increased Desire for Risk Control through School Criminalization

When the genuinely high potential cost of school rampage fused with the perception of high probability that it can happen anywhere, school rampages came to be viewed as a risk that could not be tolerated and must be avoided at nearly any cost. Such a focus upon risk control entails the mindset that every locale must be wary and take whatever measures might be necessary to prepare for the onslaught of random violence. Thus, the exaggerated risk perception of these tragic incidents has directly corresponded to increased desire for risk control via surveillance, securitization, and criminalization rather than more ameliorative forms of prevention, such as restorative justice (Meyer and Evans 2012). As Mr. Lewis, a suburban principal, put it, "This kind of thing can happen anywhere and so there's no room for complacency." In the same vein, another suburban principal, Mr. Decocco, stated that, "As a school administrator, people have to feel safe and they have to feel comfortable. So [Columbine] made people vigilant and some cases hyper-vigilant." He continued, "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." In response to the perception that school violence was newly pervasive in suburban and rural schools and a widespread problem without much in the way of pattern or motive, administrators even in low crime areas acquiesced to a regime of "hyper-vigilance" where an overreaction (with widespread arrests, expulsions, and suspensions for minor disciplinary infractions and prison-like school buildings with armed guards, locked doors, and security cameras) was preferable to neglecting the extremely unlikely catastrophe of a rampage attack. This sentiment perhaps most clearly represents the link between exaggerated perceptions of risk (i.e. moral panic) and the desire for punitive solutions, for while Mr. Sacco explicitly recognized the fact that his approach will leave him overly aggressive 99 % of the time, he conceives of this as a wholly rational calculation. In this process, significant concerns about students' civil liberties and schools' limited financial resources were broadly deemed as subordinate to the primary goal of school safety. Further, the negative effects of school criminalization upon school safety and the larger learning environment (see Madfis 2014a) were rarely acknowledged or considered.

Discussion

The process of school criminalization began far before the highly publicized school shootings of the late 1990's. For example, zero tolerance policies were adopted widely across the country by as early as 1993 in response to public fears about drugs, gangs, and weapons (Skiba 2000). Likewise, according to a 1993 National School Boards Association report, half of school districts nationwide reported conducting locker searches, 24 % utilized drug-sniffing dogs, and 15 % had metal detectors (Sautter 1995), though these practices were, and still are, more frequently utilized in urban schools with predominantly minority student populations (Hirschfield 2010). This pre-Columbine legacy of school criminalization indicates that these punitive practices are symptomatic of larger socio-political forces and trends (Kupchik and Monahan 2006), and it would be simplistic and fallacious to suggest that the current disciplinary regime may be solely rooted in the fearful response to a moral panic over school rampages. At the same time, however, nearly all of my interview respondents found Columbine to be a decisive and momentous transition point in the transformation of school safety, and they continually referenced the prevention of school rampage as a fundamental component of contemporary public education.

Ultimately, this interview data reveal initial but important empirical support for the Columbine Effect. That is, when the threat of rampage violence was exaggerated and distorted in the context of a moral panic, school officials came to perceive these isolated events as both commonplace and entirely random and subsequently deemed the expansion of punitive discipline and security to be necessary solutions to manage and control this particular risk.

Some scholarship (such as Rohloff and Wright 2010; Ungar 2001) has argued for the incompatibility of (or, at least, the potentially contradictory implications within) the moral panic tradition and newer perspectives emphasizing neoliberal governance and an emergent "risk society" which entails a mindset where there is a preoccupation with the future and the systematic manipulation of risk is achievable, global, and primary (Beck 1992). Others (such as Ajzenstadt 2009; Critcher 2008; Hier 2008; Miller 2006) have emphasized the potential importance of understanding how moral panics maintain their significance in a late modern neoliberal risk society. The fault lines in this debate are too far afield to address here, but the findings of this study suggest that moral panics still emerge today—though perhaps with greater frequency and in a less culturally monolithic manner than they did 30 years ago.

Through the exploration of how school authorities currently fear and perceive the risks associated with rampage violence and the solutions they propose to alleviate such concerns, we can gain insight into the process wherein several incidents of school rampage caused such a degree of fear and anxiety across the country that even otherwise progressive educators in generally safe suburban and rural areas felt it necessary and appropriate to transform educational institutions into projects of punitive discipline and advanced (not to mention expensive) surveillance and security (Lewis 2003). Certainly the move towards punitiveness and associated "tough on crime" policies were largely embraced by many politicians on both sides of the political isle long before the Columbine event (Wacquant 2009), but it took the heightened fear and risk perception of school rampage for school authorities outside urban areas to broadly acquiesce to the criminalization of their schools.

Conclusion

This article entailed a critical discussion of the factors contributing to the expansion of school discipline, surveillance, and security whereby an exaggerated perception of the likelihood of rampage shootings has led many of officials to justify the extensive criminalization of their schools. Birkland and Lawrence (2009, p. 1412) have suggested that the Columbine event didn’t create “novel policy responses” or new forms of discipline and security from whole cloth—as an extreme reading of the moral panic perspective might indicate. They argue that the incident “mostly spurred more rapid implementation of existing policies and tools that were already available to schools” (ibid, p. 1412). Accordingly, rampage attacks should not be understood as the original cause of school criminalization but rather as events which further facilitated and exacerbated the process.

Yet, as the findings of this study indicate, such reactionary practices were rhetorically justified by, if not initially put in place as a response to, highly publicized but extremely rare incidents of school rampage. While the initial moral panic surrounding school rampage peaked in terms of media coverage more than a decade ago in 1999 (Muschert and Carr 2006), rampage shootings remain remarkably relevant in contemporary discussions and practices of school safety and discipline. The fear of school rampage gained traction as a pervasive problem perceived to strike indiscriminately across the nation. The media-hyped concern over school rampage was leveraged to expand school networks of social control via enhanced criminalization and securitization.

The data, taken as a whole, result in numerous significant implications. First, when officials in districts with relatively low rates of crime and violence overestimate the occurrence of school rampage and base broad policy decisions on these devastating events, their risk calculation is not only statistically inaccurate, but rhetorically dishonest. The public, including school and police officials but also students and parents, ought to be engaging in a debate over whether or not the negative aspects of punitive zero tolerance policies and enhanced security (such as changes to the school atmosphere as an educational institution, potential violations of students’ civil liberties, expenditures of limited resources for personnel and technology, etc.) are worth the benefits of reducing or preventing typical and relatively minor student misbehavior, rather than having to conduct a cost-benefit analysis where one side of the equation is characterized in such a radically skewed manner (i.e. the cost of not adopting law enforcement solutions in schools will immanently result in multiple students deaths). There is much to gain, then, by advancing a rational discourse about school rampage that emphasizes the true rarity of these events and the lack of empirical evidence indicating the success of enhanced security and discipline in deterring rampage (see, for example, Madfis 2014a).

Additionally, the disproportionality of disciplinary outcomes must not be ignored. Even though school rampages are perpetrated most frequently by white males in suburban and rural schools, the zero tolerance policies and enhanced security practices often designed to prevent these attacks are disproportionately used to surveille and punish students of color in urban areas (Fenning and Rose 2007; Irwin et al. 2013). They are routinely applied to stigmatize and penalize students for relatively petty crimes like drug use, disorderly conduct, and vandalism, not violence (Kupchik 2010).

Finally, researchers and practitioners must delve more deeply into the ways in which school faculty and administrators feel comfortable lessening the punitive nature of their institutions without feeling that they were sacrificing safety and security. In this regard, restorative justice practices wherein principles of reconciliation, reparation, and transformation replace the conventional goal of punishment may prove invaluable (Karp and Breslin 2001; Meyer and Evans 2012; Van Ness and Strong 2010).

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