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Seriousness of purpose in seeking to avert the tragedy of school violence does not necessarily demand rigid adherence to harsh and extreme measures. There are alternatives to politically facile get-tough strategies, the authors point out.

THE 1997-98 school year was a shocking and frightening one, filled with reports of seemingly random violence in communities heretofore immune to such incidents. In the wake of these tragedies, we can expect to hear renewed calls for increasingly severe penalties for any kind of school disruption, a stance that has led to the widespread adoption of so-called zero tolerance discipline policies.

Already many districts have decreed that making any sort of threat will result in automatic expulsion. Some have gone as far as to suggest that principals be armed in order to deter - or perhaps outshoot - students who bring firearms to school. Such an approach is extreme, to say the least, and is unlikely to be implemented. Yet it is simply the far end of a continuum of responses to what has become the largely unquestioned assumption that school violence is accelerating at an alarming rate and that increasingly draconian disciplinary measures are not only justified but necessary to guarantee school safety.

Before we continue down a path that may well turn school principals into town marshals and cafeterias into free-fire zones, however, we would do well to examine more closely the track record of zero tolerance. What is "zero tolerance"? What is the nature of the school violence that has brought us to this point? How well does the approach address the serious issues of school safety toward which it has been aimed?

The Origins of Zero Tolerance

The term "zero tolerance" - referring to policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor - grew out of state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s. The first use of the term recorded in the Lexis-Nexis national newspaper database was in 1983, when the Navy reassigned 40 submarine crew members for suspected drug abuse. In 1986 zero tolerance was picked up and used by a U.S. attorney in San Diego as the title of a program developed to impound seacraft carrying any amount of drugs. By February 1988 the program had received national attention, and U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese authorized customs officials to seize the boats, automobiles, and passports of anyone crossing the border with even trace amounts of drugs and to charge those individuals in federal court. Zero tolerance took hold quickly and within months was being applied to issues as diverse as environmental pollution, trespassing, skateboarding, racial intolerance, homelessness, sexual harassment, and boom boxes.

From the outset, the harsh punishments meted out under zero tolerance drug policies engendered considerable controversy. Private citizens whose cars, boats, and even bicycles were impounded for sometimes minute amounts of drugs complained bitterly, and the American Civil Liberties Union considered filing suit against the program. By 1990 the U.S. Customs Service quietly discontinued its initial zero tolerance program after strict applications of the rule resulted in the seizure of two research vessels on which a small amount of marijuana was found.

Yet just as the early zero tolerance drug programs in the community were being phased out, the concept was beginning to catch on in the public schools. In late 1989 school districts in Orange County, California, and Louisville, Kentucky, promulgated

zero tolerance policies that called for expulsion for possession of drugs or participation in gang-related activity. In New York, Donald Batista, superintendent of the Yonkers public schools, proposed a sweeping zero tolerance program as a way of taking action against students who caused school disruption. With its restricted school access, ban on hats, immediate suspension for any school disruption, and increased use of law enforcement, the program contained many of the elements that have come to characterize zero tolerance approaches in the past decade.

By 1993 zero tolerance policies were being adopted by school boards across the country, often broadened to include not only drugs and weapons but also tobacco-related offenses and school disruption. In 1994 the federal government stepped in to mandate the policy nationally when President Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act into law.¹ This law mandates an expulsion of one calendar year for possession of a weapon and referral of students who violate the law to the criminal or juvenile justice system. It also provides that the one-year expulsions may be modified by the “chief administrative officer” of each local school district on a case-by-case basis.

School Violence:

Reality and Perception

Last year’s string of school shootings has left all educators shaken and nervous about the potential for violence in their own schools. The fear that drugs and violence are spreading in our nation’s schools provided the initial motivation for adopting zero tolerance disciplinary policies and may well motivate still another round of tough disciplinary measures. But what is the reality of school violence and drug use? How bad is it, and is it getting worse?

It is hard to say that we are overreacting when the incidents we have witnessed on a regular basis are so horrific. Yet some data on the topic suggest that we are doing just that. In a report titled *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-1997*, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,234 school principals or disciplinarians at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.² When these principals were asked to list what they considered serious or moderate problems in their schools, the most frequently cited problems at all levels were the less violent behaviors such as tardiness (40%), absenteeism (25%), and physical conflicts between students (21%). The critical incidents that are typically the focus of school safety debates were reported to be at least “a moderate problem” only relatively infrequently: drug use (9%), gangs (5%), possession of weapons (2%), and physical abuse of teachers (2%). The NCES report found that violent crimes occurred at an annual rate of only 53 per 100,000 students.

When we watch the evening news or walk through the edgy and noisy corridors of urban middle schools, it is difficult to believe that school behavior is not worsening. But again, the evidence seems to contradict our gut feelings. Comparisons of the current NCES survey data with results from an earlier survey of public school principals conducted in 1991 show virtually no changes across either minor misbehavior or more serious infractions (see Table 1, next page). Noted school violence researcher Irwin Hyman tracked a number of indicators of school violence over the past 20 years and concluded, “As was the case 20 years ago, despite public perceptions to the contrary, the current data do not support the claim that there has been a dramatic, overall increase in school-based violence in recent years.”³

It seems almost inconceivable that there are so few incidents of truly dangerous behavior and that things are not necessarily getting worse. Perhaps there are some behaviors that just shake us up, whatever their absolute frequency. School shootings involving multiple victims are still extremely rare from a statistical standpoint. However,

statistics are hardly reassuring as long as the possibility exists that it could happen in our school, to our children. It is probably healthier that a single shooting on school grounds be viewed as one too many than that we become inured to violence.

Yet this fear of random violence is clearly the prime motivator for the adoption of zero tolerance approaches to school discipline. From that first boat's impoundment in San Diego harbor, zero tolerance has cast a broad net, by its very definition treating both minor and major incidents with equal severity in order to "send a message" to potential violators.

Indeed, infractions that fall under the rubric of zero tolerance seem to multiply as the definition of what will not be tolerated expands. Test cases of school district zero tolerance policies reported in the media from 1988 to 1993 did involve difficult judgments about the severity of the punishment, but they were also clearly concerned with weapons and drugs: a high school senior in Chicago was expelled from school when police found marijuana in the trunk of his car during the lunch hour; an honor student in Los Angeles was expelled when he pulled out a knife to scare away peers who had been harassing him because of his Filipino-Mexican heritage.⁴

Over time, however, increasingly broad interpretations of zero tolerance have resulted in a near epidemic of suspensions and expulsions for seemingly trivial events. Table 2 provides a list of some of the events that have received national attention in recent years; we note here that this is just a partial list, including only those incidents that have been reported in detail.

The reaction to these cases has created sharp divisions in schools and communities. In a number of these incidents, parents have filed lawsuits against the school districts, for the most part unsuccessfully.⁵ A number of states have amended their zero tolerance policies to allow more flexibility for individual cases,⁶ while the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education began advocating a less comprehensive interpretation of sexual harassment after the suspension of 6-year-old Jonathan Prevette for kissing a classmate made national headlines.⁷ Yet in many cases school administrators and school boards have not backed down even in the face of public clamor. They claim that their hands are tied by federal or state law (despite language in the federal law that allows local review on a case-by-case basis), or they assert that continued application of zero tolerance is necessary to send a message to disruptive students.

Who Gets Suspended And Expelled?

If the NCES data on school violence are correct, it is not surprising that the broad net of zero tolerance will catch a host of minor misbehaviors. Since there are few incidents of serious violence and many incidents of minor disruption, policies that set harsh consequences indiscriminately will capture a few incidents of serious violence and many incidents of minor disruption.

In fact, data on suspension and expulsion suggest that the incidents brought to national attention by the media are not all that inaccurate in describing the types of behavior that lead to exclusion from school. Data on suspension consistently show that, as the NCES has reported, referrals for drugs, weapons, and gang-related behaviors constitute but a small minority of office referrals leading to suspension. Fighting among students is the single most frequent reason for suspension, but the majority of school suspensions occur in response to relatively minor incidents that do not threaten school safety.⁸ At the middle school level, disrespect and disobedience are among the most common reasons for suspension, and a significant proportion of suspensions are for tardiness and truancy. In one of the few reported studies of school expulsion in American education, Gale Morrison and Barbara D'Incau reported that the

majority of offenses in the sample they investigated were committed by students who would not generally be considered dangerous to the school environment.⁹ In their study, as in many that have explored suspension and expulsion, poor academic skill was a strong predictor of school exclusion.

One of the more troubling characteristics of the zero tolerance approach to discipline is that a disproportionate number of those at risk for a range of school punishments are poor and African American. In 1975 the Children's Defense Fund, studying data on school discipline from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), found high rates of suspension for black students. Of the nearly 3,000 school districts represented in the OCR data, more than two-thirds showed rates of black suspension that exceeded rates for white students.¹⁰

Since then, researchers have consistently found disproportionate minority representation among students on the receiving end of exclusionary and punitive discipline practices. African American students are overrepresented in the use of corporal punishment and expulsion, and they are underrepresented in the use of milder disciplinary alternatives.¹¹ This overrepresentation of minorities in the application of harsh discipline appears to be related to the overall use of school exclusion: schools that rely most heavily on suspension and expulsion are also those that show the highest rates of minority overrepresentation in school disciplinary consequences.

Of course, there are hypotheses other than racial bias that might be called upon to explain minority overrepresentation in school discipline. First, the unfortunate correlation of race and poverty in our society suggests that inequitable racial treatment in discipline may be a socioeconomic issue rather than a racial one. Yet multivariate studies have continued to find evidence of black overrepresentation in suspension - even after controlling for socioeconomic background - suggesting that racial disproportionality in suspension involves more than just poverty.¹²

A second hypothesis suggests that racial differences in punishment are the result of differences in school behavior: higher rates of suspension for African American students would not be bias if those students misbehaved more frequently. Yet when rates of behavior for African American and other students are taken into account, the differences are minor at best, and behavior makes a weak contribution to explaining the discrepancy in the suspension rates of blacks and whites.¹³ While there are doubtless complex factors involving defiance, fighting, and school authority that determine who is suspended or expelled in any given situation, it is clear that the burden of suspension and expulsion falls most heavily on poor black males.

How Effective Is Zero Tolerance?

It has been almost a decade since school districts first began to adopt zero tolerance policies. And it has been four years since the policy was institutionalized nationally in the Gun-Free Schools Act. How well has it worked?

The short answer is that we don't really know. Unlike the domain of academic achievement, in which constant calls for accountability have led to state and national standards and tests, there has been no concomitant pressure to test the efficacy of interventions that target school behavior. Perhaps as a result, there are almost no studies that evaluate the effectiveness of zero tolerance strategies.

Of course, the media have reported claims by school districts that zero tolerance approaches have curtailed guns, gangs, or fighting in their schools. The most comprehensive and controlled study of zero tolerance policies, however, appears once again to be the NCES study of school violence. The NCES survey asked principals to identify which of a number of possible components of a zero tolerance strategy (e.g., expulsions, locker searches, the use of metal detectors, school uniforms) were employed at their school. Of the responding principals, 79% reported having a zero

tolerance policy for violence. Schools with no reported crime were less likely to have a zero tolerance policy (74%) than schools that reported incidents of serious crime (85%). From one perspective, the relationship is unsurprising, since unsafe schools might well be expected to try more extreme measures. Yet after four years of implementation, the NCES found that schools that use zero tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies.

As time has allowed all of us to gain some perspective on the school shootings of last year, the media have begun to report data showing that the rate of school violence has remained fairly level since the early 1990s. One overlooked implication of these figures is their evaluative significance for the Gun-Free Schools Act. In an era of accountability, is it unfair to expect that a national policy implemented consistently, one might even say aggressively, over a four-year period should demonstrate some measurable effect on its target: school disruption and violence? Virtually no data suggest that zero tolerance policies reduce school violence, and some data suggest that certain strategies, such as strip searches or undercover agents in school, may create emotional harm or encourage students to drop out.¹⁴ When the lives of schoolchildren and staff members continue to be claimed in random shootings after extensive implementation of the most extreme measures in our schools, is it wise to push these strategies harder?

Our concerns about the long-term effects of zero tolerance multiply when we look more closely at one of its central components: school exclusion. In the 1980s, national concern over children termed “at risk” led to extensive investigations of the causes and correlates of dropping out. Consistently, school suspension was found to be a moderate to strong predictor of a student’s dropping out of school. More than 30% of sophomores who dropped out of school had been suspended, a rate three times that of peers who stayed in school.¹⁵

Indeed, the relationship between suspension and dropping out may not be accidental. In ethnographic studies, school disciplinarians report that suspension is sometimes used as a tool to “push out” particular students, to encourage “troublemakers” or those perceived as unlikely to succeed in school to leave.¹⁶

Recent advances in developmental psychopathology suggest other explanations for the relationship between suspension and dropping out. In the elementary school years, students at risk for developing conduct disorders exhibit disruptive behavior, below-average achievement, and poor social skills. Together, these deficits cause them to become increasingly alienated from teachers and peers.¹⁷ As they reach middle school, these youngsters become less interested in school and seek the company of other antisocial peers, perhaps even gangs. At the same time, their families often fail to monitor their whereabouts, allowing more unsupervised time on the streets. In such a context, it seems unlikely that suspension will positively influence the behavior of the student being suspended. Rather, suspension may simply accelerate the course of delinquency by giving a troubled youth with little parental supervision a few extra days to “hang” with deviant peers. One student interviewed while in detention expresses this aptly.

When they suspend you, you get in more trouble, 'cause you're out in the street. . . . And that's what happened to me once. I got into trouble one day 'cause there was a party, and they arrested everybody in that party. . . . I got in trouble more than I get in trouble at school, because I got arrested and everything.¹⁸

Whether and how to provide services to students who are suspended and expelled may be our next pressing national discussion. Without such services, school personnel may simply be dumping problem students out on the streets, only to find them later causing increased violence and disruption in the community. In sum, we lack solid

evidence to support the effectiveness of harsh policies in improving school safety, and we face serious questions about the long-term negative effects of one of the cornerstones of zero tolerance, school exclusion.

Indeed, the popularity of zero tolerance may have less to do with its actual effects than with the image it portrays. Writing in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Pedro Noguera argues that the primary function of harsh punishment is not to change the behavior of the recipient, but to reassert the power of authority.¹⁹ Seemingly random violence poses a profound threat to schools and to the authority of those who administer those schools. In the face of an apparent inability to influence the course of violence in schools, harsh measures are intended to send a message that the administration is still in charge. Whether the message is effectively received or actually changes student behavior may be less important than the reassurance that sending it provides to administrators, teachers, and parents.

In his recent book, *The Triumph of Meanness*, Nicholas Mills argues that a culture of meanness has come to characterize many aspects of our nation's social policies, from "bum-proof" park benches to sweeping social welfare reform. According to Mills, "Meanness today is a state of mind, the product of a culture of spite and cruelty that has had an enormous impact on us."²⁰ The zeal with which punitive policies are sometimes implemented suggests that zero tolerance discipline may be yet another example of what Mills is referring to. Whether such policies work or how they affect the lives of students may be less important than providing harsh punishment for offenders as a form of generalized retribution for a generalized evil.

What Else Should We Do?

In any institution, the preservation of order demands that boundaries be set and enforced. Children whose families set no limits for them soon become uncontrolled and uncontrollable. In the same way, schools and classrooms in which aggressive, dangerous, or seriously disruptive behaviors are tolerated will almost inevitably descend into chaos.

Yet the indiscriminate use of force without regard for its effects is the hallmark of authoritarianism, incompatible with the functioning of a democracy, and certainly incompatible with the transmission of democratic values to children. If we rely solely, or even primarily, on zero tolerance strategies to preserve the safety of our schools, we are accepting a model of schooling that implicitly teaches students that the preservation of order demands the suspension of individual rights and liberties. As we exclude ever-higher proportions of children whose behavior does not meet increasingly tough standards, we will inevitably meet many of those disruptive youths on the streets. In choosing control and exclusion as our preferred methods of dealing with school disruption, even as we refrain from positive interventions, we increase the likelihood that the correctional system will become the primary agency responsible for troubled youths. Ultimately, as we commit ourselves to increasingly draconian policies of school discipline, we may also need to resign ourselves to increasingly joyless schools, increasingly unsafe streets, and dramatically increasing expenditures for detention centers and prisons.

Seriousness of purpose in seeking to avert the tragedy of school violence does not necessarily demand rigid adherence to harsh and extreme measures. There are alternatives to politically facile get-tough strategies, alternatives that rely on a comprehensive program of prevention and planning. However, prevention is not a politically popular approach to solving problems of crime and violence in America. A recent task force on prevention research, commissioned by the National Institutes of Mental Health, found wide gaps in our knowledge, noting that "virtually no preventive services research of any kind was found under NIMH sponsorship."²¹

Yet if we are to break the cycle of violence in American society, we must begin to look beyond a program of stiffer consequences. We must begin with long-term planning aimed at fostering nonviolent school communities. First, programmatic prevention efforts - such as conflict resolution and schoolwide behavior management - can help establish a climate free of violence. Conflict resolution has been shown to have a moderate effect on the level of student aggression in schools,²² but more important, it teaches students to consider and use alternatives to violence in solving conflicts. Schoolwide discipline plans and the planning process required to develop and implement them help ensure that school staff members have both the consistent philosophy and the consistent procedures that are so critical to effective behavior management.²³

Second, screening and early identification of troubled young people appear to be critical in preventing the eruption of violence. In a number of the multiple-victim shooting incidents that occurred last year, the shooter left warning signs, cries for help that went unheeded.²⁴ There is at least one widely available and well-researched measure designed to screen for troubled students, whether the primary concern is acting-out behavior or social withdrawal.²⁵ With such screening and with knowledge of the early warning signs listed in the President's guide for preventing violence,²⁶ we are beginning to have the capability of identifying students with serious problems while they can still be helped.

Finally, schools with effective discipline have plans and procedures in place to deal with the disruptive behaviors that inevitably occur. School safety teams or behavior support teams - composed of regular and special education teachers, personnel from related services, administrators, and parents - ensure a consistent and individualized response to disruptive students.²⁷ Individual behavior plans and a functional assessment process for developing those plans provide consistent consequences for offenders and teach disruptive youngsters alternatives to aggression.²⁸ Emergency and crisis planning before serious incidents occur can help ensure that, if violence erupts, its negative short- and long-term effects will be minimized.²⁹ In short, effective interventions emphasize building positive prosocial behaviors rather than merely punishing inappropriate behaviors. Whether at the level of the school or at the level of the individual, effective intervention requires a wide spectrum of options that extend significantly beyond a narrow focus on punishment and exclusion.

There are doubtless those with little patience for the complex and careful planning that such a program demands, those who prefer the quick fix that zero tolerance purports to be. But the problems that have brought us to the current precarious situation in our nation's schools are highly complex and will not abide simplistic solutions. Zero tolerance strategies have begun to turn our schools into supplemental law enforcement agencies, but they have demonstrated little return despite a decade of hype. In contrast, long-term, comprehensive planning and prevention can build safe and responsive schools over time by emphasizing what American education has always done best: teaching.

ADDED MATERIAL

1. The original definition of "firearm" as contained in the Gun-Free Schools Act did not include weapons other than firearms. Later amendments and state policies have since expanded the definition to include any instrument intended to be used as a weapon.

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