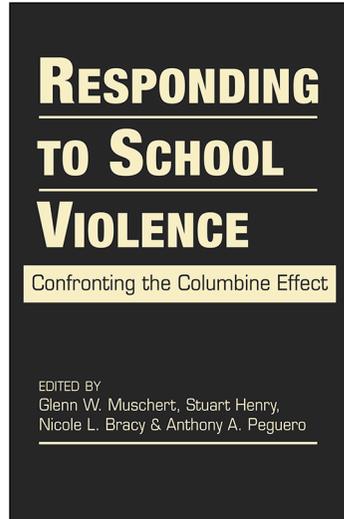# Responding to School Violence: Confronting the Columbine Effect

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The Columbine Effect

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> Numerous school shootings or threats for intended school shootings that have shocked and frightened the entire nation have been featured in the media both before and after the massacre in Littleton, Colorado. We have been bombarded with media images of dangerous white, sub-urban, affluent youths and notions that schools are far more violent places than ever. This is not necessarily the case, but now those in power are paying attention to these images, and they are motivated to do something about the problem. (Williams 2005, p. 3)

For well over a decade, the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School have framed how we perceive and respond to continued occurrences of school-related violence. This phenomenon has resulted in a social, cultural, political, and media image that schools are dangerous places for youths, in spite of the reality that such inci-dences are rare and that the rate of school violence has decreased since the mid-1990s (DeVoe et al. 2005; Dinkes et al. 2006).[1] Indeed schools are statistically one of the safest places for youths, with only 1 percent of youths ages 12–18 reporting violent victimization, and less than .5 percent reporting serious violent victimization in 2009 (Robers, Zhang, and Truman 2012). Nonetheless, the discourse about, and responses to, school violence have been ardent and alarming. The social problem of school violence, especially extreme violence such as rampage shootings, remains a source of fear, and risk tolerance for these events is extremely low. The general anxiety about the risk of school shootings, when coupled with the consensus about their intol-erability, has been a catalyst to the development of wide-scale policy responses for managing this and related social problems that are

based more on fear than fact, and more on reaction to images than on sound judgment based on evidence.

In the same year as the Columbine shootings, the social theorist Beck (1999; see also Giddens 1999) posited the global emergence of a "risk society," one in which our technological and social systems are out of control, and where people are future-directed and increasingly preoccupied with controlling or limiting risk for human or technical events that are the "normal" outgrowth of complex social systems. While traditional conceptions of such fears derived from moral panics connected to groups that were demonized as "folk devils," this new conception viewed terrible events, such as school violence, as deriving from systematic complexity. From this point of view, the risk and danger are seen as inevitable and the only possible societal response is to either reduce the risk of such events or to deal with them more effectively, more rapidly, and more demonstrably when they do occur.

Because the 1999 Columbine school shooting is an arguable impetus for the social, cultural, political, and media belief that schools are dangerous places for youths, Muschert and Peguero (2010; Cloud 1999) adopted the term the "Columbine Effect," which refers to the way public fear of school rampage shootings has changed how we think about school violence and has affected the types of policies implemented in pursuit of school safety. The fundamental premise is that the Columbine shootings remain a potent (yet inaccurate) image of violence in contemporary American schools. The Columbine Effect phenomenon includes media portrayal and public perception of school violence as ubiquitous, parents' fear over the safety of their children in schools and demands for security, and school administrators' response to parents' demands via the institution of antiviolence policies and practices. Whether these policies are necessary, appropriate, or effective is contested by many scholars (e.g., Kupchik 2010; Lyons and Drew 2006), by some practitioners (Beckham 2009), and by authors of the chapters in this volume. Often, such policies address only a narrow range of the multiple interrelated causes behind school violence, and emerging research suggests they may have unintended negative consequences for students, schools, and communities.

Clearly, school violence was a concern well before the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado; however, the Columbine shootings helped to crystallize the issue. Columbine sparked broad social concerns regarding school violence and subsequent scrutiny of school antiviolence policies. Typically this discourse assumed two

debatable facts: first, that the levels of school violence were unacceptably high and rising, and second, that current antiviolence policies were insufficient, ineffective, or nonexistent. Despite the rarity of rampage attacks on schools, the fear generated by school shootings has widely influenced antiviolence policies in urban schools, suburban schools, and even rural schools.

The perception of the problem of school violence is related to the perception of, and tolerance for, the risk of violence and victimization in schools. While school shootings are undoubtedly horrific tragedies and grave in their consequences, they are extremely rare and they occupy the extreme end of the continuum of school violence. Shocking events like Columbine and the 2012 Sandy Hook shootings exert disproportionate leverage on the discussion (and subsequent control responses) about school violence, and many policies instituted may be irrational in their applications to preventing more common (and often less severe) forms of violence in schools.

Henry (2009) also argues that antiviolence policies tend to look at school violence in fragmented ways, which reflects a disciplinary analysis of social problems. Such explanations about the causes of school violence tend to be at the individual or micro-level of analysis, such as theories of rational choice and routine activities, psychological and developmental explanations about why school-age children become violent, and social control theory about the lack of attachment and involvement by youths in conventional culture. Therefore, the consequential policies implemented to deal with the problem of school violence have focused on controlling access to schools, better detection, preemptive intervention, closer supervision, zero-tolerance, and peer mediation. These school antiviolence policies, Henry argues, are too narrow, and they fail to consider the multiple causal components of this complex problem, which include the interrelated role of teachers, school administrators, educational practices and effective pedagogy, school district policy, cultural framing, gendered educational expectations, and the changing state of family and community relations in a postmodern society. In short, they fail to deal with the wider cultural and structural context of the school.

However, instead of simply critiquing the existing policies for failure to address the scope of school violence, this volume examines school antiviolence policy in the context of the totality and complexity of the problem, seeking to relate specific policies to different levels and dimensions of the problem. Rather than taking policies in isolation or as alternatives, this book argues that effective prevention

policy requires the multiple, cumulative causes of school violence to be simultaneously addressed through a comprehensive web of policies. We do so to provide readers with more than critique, by working to connect the discursive and policy aspects of this field with more practical and applied aspects. Thus we conclude the volume with statements about policies or approaches that might prove to be among the most progressive and effective measures available today. It is our hope that the various audiences who might read this volume (among them scholars of all types, school administrators, teachers, concerned parents, journalists, and security personnel) might become more knowledgeable about what seems to work to mitigate the challenges of school security without causing damage to one or more of the levels of social organization that undergird the educational process.

In summary, the core arguments of this book are that since the Columbine shootings, the development of school antiviolence policy: (1) has been based on fear driven by extreme, low-probability events, such as school rampage shootings; (2) may have unintended negative effects in (a) damaging the school learning environment, (b) undermining relationships among students and teachers, and/or (c) exacerbating the problems of violence that they are intended to alleviate; and (3) distracts from the development of a comprehensive, multilevel approach to deal with the multifaceted causes of the problem. We propose moving beyond Columbine Effect policy.

The Organization of the Book

This volume proceeds in three parts: the first examines the role of fear and the so-called Columbine Effect, the second examines contemporary antiviolence policies in schools, and the third concentrates on alternative responses to school violence. The first part builds directly on the foundation laid by Muschert and Peguero in their article on the Columbine Effect (2010).

Part 1: Contexts

The first part, on contexts, lays a foundation for understanding current anxieties about school violence in their historical and cultural contexts, and for situating the discussion within broader academic discussions about youth violence and reactions to threats to school security, including both rampage-style attacks and other, more mundane forms of misbehavior.

In Chapter 2, "Fear of School Violence in the Post-Columbine Era," Glenn W. Muschert and Eric Madfis provide a constructionist starting point for the volume by exploring the role of risk and risk tolerance in contemporary society. The chapter explores the historical development of anxiety about violence in schools, the influence of highly publicized school crimes such as school shootings, and this tendency within the wider discourses of fear and risk. The chapter concludes by exploring what might be seen as rational, feasible alternatives to such a discourse.

In Chapter 3, "Negotiation of Care and Control in School Safety," Curtis A. Brewer and Jane Clark Lindle discuss how the Columbine Effect was the forced reinterpretation of the commonsense notion that safety is an essential requirement for learning. However, when relationships in schools are disrupted, learning ceases. Responses to disruptions actually perpetrate uncertainty and increase perceptions about lack of safety. In this chapter, the authors discuss how school personnel continually balance their duty to provide a low-risk environment with their professional ethic of care. School personnel experience stress from policies and hierarchies that mandate control of schooling with simultaneous professional demands for nurturing relationships. Through a discussion of the common dilemmas faced in schools and the application of our framework, they argue for school administrators to embrace their dual obligations of safety and concern in the midst of daily conflicts. In sum, Brewer and Lindle argue that school leaders must become adept at "walking the line" in recognition of their role in negotiating these dual obligations across multiple social levels.

In Chapter 4, "The Dynamics of School Discipline in a Neoliberal Era," Aaron Kupchik and Thomas J. Catlaw discuss why schools have acted so similarly in their efforts to promote safety, despite evidence that their efforts may have little effect or even backfire. Reducing students' democratic participation in schools through authoritarian discipline was one solution among many available in response to the moral panic over school violence, but it is by far the most common one. Though a Columbine Effect certainly has been important, the tragedy at Columbine did not ensure policy action in the particular form that we have seen. As Kupchik and Catlaw argue, contemporary school security and punishment practices are informed by, and implemented against, the backdrop of longer-term general trends in US governance and policymaking. These broader governance trends, referred to as "neoliberalism," constitute the interpretive context within which schools and policy makers make sense of events such

as Columbine and assess the menu of practically available and politically appropriate responses.

Part 2: Contemporary Policies

The chapters in the second part, "Contemporary Policies," demonstrate how the public's fear of school violence has influenced school policy changes, most notably changes to school discipline and security. This second part draws on the multilevel theory of school violence developed by Henry (2009) to argue not only that these policies are directed at a narrow range of causes and therefore insufficient, but also that they often produce negative, unintended consequences. Although each of the chapters varies in its precise focus, they all examine aspects of school discipline in contemporary society, and all point out that there are many unintended negative consequences to how security is conducted in schools.

Lynn A. Addington opens the part with an overview of discipline in the aftermath of Columbine in Chapter 5, "Surveillance and Security Approaches Across Public School Levels." In particular she focuses on policies and practices that involve using visible security measures in public schools as a preventive strategy. Using a nationally representative sample of public elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States, Addington highlights the rapid increase in the use of visible security measures in the decade since Columbine: notably, the use of security officers, surveillance cameras, and metal detectors across all school levels. This chapter also identifies differences in schools that employ security officers, surveillance cameras, and metal detectors.

In Chapter 6, "Zero-Tolerance Policies," Aviva M. Rich-Shea and James Alan Fox discuss how the zero-tolerance approach to school discipline arose with the federal requirement for automatic suspensions and expulsions of students caught bringing a firearm to school. Mass school shootings in suburban communities reinforced the pressure for all school administrators to institute a tough disciplinary policy. However, research evaluating the effectiveness of zero-tolerance has failed to uncover measurable improvements in school safety. In fact, these policies have been found to breed a hostile school climate and a decline in academic achievement in the face of increased school exclusions. The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program provided federal funding to accelerate the placement of armed police called School Resource Officers (SROs)

in public middle and high schools. While their duties vary from school to school, their fundamental responsibility is to "prevent another Columbine," with training focused on neutralizing an active shooter. Various researchers have noted that the confluence of zero-tolerance and SROs produces a punitive school climate and forms the bedrock of the school-to-prison pipeline. The authors use Black's theory of law as a theoretical framework and their own research as evidence to show that the more fully an administration embraces a zero-tolerance approach, the more likely the school is both to have an SRO and to use the SRO to institute more formal methods of social control. Thus, the SRO operates as a tool in the toolkit of formal social control utilized disproportionately by authoritarian school administrators.

In Chapter 7, "Safe Schools Initiatives and the Shifting Climate of Trust," Valerie Steeves and Gary T. Marx use ethnography to examine the impact of formal school antiviolence policies and related behaviors in two Canadian schools in the years following the Columbine High School shootings. Steeves and Marx build on Henry's (2009) insight that school violence is the result of a complex set of influences that operate at the institutional and individual levels. In particular, they argue that the policies enacted in response to Columbine to reduce individual acts of violence have reshaped the social relationships between administrators, teachers, and students, and inadvertently created a school climate that undermines students' trust in the ability of school administrators to respond to violent incidents. The chapter provides two added dimensions to the volume, first, a detailed description of antiviolence policies, and second, a view of the Columbine Effect in Canada.

Chapter 8, "Racial Implication of School Discipline and Climate," by Kelly Welch and Allison Ann Payne, discusses how harsh disciplinary practices are applied unequally in response to student violations, and the fact that black students are more likely than white students to be subjected to relatively strict treatment and harsh punishment. They argue that, coupled with the fear of school-based violence that characterizes the Columbine Effect, criminal stereotypes of black youths may exacerbate that impulse to intensify school discipline, particularly for minorities. This is a trend that mirrors patterns in the US penal system: criminal justice institutions have not only become increasingly punitive, despite two decades of decreasing crime rates, but have also produced a dramatic racial disparity in who is punished in the criminal justice system relative to representations

in the larger national population. The authors discuss the possibility of how to restore racial equity within school institutions.

Concluding Part 2, Chapter 9, "Violence Prevention and Intervention," by Jun Sung Hong, Dorothy L. Espelage, Christopher J. Ferguson, and Paula Allen-Meares, assesses school antiviolence programs and policies that were enacted in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979) ecological systems theory. The authors argue that effective school violence prevention and intervention programs and policies require multidisciplinary and integrative approaches. Building on the works of several researchers, they examine recent school and youth violence programs and policies within the context of the ecological systems levels: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. The authors then discuss alternative ways to best better address school violence and enhance school safety in US schools.

Part 3: Alternatives

The chapters in the third part, "Alternatives," examine different approaches to the risks of school violence, which rely on a comprehensive view of school antiviolence policy based on a causal analysis of the problem. In this part, the contributing authors discuss the kinds of policies that a comprehensive, multilevel analysis of school violence suggest will be effective for reducing school violence and promoting positive outcomes for students, teachers, and communities. It is in this final part that the volume fully integrates a discussion of the environment of fear in contemporary schools, the policy problem and its failures, a cause-based analysis of the problem, and the potential for a new direction in school antiviolence policy. Here we offer a point of departure for future development in school antiviolence policies.

Jeffrey R. Sprague, Daniel W. Close, and Hill M. Walker address the topic of school violence from the perspective of a social-ecological framework in Chapter 10, "Encouraging Positive Behavior." This theoretical formulation offers traction in defining and cataloging risks to school safety as well as in conceptualizing intervention approaches to reducing such risks. In particular, they describe a well-established, effective, and broadly accepted social-ecological intervention, called School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS). In addition to improving school safety, SWPBIS can also lead to improvements in school climate, a positive schooling

ecology, and enhanced academic achievement. Evidence for the effi-cacy of SWPBIS is discussed along with its key components and details of its implementation.

In Chapter 11, "Ecological, Peacemaking, and Feminist Consid-erations," Daniel Hillyard and M. Joan McDermott discuss how "get tough," retributive, and fear-driven school antiviolence policies are related to broad social structures and cultural values concerning crime, and how alternatives to getting tough seek to transform those structures and values. Hillyard and McDermott link the punishment response to social inequality and discuss how both peacemaking and feminist perspectives seek to change "get tough" systems based on domination of some groups by others. The authors also discuss the punishment response in terms of its societal and individual conse-quences, and highlight the significance of transformation of the indi-vidual, as well as social transformation, to both feminism and trans-formative justice perspectives. The authors root their analysis in literatures on the criminalization of deviance and overcriminalization (the limits of the criminal sanctioning).

Finally, in Chapter 12, "Diagnosing and Preventing School Shoot-ings," Douglas Kellner argues that episodes of mass violence like the shootings at Virginia Tech, Columbine High School, Chardon High School in Ohio, and Oikos University in Oakland are complex his-torical events and require a multiperspectivist vision. Addressing the causes of problems like domestic terrorism, school shootings, and societal violence involves a range of apparently disparate and wider social and cultural phenomena, such as a critique of male socializa-tion and construction of ultramasculine male identities, the preva-lence of gun culture and (para)militarism, and a media culture that promotes violence and retribution while circulating and sensational-izing media spectacle and a culture of celebrity. Kellner presents a critical diagnostic of the key macro-level reasons for school shoot-ings and suggests ways to reorient educational systems to alleviate some of the underlying causes.

Overall, the following eleven chapters in this book provide an interwoven critique of the limits of public policy formation in the context of contemporary social problems. The authors highlight the process, which is distorted by images of fear and the consequences for schools, students, and their communities, as well as for the edu-cational process, of the failure to take a more measured approach to policy formation. They also offer a way forward toward a compre-hensive approach to the development of school antiviolence policy

that goes beyond the Columbine Effect and addresses the interconnected and multifaceted nature of the problem.

Note

1. Although between the years 2003 and 2006, the number of deaths from violence in school increased, it has been falling ever since, and in 2009 it was at its lowest since 1999–2000 (Robers, Zhang, and Truman 2012).