

1 Introduction

Schools across the United States are in a school safety crisis. But it's not the one that most might imagine it to be. The crisis is *not* that our schools are at risk of another mass shooting like those at Columbine or Sandy Hook. And it's *not* that children are out of control, with violence and theft rampant in schools. Such situations are horrifying (particularly mass shootings) and devastating, and we ought to do what we can to prevent them. But they do not exist at crisis levels. The crisis—the real school safety problem—is that we have implemented a series of practices that go too far in promoting school security and punishment, and as a result do considerable harm to students, schools, families, and communities.

Parents, school officials, and policy-makers often ask the wrong questions. For example, consider my seven-year-old daughter's reaction when I told her about the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. I expected a ten-minute conversation, in which I would tell her, she would be scared, and I would comfort her. I was so wrong. We talked for well over an hour. She was calm and curious, not scared. She asked me question after question about what had happened. At first she wanted to know the specifics of the event itself, in an attempt to wrap her mind around how such tragedy is possible: Were the children who died all in

one classroom, or in many? Did they die right away? Did the killer use several guns, or reload one? And so on. But then her questions shifted to trying to come to grips with how the tragedy could have been prevented, what her school does to prevent violence, and what schools *should* do. She wanted to know what was done to diagnose and treat gunman Adam Lanza's mental health issues, whether the door to the school was locked, how Lanza was able to enter the school, whether they should have had a police officer there, and whether police officers should be at schools everywhere. She wanted to know whether schools were safe, and what we could best do to keep schools safe.

Thankfully, I felt pretty confident in answering her questions, since I'd spent the past several years trying to understand what schools do to keep kids safe, how well these practices work, and what effects they have. But it occurred to me how few people ask these questions that are apparent to a seven-year-old. Instead of *asking* whether tighter security and harsher punishments are a good idea for schools, the public, school administrators, politicians, and others simply *assume* that they are. Rather than engaging with the problem of school safety and seeking information, as my daughter did, these groups more often respond out of fear. As a result, their assumptions about security and punishment are usually wrong because they misunderstand the real problem with school safety. The problem is *not* that students misbehave too much, that school gates aren't sufficiently secure, or that we don't have enough surveillance over our kids. Instead, the real problems with school safety are the well-intended but misguided policies we have put in place over the past twenty years. Our fears about school safety have caused us to alter public education in a way that has hurt children more than it might help them.

Consider the response to the horrible events at Newtown. Soon after the massacre, the National Rifle Association (NRA) made headlines by proposing that all schools in the United States hire armed guards. The public response to their suggestion was harsh, with politicians and advocates calling it absurd (among other things). While I agree with the critics that it was a bad idea, the backlash against it was political hypocrisy, seeing as how it isn't too far from what we currently do. For example, then New York City Council Speaker (and 2013 mayoral candidate) Christine Quinn called the NRA's proposal "Some of the most stupid, asinine, insensitive, ridiculous comments I have ever heard in the public arena."¹ New York City

Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the NRA's proposal "a paranoid, dystopian vision of a more dangerous and violent America where everyone is armed and no place is safe."² And yet, during Bloomberg's time as mayor, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) had a School Safety Division of over five thousand school safety officers policing the city's public schools. Their job requirements are less strict than those for other NYPD officers, and they receive less training and pay than other officers. And while they do not carry guns, they do have arrest powers and are backed up by police officers who are armed. New York City was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union and the New York Civil Liberties Union because of alleged unfair treatment of students,³ and several investigations have documented abusive treatment at the hands of these officers.⁴ Is that really so different from what the NRA proposed? Don't hold me to this, but I think the NRA's proposal may be better than what went on in New York City public schools during the Bloomberg administration.

The NRA wasn't the only group offering more security as a solution, either. Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) proposed stationing National Guard troops in schools across the country. Ironically, Mayor Bloomberg, who oversaw NYPD's massive School Safety Division, called Senator Boxer's plan "ridiculous," stating that "You can't live your life that way. You'd be in a prison."⁵ President Obama's January 2013 executive order in response to Newtown also proposed more policing in schools. While the gun control measures in this order drew the most attention by far, it also included more funding for police officers in schools.

We have already been fortifying schools for the past twenty years. We have added police officers, surveillance cameras, and locked gates. We now have drug-sniffing police dogs searching students' possessions. We follow zero-tolerance policies and suspend, expel, or arrest students for minor misbehavior that would only have led to a trip to the principal's office a generation ago. And so on. Each of these reforms is justified as a means to maintain safety: metal detectors are intended to prevent guns from entering the school, dogs to detect and eliminate drugs from the school, and zero-tolerance policies to target students who are violent and remove them from school before they can hurt other children. Of course, the causes of these practices are more complex and involve racial and class tensions, as well as insecurity about schools more generally.⁶ But they promise to maintain

safety by securing the school's borders, policing students within the school, and punishing students who are seen as potential threats.

Over the past twenty years, while we have been punishing students in increasingly harsh ways and making schools look more like prisons, our policy-makers have failed to ask the questions my daughter raised. Those who study school security and school discipline have been warning that these practices are ineffective and often harmful. Yet the public, policy-makers, and school officials either haven't been listening or don't care whether these practices are effective. They meet political needs, demonstrating that politicians and school administrators are taking action to protect children. The assumption that more invasive security and harsher punishments mean less trouble, less disorder, less danger, and more safety has either caused or allowed schools across the country to beef up security and punishments. Our children pay for the fact that adults misunderstand what the real problem with school safety is.

Certainly, horrific events like the shooting at Newtown are very important and offer many lessons. But they are rare. The horror at Newtown does not define the danger that students across the United States face on a daily basis. This danger—the real school safety problem—is the policies that we have put in place to try to keep children safe in schools. These policies, which have us guard the gates of schools, police their interiors, and respond vigorously to any disorder, are the real problem because they are mostly ineffective, while causing harm to students, schools, families, and communities. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that our school safety practices are often ineffective and even harmful to children, since we have made massive changes to schools that are guided by assumptions rather than evidence. But it is wrong to subject our kids to harm based on excessive devotion to security and punishment strategies in schools. The point of this book is to help improve this state of affairs, to discuss what we know about effective school security and punishment in the hope of advancing a real dialogue about the issue.

OVERREACTING TO OUR FEARS

Imagine that school crime has been decreasing for over twenty years, nationwide. Imagine kids in school today reporting that they are injured

less, get in fewer fights, are less likely to carry a weapon to school, and less likely to have something stolen, compared to kids in the early 1990s. Imagine that school is one of the safest places for kids to be, that they are far more likely to be killed at home by a parent or other caregiver, to drown, or to die in a fire, for example, than to be killed at school.

All of this is actually true. Schools are safer, and students better behaved (in terms of fighting, stealing, weapon carrying, etc.) than they were in the early 1990s, when the Department of Education began collecting annual nationwide data on school crime. And yet parents' fears about the dangers kids face at school are high. In a 2013 Gallup poll, 33 percent of parents with a child in kindergarten to twelfth grade stated that they feared for his or her physical safety while at school, even though only 10 percent of these same parents stated that their children had voiced any concern about their own safety.⁷ This fear among parents and other adults⁸ is a significant problem, because it has caused us to change how we run schools. Over the past twenty years we have put police officers and other security guards in schools, posted surveillance cameras, and installed metal detectors. The criminal justice system is now a real part of our educational system. This doesn't just happen in inner-city schools with mostly students of color and low-income children, but in wealthy communities with mostly White students, too.⁹ In order to keep students in line we have beefed up punishments within school so that minor misbehavior—talking back to teachers, cursing, and other types of typical adolescent shenanigans—now results in suspension. We use police dogs to search our children's belongings—not just in response to an incident, but as a matter of course. Either we don't care whether these practices actually work to keep kids safe or we've just assumed they will, without bothering to consider any evidence on whether or not they work. The evidence that is available tells us that our efforts have been misguided—an overreaction that hurts kids.

Consider, for example, the use of a chemical spray—a version of mace, or pepper spray, called “Freeze +P”—in Birmingham, Alabama, public schools. Students working with the Southern Poverty Law Center recently won a lawsuit against police officers stationed in schools; the students sued the police for repeatedly using mace on students, even when there was no immediate danger to anyone. Students named in the lawsuit claim that they have been sprayed for watching—not participating in, but just watching—

fights in the hallways, for running on school grounds, and even while already restrained by other security guards or police. One complainant, K. B., was four months pregnant when she was involved in a macing incident. According to her, she was upset after being sexually harassed (being called a “ho” and other offensive terms) by another student, so she walked away to her next class, crying. When a police officer approached her and she failed to “calm down” as ordered, the officer sprayed her in the face.¹⁰

Certainly, police officers should have authority to use force if it is necessary to protect themselves or others from a real threat of serious violence. But cases described in the lawsuit included no threat of violence to the officers, and rarely to other students (if there was a threat, it was in the form of a fistfight, not a deadly weapon). Instead the case demonstrates what happens when an entire student body is perceived as threatening and in need of aggressive policing. Birmingham schools tend to be overcrowded and disorderly, and they are overwhelmingly composed of low-income Black students. Many police might fear these students, seeing them as potential criminals.¹¹ It’s a shame that fear causes adults to see a child as a criminal who requires force, not as a teenager struggling to cope with real-life problems (as in the case of K. B.). In such a case, fear is dehumanizing—it leads adults to see kids only as threats, not as children who need care or young people learning to be citizens. Harsh, abusive actions like this can seem reasonable only if the public has blind faith in rigid security measures.

Although this example offers a good illustration of how fear of school violence can lead us to bad policy choices, it’s also a little misleading because it’s such an extreme case. A majority of high schools across the country have police officers in them, but such brutality is exceptionally rare. Moreover, police in schools do many good things for children. They mentor students and serve as positive role models, and they are there to protect and restore order in case real crime occurs on campus. This is all true and is too often dismissed by advocates for removing police from schools.

Yet there is a growing body of research showing that on the balance, the daily presence of police can do more harm than good. Certainly they are needed in some schools with real violence problems. Thankfully, though, most schools are relatively peaceful, with only occasional fights—fewer than they had a generation ago, when teachers and administrators were able to break them up without police intervention. The harm comes

because the presence of police officers changes the school environment in subtle but important ways. Schools shift from sites of caring, where students' academic and social needs are met, to sites of law enforcement, with a greater focus on crimes and legal responses to student problems than on students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Recently, in October 2015, we saw another example of harm at the hands of a school police officer when Richland County, South Carolina, Sheriff's Deputy Ben Fields was captured on camera throwing a female student to the ground and across a classroom. Mr. Fields was fired within days of the incident, as the cell phone footage went viral, being reported by major news media and social media as well. The fact that Fields was fired shows that the Sheriff's Department recognized that his actions were inconsistent with department policy and procedure. But if we look more carefully at this incident, it highlights other potential problems with school policing that go well beyond a single officer's violent overreaction. One issue is that an officer was called to the classroom because the student would not follow an order to leave the room—she was banished from the classroom for having her cell phone out, despite the fact that she put it away when asked and apologized to the teacher. A second issue is that the child who stood her ground and refused to leave her seat was in foster care.¹² These two aspects of the incident are important, because they demonstrate some of the hazards of putting officers in schools across the country: (1) officers are asked to respond to behavior that is against school rules, but illegal only under a very loose interpretation of criminal law; and (2) they are asked to respond to the actions of students whose complicated lives and histories they have no way of knowing about, but whose trauma might be directing their behaviors.

In my book *Homeroom Security*, I reported the results of a multiyear study in which I shadowed police in schools. I was impressed with how much these officers, usually called "school resource officers" (SROs), cared for the children in their charge. They tried to mentor and teach them, and they were indeed positive role models. But at the same time, SROs are limited in their ability to truly help most kids. Often they are unable to hold their confidence and are insufficiently trained in how to respond to typical adolescent problems. They are excellent at responding to conflict, but typically with a rougher edge than someone who is instead trained in

child development. While I never saw a student thrown across a room, I can understand how this might happen if an officer trained in responding to violence overreacts, without any consideration for why a student might refuse to leave her classroom (in the case of the South Carolina student, one might wonder whether her experience in foster care makes her less willing to relinquish control when she thinks she's being treated unfairly).

Of course, much of the current debate about school safety is framed by the goal of protecting schools from armed attackers, not policing young threats within the school. The truth is that we don't know whether more police in schools might prevent another Newtown. Events like that one—or the tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, which was both an armed attack and a crime committed by students—are so rare that it is difficult to know whether one or two officers per school might have an effect. One can look at Newtown, an elementary school without an SRO, and say that an officer or other armed guard might have prevented it. But what about Columbine, which had an SRO on campus at the time of the attack there? If we assume that a police officer on campus would have prevented the Newtown attack, wouldn't the same brand of logic have told us, based on the inability of an SRO's presence to prevent the tragedy at Columbine, that police presence doesn't prevent these types of horrific events? Research on whether the presence of SROs can make schools safer from more minor crimes suggests that it does not (I discuss this further in chapter 2).

Attempts to prevent school shootings by hiring more guards and SROs are a lot like the war on terror. In both scenarios, we are afraid and respond to this fear by trading something important for perceived security. In general, many Americans haven't cared much about the privacy they sacrifice in the name of security, but with Edward Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency illegally spying on citizens, more Americans began to take note. In the war on terror, we sacrifice privacy for security (experts may debate whether actual security is achieved, but that is a debate for someone else to take up). When it comes to armed school guards, SROs, and increased punishments for student misbehavior, we make a parallel choice to sacrifice for the sake of security. Yet public and political rhetoric underestimate what we sacrifice and overestimate what

we gain. In this book, I clarify the trade-off: What do we sacrifice when we ramp up school security and punishment efforts, and what do we gain?

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

The National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, collects data every year on school crime and school security. In its annual report, “Indicators of School Crime and Safety,” the center presents these data, including national trends on crime in schools (kindergarten through high school) since 1992. Figure 1 shows the most recent trend data available, clearly documenting the extraordinary decline in student victimization over the past twenty years.¹³ These data come from surveys of youths in which they were asked whether they had been victims of crime over the past year, an extension (via the “School Crime Supplement”) to the well-respected National Criminal Victimization Survey. While no survey data are perfect, there is no reason to think that errors in reporting would be greater today than they were in 1992, which means we can have confidence in the conclusion that schools across the country are safer, overall, than they were in the early 1990s.

Other sources of data confirm that schools have been getting safer. For example, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, another well-respected, nationally representative data-collection effort, finds substantial declines in students’ reports of whether they have been in a fight at school, or carried a weapon at school, between 1993 and 2013.¹⁴

Since I began my discussion with Newtown, though, I should also focus on fear of kids dying, not just concerns that they get beat up or stolen from. Figure 2 shows the number of homicides of students ages five to eighteen at school each year, which has also declined over the past twenty years.¹⁵ The decline in figure 2 is much less stark, and less consistent, than that in figure 1, but this makes sense given that student deaths were so rare to begin with. Unlike figure 1, which lets us conclude that schools are safer places than they were twenty years ago, figure 2 tells us that deaths at school have always been rare. To put it into perspective, there were more than twice as many infants who died from whooping cough (twenty-five) or syphilis (twenty-eight) in 2010 than there were children who

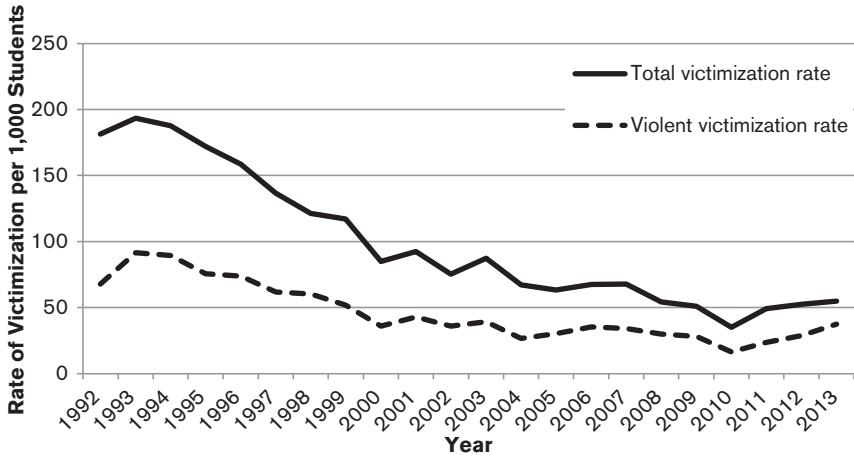


Figure 1. Total and violent victimization rates per 1,000 students, ages twelve to eighteen, 1992–2013. Source: table 2.1 in Simone Robers et al. (2015) “Indicators of school crime and safety: 2014.” Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

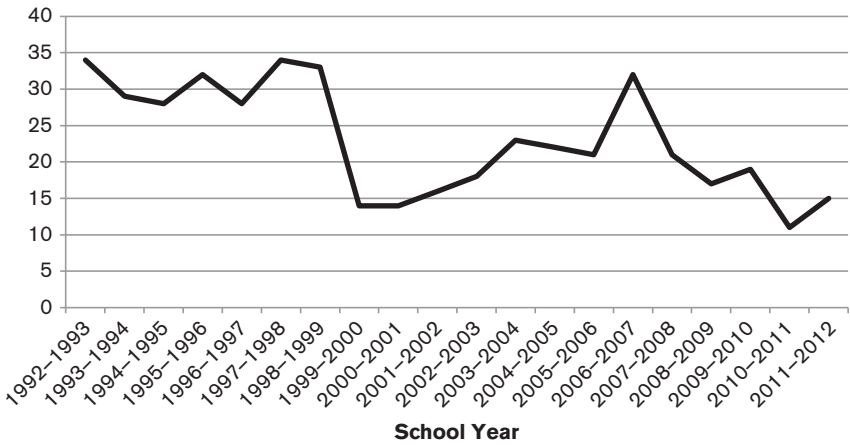


Figure 2. Numbers of homicides of youths ages five to eighteen at school, 1992–2012. Source: figure 1.1 in Simone Robers et al. (2015) “Indicators of school crime and safety: 2014.” Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

suffered violent deaths at school during the 2010–11 school year; there were 129 times more deaths of children ages fourteen or younger in motor vehicle accidents (1,418) than there were students of any age who died in schools that year.¹⁶

If we look at other data that describe youths' lives more broadly, we see additional support for the overall message conveyed by these school surveys. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, teenage pregnancy is less common now than twenty years ago, age at first sexual activity has increased, and alcohol use and most forms of drug use by adolescents are declining.¹⁷ And it's well documented that juvenile crime is much lower, generally, than it was during its peak in the early 1990s. There are a lot of reasons to be very confident that kids today are, overall, better behaved than kids twenty years ago.

The data are clear and convincing that schools are safer, nationally. Yet since these are national-level data, they may hide the fact that some schools have gotten worse. Certainly, there are some pockets of crime, some schools in which violence has escalated and continues to get worse. These schools are important and require intervention—but they are exceptions and should not be used to set the tone for national school policy debates. Unfortunately, though, that is precisely what has happened. We hear about those rare schools with increasing problems or isolated cases of school violence—or worse, as in the case of mass tragedies such as those at Columbine and Sandy Hook—and we assume that students are simultaneously out of control and in danger.

Our response has been to pursue two related strategies: (1) to protect the borders of schools in an effort to keep out any threats; and (2) to police and punish students more rigorously, so as to weed out those who may harm others. Some school practices are clearly intended to do only one of these two functions. One example is the use of locked doors, clearly intended to prevent intruders from accessing the school. Another is the increased use of suspension as a method of removing kids believed to be negative influences and/or potential threats. Indeed numbers of student suspensions have risen, going from 1.7 million in 1974 (3.7 percent of the student population) to 3.3 million (6.9 percent) in 2006. In the 2009–10 school year, more than 2,600 high schools in the nation suspended over 25 percent of their student bodies at least once.¹⁸ In my research I've

found that suspension is commonly used for very minor offenses, typically in response to behaviors such as talking back to teachers.

Other school strategies aim more broadly by trying to both secure the school's borders and police the students within. The best example of this is the use of SROs. Though practically unheard of twenty-five years ago, an armed police officer or security guard was present in 63 percent of high schools during 2009–10, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.¹⁹ Police, security, and other law enforcement do many things at once. They mentor students, they teach law-related classes, they are first-responders in case of crisis, and they respond to more mundane crimes that occur on campus (e.g., drug or alcohol possession). Their presence is a key aspect of the changes that have occurred in schools, since they are one of the most visible features of the new school security regime.

In this book, I focus primarily on the second of these strategies—how we police and punish youths—rather than on how we secure schools' borders from outside threats, for a few important reasons. One is that I am most concerned with how we treat students, not how we treat visitors to the school. A second is that efforts to secure schools' borders are less contentious; while they may be expensive (a subject I discuss in chapter 7), there are few other documented harms that come from locked doors, cameras at the school's entrance, and visitor entrance policies. In contrast, the ways that we police and punish children in schools—particularly how we punish those who are seen as threats to the school—have many harms.

In sum, the current state of affairs is a curious one. Compared to a generation ago, school crime is down, schools are safe places for most youths, and students are better behaved, overall. And yet we behave as if the opposite were true—as if today's kids are menaces who need greater surveillance and restrictions and are in danger of ever-more-frequent attacks.

EXPLAINING SCHOOL SECURITY AND PUNISHMENT

When I talk about the problems with school security and punishment today, I'm almost always asked why we have the policies we do. I find it difficult to answer this in a straightforward way, because the answers commonly assumed to be true are simply not true. For example, the buildup of

school security and punishment is most certainly not a response to high levels of student misbehavior—at least not in most schools, where student misbehavior and violence have been plummeting. Student crime may have been a reason why many such practices began in the early 1990s, but this cannot explain why schools have accelerated the buildup of school security and invested heavily in increasingly severe school punishments since then.

We also can't explain school security as a result of its effectiveness, as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 2. Generally, school crime and student misbehavior have been decreasing at the same time that school security and punishments have been increasing. But despite the timing of these events, there is no compelling evidence that increases in policing, surveillance, suspensions, and the like have made schools safer. It is certainly true that schools require strict disciplinary codes in order to best prevent student misbehavior—any parent should recognize the importance of clear, firm, and fairly enforced rules. But the changes over the past two decades aren't about strictness; they are about excluding youths from schools, arresting them for minor acts, and subjecting them to policing tactics not formerly seen in schools. Researchers have looked at whether the buildup of security and punishment seems to have caused decreasing crime or misbehavior rates, and no credible data have been able to show such a connection. In contrast, the evidence on effective school practices is very clear that one of the most effective ways to prevent school crime and student misbehavior is to have an inclusive school social climate.²⁰ As I discuss in chapter 2, this refers to a school environment where students feel respected, valued, listened to, and included in school governance; inclusive schools are ones that treat students like young citizens who are valued, not as potential threats. And yet research that examines how punishment and policing take shape in schools finds that we achieve exactly the opposite: that our security and punishment practices can alienate students from school, making them feel excluded and ignored.²¹

Another explanation often given for why we have so many police officers, surveillance cameras, drug-sniffing dogs, and suspensions in schools is that schools are responding to Columbine and other high-profile, terrifying incidents. I disagree with this as well. The changes to school punishment and security were already in progress prior to Columbine; in fact, Columbine had both surveillance cameras in use and an officer on

staff. Columbine may have accelerated the trend, but it certainly did not create it.

Some, such as sociologist Richard Arum, have argued that contemporary school discipline is a response to a lack of legitimacy in school authority.²² Arum begins his explanation with the civil rights era, in which several students challenged the constitutionality of school discipline, often when it was excessive or clearly racially motivated. Because many of these students won their lawsuits, Arum claims that this pro-student legal climate established the precedent of parents and students challenging the school's authority. This, he argues, continues today, as students and parents do not perceive the school's authority to be legitimate, meaning that they do not feel a moral obligation to abide by school rules; one result is that schools must do more to enforce these rules. But there are several flaws in Arum's argument. One is that even during what he calls the "pro-student legal era," schools still won most cases brought against them. Another is that after the early 1970s and the waning of the civil rights era, the percentage of court cases in which students were victorious against schools plummeted. A third is that it is entirely unclear how the correction of unjust and racist actions forty to fifty years ago translates into a perceived lack of legitimacy today. And finally, there is the fact that by today's standards (thankfully), we can see that schools were in the wrong and required legal intervention in order to correct unfair actions. Had they exercised fair authority to begin with, it is unlikely that so many legal cases would have been brought against them. Though it is indeed important for schools to be perceived as having moral authority, this is achieved through *fair* use of power, by listening to students, valuing them, and respecting them, not through denial of students' rights or oppressive discipline. A lack of legitimacy is therefore a consequence of school security and punishment, not a cause.

Other scholars rightly point toward the racially disproportionate use of school punishments and argue that racial animus is the cause of today's policies. It is absolutely true that youths of color are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested at school than are White youths; racialized perceptions of youths are central to the problem of school punishment, as I discuss in detail in chapter 3. And yet schools—particularly high schools—in communities all over the country have implemented

rigid security and harsh punishment. Practices and policies vary in important ways that correspond to student race/ethnicity and poverty, and school security and punishment do indeed have graver and more frequent consequences for poor students and youths of color. But intense policing and harsh punishments are not just reserved for inner-city schools. Some similar practices are used in schools with mostly middle-class and White students, too. In other words, race and social class can explain a lot about school security and punishment, but this argument is incomplete, since it does not explain why schools hosting mostly middle-class White youths still rely on rigid policing, harsh punishment, and invasive surveillance. These practices may have begun as attempts to control poor youths and youths of color, but they have spread to schools—particularly high schools—across racial and class boundaries.²³

So, what best explains the rampant spread of school security and punishment over the past generation? Fear and anxiety. We are afraid of, and anxious about, so many things; it goes well beyond our fear of student crime or armed attackers and includes the fear of incompetent teachers, of falling behind international educational standards, and other potential ills. Our fear and anxiety have two parallel effects. One is direct, in that we demand greater accountability for schools, more rules under which both students and teachers must operate, less authority for teachers to decide which students should avoid punishment, more police oversight, greater surveillance, and steeper penalties in case of misbehavior. The second is indirect: our anxieties ramp up the pressure put on schools (think standardized testing, Common Core Standards, Race to the Top, etc.). Schools respond by taking out their frustrations and difficulties on students, particularly the most frustrating students—those who misbehave or are just plain difficult to deal with. Like a parent who yells at her child after a horrible day in the office, so do teachers and administrators take out their frustrations on children. It's understandable, though it results in less empathy and patience for struggling students than typically caring and devoted educators might otherwise have.²⁴

Furthermore, these fears and anxieties have come at a time when broader social currents direct them toward increased accountability and punishment. Contemporary society is often discussed as proceeding by a “neoliberal” logic, meaning that we are enthralled by corporate sensibilities of

outsourcing, shifting accountability to lower levels (e.g., low-level employees lose their jobs before their bosses), rigid oversight, and benchmarks for productivity.²⁵ No Child Left Behind is the perfect illustration of this trend in schools, since it demands accountability for achievement as defined by standardized scores, and punishes schools that fail to meet their goals. A second important trend is mass incarceration, marked by fascination with the prison and a willingness to send more people there for longer sentences than ever before. The United States currently has the largest prison population and highest incarceration rate in the world, more than quadrupled since the 1970s.²⁶ We are a very punitive society—the most punitive among all industrialized nations. Given these two trends, and the fact that schools are under so much pressure because of the levels of anxiety and fear directed at them, it makes sense that the response is to impose more rules, harsher punishments, greater accountability for students, and more surveillance.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the following chapters I illustrate how the brand of school security and punishment that has spread across the country hurts kids. I begin in chapter 2 by discussing what we know about effective—and ineffective—school security and punishment practices. At this point, there is solid evidence that supports a number of promising programs; rather than treating students like threats or criminals, these programs treat them like valued children who make mistakes, and who need to learn from their mistakes. I also discuss the research that evaluates policing and punishment in schools; though there are some successes to report, the evidence tells us that our nationwide experiment in turning schools into fortresses hurts kids more than it helps them.

In chapter 3, I address the issue of racial disproportionality in school discipline and security. One of the most important harms—if not *the* most important—of excessive school security and punishment is that it increases inequality, particularly racial inequality. In this chapter, I discuss what we know about race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other sources of inequality in society, and how they relate to school security and punishment.

Chapters 4 through 6 take a different approach, in two ways. One is that they present new evidence rather than summarizing and interpreting the existing research on school security and punishment. The second is that they consider how school security and punishment have farther-reaching, longer-lasting negative consequences than others have considered. By illustrating those consequences, these chapters demonstrate that the real problem with school security is the set of practices we have implemented across the country to keep schools safe. I focus heavily (but not only) on school suspension, since this is the most common way that schools respond to students who threaten the school's safety and order.

In chapter 4, coauthor Thomas Mowen and I share the experiences of parents and students we met in Mobile, Alabama, to illustrate that school punishment has broader consequences than have been considered before, as it can profoundly affect family life. Chapter 5 turns to another hot-button issue, bullying, as a way to demonstrate how harsh punishment and rigid security can have important negative effects on kids throughout schools, not just those who get in trouble. Here, Katie Farina and I discuss how unfair school rules and punishments might actually *increase* the chances that students are victims of bullying. In chapter 6, Thomas Catlaw and I look at long-term influences of schools' actions, and how school punishment can alienate students to the point where it inhibits voting and community volunteering years down the road, once students are adults in their late twenties.

I continue in chapter 7 by discussing the finances of school security and discipline. Everything has a cost—so how much does it cost us, in the short term and the long term, to police youths in schools and punish them the way we do? Current practices are profitable for private security companies eager to take ever larger portions of declining public dollars, but they are costly to everyone else.

Finally, in chapter 8, I conclude with principles for how schools can improve their efforts to keep children safe, while staying mindful of the potential obstacles that might prevent lasting improvements. There are several basic steps schools can take to improve safety while ensuring greater fairness—but the fact that schools' practices are now so well established means that real reform is a challenging task.

It's not easy to protect children in schools while punishing the ones who misbehave. Children can be very difficult to deal with, and teaching is

an extremely tough job—especially in today’s climate of standardized testing and uncertain school funding. But the lack of public debate on the topic is shameful and results in bad policies that hurt our kids. My hope is that in the future, the public and policy-makers can have informed discussions in which we assess risks and benefits of actions in more thoughtful and informed ways than we currently do. Our country needs to have a more engaged, ongoing conversation about these issues, much like the discussion I had with my daughter about Newtown.