

Reflection

Caring and criminalising

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Abstract

In the United States, many schools hire police to patrol the grounds and more call upon police to arrest students for violation of school policies. Many of these will be incarcerated within the subsequent five years. The widespread adoption of surveillance cameras, zero tolerance, and police presence in schools has resulted in more students being criminalised. This reflective essay examines the ideology supporting this school-to-prison pipeline. What conception of justice has been responsible for mass incarceration? Why are surveillance cameras, police, and zero tolerance taken to be effective? Why has rehabilitation given way to retribution? Why does the public accept the criminalisation of youth in schools?

Keywords: Police presence, school shootings, school-to-prison pipeline, surveillance cameras, zero tolerance

Educators care about a subject matter, about a discipline, taking pleasure in learning more about it, concerned that it be recognised and promoted. Educators care for the young people they instruct. They enjoy the company of the springtime beauty and vitality of young people; they take pleasure in helping them to learn their discipline and also to learn generally. Seeing students respectful and attentive to the material the educator is presenting functions as a demand and obligation that the educator respond to their expectation, to prepare for the meetings and present the material clearly and interestingly. To care for a young person is to know ever more about his or her experiences, friendships, tastes, talents, dreams.

Educators grieve the murder of students in their care.

On April 16, 2007, a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University killed 32 people and wounded 17 others with two semi-automatic pistols. In the United States, since 2001, 486 people were shot in 190 college campus shooting incidents, 184 killed. Another 128 were murdered and 386 wounded in K12 shootings.

On April 20, 1999 two students at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado in the United States shot dead twelve fellow students and one teacher and wounded twenty-one students. On January 3, 2013, 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot dead 20 children between six and seven



years old and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

New Policies for Security

In response to public horror over the mass shootings of young people, three kinds of measures were broadly implemented. 1) Surveillance cameras were installed throughout school and university buildings. Metal detectors, x-ray screening, hand wands, and backpack searches at the now single entrances to schools were set up. However, the high cost of the metal detectors and of uniformed guards to operate them was beyond the budget of many schools. Students were required to purchase backpacks of clear material and bulletproof binders. Almost all American public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade conduct lockdown drills for shootings several times a year.

2) Sixteen states banned carrying a concealed weapon on a college campus; in 23 states the decision to ban or allow concealed carry weapons on campuses is made by each college or university, and 10 states allow the carrying of concealed weapons on public postsecondary campuses. A new federal law required K12 schools to expel for one year any student who brought a firearm on school grounds. Schools have subsequently extended zero tolerance to a broad range of infractions, punishing with suspension, expulsion, or police arrest bringing on school grounds knives, the use of drugs or alcohol, fighting without weapons, disruptive behaviour, truancy, tardiness.

3) Police, called “school resource officers” or campus police, were hired full-time in colleges, elementary schools, and some 70% of the nation’s high schools. Drug sniffing dogs were introduced, and the police make random searches of students. Some schools employ dogs, Tasers, and SWAT team in raids for drug and weapons searches.

Zero tolerance policies in schools for guns and drugs with punishment by expulsion were congruent with “tough on crime” policies being implemented throughout the country. The “war on drugs” launched by President Nixon and relaunched by President Reagan set mandatory lengthy prison sentences for drug crimes and also other felonies. Twenty-eight states passed laws mandating life imprisonment after three convictions. Since 1975 the population of state and federal prisons increased from 200,000 to 2,400,000. With 4.4% of the world’s population, the United States had in 2008 around 24.7% of the world’s 9.8 million prisoners.

Education that Criminalises

Educators and administrations have a responsibility to determine whether these policies made educational institutions more secure and students more protected, whether they have reduced the number of murders and attempted murders in educational institutions.

From 2000 through 2021 there have been 296 K12 and college-university shootings in the United States, leaving 312 dead and 772 wounded. In just five reported cases a school police officer intervened and stopped a school shooting.

The metal detectors indicate to students that the building is not safe. Surveillance cameras suggest that students are untrustworthy and potentially violent. Students see police as waiting for them to do something wrong and develop a negative view of law enforcement.

The salaries paid to the police are generally higher than the salaries of teachers and counsellors. Some two million students attend a school with a “school resource officer” but no counsellor. Six million students attend a school with a school resource officer and no school psychologist. One in four students is in a school with a school resource officer but no counsellor, nurse, school psychologist, or social worker.

Administrators and teachers increasingly call upon the “school resource officer” to deal with disciplinary problems that hitherto had been handled with admonitions, detentions, and counselling. Police can intervene with pepper spray and handcuffs. There have been reported instances of police brutality. Some two million students are arrested and put in juvenile detention institutions every year. These harsh methods diminish respect for police, administrators, and teachers.

Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are punished three and a half times more frequently and more harshly than are White students for the same offences.

The “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001 required greater accountability and extensive standardised testing and reduced funding for failing institutions. This encourages administrators to expel students who are dragging down a school’s test scores.

Suspending students puts them behind in their classes. Students who are arrested at school or university are three times more likely to drop out of school than their peers. Lack of educational attainment and a criminal record make it more difficult to obtain adequate employment. Students who drop out of school are more than eight times more likely than those who graduate to end up in the criminal justice system.

That once a student is arrested, he or she will likely be arrested again corresponds with recidivism of all prisoners. In 2005 56.7% of 405,000 released prisoners in the United States were arrested again by the end of their first year of release; 67.8% within three years after their release; 76.6% within five years.

The public fear of a murderous student in school has issued in schools that produce criminals.

The Political and Economic Environment

“If it bleeds it leads”—violence draws readers of newspapers and viewers of television, and readership and viewer ratings determine profits for the media corporations. Researchers found that in the months after a mass school shooting, the media devote more coverage to the shooter than to star athletes and entertainment celebrities.

Psychologists identify a tendency for people to imitate behaviours that get a lot of attention. Mass shootings are followed by “copycat” shootings. On 30 November 2021 in Oxford, Michigan, a student shot dead four students and wounded seven. By December 3, 519 schools were closed having learned of threatened shootings.

In the 1970s the media broadly sensationalised urban gangs, crack cocaine, and “superpredator” youth violence. That teen-aged children are mass murderers reinforces the notion that there are “natural-born killers,” people criminal by nature for whom rehabilitation is an illusion. The public’s lack of concern for students in the school to prison pipeline reflects the widespread notion that they are bad by nature, impervious to rehabilitation. The “war on drugs” reflects the judgment that addicts, gangs, and drug dealers, and indeed wrongdoers in general must be separated from the population. Until the 1970s rehabilitation programs such as learning trades and psychological treatment of substance abuse were part of the prison system. As the prison population grew, funding was withdrawn from many of those programs; the misery of long sentences in prison was taken to rehabilitate felons. In schools removing trouble-makers became a priority.

Youthful shooters find easy access to guns, including assault weapons. Americans own 393 million, about 46%, of the 857 million guns owned by civilians throughout the world. Any gun control legislation is vigorously resisted by the weapons industry and the segment of the population who purchase guns. Since 2009, over 50 times more school shootings have occurred in the U.S. than in Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom combined.

While personal safety tops the list of reasons why American gun owners say they own a firearm, 63% of US gun-related deaths are suicides. Most gun-owners say they own a gun to protect themselves and their family from intruders, but 54.3% of people murdered by firearms were killed by someone they knew (boyfriend, friend, neighbour); 24.8% of victims were slain by family members.

The conviction that one’s safety depends on personal ownership of a deadly weapon is congruent with the conviction that public safety requires mass incarceration of wrongdoers without trust in rehabilitation.

Teachers in overcrowded schools are relieved when troubled and troublesome students are removed. Schools underperforming on standardised testing and threatened with defunding are relieved to expel the students with learning disabilities. Police are pleased to find their numbers increased and funded. Taxpayers are relieved to learn that state governments need not build and maintain new prison buildings, now built by for-profit private companies. 8.5% of all prisoners are housed in for-profit privately owned prisons. 40% of juvenile prisoners are in for-profit privately-owned juvenile prisons. Prisons are usually built in economically depressed areas where they provide guaranteed employment. The disproportionate number of Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans led through school into prison pipeline justifies increased policing of their neighbourhoods.

The Future of Learning

In the United States shootings in schools and universities are increasing in number; there were three times as many in 2019 as in 2015. 2021 had 34 shootings, 14 dead, 54 wounded.

Education critics and reformers refuse to resign us to an ever more murderous future in our educational institutions. They argue that potential shooters are to be identified and perhaps

taken out of a toxic home or neighbourhood environment, given psychological care, and deprived of access to guns, especially assault weapons.

61% of shooters had histories of feeling extremely depressed or desperate. 78% had attempted suicide or had suicidal thoughts. They are students who are in crisis, who have experienced trauma, and who are actively suicidal prior to the shooting and expect to die in the act. Teachers and school psychologists are to be trained to recognise depression and suicidal thoughts and arrange therapy. Teachers should feel as comfortable asking a student about suicide as asking students how they feel going into lockdown.

About 74% of student shooters took their guns from home or from a relative's home. The legislative proposals to reduce shootings are 1) Universal background checks to keep guns from people with criminal records or potentially violent people due to mental health problems; 2) "Red flag" laws that empower family members and law enforcement to seek an Extreme Risk Protection Order, a court order temporarily restricting a person's access to guns when they threaten violence to self or others; 3) A thumb scan or passcode on guns so that only the authorised owners can use them; 4) Legislation that requires gun owners to keep their guns unloaded and in a locked location separate from ammunition; and 5) Ban of assault weapons. The shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary School had an assault weapon and ten 30-round magazines; in four minutes, he shot 154 bullets, killing 20 children and 6 adults.

Education critics and reformers argue that to prevent the criminalisation of students by schools, zero tolerance policies and punishment by suspension, expulsion, and arrest must be replaced by methods of restorative justice.

Zero tolerance policies are focused on the act: a knife was brought on school grounds. The act is punished with suspension, expulsion, or arrest whether or not harm was done or intended.

Researchers of premodern societies, especially of the First Nations of Canada and the Maori of New Zealand, find practices focused on the harm done. A meeting is arranged between the offender and the victim with a mediator. The goal is to repair the harm in a way both offender and victim will accept, so that both are restored to the community. Researchers called such practices restorative justice.

When practiced in K12 schools and universities, at the start of the meeting confidentiality is pledged, sometimes by written agreement, such that nothing that is said in the meeting will be repeated outside. The offender is induced to understand the harm done, take responsibility for the offence, and come to an agreement with the victim about what can be done to repair the harm. An apology may be made to the victim, sometimes in writing. In the case of bullying, the offender may agree to compose a research paper on the harmful effects of bullying. The victim is afforded an active role and is left without the feeling of powerlessness and resentment. The offender is not excluded or shamed and stigmatised but affirmed as a responsible member of the school community.

Peer tribunals have been instituted in some schools. The students themselves determine the school rules and conduct restorative meetings to deal with infractions. Schools where these

restorative justice methods are used radically reduce resort to suspensions, expulsions, and arrests.

Educators have to educate administrations, board members, university trustees, legislators, and the public that current policies fail to reduce murders and criminalise wrongdoers, and that alternative policies are imperative if the murder of students is to be reduced.

Grieving

Students in the educational institutions where fellow students were shot may suffer posttraumatic stress disorder. Many suffer acute short-term stress disorder, anxiety, headaches, nightmares. Many students suffer difficulty studying and do more poorly on tests. Some are increasingly absent and some fail to graduate.

Some educators who have witnessed a shooting suffer from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. They may become withdrawn and emotionally unstable.

The educators who knew the students who were murdered, or who might have known them and now come to contemplate their photographs and hear what their family and friends say of them, grieve. They grieve the murder of somewhat vivacious or shy, on the run or dreamy, insightful, or playful—someone unique and irreplaceable. The educator had lived in an intricate and muted network of connections with the murdered students—pleasure of seeing the youthful bloom or eccentric allure, growing fund of knowledge shared, interplay of questions and contestations, horizon of a good life promised. For the educator to mourn the murder of the student is to mourn the network of connections with that student that is now vacated, to mourn the loss of that student and to mourn the life one conducted with that student. The grieving is also cherishing the gift that the murdered young person had been and continues to be in one's life. The educator has to help the murdered students' family, friends, and fellow-students to acknowledge the horror of the murder and also the goodness of the one who had been murdered, to help them to grieve.

Author Biography

Alphonso Lingis is professor of philosophy emeritus at the Pennsylvania State University. Among his books published are *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, *Abuses*, *The Imperative*, *Dangerous Emotions*, *Trust*, *The First Person Singular*, *Contact*, *Violence and Splendor*, *Irrevocable*, and *The Alphonso Lingis Reader*.