
Student Perceptions of High-Security School Environments

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Abstract

Public schools have transformed significantly over the past several decades in response to concerns about rising school violence. Today, most public schools are high-security environments employing police officers, security cameras, and metal detectors, as well as strict discipline policies to keep students in line and maintain safe campuses. These changes undoubtedly influence the social climate of schools, yet we know very little about how students experience and perceive these measures. Via ethnographic research in two contemporary public high schools, the author examines students' perceptions of high-security school environments, including perceptions of their school resource officer, schools' discipline policies, punishments, and fairness in rule application. Findings show that students believe their schools to be safe places and think many of the security strategies their schools use are unnecessary. Students further express feeling powerless as a result of the manner in which their schools enforce rules and hand down punishments.

Keywords

school security, student perceptions, school punishment

Contemporary public schools are notably different physical and social environments than they were 25 years ago. A handful of highly publicized incidents of school violence in the 1980s and 1990s, the most memorable of which occurred in 1999 at Columbine High School, have aggravated public

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fears that schools are dangerous, unruly, and in need of reform. Brooks, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg (2000) cited a *USA Today* poll taken shortly after the shootings at Columbine in which 68% of Americans report that it is likely a school shooting could happen in their town. In response to these fears, schools have increasingly relied on punitive policies and strategies, designed to crack down on student misbehavior and improve school safety (Brady, Balmer, & Phenix, 2007; Casella, 2001; Lyons & Drew, 2006; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003). Despite declining national rates of school violence over the past two decades and the fact that the likelihood of a student being killed or committing suicide at school is less than 1 in 3.2 million (Dinkes, Forrest Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007), security and discipline measures in schools have been steadily growing.

These security and discipline changes have led to a "New American School" (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006), which employs a variety of security measures such as police officers (often called school resource officers, or SROs), security guards, surveillance cameras, and metal detectors to control their school buildings and convey a serious stance on crime and other student misbehavior. These measures are most frequently used in high schools, though are increasingly being used in elementary and middle schools as well. The National Center for Education Statistics' 2009 Indicators of School Crime and Safety report (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009) shows that during the 2007-2008 school year, 69% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported having police or security presence in their schools. During the same school year, 55% of all schools and 77% of high schools used security cameras to monitor the school and 11% of high schools used random metal detector checks on students.

Schools have also supplemented various surveillance strategies with stricter discipline policies and more severe punishments for students who are found to be violating the rules. Zero-tolerance policies have been one such addition. The zero-tolerance movement in schools began in the late 1980s and gained momentum in 1994 with the passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act, which required public schools to expel any student bringing a weapon to school for at least 1 year or lose their federal funding (Adams, 2000). Many schools have since voluntarily expanded zero-tolerance policies to include nonviolent and noncriminal behaviors such as excessive absenteeism, persistent defiance of authority, and defacement of school property (Insley, 2001).

Given the various strategies that have been introduced over the past 25 years to maintain safety and order, the majority of public schools today are high-security environments. These changes were surely made with students' best interests at heart, yet we know very little about how students, themselves,

experience these high-security schools. This study begins to fill this void by employing ethnographic methodology in two contemporary public high schools to address the following questions: How do students perceive their high-security school environments? What do they think about the specific security and discipline measures their schools use? What are their perceptions of punishment in their schools?

Importance of Student Perceptions

Research on students' perceptions of school rules and security measures is scant yet important, particularly in light of the changes that public schools have undergone over the past few decades. In fact, prior research on school disciplinary policies consistently shows a link between the perceived fairness of policies and their actual effectiveness. Schools in which students perceive the rules to be fair and fairly applied are safer (National Institute of Education, 1978) and have generally lower levels of disorder (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Mayer & Leone, 1999).

Excessive punitiveness and inconsistent rule enforcement, on the other hand, are counterproductive to school safety. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) identified several common denominators of disorderly schools: teachers with punitive attitudes, rules that are perceived as unfair, unclear and inconsistently enforced, and discord between teachers and administrators regarding school rules and appropriate responses to student misbehavior. In another study, Denise Gottfredson (1989) found that students identify rules that are unfair (or unfairly applied) as the source of most of their school's disciplinary problems. The results of the 1978 Safe Schools study further support the assertion that punitive school climates can exacerbate student misbehavior and that safe schools are ones where students perceive discipline to be administered fairly (National Institute of Education, 1978).

In an attempt to make sense of the apparent link between fairness in discipline and effectiveness of discipline, it is useful to turn to the procedural justice literature. A procedural justice perspective suggests that when people feel they have been treated fairly by an authority they are more likely to (voluntarily) comply with the authority and accept the outcome of the authorities' decisions (Tyler, 1990). This pattern has been documented in research examining policing behavior (Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002), court processes (Casper, Tyler, & Fisher, 1988; Ramirez, 2008), and work environments (Tyler & Blader, 2000).

A procedural justice perspective of school discipline suggests that students' views of the fairness of their schools' policies and procedures may offer

insight into whether, and to what degree, students accept the authority of the school as legitimate and worthy of being obeyed.¹ Accordingly, though the goal of placing police in schools, adding surveillance technology to school buildings, and implementing zero-tolerance policies is to increase safety and maintain order in schools, this goal will only be realized if these strategies are effective. A procedural justice framework highlights the practical importance of understanding students' views; if students perceive their school rules and policies to be fair, they will be more likely to follow the rules, which ultimately will contribute to a safer school environment.

A few studies that have examined students' perceptions of fairness in contemporary schools suggest that there is reason for concern. Kupchik and Ellis, for example, found that students in schools with nonpolice security forces (e.g., security guards) have higher perceptions of fairness regarding school rules than students in schools with police officers. Considering that the majority of schools now have regular police presence and that this is a growing trend, this is a point worthy of further exploration. There may also be variation within schools as to how certain groups of students perceive their school rules. Some studies have found, for example, that Black and Hispanic students perceive their schools' rules and enforcement of rules as less fair than White students (Johnson, Arumi, & Ott, 2006; Kupchik & Ellis, 2008). These findings suggest that within-school variations in student perceptions are important to examine as well.

In addition to the practical importance of trying to understand students' perceptions of high-security school environments, the current study contributes to theory by broadening our understanding of school climate. *School climate* is defined in the social science literature as "shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school" (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008, p. 96). A positive school climate is considered a central component of effective schools and has been shown to be related to a variety of important variables, including engagement and academic achievement of students (Griffith, 1999; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993) and reduced risk of antisocial behavior (Gottfredson, 1986; Hawkins & Lishner, 1987; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Welsh, 2000; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). Students' views of the ways their schools do discipline and safety are components of school climate that have been underexplored, particularly in contemporary high schools. This study examines how students' experiences in high-security schools inform their feelings about school authority, and their own roles within their schools.

A Preview of High-Security Schools

Though students' perceptions of contemporary high-security school environments have not been well examined to date, research by scholars in the fields of education, sociology, and criminal justice investigating other side effects of high-security schools raises concerns about the negative impact these security measures may have on students. Some research has suggested that "secure buildings" strategies, including security guards, sign-in procedures, metal detectors, locked doors, and locker checks, are associated with higher levels of disorder in schools (Mayer & Leone, 1999).² Other research finds that, when comparing schools before and after the implementation of secure building strategies, there is little or no reduction in student victimization (Schreck et al., 2003).

Though law enforcement agencies and schools seem to assume that placing SROs in schools intuitively creates safer environments and benefits students (e.g., Burke, 2001; West & Fries, 1995), critical examinations of law enforcement officers' work in schools generate skepticism, suggesting that police presence can actually escalate minor situations and alienate students (Beger, 2002). The New York Civil Liberties Union's account of police behavior in New York City public schools (Mukherjee, 2007) documents a prison-like environment created by police presence, where students and staff are subject to abusive behavior at the hands of school police officers. Another study of the placement of SROs in New York City schools finds worsening attendance, suspensions, and noncriminal police incidents in SRO-present schools as compared to SRO-absent schools (Brady et al., 2007). Furthermore, the manner in which SROs partner with school administrators can jeopardize students' Fourth Amendment, Fifth Amendment, and privacy rights (Bracy, forthcoming).

Two studies report positive effects of SRO presence in schools—Johnson's (1999) evaluation of the SRO program in a Southern city and Schuiteman's (2001) evaluation of Virginia's state-funded SRO program. Both Johnson and Schuiteman claim reductions in violence and increased feelings of safety as a result of SRO presence in the schools they study; however, both of these studies have methodological issues that call their conclusions into question. Johnson's research was conducted during the mid-1990s when school crime was already declining nationally, yet her study employs no comparison group so it cannot be assumed that the crime reduction she reports is a function of SRO presence. Schuiteman finds that students and staff in schools with SROs feel safe and support of the idea of SROs in their schools; he then goes on to conclude that the SRO programs are effective in reducing school violence. Though Schuiteman inappropriately assumes that feeling safe means actual

violence reduction, his findings do suggest that students may like having an SRO on campus and feel safer with his or her presence, which could be viewed as benefits of the SRO program as well.

Other studies that examine how students perceive their school's SRO find a lack of support for the SRO program's community-policing goals.³ A four-school study by Arrick Jackson (2002) concludes that SRO presence in schools did not change students' views of the police, influence student perceptions of offending, or make students more likely to think they would be caught should they misbehave. Hopkins' (1994) study in the United Kingdom produced similar findings—students' overall views of the police were not affected by having a police officer (called School Liaison Officers in the United Kingdom) on campus. Hopkins concludes that this is in large part because students view their schools' SLO as an atypical police officer (different from the police on the streets). The outcomes of Jackson's and Hopkins' studies are important, considering the goal of the SRO program to improve relationships between police and youth, and suggest that this may not be able to be accomplished through the current model of school policing.

In addition to secure buildings strategies like SROs and security cameras, other contemporary school discipline policies have drawn criticism for ineffectiveness. Despite evidence that extreme or rigid school disciplinary policies can lead to student frustration, anger, and emotional harm (Dornan, 1978; Hart, 1987; Hyman, 1990, 1995), school discipline policies have continued to become increasingly punitive over the past several decades. Zero-tolerance policy is the archetype of this punitiveness. Some research has suggested that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective for reducing misbehavior and can instead alienate students and even exacerbate misbehavior (Adams, 2000; Insley, 2001; Mayer & Leone, 1999; Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993). Other research has pointed out how zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect students of color and poor students (Advancement Project & The Civil Rights Project, 2000; Browne, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Verdugo, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Furthermore, studies have shown that students that are suspended or expelled under zero-tolerance policies may be more likely to drop out of school altogether, thereby reducing their opportunities for employment and other successes later in life (Bowditch, 1993; Brooks et al., 2000; DeRidder, 1990; Insley, 2001).

Research Expectations

Considering the relationship between perceived legitimacy and rule compliance that has been demonstrated in the procedural justice literature and gaps

in the literature on the impact of contemporary security and discipline strategies in schools, an examination of students' perceptions of high-security schools is warranted. This study seeks to understand how students experience their high-security schools and how their experiences inform their perceptions.

Previous studies on contemporary school security and discipline measures suggest two competing expectations for the outcomes of this research. On one hand, a broad spectrum of research from the fields of education, psychology, sociology, and criminology empirically documents a variety of ways in which the high-security movement in schools has been ineffective and counterproductive to violence-reducing, misbehavior-curbing goals. This line of research suggests that students will be critical of the ways their schools manage discipline and security and have negative experiences with these measures. Students of color are expected to be the most disapproving of their schools discipline policies and enforcement, as research shows they bear the brunt of these policies.

On the other hand, schools continue to trend toward increasing punitiveness—getting stricter with rules and punishments, installing additional surveillance technology, and hiring full-time police officers—and seem to be convinced that this is improving conditions in schools (e.g., Goggins, Newman, Waechter, & Williams, 1994). In addition, law enforcement organizations also claim that the SRO program is working and reducing violence in schools (e.g., Burke, 2001; Maranzano, 2001; Kipper, 1996; West & Fries, 1995), and some empirical research supports these claims (e.g., Johnson, 1999; Schuiteman, 2001). This perspective on school security suggests that students will be comforted by security measures and police presence and that they will view these measures as positive additions to their schools.

Method

This study draws upon ethnographic data, specifically data from in-depth interviews and direct observations, collected in two Mid-Atlantic high-security public high schools: Cole High School and Vista High School. These two schools are approximately 20 miles apart and are located in the same county but in different school districts and different towns. The student bodies of these schools are also notably different. Cole High School hosts a predominantly White, middle-class student population, where only 11% of the students from low-income families, whereas Vista High School has a much higher percentage (41%) of students from low-income families.⁴ Approximately 75% of the 2,100 students at Cole High are White and 20% are African American. Vista High School is more racially mixed; approximately

36% Vista High's 1,500 students are White, 50% are African American, and 11% are Latino/a. Both schools use similar security strategies, including full-time SROs. Cole High School's SRO is Officer Mike, a White man in his mid-50s; Vista High School's SRO is Officer Steve, an African American man in his mid-30s.

Data collection for this study was completed over the 2006-2007 school year. Two ethnographers, a female graduate student and a male professor, spent several days a week in the schools observing the way that school staff, including the SRO, administrators, disciplinarians, and teachers, interacted with students and enforced school rules. This was accomplished by shadowing school staff, observing classrooms, talking to staff and students, and listening to staff and students talk to each other. We paid special attention to situations in which students were in trouble, being disciplined, or, in some cases, even arrested. We also intentionally varied the days and times of our school visits so as to capture the full experience of each school. Visits were kept relatively short (they ranged from approximately 1 hr to 3 hr long) to ensure that the details of the visits could be recalled and detailed fieldnotes were written immediately upon leaving the schools. A total of 111 of these observations were conducted over the 2006-2007 school year.

We documented in our fieldnotes everything we observed during each visit. We noted how the schools' SROs interacted with the students, what their routines and duties were, and what they described as their mission in the school. We also documented lunchtime activities, classroom activities, and activities of the in-school suspension rooms. We further noted casual interactions and conversations between school staff and students as well as disciplinary interactions between staff and students. In cases of discipline, we noted what was said to students about what they had done wrong, what opportunities they were given to reply, and what consequences were given. As a result of making repeated visits month after month, we were able to keep track of how certain situations were resolved within the school over time. We were also able to document inconsistencies between what school staff, including the SRO, said and what they actually did.

In addition to observations, 26 face-to-face, audiotaped interviews were conducted at each school (for a total of 52 interviews). We interviewed all administrators, the SRO, all disciplinary staff, approximately 5 teachers, 10 students, and 5 parents at each school. As we were introduced to students (both those who got in trouble and those that didn't) and teachers throughout the course of our field work, we asked them whether they would be willing to participate in one-on-one interviews. Parental consent forms were sent home with students who were younger than 18, and interviews were scheduled once

the consents were returned. Interviews ranged in length from 30 min to 2 hr, and participants were asked about their school's disciplinary and safety policies, including questions about the SRO's role in the school. All interviews were professionally transcribed.

The software program Atlas.ti 5.2 was used to code and analyze all field-notes and all interview transcriptions. The data were coded in two waves; during the first wave I coded very broadly and identified emerging themes and codes relevant to the research questions. Some of these codes are feeling safe, labeling students, rule fairness, and zero tolerance. During the second wave of coding, I made an effort to ensure that all passages of text that fit into existing codes were accounted for and also created any new codes as necessary. Examples of codes that were created during the second wave of coding are subjective interpretations of behavior, marginalization/exclusion, and inconsistent rule enforcement. I next refined and collapsed all codes; at the end of this process, 136 codes remained. Once coding was complete, patterns in the codes were examined. I looked closely at instances where certain codes occurred together in the data and examined similarities and differences in code occurrence and frequency between the two schools.

Results

There are multiple segments that comprise Vista and Cole High School students' daily experiences with high-security school environments. These segments include students' experiences with (a) their SRO, (b) their school's security and discipline policies, (c) punishments, and (d) fairness in rule application across the student body. Although the two schools in this study possess different qualities, I find that these segments exist in both schools and student perceptions of these issues across schools are more similar than dissimilar. This parallel, I argue, reflects the similarities in the security and discipline strategies utilized by both schools and, more generally, the pervasiveness of high-security school environments in the United States. The perceptions and experiences of Vista and Cole High School students on each of the four segments listed previously are detailed in the following sections.

Perceptions of the SRO

Now that police officers are a part of the fabric of most public middle and high schools in the United States, it is opportune to understand what students think about having SROs in their schools and how they interpret his or her role in the school. In both Vista and Cole High Schools, I found that

students are not opposed to the presence of their SRO but tend to think that his presence does not make a significant difference in the safety of the school. When students express this position, it is typically on the basis of one of the three reasons as follows: Students view the SRO as unnecessary because their schools are safe; they feel that the SRO is only one person and, therefore, can't prevent all crimes; or they think that students who are intent on committing a crime at school will do so regardless of the presence of the police officer.

When we asked students whether they thought the SRO helped prevent crime at school, some students told us they felt their school was safe and, therefore, didn't need an SRO. A Latina student at Cole High School expresses this position in her interview:

I don't think the school is bad, and we don't need it particularly, but if he's here, I guess he'll make the school safer, but I don't think the school's that bad for a police officer to be here.

This student's evaluation of her school as not "that bad" to necessitate police presence suggests that students view police in schools as purely a security measure. Her statement also suggests that students may not see police placement in schools as a necessary measure or that they think police only belong in schools with serious crime problems.

Second, some students who aren't confident the SRO makes the school safer point out that the officer can't be everywhere in the school all the time to prevent all crimes that might occur on campus:

Student (African American male): I mean nobody's gonna' do anything around him that might be a crime, but when he walks away, you know the school is so big, and he's only one person.

This student's observation echoes criminological ideas about place-based policing and spatial displacement (i.e., Repetto, 1976)—specifically that when crime prevention efforts are centered on one area, criminal activity just moves to a different location. This student points out that though the officer's presence may deter crime from happening right in front of him, it is still going on in other parts of the school and that students may just move their activities to times and areas when the SRO is not around.

Finally, others suggest that there are some students at school who don't care about getting in trouble, such that even the presence of the SRO isn't sufficient to deter them:

Interviewer: Do you think having a cop here prevents students from doing things they shouldn't?

Student (Middle-Eastern male): I mean it should, but then again like if you go to the bathrooms on the second floor it's all vandalized. So I don't see how, like some kids it prevents from doing bad things but others, they just don't care.

There is a conflict between what this student believes and what he observes. He believes that the SRO should be an effective deterrent, but he points to examples of how the SRO is not an effective deterrent.

Many students aren't convinced the SRO is a significant contributor to the safety of their schools; however, no student we encountered took issue with the idea of there being police in schools in general. For the most part, students at Vista and Cole High School are indifferent to the SRO's presence. When asked about what it is like to have an SRO in school, for example, one White male student replies, "I don't know, I don't care, he's just here to do his job."

There are, however, some students at both schools that have positive things to say about their SRO. Some students like the SRO, as a person, and told us about positive interactions they have with him. An African American female student at Vista High said about Officer Steve:

He's one of my favorite. He's real nice. I don't look at him more as police because he's real, he's not ignorant, or whatever; he's just, he's real cool until you do something that you're not supposed to do. Other than that it's just like having somebody around school that's just real cool. I talk to him all the time; he reads a lot of books; sometimes he gives me books to read, because he buys them at the stores. I like him, he's nice.

Other students find the SRO to be a useful legal resource. A White male student at Cole High said the following about SROs:

Student: You can talk to them . . . you can ask them to pull up your record and see how certain different things; you can talk to them about problems that you have with like outside of school with the law and everything like that. Like you can ask him questions, you know, if you do something wrong. Like I think one thing, if a State Trooper pulls you over and [he doesn't] have his hat on, you can ask, find out if that's true, you can talk to him about it. See what things the cops are supposed to do that they do and [it] seems to prepare you actually.

Many students have accepted police presence as a normal part of high school, sometimes likening the role of the SRO to that of an additional school disciplinary staff member. When asked what he thought about having a police officer at school, for example, one White male student at Cole High School replied:

It really, it really don't make a difference you know what I mean?
 I mean yeah there is a cop, you know; you can get in trouble a lot faster, but uh, other than that I mean, they're really ain't no difference between a principal and a cop . . . they really don't bother me that much, I mean.

Comments like these suggest that students identify police officers as a typical member of their school staff; therefore, they don't question or object to his presence.⁵

Perceptions of Security and Discipline Policies and Practices

For some of the same reasons that they doubt the safety benefit of the SRO, the students interviewed at Vista and Cole High Schools express mixed support for the idea of bringing additional security technology to their schools. One of the most common reasons for a lack of support is that students don't think additional security is necessary. A student at Vista High School, for example, explains why he wouldn't want metal detectors there:

Student: Because if you have one, you have to deal with it every day, because you have to worry about taking your stuff out of your pockets, like your keys and stuff, you have to be careful about what you bring.

Interviewer: Right, so it just would be too much of a hassle?

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that it would help prevent problems or?

Student: Not really . . . because most of the problems are because of some type of drama, it's all about the drama nowadays.

Interviewer: What kind of drama?

Student: Just like "I heard this I heard that" or boyfriend/girlfriend stuff.

Interviewer: Mmmm . . . right. Now when the drama comes up like are weapons a problem here at [Vista High]?

Student: Nah, not really.

Interviewer: No, kids don't usually bring a knife or something?

Student: Uh uh, no.

Here, the student says he doesn't support the idea of metal detectors at school, as they would be an added hassle with little benefit, and because he doesn't think students actually bring weapons to school.

Other students who do not support increasing security measures at school express feeling overwhelmed by the high-security environment and describe how it negatively influences the atmosphere of the school. A Cole High School student talks about his school's policy that all students have to wear identification badges:

Student (White male): I mean I think . . . there should be a lot of safety, but to a certain point. Like stressing all these other rules and all this other stuff, it makes all the kids all frustrated, and they get off track with school, and it just throws everything off.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Student: Like yesterday, they had hall sweeps and everybody was just all [flustered] because a lot of people didn't have ID badges, which is their own fault, but everybody was all [flustered] and like running around, and I feel that a lot of people got distracted and didn't even stay on task that day, because they were all worried [about] if they were gonna' get in trouble.

This student describes how surges in rule enforcement (such as the ID-badge sweep he describes) become a distraction to students because they are preoccupied with avoiding discipline rather than focusing on their school work.

An African American female student at Vista High School also describes how excessive rules are a burden on students and sour the atmosphere of the school:

Like they have so many rules . . . every little thing you can get in trouble for, so therefore, you would absolutely have to do exactly what you're supposed to do to not get in trouble. Which is good in a way, but then sometimes . . . it's like you're cramped, like you're in some type of hole when you go to this school, and I think it should be the complete opposite; you should be free; you should go to teachers if you need help; education should be strict but not too strict, like you're being caged in a classroom with no help and so

I don't know . . . [Vista High] is confusing. Like you have a lot of teachers, you have a lot rules, and a lot of discipline, and yet nothing gets accomplished at all. So it's like there's a lot of rules for nothing, because like when you actually do what you're supposed to do, nothing still happens, so.

The student quoted here expresses her feelings of alienation and hopelessness as a result of her school's rules and the way they are enforced. This account illustrates the frustration students may feel when discipline becomes too central an objective at school (i.e., discipline for discipline's sake) and students are not rewarded or acknowledged for times when they exhibit good behavior and follow rules.

Consistent with students' claims, we observed numerous instances at both schools of "discipline for discipline's sake"—times when school administrators insist on enforcing rules that are of no consequence to student safety but are for purposes of asserting power and control. One day after school at Cole High School we observed one such instance as students were boarding their school buses:

Mr. Stevens (White assistant principal) walked over to Principal Thompson (White female), who was having a heated conversation with an African American male student. The student insisted on getting on his bus, though it was too late. No buses were moving—they were stopped because of the incident—but Principal Thompson and Mr. Stevens told the student he couldn't board. The student was upset, complaining that his bus was right in front of him, and they were telling him he couldn't get on it. The bus driver opened the door, and the student got on. Mr. Stevens then boarded and said, "This bus isn't going anywhere until he gets off." The student got off the bus and walked away angrily. Principal Thompson looked at me and said, "He lives right across the street, but you wouldn't know it from his attitude. He was carrying three slices of pizza—he stayed to eat instead of getting on his bus in time."

In this situation it would have been easier (and harmless) to let the student board his bus, considering that it was still in the parking lot and the bus driver was willing to open the door to let him on. However, the administrators insist on teaching the student a lesson (and, most importantly, demonstrating that they are in charge) by denying him access to the bus.⁶ As a result, the student becomes agitated and clearly doesn't understand the logic behind the enforcement of this rule. The use of "discipline for discipline's

sake,” as seen in this scenario, may actually serve to undermine the authority of administrators instead of bolster it.

Not all of the students we interviewed, however, feel the rules at their schools are too strict or unfair. Unexpectedly, some of the students we talked to who express the strongest support for increasing security at their schools are students who admit to a history of being in trouble at school. A White male student at Vista High School, who has been arrested at school for an alcohol-related charge, has been disciplined several times for skipping class and most recently was suspended for climbing up onto the roof of the school, surprisingly argues that more security would improve the school:

Interviewer: I wonder if you have more thoughts on what you would do if you had an opportunity to change anything about the school?

Student: I'd probably add another officer in school.

Interviewer: Another police officer?

Student: Yes. Of course, metal detectors that would help, more cameras, somebody actually paying attention to surveillance.

It is somewhat unexpected that students who would likely be negatively affected by increased security (because it would mean that they would more frequently be caught misbehaving) support additional school security and surveillance. However, this type of counterintuitive finding is not unprecedented in the criminological literature. Some research on criminals' views of punishment suggests that though they may be critical of how the system worked in their case, criminals still tend to subscribe to conventional norms about the necessity of punishment for law-breaking behavior (Benaquisto & Freed, 1996; Sykes, 1958). Similarly in this case, it could be that students who break school rules and are punished still subscribe to the necessity of rules and punishments to maintain order in their schools.

In addition, this student's suggestion of more police, metal detectors, and cameras illustrates that at least some students buy into the notion that increasing surveillance increases the safety of the school. Previous literature has demonstrated that increased surveillance does not necessarily increase safety (e.g., Hyman & Perone, 1998), although this certainly seems to be the assumption underlying many schools' safety policies. It seems that students may be following adults' lead in this assumption.

Perceptions of Punishments

Students at Cole and Vista High Schools express three specific concerns about the punishment process in their schools. First, they are frustrated by the

lack of due process in the punishment. Second, they observe inconsistent rule enforcement in their schools. Third, they express feelings that punishments are often disproportionately harsh. These three sources of dissatisfaction with school punishment lead students to feel discouraged and powerless.

Students at Cole and Vista High Schools are frustrated with the way punishments are handed down in their schools. An African American female Vista High School student explained:

This school is more take action than ask questions. So you may do something; it may not even be your fault, but you'll get suspended . . . or they'll already have it written up and then you explain it, but they already got their minds made up so, "Okay, well, you have a detention next week," or something. You know what I'm saying? It's nothing like both sides of the story at all.

At Cole High School, students express similar aggravation:

Interviewer: How fair do you think teachers are in general in the way they deal with students?

Student (White male): Like detention, like all that other stuff, like write-ups?

Interviewer: Yeah, just in general.

Student: Not fair at all. They write up people like there's no tomorrow. There's no detentions; I mean there are detentions, but they'll skip detention go straight to referral; they want them out of the class and they want suspension.

While visiting Vista and Cole High Schools we observed many instances where students were disciplined without having the opportunity to explain what happened, lending credibility to the claims students made in interviews. In a staff meeting at Vista High School, responding to staff concerns that students get upset when told that they are suspended, the school principal made the following suggestion:

The principal said that one tactic that works is to calm the student down and don't tell him or her that he or she is suspended. Let the student go home, then call the parents, tell them their child has been suspended, and let them tell the student. This way, the parents will understand, and the student will get upset at home rather than at school.

Other times, we observed discipline staff or administrators disregarding potentially mitigating circumstances in favor of handing out punishments swiftly and with the least resistance:

Mr. Mancini (White disciplinarian) then opens up the student code of conduct book, published by the school district. He also goes into his computer system and looks up the file of each student for whom he has a referral. Based on the student's prior offenses and the offense listed on the referral, he assigns punishments to these students. In about 30 seconds per form, he checks off the appropriate box on the bottom of the form and goes through each of them. He says that he will then try to track down each student and find them to tell them what punishment they have received.

When disciplinary actions are handled in these manners, students are not given the chance to tell their side of the story or dispute the "charges" levied against them. In some cases, as seen earlier, students are not even aware that they have been written up until they receive their punishments.

This type of "take-action-before-asking-questions" practice of discipline results in students feeling alienated and powerless and disconnected from their schools. In what follows, a student from Cole High School describes how an administrator deals with students who have been referred to him for a discipline problem:

Student (African American male): He'll sit you down and he'll talk to you for a minute and give you a lecture about what you did wrong, and then he'll tell you exactly what the teacher pointed out that you did wrong. He'll open up the code of conduct book and show you exactly what you did was wrong and how they deal with it. He'll call your parents; I mean he'll ask you what you did, did you think it was right or whatever, but that doesn't really matter, because it's already written up, and then he'll call your parents to tell them; no matter what you say, it's still the same as it is.

Interviewer: So how do you respond?

Student: I don't know, it tends to piss you off that no matter, like he'll ask you your side of the story, but it doesn't really matter, and you just, like most kids, if you get an attitude with him, he gets like even more upset because like you really don't wanna sit there and tell him like what happened and your side because you know it's a waste of time and it doesn't really matter.

In addition to feeling that they have no control over a situation once they are accused of breaking a school rule, students at Vista and Cole High Schools are frustrated with the inconsistency with which rules are enforced. A Vista High School student reveals his discontent with the inconsistent rule enforcement at his school during an interview:

Interviewer: And tell me your perception—are things fair with regard to how rules are enforced here?

Student (White male): Mmmm . . . well kind of, but not really. Like, you know, you see certain teachers have their cell phones out, but it's like if I bring mine out of my pocket, it gets taken, or I get a write-up or something. Or like if certain students know certain deans and are friends with them, they'll you know, [they will] not get a write-up, or you know something like that, but if you don't know the deans and you get written up then, oh, well.

This student points out two problems with rule enforcement at his school. The first is that teachers and students are held to different standards when it comes to obeying school rules. It could be argued that teachers shouldn't have to abide by the same rules as students, as they are adults and in positions of authority. However, when teachers don't adhere to rules that students are expected to adhere to, this undermines the legitimacy of the rule by sending the message to students that breaking the rules is harmless. It also exposes the power differential between students and staff by suggesting to students that teachers are above the rules. Second, this student suggests that preferential treatment is given to some students by the disciplinarians, depending on the disciplinarian's familiarity with the students. Again, this practice is likely to leave students feeling like the rules aren't very important if only some students have to follow them.

I again find that students' claims about these issues are supported by other sources. In this case, teachers and administrators at Cole and Vista admit that inconsistent rule enforcements exist at their schools and in their classrooms. A White male teacher at Vista High, for example, says in an interview:

You know, I got students I won't let out of the room. You know, just because when I do they're gone for 20 minutes. "I really gotta' go to the bathroom." "Well, you should have thought about that when you left for 20 minutes the first three times I let you go, now you're not leaving. You could handle it however you wanna handle it, but I'm not letting you out." And then somebody else would come and I won't even ask where they're going. You know, "I need to leave,

okay go.” You let them leave! “‘A’ student, you become an ‘A’ student, I’ll let you walk out any time you want, go ahead.”

Though this teacher seems to be explaining his actions in terms of giving responsible students more privileges than irresponsible students, allowing “A” students to use the restroom during class but not other students is clearly an inequitable enforcement of the school rules. This supports students’ contentions that the rules are not always the same for everyone.

Finally, students at Vista and Cole High Schools complain about receiving disproportionately harsh punishments relative to the rule they violated. At Cole High School, a White male student named *Tim* was being disciplined in an assistant principal’s office for not wearing his ID badge and then giving a fake name to a teacher when he was stopped and questioned. During his discipline session, he angrily stormed out of the assistant principal’s office. Officer Mike was nearby and pulled Tim aside and asked him what was going on:

According to Tim, he was just joking around by giving the wrong name. He walked off to get his ID badge, and didn’t do anything wrong. He got angry when Ms. Anderson suspended him for 3 days because he didn’t do anything, so she immediately changed it to 4 because he got angry. He says the whole thing is stupid, and they’re just on a power trip. He repeated that he didn’t understand why an ID badge is such a big deal.

When schools use harsh and escalating punishments, especially for minor rule violations, it creates a counterproductive cycle. As seen in this scenario, Tim received a harsh punishment for a minor rule violation that led him to become upset and, in turn, resulted in his punishment being increased even more.

The consequence of student frustrations with the punishment processes at their schools is that many have become so discouraged and disheartened with the way that their school enforces rules and handles punishments that they have given up on trying to set the record straight and have instead accepted their fate as “the way it is.” A student at Vista High School describes how she sees students react when they get in trouble:

Student (African American female): I’ve seen students get mad, I’ve seen students cry, and I’ve seen students act like, “oh, well.” There’s not much you can do about anything in this school . . . their mind is made up or whatever.

This student describes how feelings of powerlessness manifest in students who get in trouble at school—they get angry, they cry, or they are dismissive. However, the conclusion that even she draws here is that, ultimately, it doesn't matter how a student reacts because there is nothing he or she can do to change the situation.

Even though it seems from our observations that students are correct in these evaluations of disciplinary situations, the verifiable truth of students' statements is of secondary importance. The point to note here is that the interactions students are having with their teachers, deans, and administrators are leading students to these conclusions. Many students at Vista and Cole High Schools feel like they go unheard, feel like it doesn't matter what they say when they get in trouble, and feel like there is nothing they can do about their situation once they have been accused of breaking a school rule. This is particularly the case for students who have experienced the disciplinary process first hand. Furthermore, this pattern of lack of due process, inconsistent rule enforcement and excessively harsh punishments seems to have become so routinized in these schools that many students have given up hope that things could be any different.

Fairness in Rule Application

Research on school discipline has pointed to significant racial disparities in punishment, where African American students are more likely to be disciplined in school, despite equal rates of misbehavior to their White counterparts (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu et al, 1982). This research has pointed to teachers' subjective interpretations of African American students' behavior as negative, threatening, otherwise problematic as the source of this disproportion (Ferguson, 2000; Morris, 2005, 2007; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000). When asked whether they think the school administrators, the SRO or other school staff ever treat any groups of students differently than others, several students from Vista and Cole High Schools acknowledge differential treatment (most frequently on the basis of a student's status as an athlete), but very few at either school report thinking that students are treated differently on the basis of race. There are two exceptions to this finding: First, there are some White students, particularly at Cole High School, who complain of "reverse racism," and second, there are some students at both schools who deny differential treatment on the basis of race, but whose narratives contradict this denial. In the latter cases, the suggestions of differential treatment on the basis of race are revealed via racially coded language.

Most students told us that at their schools students of all races and ethnicities “get treated the same.” However, at least in some cases, this interpretation seems to be a result of the students’ own racial stereotypes. For example, an Asian American student at Vista High School said the following when asked about race and discipline in his interview:

Student: Well, you’d see like certain people get referred to detention and suspension and it’s only, I don’t think it would be based on their racial ethnicity; it would be more on their actions . . . like during the day I see African American students being like [sent to] deans and stuff, I wouldn’t, you know, assume that it was because they were African Americans that they had that problem. But usually we wouldn’t see that with Asian students . . . to my knowledge, there has not been any Asian student in this school that has been referred to detention or in-school suspension. But I think it’s more based on personal actions rather than racial profile.

In this case, the student assumes that African American students misbehave more and so are more frequently referred for discipline. This could be a fair assumption; however, when he contrasts that observation with the statement that Asian students have never been referred for discipline at his school, he seems to be espousing the racial stereotype of African American students as troublemakers and Asian students as the “model minority” students.

Similarly, a White student at Cole High School also references racial stereotypes when he does not attribute administrators’ targeting of a certain group of students to their race, but instead to the way the group of students dress:

Student: It’s usually the ones that dress up as, well for instance the gangsters. Whatever you wanna’ call them. But those are usually the ones that they focus in on, because I guess that’s just what they think is the worst part of the school.

Interviewer: Who are the gangsters?

Student: Anyone that wears baggy clothes . . . expensive clothes, just [pause] it’s kind of hard to explain . . . hmmm . . . gangsters in a sense that maybe they wear different kinds of stuff, chains around their neck, act different, talk different.

Interviewer: More like inner-city type?

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: I gotcha, okay, and those are the ones that get the attention?

Student: Yes. They get the attention in a negative way.

Again, though the White student cited here does not explicitly acknowledge that certain students are targeted for discipline on the basis of race, his account is filled with racially coded language—describing certain students as “gangsters” that “talk different” and “act different.” Joe Feagin (2000) argued that racial code words, like these, are commonly used in the English language to symbolize Black Americans (p. 120). In this interview excerpt, the student proposes that the administrators at Cole High School think this group is the “worst part of the school” and so give them most negative attention. This suggests the possibility that African American students, in particular, may be unduly targeted for disciplinary action at this school.⁷

By contrast, we encountered very few African American students complaining about unfair treatment on the basis of race, and only two African American students (one from each school) reported in an interview experiencing or witnessing this type of discriminatory treatment. At Vista High School, an African American female student reports feeling that one of her teachers was racist and was giving her a hard time in class because of her race. In an interview at Cole High School, an African American male student points out administrators’ patterns of racial profiling that he has observed:

Well, just like if they see a group of Black kids, they automatically assume they’re doing something bad. Like if you like standing in the hallway with a group of Black kids in one spot and the White kids, the administrator will tend to come to the Black kids . . . if I’m walking to the nurse I’m automatically stopped, I’m questioned about what I’m doing, but then you see all the other White kids just walk out of the school.

Although these claims by African American students are relatively rare at Vista and Cole High Schools, they are consistent with Sheets’ (1996) study of urban high school students’ perceptions of school discipline. Sheets finds that African American students believe racial discrimination in their schools’ disciplinary process is conscious and deliberate and that teachers arbitrarily enforce rules to punish students they don’t like.

Surprisingly, the students who were the most explicitly vocal about racial differentiation in treatment were White and claimed that African American teachers or staff discriminated against White students. In the following interview excerpt with a White male student at Cole High School, the student responds to questions about the fairness of the assistant principals:

Student: I only like Mr. Stevens and Mr. Kraven [White administrators]. I really don't like Ms. Anderson and Mr. Jones [African American administrators].

Interviewer: Okay, do you have any reasons for that?

Student: They're racist.

Interviewer: They're racist? Okay how so?

Student: They don't like White people and I'll swear on it.

Interviewer: Okay, tell me about that.

Student: Like last year I had gotten in trouble, I had my hat on. Ms. Anderson told me to take it off, so I took it off, and then I walked out of the shop room because I was welding and had my hat on backwards . . . I got a paper towel, and my hat was still on under my helmet, and she took the helmet off and took my hat and walked away but yet she . . . all her other students that are African American had their hat on sideways or their do-rags on, and she'd just tell them to take them off and they just keep going; she don't do nothing about it . . . she just lets them go.

At Cole High School in particular, we encountered and heard about some White students making accusations from time to time that Black teachers or administrators didn't like them because they were White. Most of the time, these claims were not taken very seriously by anyone to whom they were reported. We never observed Black administrators or teachers singling out White students in any obvious way; however, this type of discrimination is perhaps more difficult to notice because of the large number of White students and relatively small number of Black teachers. These claims may also be explained by the fact that a segment of the White student body at Cole High School comes from poor, rural areas of the state, and previous research has suggested that residents of nonurban areas are generally less racially tolerant (Middleton, 1976; Scott, Steelman, Mulkey, & Borch, 2005; Tuch, 1987). It's also possible that these students are not used to African Americans being in positions of authority over them and, therefore, feel uncomfortable when disciplined by African American teachers and administrators.

Discussion

It has been a significant concern of school administrators and policy makers, particularly over the past decade, that students are able to be safe and feel safe when they go to school (see, for example, National Association of School Psychologists, 2006; Paine, 2006). In talking with students at Vista and Cole

High Schools and observing these schools over the course of a year, I can reasonably conclude that the schools' safety goals are being realized; there have not been any serious incidences of violence at either school in recent history and students at both Vista and Cole report feeling safe in their buildings. Lost in the margins of the discussion of school safety, however, are the opinions and experiences of students who experience these measures on a daily basis. Interviews with students in this study reveal that the security strategies employed by schools may have very little to do with students feeling safe. Students at Vista and Cole High Schools report that they don't think their schools' SROs increase the safety of the school and that they do not see the need for additional security measures like metal detectors or more surveillance cameras. This is important because if students do not perceive these strategies to be effective, this could also mean that they don't serve as effective deterrents to student misbehavior.

Even though students think SROs, security cameras and metal detectors are largely unnecessary in their schools, they do not express disagreement with the premise of using these strategies in schools to begin with. This is likely because, as Ronnie Casella (2001) noted, these strategies have become such a normal part of schools that contemporary students don't think to question their use; a police officer in school is as normal to students as a principal in school and security cameras are as normal as lockers. Schools today are high-security environments, and, as participants in them, students have come to expect these things, whether they think they are necessary or not.

Though students at Vista and Cole are not categorically opposed to some of their schools' security and discipline strategies, they express significant dissatisfaction with how their schools carry out discipline and punishment. Students in this study report multiple complaints about their schools' disciplinary process, such as lack of due process in punishment and unfair application of rules. Students express that they (and their peers) have no opportunity to tell their side of the story when in trouble and that they think administrators' minds are already made up and are simply not interested in hearing a student's perspective.

From a procedural justice perspective, these findings may be consequential for school safety and order. Tyler (1990) suggested that when people feel they have been treated fairly by an authority, they are more likely to willingly comply with the authority and accept the outcome of the authorities' decisions. In fact, procedural justice judgments of policing have been found to be more important than judgments about the favorability or fairness of the outcome of encounters with police (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Translated to the

schoolhouse, students who believe they are treated unfairly by their school administrators and SROs may be less likely to conform to school rules and more oppositional when a rule is enforced against them.

These results also echo the cautions of prior literature on school discipline (Casella, 2001; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Mukherjee, 2007; Skiba & Rausch, 2006, for example), that there can be significant downsides to many modern school security and discipline policies. In many ways zero-tolerance policies, automatic suspensions, surveillance systems, and SROs are symbolic of the powerlessness of students in contemporary public schools. These policies not only reduce discretion of school administrators but also diminish students' right to be heard, as any mitigating circumstances are deemed irrelevant (Lyons & Drew, 2006). Vista and Cole students' feelings of powerlessness may lead them to become entirely apathetic toward school, lose incentive to adhere to school norms (Noguera, 2003), and possibly end up dropping out of school altogether.

What further seems evident in interviews with Cole and Vista High School students is that they way their schools *do* discipline breeds mistrust between students and school officials and negatively influences school climate. Students observe double standards in their schools' rules and perceive administrators to have predetermined decisions before hearing a student's side of the story. Though these actions are taken in the name of school safety, Noguera (2001) argued that the best way for schools to create safe environments is to "cultivate bonds of trust and caring within the school community" (p. 203). Consequently, schools may find that simple positive actions, like working to build trust with students, may go a lot further in promoting school safety and improving school climate than does installing security cameras.

This study only brushes the surface of student perceptions of high-security schools, yet lays important ground work for understanding how students interpret strict discipline policies and secure building strategies like police officers, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras that pervade contemporary public schools. Future research ought to further investigate the relationship between students' perceptions of their school's policies and student compliance with these policies. Getting students on board with their school's rules and security strategies by implementing practices they believe to be fair may prove to be the key to creating safer schools.

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Notes

1. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) define *legitimacy* as “a property of an authority or institution that leads people to feel that that authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed” (p. 514).
2. These results should be interpreted cautiously, however, as it is possible this pattern is observed because schools with high levels of disorder employ more secure building strategies.
3. The school resource officer (SRO) program is based on a community policing model with goals of facilitating positive relationships between youth and law enforcement and promoting safety and order on public school campuses (Atkinson, 2002).
4. The school districts use free- and reduced-lunch lists to estimate the percentage of students who are low income in each school.
5. This echoes Casella’s (2001) findings in *Being Down: Challenging Violence in Urban Schools*.
6. Also, the Principal’s statement that the student “lives right across the street” is misleading as the school is surrounded by busy roads, and housing developments are at least a quarter to a half mile away in all directions.
7. In her ethnographic research in a public school, Ann Ferguson (2000) observed that African American men, in particular, were subject to labeling by administrators that led to them being monitored more closely and disproportionately subject to discipline enforcement. The perceptions of students described here indicate the same process of labeling, monitoring, and punishing of African American students at Vista and Cole High Schools.

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Bio

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