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Schools Safer



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U.S. Department of Justice
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School Safety

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About the cover:

This statue in front of the Philadelphia Police Administration Building exemplifies the positive relationship needed between law enforcers and youth. Photograph by Greg Lanier.

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 ACQUISITIONS

BY EDWARD MUIR

Security problems at elementary schools may be different than those at secondary schools, but they need to be addressed just as diligently.

Security now is elementary

The New York City Board of Education has just assigned 159 full-time security officers to patrol its elementary schools. That's right, elementary schools! And as plans stand now, more guards will be phased in each year until every one of the city's 600 elementary schools are covered.

Up until now, educators have thought of school security in terms of "little kids-little problems, big kids-big problems." Thus we have focused our prevention efforts on the secondary schools, where students are the source of many security problems, while paying little or no attention to the primary grades. But security risks, less visible than those that exist at the secondary level, but risks nonetheless, plague the elementary schools as well. The problems we have to face at the lower levels are not the kids, but rather adult drug abusers, psychopaths of various types and, unfortunately, irresponsible parents.

In many urban areas, the local elementary school has become the target of common street criminals. These individuals operate under the equation of *vulnerability plus attractiveness (has what you want) equals target*. This explains why more elderly folks are

mugged than professional athletes. In many inner city neighborhoods, the typical targets have made themselves less vulnerable. For example, liquor stores often do business from behind bullet proof glass. Beer distributors hire guards to ride shotgun on their trucks. It's getting tougher to make a dishonest buck.

The elementary school, on the other hand, is a building with little or no security. It is both vulnerable and attractive. The school is populated by small, defenseless children, and its staff is made up of women, for the most part, who carry cash and credit cards and wear jewelry. For the street thug or the sexual deviate, it's easy pickings.

A different, though common, type of risk for the elementary school is the security problem that parents can often present. First of all, most parents do not come to school to see a teacher or a principal unless there is a problem. They may visit the school wanting to give someone a piece of their mind, and leave after giving that individual a piece of foot, fist, umbrella or shopping bag. Some of these parents are not simply irate but drunk or on drugs. Another danger is the problem of non-custodial parents who want to "kidnap" their children and are able to take advantage of an elementary school's lack of security.

The net result of all of the above

phenomena? Assaults, robberies, larcenies, sex crimes and various other violations of law. Staff and students are the victims.

It should be noted that, until now, most urban elementary schools have not experienced these problems. But, without the proper precautions, luck can run out.

In New York City, we have developed procedures and plans aimed at these threats. First, the penalties for trespassing and loitering on or near schools have been increased by the state legislature. In addition, each school, according to the contract between the United Federation of Teachers and the Board of Education, must outline a security plan which works out procedures for visitor screening, exit security and intruder alert.

Sandra Feldman, an elementary school teacher who succeeded Albert Shanker as president of New York's United Federation of Teachers, has made school safety and security one of her top priorities. Feldman spent her first day in office as president of the UFT in a police station with an elementary school teacher who was stabbed and then robbed in her classroom.

In the past, security in New York's elementary schools has often been lax. A staff member or parent volunteer sat at a desk near the main entrance. Any-

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were used to identify any youths arrested four or more times, including one felony in the preceeding 12 months. The search turned up 220 names. Members of this group were designated potential serious habitual offenders. Their crimes were screened for seriousness, with highest ratings going to crimes involving violence or potential violence. Serious crimes included fight-

ing, occult worship, cruelty to animals and similar offenses.

Using this rating system, the group was narrowed from 220 to approximately 95 individuals. They averaged 10 arrests each, with a re-arrest every 90 days. Clearly, they were the small minority of juveniles responsible for a disproportionate amount of the crime in the community.

School district helps police recover missing children

A creative partnership between a Pennsylvania school district and police department has led to the recovery of three missing children.

This cooperative effort, assisted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, relies on the resources of the National Crime Information Computer (NCIC) to check up on suspicious new registrations. The program began after S. Phil Hunter, home and school visitor of the Wissahickson School District in Ambler, made arrangements with the district administration and the Lower Gwynedd Township Police to verify registrations through the NCIC.

Two lists of student names and birthdates led to the recovery of two children kidnapped by a parent as well as a runaway who had been living in a group home. The names and birthdates of children whose school registration raised questions (see list below) were checked through the NCIC during off-peak police hours. No police record was kept on the children.

As a result of these successes, a Pennsylvania state legislator may introduce a measure to mandate the process statewide. (More than 30 states already mandate the entry of

missing children into the NCIC.) John Rabun, deputy director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, also commended the program at the First National Conference on Missing Children.

School registrars should be alert for any of the following conditions that may indicate parental abduction:

- Extreme nervousness or belligerence by registering parent
- Inability to provide name of previous school or teacher
- Inability to provide information on other parent
- Inability to provide immunization records or past report card
- Difficulty in remembering child's birthdate
- Transient local address

Since all law enforcement agencies have access to the NCIC, this program could be initiated anywhere in the nation. And, based on previous successes by the Lower Gwynedd Township Police and the Wissahickson School District, expanding the program may well lead to the return of many other missing children.

For more information on this cooperative effort, contact: Detective Gary R. O'Conner, Lower Gwynedd Township Police, Box 293, Spring House, PA 19477, 215/646-5301.

The critical question then was, "Where are these kids?" In light of their repeat arrests, it was obvious they were not confined or supervised very well. In actuality, they were found on the streets and in the schools of Jacksonville. About half were enrolled and required to be in school. The serious habitual offenders blended into the masses and were invisible in an incident-oriented criminal justice process. Given the 400 to 450 juvenile arrests in Jacksonville each month, the 12 to 16 serious habituals were difficult to spot.

This pattern exists in most communities. Unless school officials are told who the offenders are, it is very easy for 80 to 90 juveniles to blend in and be lost in a system, many of which have more than 100,000 students. Invariably, though, many of these young people become order maintenance problems and a few are at the root of dreadful crimes involving students or schools.

For effective information sharing and intervention, leadership in participating agencies must be strong. These officials must have the ability to look beyond their "turf" and to recognize the need for information sharing. Then they must jointly focus attention, establish priorities and allocate resources responsibly. These steps make up the foundation of a program to deal with the serious habitual juvenile offender. Only by focusing on the offender, both individually and collectively, are the leaders able to identify the institutions best able to help young people in trouble.

If the "worst of the worst" cannot be seen, there is little hope of seeing those moving in that direction. Perhaps by developing a mechanism for identifying serious offenders, institutions can turn their attention to those on the edge and at-risk - the abused, the runaways, throwaways, the one- or two-time offenders. Perhaps then the community will be able to intervene successfully to prevent further criminal involvement or to protect such youths from their involvement. □