

Tomgram: Chase Madar, Handcuffing Seven-Year-Olds Won't Make Schools Safer

Posted by Joan Russow

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by Chase Madar at 8:23am, February 26, 2013.

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Outrage over the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre may or may not spur any meaningful gun control laws, but you can bet your Crayolas that it will lead to more seven-year-olds getting handcuffed and hauled away to local police precincts.

You read that right. Americans may disagree deeply about how easy it should be for a mentally ill convicted felon to purchase an AR-15, but when it comes to putting more law enforcement officers inside our schools, the National Rifle Association (NRA) and liberal Democrats like Senator Barbara Boxer are as one. And when police (or “school resource officers” as these sheriff’s deputies are often known) spend time in a school, they often deal with disorder like proper cops -- by slapping cuffs on the little perps and dragging them to the precinct.

Just ask the three nine-year-old girls and an eight-year-old boy who got into a fight at their Baltimore elementary school -- then got [arrested](#) by real police. Or Salecia Johnson, age six, [cuffed](#) and arrested for throwing a tantrum at her elementary school in Milledgeville, Georgia. Or Wilson Reyes, a seven-year-old at a Bronx, New York, elementary school who last December 4th was cuffed, hauled away, and [interrogated](#) under suspicion of taking \$5 from a classmate. (Another kid later confessed.)

The last of these incidents made the cover of the *New York Post*, but the New York City Police Department still doesn’t understand what they did wrong -- sure, the first-grader spent about 4 hours handcuffed in a detention room, but that’s “standard for juvenile arrest.”

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Which is precisely the problem: standard juvenile misbehavior (a five-year-old pitching a fit, a 12-year-old [doodling](#) on a desk, a 13-year-old [farting](#) in class, a class clown [running around](#) the football field at halftime in a banana suit) is increasingly being treated like serious crime, resulting in handcuffs and arrest. If you can't understand why such "consistency" is crazy, please desist from reading the rest of this article.

It seems grotesque that the horrific slaughter of those 20 children in Newtown, Connecticut, will result in more children getting traumatized, but that's exactly where we're headed -- with firm bipartisan support.

In his amazing post-Newtown speech last December, Wayne LaPierre, the CEO and executive vice president of the NRA, [called](#) for armed guards in all schools -- a demand widely hailed as jaw-droppingly nutty. A few weeks later, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) proposed \$50 million in federal grants to [install](#) more metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and National Guard troops in schools, but made her pitch in the caring cadences of a Marin County Democrat. And when President Obama ordered more police in schools (point 18 in his 23-point Executive Order responding to the Sandy Hook tragedy), it was all over.

So here's an American reality of 2013: we will soon have more police in our schools, and more seven-year-olds like Joseph Andersons of PS 153 in Maspeth, New York, [getting arrested](#) . (He got handcuffed after a meltdown when his Easter egg dye-job didn't come out right.)

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

In fairness to the feds, similar kinds of local responses were already underway before the LaPierre-Boxer Axis of Tiny Handcuffs even arose. Across the country, from [Florida](#) and [Connecticut](#) to [Tennessee](#), [Indiana](#),

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and

[Arizona](#)

, despite tough budgetary times, municipal governments are now eagerly scrounging up the extra money for more metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and armed guards in schools. (The same thing happened after the Columbine shooting 14 years ago.) No one keeps national statistics, but

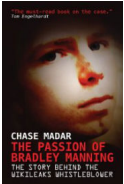
[arrests](#)

of the 10-and-under set do seem to be on the rise since Sandy Hook. A typical recent case: in January, a seven-year-old at a Connecticut school was

[arrested](#)

by the police for “threatening” a teacher. Jitters are understandable after the trauma of Sandy Hook -- but arresting a seven-year-old?

Truth be told, we were already well on our way to turning schools into carceral fortresses before the Sandy Hook slaughter even happened. In fact, the great national infrastructure project of the past 20 years may be the “school-to-prison pipeline.” After all, we are the nation that [arrested](#) Isamar Gonzalez for being in her high school early to meet with a teacher, then arrested her principal, Mark Federman, when he tried to intervene.



[Buy the book](#)

The stats speak as loudly as the anecdotes: of the Chicago School District’s [4,600 arrests](#) in 2011, 86% were for misdemeanors. That school system

[spends](#)

\$51.4 million on security guards, but only \$3.5 million for college and career coaches. And for every incident that makes the news, there are scores that don’t. Despite a growing body of damning research by civil libertarians of the left and the

[right](#)

, including Annette Fuentes’s excellent book

[Lockdown High](#)

, political opposition to the school-to-prison pipeline has proven feeble or nonexistent. Brooklyn State Senator Eric Adams, who represents one of the most liberal districts in the country, has staked out the civil libertarian outer limit by helpfully

[suggesting](#)

that Velcro handcuffs might be more suitable than metal ones for arresting young children.

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The metal detector at the schoolhouse door is threatening to become as iconic an American symbol as baseball or type 2 diabetes. Not that metal detectors in place were capable of preventing the [massacre](#) at Red Lake High School in Minnesota in 2005: young Jeffrey Weise just barged right in and shot six people dead; nor could the metal detectors at [George Washington High School](#) in Manhattan or [Paul Robeson High School](#) in Brooklyn prevent teens from getting stabbed. Yet metal detectors and school police proliferate across the country.

One state, however, truly leads the way. Self-satisfied Yankees have traditionally slandered the state of Mississippi as a jerkwater remnant of the past. As for me, I say Mississippi represents the American future. A new report by advocacy groups [shows](#) how the Hospitality State is leading the nation in cruel and draconian school over-policing. Felony assault charges for throwing peanuts on the school bus! Dress codes enforced by [handcuffing](#) a child to a railing for hours for the crime of not wearing a belt! Cops [escorting](#) a five-year-old home for wearing the wrong color shoes! And constant arrests of kids for “disorderly conduct.”

Yes, the “Mississippi model” of non-union teachers plus “zero tolerance” discipline is the kind of schooling that some of the best and brightest among our education “reformers” have been touting -- and what they are increasingly getting. In fairness, Governor Rick Perry’s Texas is [struggling](#) with Mississippi for vanguard status, with cutting-edge [surveillance](#) of students and 300,000 misdemeanor arrests in 2010 for “crimes” like tossing a paper airplane. And Massachusetts is a [strong contender](#) for third place.

Safe Schools Without Police or Metal Detectors

The over-policing of our schools is particularly grotesque because it’s so unnecessary. All schools need order and all students need self-discipline (as do adults), but putting police and metal detectors in a school often just adds another layer of violent chaos to an already tough situation. In my own policy research on school security overkill in New York City, I’ve [found](#)

plenty of high schools, and not in the fancy parts of town, that do just fine without police or scanners.

In fact, they do better than fine: one report I [coauthored](#) with advocates from the New York Civil Liberties Union and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform found that schools without police or metal detectors actually get significantly better educational results (higher graduation rates, lower truancy) than their heavily policed counterparts.

So why aren't these low-impact schools being held up as models? Why don't City Hall and the New York City Department of Education seem to want to know about these more effective -- not to mention cheaper -- models? Alas, despite a steady 15-year nationwide drop in crime, politicians continue to score points with voters by showing that they aren't afraid to crack down on children, especially the working-class Black and Latino youth who bear most of the brunt of these policies. The psycho-racial-political dynamics are pretty much the same throughout the country.

But there are proven, demonstrably better, ways to do school discipline. Ask Judge Steve Teske whose visionary common sense has [brought down](#) referrals to juvenile court by 70% in Clayton County, Georgia, by forcing schools to handle minor disciplinary infractions without handcuffs or police arrests. (In the same period in that county, serious weapons charges, like bringing guns and knives to school, have fallen by 80% -- further evidence that restraining a police presence actually makes schools safer.)

For another example of the right way to respond to school violence, look no further than Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, site of the 1999 massacre of 12 students and a teacher by two heavily armed students. In response, the school made the choice [not to add](#) a phalanx of armed guards. (Columbine actually had an armed school resource officer on duty the day of the killings, and he was unable to slow, let alone stop, the carnage.)

In fact, Columbine today remains an open campus with no metal detector at the front door. Instead, its administration has worked hard to improve communications with the student body, trying to build an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Columbine parents have supported this approach for a simple reason: they don't want their children treated like criminals. Because Littleton, Colorado, is a largely affluent community with political muscle, they've been able to resist the avalanche of punitive measures that have been generated by every school massacre since the one that took place at theirs.

Other schools -- particularly urban ones with working-class African-American and Latino students -- are not so lucky. When President Obama [announced](#) his pledge of more “resource officers” in schools, he was quick to qualify it with an “if they want them.” A laudable sentiment that doesn’t really reflect how things usually work on the ground.

One Brooklyn high school principal I interviewed [told me](#) of the constant pressure he experienced from higher up in the New York City Department of Education to put in a metal detector and more police personnel. Another school security success story I [profiled](#) back in 2008 has since had a metal detector [rammed down](#) its educational throat despite its immaculate disciplinary record. Now, its students are made to feel like potential criminals from the moment they arrive every morning. The logic is, in its way, all-American: crazy white kids go on shooting sprees, and then the screws tighten on Black and Latino kids.

Resisting the Axis of Tiny Handcuffs

Is there any hope of preventing the rush to put more first graders in handcuffs? Yes, but don’t expect any help from the NRA, which is actively promoting a heavily armed vision of heaven on Earth in which armed guards will be everywhere, with all public space turned into an airport security line. As for Barbara Boxer, evidently she wasn’t as struck as I was by the [t-shirt](#) [s](#) that Sacramento’s school security police made with the slogan “U Raise 'Em, We Cage 'Em” emblazoned on the image of a child behind bars. Or maybe she should talk to constituents like five-year-old [arrestee](#) Michael Davis or the seven-year-old in San Mateo whom a cop [blasted](#) in the face with pepper spray for climbing a bookshelf. It remains to be seen if the NRA and Boxer, united, can ever be defeated.

This response to the Newtown massacre is of a piece with a developing post-9/11 American national-security-lockdown mentality -- the belief that an armed response will solve most of our problems, domestic and foreign. It’s a habit of thought that leads not figuratively but quite literally to a police state. The over-policing of schools is just a part of the increasing [militarizatio](#)

[n](#) of the police nationwide, which in turn fuels the smoldering paranoia that drives civilians to stock up on AR-15s and the like.

Ending this cycle of armed fear and violence will require getting police out of the schools along with the whole battery of security state accessories. The only way to get there will be via the broadest possible civil libertarian coalition: Black community groups and Ron Paul types, immigrants' rights activists and teachers and principals unions that see the big picture, liberals and conservatives united against the nanny/thug state.

There could be no finer spokesperson for such an ecumenical gathering than the newly crowned Miss America, Alabama-raised Brooklyn-residing Mallory Hytes Hagan. After wowing the pageant judges with her terpsichorean prowess, she demonstrated the soundest policy judgment. Asked if she thought it was a good idea to bring armed guards into schools, Ms. Hagan's response was clear. "No, I don't think the proper way to fight violence is with violence."

[According to](#)

the

New York Daily News

, she said it "firmly." Let people of goodwill rally behind this model citizen to end all the grotesque violence in our schools.

Chase Madar ([@ChMadar](#)) is a civil rights attorney in New York City who has written about the proven alternatives to [school](#) security [overkill](#) . His latest book is [The Passion of Bradley Manning: The Story Behind the Wikileaks Whistleblower](#) (Verso).

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