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## Do You Know the Drill?

### Why we should worry about school lockdown policies

**A**t some point during the school lockdown drill someone whispers — is it a teacher's voice, a student's, or his own? — that children who make noise never see their family again. He tells me this, my six-year-old son, bursting into tears. My daughter, two years his senior, joins him in short order, repeating over and over: "We have no locks on our doors, Daddy. We have *no locks!*"

This is the first time I've encountered this response to school emergency safety drills, a sea change from the drills we'd learned about in London, Ontario, where they'd begun their elementary schooling. There was no fear in those drills. Rather, the teachers made a contest of it by rewarding the students who could be the quietest, then rewarding them all, of course. This was the same game I'd played while staying home with children on sick days or PD days when I just needed 15 minutes of quiet: light, unserious, but also understandable to my children.

But this? This was abject terror, and it nearly floored me. It was an hour of debriefing to work through their fears and to talk about personal and community safety; it took several hours more to finally settle them into bed, all of us exhausted. In the back of my beleaguered mind, I marveled at the global experiences of others who deal with incidents of personal danger on a daily basis (both here

and abroad), while simultaneously wondering why we'd want to instill such fears into our children when their immediate circumstances are so different? And is a little fear anything like the panic reported during those fatal minutes in La Loche, Saskatchewan, on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, when an armed teen shot to death two educators and two boys earlier that day in their home, leaving seven others wounded?<sup>1</sup>

This article is an attempt to place lockdown policies and practices in that broader context of public safety, privilege and politics.

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Sadly, school shootings have a long history in North America. The first recorded fatal incident dates back to the 1840s for the United States, while Canada's first recorded fatal shootings both took place more than a century later, in 1975, at Brampton Centennial Secondary School and later that same year, at Ottawa's Pius X high school.<sup>2</sup> While in the U.S. gun violence in schools continued unabated, and even increased through the latter decades of the twentieth century, it would be nearly 25 years before the next fatal school shooting in Canada. It occurred in tiny Taber, Alberta, in 1999.<sup>3</sup> It was a mere eight days after the Columbine massacre.

When Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold stormed their Colorado high school, using a veritable arsenal of home-made bombs and semi-automatic firearms, it provoked a debate about school safety that endures to this day. Columbine's horror is found partly in its meticulously planned execution, complete with diversions and deterrents for local first responders. It is also that it occurred in an affluent Denver suburb, rather than say, Springfield, Oregon,<sup>4</sup> or perhaps Jonesboro, Arkansas.<sup>5</sup> Those latter mass shootings occurred a year prior to Columbine; in the decade prior to Columbine, there had been a dozen mass shootings at American schools and dozens more individual shootings.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of history, and belying the fact that there has never been a Columbine-like incident in Canada,<sup>7</sup> the massacre at Columbine (and reinforced in 2012 by the horrific events of Newtown, CT<sup>8</sup>) appears to have shaped what came next. Canadian provinces, through the 2000s, began updating and revising their respective "safe schools" policies. Upon implementation, most provinces had now introduced new

“lockdown” and “hold-and-secure” procedures, in addition to more interventionist anti-bullying policies. Suddenly, as one discovers upon reading Ontario’s Safe Schools Action Team’s 2006 report announcing its new plans, it was deemed that safety would come first in Ontario schools, even before education.<sup>9</sup>

Safety, of course, has long been a concern of schooling. School evacuation procedures have been practiced for decades, and when appropriate, environmental concerns have motivated many safety decisions. How can one forget the ballyhooed “snow day” of our youth, which is nothing if not a safety (and really, an insurance) concern? What is revealing, then, is how new fears have been rolled into the older, obviously less nefarious ones. Bomb threats, for instance, are now included in evacuation guidelines, and it would be hard to imagine them being so publicly averred in a pre-9/11 landscape. When I was a building security manager through Columbine and 9/11, bomb threats were taken seriously, but quietly. They have since become front-page, viral media events.

It is more troubling, however, that an underlying assumption in these new policies posits the school as an exceptional site of violence. In British Columbia’s new guidelines, lockdowns are to be practiced in case the school has to deal with a dangerous intruder, barricaded suspect or active shooter.<sup>10</sup> (As an aside, surely the word “active” to describe “shooter” is redundant, but perhaps the term’s creators are aware of a category of “passive shooter” that has yet to present itself as a public danger.) For the “hold-and-secure” policies of several provinces, also termed a “lockout,” these typically refer to police incidents or other potentially dangerous events in the vicinities of schools, but unrelated to the school itself.<sup>11</sup> Schools are essentially shuttered and doors locked, but students are expected to continue with their classes as normal.

Fear for safety is at the heart of these policies, but where do those fears come from? Ontario’s 2006 report, emerging after a two-year consultation with parents, educators, administrators, law enforcement

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and other interested parties, repeatedly says that parents are worried about safety. There is no information on the method used to arrive at this conclusion. Did they use ranked statements on a survey? Comparative issues assessment? Or was it merely leading questions

about the importance of safety, generally or specific to schools: I like my children to be, A) very safe, B) mostly safe or C) not safe at all?

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Ironically, given these are ministries or departments of education, there is precious little rationale or methodology provided in Ontario, British Columbia or Nova Scotia's outlines, apart from general preparedness. Even the RCMP's information page on school violence refers to school violence being a problem "in many parts of the world," while frequently citing American incidents and reports.<sup>12</sup> That shocking lack of specificity only muddies the waters.

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Even if one were to accept that emergency preparedness for school violence is vital, one must still place school lockdowns within a broader continuum of disciplinarian features of the elementary school system. What this means is considering the effects on students' societal perceptions, and how fear of violence disciplines them toward certain beliefs or behaviours already prevalent in society.

For instance, during Ontario's Safe Schools consultation, concern was expressed that "some groups are more likely to be suspended or expelled than others."<sup>13</sup> While not explicitly related to lockdowns, it falls under the same category of disciplinarianism that should rightly be questioned. In Canada, it is well-established that racial minorities — Black and Indigenous in particular — are more likely to experience routine stops by the police ("carding"), be arrested for minor incidents, and face longer convictions than white counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

If this tendency to see people other than the white majority as inherently more criminal is found in our justice system, it is going to be

found in our schools' disciplinary systems and in society at large. Fear-based conditioning, liberated of plausible rationales and analytical assessment, can only reflect our prejudices. When determining what constitutes a "threatening individual" or "threatening behaviour" in our schools, we already have the model provided by the inequities of criminal justice through which to assess how enforcement and discipline are meted out.

One cannot stop there, however, without critically considering the origins of these regulations, rooted as they are in American politics. Canadian schools, as previously stated, have not been subject to such assaults. Why would we opt for a "solution" to a problem that has neither presented itself, nor seems particularly likely to do so? An assumption of inevitability appears to have underwritten these policies, without much consideration that one policy trajectory dovetails into other considerations. In addition to the one concerning criminal justice, there is another worth weighing that is just as chilling.

In the U.S., there is an observable, and increasingly concerning phenomenon dubbed the "school-to-prison pipeline."<sup>15</sup> In brief, it refers to the alarming increase in criminalizing juvenile transgressions, and it is particularly related to school suspensions and expulsions. Barring students from classes is shown to lead to higher dropouts, and accordingly higher rates of adult criminality. More alarming still is the fact that law enforcement is increasingly being called to deal with issues formerly dealt with by school authorities.<sup>16</sup>

Both of these issues have recently sparked controversy in Toronto, especially in marginalized communities, and for good reason.<sup>17</sup> Black children in schools are disciplined more frequently and more severely than their peers.<sup>18</sup> Schools are not free from harmful societal perceptions, and stigmas are easily attached to certain groups by fellow classmates. For instance, a minor confrontation between white students may be perceived as more threatening if a Black student is involved, by both students and teachers alike. Instilling fear for one's personal safety exploits these perceptual biases. In essence, severe disciplinary measures may diminish the sense of community in schools, rather than improve it.

The common ground in these issues, between severe discipline and school lockdown policies, is that they both take a zero-tolerance approach — another failed policy of the American public school

system. These rigid guidelines encourage not to question or assess situations. “At the first indication of a major incident of school violence,” says The Northwest Catholic District School Board, one is to call for a lockdown.<sup>19</sup> De-escalation is not an option, and interpretation is administered through the same societal biases one encounters elsewhere.

Though these conclusions are almost invariably based on American findings, the entire principle of the school lockdown is equally so. It is only fair to consider the trajectory of those policies and their effects in that context. When a 2012 Angus Reid poll shows that 84% of Canadians want to see school bullying criminalized,<sup>20</sup> one must ask: to what effect, and to what end?

If there is some good news in Canadian schools, it’s that in Ontario at least, the formerly severe, zero-tolerance approach to school discipline has been replaced by progressive discipline. Since these policies were created in 2009, expulsion rates remain steady at 0.03% of the total school population — or 525 students a year — dropping from previous rates of 0.07-0.09%.<sup>21</sup> Suspensions, in the meantime, have continued their diminishing trend since 2005-6, from 5.77% to 3.17% in 2012-13 (the most current data).<sup>22</sup> This data suggests that at least Ontario is trying to avoid the trap of American-style disciplinary policies. That is, of course, assuming criminal charges have not replaced school discipline.

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Beyond the realms of origins and societal bias, one must ask: how and when are these policies used? One quickly discovers that the media is the best source of information on lockdowns and hold-and-secures in practice. This skews interpretation, not least for the need to sell copy and for the increasing centralization of news corporations, but also because it skews toward major media markets that have the resources to report on such things. Regardless, the media is still the best resource, and the reason is surprising: many school boards do not track their use of these security measures.

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is instructive in this regard. In a report by Oliver Sachgau with the *Toronto Star*,<sup>23</sup> following a rash of lockdowns and hold-and-secures to start the 2015-16 school year,<sup>24</sup>

it was discovered that only five school boards in the region tracked the two types of incidents. A sixth tracked only lockdowns, and four more tracked nothing at all. Given how involved the execution of these policies are, it would seem elementary to have a mandatory incident reporting form, either online or on paper, whenever a school initiates either one. The side benefit of such a form is that they remind participants of their own obligations, so surely that is a win-win in the lives of otherwise busy school administrators who are suddenly thrust into a “Command” role when danger threatens.

One of the chief problems with not tracking these events, of course, is that one loses all sense of scale.

How often are they occurring? Under what circumstances? How many are legitimate threats to school safety, and how many are hoaxes or false alarms? There are also finer details that would undoubtedly help police and other researchers, but these are not being properly recorded.

Lack of tracking and disclosure of circumstances can also lead to abuse. This is already a criticism facing the provinces relating to their other “safe school” measures — especially anti-bullying legislation and the application of discipline.<sup>25</sup> Without proper tracking of major, and potentially traumatic and disruptive school events, it can lead to school administrators taking liberties in interpretation.

Unsurprisingly, such abuses appear to be creeping into a system without proper monitoring. Sachgau’s *Star* article quotes Janine Bowyer, who is the safe schools superintendent of the Durham Catholic District School Board — notably the Toronto-area board mentioned above that only tracks lockdowns. She states: “If there’s an upset student in the hallway, and they just want to make sure everybody stays in their room, that [can trigger] a hold-and-secure. [...] [It’s] just a nice way of keeping students in their classrooms.”<sup>26</sup>

Except that’s not what a hold-and-secure is intended for at all. Both lockdowns and hold-and-secures are intended for concerns of

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a criminal nature: the former for violent incidents in or related to the school, and the latter for incidents occurring outside and *unrelated to the school*.<sup>27</sup> The document even warns about desensitization to the seriousness of these procedures, and warns about their overuse. Hardly “a nice way of keeping students in their classroom,” then. This is precisely the kind of attitude that permits the escalation of otherwise mundane, benign events to the status of imminent danger.

This is not to say that lockdowns, specifically, are necessarily being abused. Some lockdowns that occurred in the GTA over the past year, for instance, appear to be for legitimate reasons. Two occurred after stabbings in the vicinity of the schools, but not in the schools themselves.<sup>28</sup> But several have occurred as the result of false alarms, and probable hoaxes. One school was locked down after a false report of a shooting<sup>29</sup>; in Caledon, a digital photo of a weapon with no threats attached prompted a school lockdown.<sup>30</sup> In Fredericton, NB, a man reportedly carrying a firearm resulted in six schools being locked down. The “firearm” turned out to be an umbrella; more bizarrely still, the umbrella was designed to look like a katana.<sup>31</sup>

One might be inclined to think that these perceived dangers must be investigated, and there is some sense to that argument. One also, however, must consider the effect these policies have on those who experience them — including false alarms and drills. Reporting from the U.S., again, confirms that these drills can be as traumatic as real emergencies (as I have personally witnessed with my own children).<sup>32</sup> As with zero-tolerance disciplinary measures, security measures that teach us to assume the worst can be deleterious to an effective response to the challenges of violence in our schools.

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Ultimately we are left with the question of whether or not these policies are effective. And the operative question there, really, is *effective at what?* We have already heard that these measures can be effective disciplinary tools, both in the sense of school administrators wanting to control the inner space of the schools, but also in the sense of individual psychology. What else do they do?

Hoaxes raise interesting concerns, because they can easily exploit responses that are invariably severe and unilateral. Lockdowns can



last over two hours ... after which regular learning and instruction are expected to continue? Seems unlikely. In one notable 2015 incident in Brampton, threats were made against at least two schools, prompting lockdowns. The problem is that the threats arrived before the first bell, meaning students arriving at school found themselves outside and unprotected, in spite of the threats having been made against non-specified staff and students. At least the buses were diverted, but this would hardly be reassuring to those students on the front steps.<sup>33</sup> In this case, the rigidity of the policy made the school the focus of attention, rather than the people the policy claims to protect.

The big question ought to be about policing, and what it means to provide responses to each of these incidents. Schools are large buildings with many entrances and exits. They require a large number of emergency responders and, threat depending, they'll require specialized equipment. All of this has a cost: social, economic and material. Already schools across the country are bringing in uniformed officers to spend their days policing the halls. All this does is radically expand the domestic security apparatus, while diminishing the importance of community role models like teachers and school administrators. There is never enough money for new teachers, it seems, but provinces and municipalities don't bat an eye over hiring more police or purchasing army surplus gear for them.

But are lockdowns at least effective in what they purport to do, which is to avert crisis and potentially save lives? In the two major test cases one might examine, the conclusion must be "who knows?" Lockdowns were enacted at both the Red Lake shooting in 2003, and at Sandy Hook in 2012 — the latter being our modern standard for school horrors. Proponents might say it is a deterrent, but even Stu Auty, president of the Canadian Safe School Network, has stated in the past: "How do you measure the absence of crime," in response to being asked about their efficacy.<sup>34</sup>

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Well, one could start by tracking these incidents properly because until one has measurable data, it would be impossible to test efficacy. This would create a presence, rather than the absence which Auty seems content to accept. And we need to know even the tiniest details before one can assume, especially in the wake of continued mass shootings in the U.S. (and their continued absence in Canada), that they do something entirely other than provide protection.

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I picture young Noel Desjarlais coming back from lunch on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, to his La Loche high school. “Run,” they scream, as it slowly registers what the sharp popping sound is. “There’s a shotgun!”<sup>35</sup> Pandemonium has replaced the otherwise cool chaos of teens coming and going. The doors are thrown wide. Now, they’re just going. Fleeing.

In response, we will call for more lockdowns, while fleeing the truth. That truth is that Canada is sorely lacking in social services for those in desperate need. Like those living in chronic poverty in the GTA and our other major cities. Like those suffering the debilitating and alienating effects of mental health challenges. Like those living in remote — or really, any — Indigenous community in Canada. We will, and have, found money for lockdowns and the expansion of policing, without providing more teachers, psychologists or youth counselors. We’ll build more prison cells but fail to provide more classrooms with fewer students, which could be accomplished for the same costs.

This also assumes that the drills don’t cause more harm than they prevent. While drafting this article I was put in touch with another parent, whose child in a Nova Scotia elementary school was left in lockdown by accident. His class was in the library of their school, and when the lockdown drill was lifted, the administration of the school failed to inform them. Minutes passed before the error was realized, but not before the damage was done. In the back of this child’s mind, the sounds of feet in the hallways was not the usual, cheerful sounds of children headed outdoors for recess; in his mind, it was the sound of an evacuation.

He never told anyone about the experience. It was June, so a child suddenly not wanting to go to school anymore isn’t that alarming. When he started being fearful of sleeping at his grandmother’s, playing at a friend’s house, or even going outside — that’s when it

becomes alarming. He had trouble sleeping. By July he was asking to be home-schooled, and then, finally, he broke. He told his parents that since the lockdown drill, the fear that someone might come to his school to shoot him had possessed his every thought. In a moment no parent ever forgets, he said: "Sometimes I think the only way I won't be scared is if I'm not here anymore."<sup>36</sup>

This family was fortunate to have expedient access to high quality counseling, which helped assuage their son's fears and all but returned him to his previous, more carefree self. But he doesn't do the drills anymore. And if he hadn't received or had access to counseling? Suppose he wasn't an isolated case in that classroom, never mind the entire school or schoolboard? How would we know? The issue, as far as I can tell, is all but unstudied; the anecdotal evidence, however, is chilling.

If safety truly is a prerequisite for learning, then surely the knee-jerk lessons in fear that lockdowns promote are a poor, and even harmful learning experience masquerading as safety. A safer, kinder, more compassionate society can emerge from our education system, but it will not emerge from fear. Instead of cowering in corners, fearful of stray bullets that have impacted four schools in 40 years, why not teach about the conditions that create the feelings of hopelessness, alienation and resentment found in most school shooters?

It seems we've put the cart before the horse. Better education breeds greater safety and security. And not just in our schools, but in society writ large.

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### ENDNOTES

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5. J. Kifner, R. Bragg, D. Johnson and S.H. Verhovek, "From Wild Talk and Friendship to Five Deaths in a Schoolyard," *New York Times*, 29 Mar 1998. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/29/us/from-wild-talk-and-friendship-to-five-deaths-in-a-schoolyard.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>.
6. For defining purposes, I take the term "mass shooting" to mean four or more dead or injured, possibly including the assailant. There is no consensus on definitions of "mass shooting." My reasoning for this definition is that most attacks involving three or less victims, based on my research, are specifically targeted acts of violence and frequently enough include the assailant as one of the victims (often by suicide). Mass shootings, conversely, tend to implicate others who were either not an intended target, or are the victims of indiscriminate violence by the perpetrators. This strikes me as a reasonable, if obviously imperfect distinction to make. My statistics are drawn from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_school\\_shootings\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school_shootings_in_the_United_States). Methodologically, Wikipedia requires at least one credible news report on the incident in order for it to be listed on their site.
7. The notable exception is the École Polytechnique massacre, during which Marc Lépine targeted and murdered fourteen women while injuring fourteen more, in his avowedly anti-feminist crusade. It's exclusion from this discussion will be addressed later in this piece.
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13. SSAT p. 12.

14. See the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's brief summary at: <https://ccla.org/a-recent-history-of-racial-profiling-and-policing/>.

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19. The Northwest Catholic District School Board, "Guidelines for Developing and Maintaining Lockdown Procedures Elementary Schools Ontario," Dec 2010: p. 5. <http://www.tncdsb.on.ca/new/resources/PRO%20F02%20Guidelines%20Lockdown%20Procedures.pdf>.

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21. [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/pdfs/exp\\_tableE.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/pdfs/exp_tableE.pdf).

22. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/pdfs/prov-susp.pdf>.

23. Oliver Sachgau, "Are School Security Incidents Rising in the GTA?," *The Toronto Star*, 27 Oct 2015: <http://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/education/2015/10/27/are-school-security-incidents-rising-in-the-gta.html>.

24. Seventeen lockdowns and hold-and-secures were reported on in just the Toronto and Peel regions between September 5<sup>th</sup> and October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015. A list of those incidents and locations was reported by City News: <http://www.citynews.ca/2015/10/27/toronto-schools-deal-with-rash-of-lockdowns-hold-and-secures/>.

25. Both Ontario and British Columbia's Auditors General have expressed concern

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about significant spending on anti-bullying programs, while either not tracking or not showing their impacts. Ontario's review was conducted after three years of program implementation, in Fall, 2010: [http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en10/2010ar\\_en.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en10/2010ar_en.pdf) (relevant section begins on p. 227). BC's is more dated, having been done after only two years of the program's commencement, in 2001: <https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/publications/2000/report1/report/fostering-safe-learning-environment-how-british-columbia-public-school-syst.pdf> (relevant criticisms begin on p. 9).

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34. Liza Finlay, "The Safe Schools Guide," *Today's Parent* (4 Aug 2009): <http://www.todayparent.com/family/parenting/the-safe-schools-guide/>.

35. MacPherson, Modjeski and Deibert, *op. cit.*

36. I have deliberately omitted names and exact locations out of respect for the family's privacy. I was put in touch with the family by Christine Saulnier, in the CCPA's Nova Scotia office. I owe both her and the family my thanks for sharing this troubling story.