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Detecting the Problem with Metal Detectors

Metal detectors are usually viewed as a perfect and simple solution to stop violence and increase security in schools. After mass shootings, the security measures in place at a school are often scrutinized and installing metal detectors is always the first promise or solution that I hear, stating that these will prevent weapons from being brought into the school in the future. Some schools will randomly conduct searches, while other schools will use metal detectors every day. Walking through a metal detector every day makes some, such as Alondra Alvarez, “feel safe” (qtd. in Williams), while others feel like they are “entering a penitentiary” (qtd. in Singer) or a “correctional facility” (qtd. in Servoss), illustrating the wide range of attitudes that students have about their schools using metal detectors, and the negative views that metal detectors lead students to have about their school. Instead of protecting students and making them feel safe or secure, these devices transform schools into prisons. While installing metal detectors appears to be an obvious way to ensure that weapons do not enter schools, the deeper ramifications of installing these devices are present, but not clearly evident. These metal detectors are installed based on the make-up of the student population, which reinforces stereotypes, as well as negatively altering students’ perceptions about their learning environment. While it may seem that metal detectors will prevent future violent events in schools, these metal detectors actually have many negative effects on students and their school environment.

The installation of metal detectors is often offered as a solution to increase security in schools as well as reduce the number of violent incidents that take place in the school. Placing metal detectors in entrances to the school and having students walk through them every day allows weapons to be detected as soon as students enter the building, reducing the chances of a violent incident happening. For some students, metal detectors make the school feel safer and brings about a peace of mind as students know that everyone is passing through the detectors before entering the building. In some cases, metal detectors are present in the school but are not turned on every day or are only used for random searches. In these cases, the metal detectors will not be able to detect a weapon, but they act as deterrents to scare students into not bringing weapons to school in the fear that they will be caught. Lazard, the C. Eric Lincoln Minister for Student Engagement at Duke University Chapel, states that he remembers having “friends who would not bring weapons…because they knew we had metal detectors” (Lazard), proving that using metal detectors as a deterrent can also be effective in reducing the number of students who will bring weapons to school. Whether students are aware that the metal detectors are in use or not, making it known that there are random checks or having the physical metal detectors at the entrance of the school will deter students who may be considering bringing a weapon to school to not risk being caught. Some may argue that the use of metal detectors in schools infringes on students’ rights and while “[c]ivil liberties are important…saving children’s lives” (Floyd) should be the first priority. While some rights might be violated, the use of metal detectors is done to benefit and protect not only the students, but all of the staff and members of the school, allowing potential violent incidents to be stopped before they occur inside the school building.

Opponents to metal detectors in schools argue that the presence of these devices contribute to what is referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is when children are pushed from schools into the juvenile or criminal justice system (Flannery). This process can occur when students are suspended or expelled from schools, or any other action that results in a student being forced to leave school. However, every student is not at an equal probability of being pushed out of school and entering the school-to-prison pipeline. The U.S. Department of Justice found that African-American students are pushed out of schools “at a rate three times greater than White students” while those with “disabilities are twice as likely” and “LGBT students are 1.4 times more likely to face suspension” (Flannery) than non-disabled or straight students. African-American students, students with disabilities, and LGBT students are more likely to be pushed out of schools as a result of suspensions or expulsions, and therefore, are more likely to enter the school-to-prison pipeline. The use of metal detectors is also not equal among areas of the country, or even among schools in the same district.

The distribution of metal detectors is largely determined by the make-up of the student population, as well as the rate of violence in the school or community. Metal detectors are most commonly seen in inner-city schools where there is perceived to be a higher rate of violence compared to other districts, such as those located in suburban or rural areas. However, in rural areas, guns can be found in 58 percent of households and 41 percent in the suburbs when in urban areas, guns are found in only 29 percent of households (Lazard). Even though guns can be found more commonly and are more accessible in rural and suburban areas, schools in these areas have lower levels of security, including the use of fewer metal detectors, than do schools in urban areas. This inequity is due to the perception of schools in urban areas being more prone to violence than schools in rural and suburban areas, when in reality, the majority of mass shootings are carried out by white males in suburban schools (Lazard). The image of urban schools being more prone to violence is predominantly based on the composition of the student populations in these areas. The percentage of African-American students is the “strongest predictor of school security level, even when controlling for region, urbanicity, enrollment, neighborhood crime, [and] student misbehavior” (Servoss). In other words, the proportion of African-American students in a school or district is the largest determining factor of the amount or type of security present in that school, resulting in schools that have a higher portion of African-American students having higher levels of security. While the make-up of the student body plays a large role in determining the level of security present in a school, the rate of violence is still significantly related to the use of daily searches, (Gastic) exhibiting that factors other than the student population, while they may not be as influential, also play a part in determining the security levels found in schools. However, it was found that “majority-minority high-violence schools were significantly more likely to conduct daily metal detector searches than other high-violence public schools” (Gastic) confirming that the make-up of the school’s population is the leading factor in determining the level of security, even in schools where violence is a considerable issue. When entering school, African American students are six times more likely to pass through a metal detector than are White students (Servoss), demonstrating how these students are more likely to experience the school-to-prison pipeline than White students. Students that have to walk through a metal detector every day feel as though they are in a prison rather than a school, which should not just be a safe environment, but should also be a welcoming one. Treating schools more like prisons by having students walk through metal detectors every day can inadvertently push students out of schools and into the criminal justice system, as defined by the school-to-prison pipeline.

Opponents of the use of metal detectors in schools also consider the attitudes of the students regarding the metal detectors. While some students like the presence of metal detectors in schools because they feel safer, others have very negative views of the metal detectors in their schools. Students who attend schools where they must pass through metal detectors every day feel like their school is preparing them for “second-class citizenship and life in prison” instead of preparing them for “colleges, careers, citizenship, and adulthood” (qtd. in Singer). Rather than equipping them for the real world after high school, students see their schools as preparing them for a life in prison over anything else, making them feel like that is where they will end up. Because students tend to internalize things, if a school “looks like a prison,” then those attending the school will “decide that’s what is expected of them” (qtd. in Williams). When schools are structured more as a prison, students will see themselves as being in a prison, and may alter their behavior as a result of that perspective. Surrounding students in a prison-like environment can affect their behavior. Behaviors may worsen as a result of students feeling like they are not welcome in school or are having their rights restricted or taken away, leading to more students being pushed out of schools and into the school-to-prison pipeline. The use of metal detectors in schools can also “drive a wedge between students of color and their communities” by perpetuating the stereotypes of young men of color as violent and delinquent (Gastic). This “wedge” (Gastic) further distances students from their school and community, continuing to push them out of the school system and towards the criminal justice system, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline.

Metal detectors seem like an easy and effective way to prevent weapons from entering schools and to hopefully stop any violent incidents before they are able to happen. In reality, metal detectors are “used in fewer than 8 percent of high schools” (Servoss) and can have many negative effects on students in these schools. Students can be further distanced from their schools as a result of these metal detectors and the wedges they can create between them and their community. In schools with a higher proportion of minority students, the use of metal detectors can make these students feel like they are not welcome in school or reinforce stereotypes. Even though metal detectors may be able to prevent weapons from entering schools, there is little proof supporting any actual “sustained improvements in school safety” (Gastic). While metal detectors may see an improvement in school security shortly after installation, there is little evidence showing that the use of metal detectors exhibits a continuously increased level of security in schools for a longer period after they are introduced. Instead of only focusing on ways to stop weapons from entering schools, the focus should be on the reasons why students bring weapons to school. By understanding what pushes students in a specific school or area to bring weapons to school, more appropriate methods can be employed to prevent students from bringing weapons in the future (Gastic). When deciding whether or not to implement a system using metal detectors in a school, the voices of the students should be considered. While some may welcome the use of metal detectors in their schools as a way to increase their feelings of safety, others are opposed to the environment that these devices will create. When going to school, students want to feel that they are in a safe and welcoming environment, not that they are entering a correctional facility or prison. Structuring schools more as prisons with the use of metal detectors can cause students to change their attitudes about the school and change their behaviors as a result of the feeling that their rights are being restricted and that they are not welcome in their own school.

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