

Why Schools Are Likely to See More School Riots In the Future?

In the past year, L.I. school districts experienced 7 riots associated with their high schools. While four of them made the papers, I know of three that did not. This raises a number of interesting questions. Were there others that didn't make the papers and we don't know of? Also, is this an isolated series of events or are we seeing a new trend? Finally, what is happening in the rest of the country?

This article will look at some risk factors that make riots possible and suggest areas for school districts to examine that might eliminate or at least minimize some risk factors. Many of these suggestions are not new. They have been suggested by child and school safety advocates for years. Unfortunately, the "pot is beginning to bubble over" now and unless serious pro-active steps are taken, we are likely to see greater numbers of riots in our public schools.

Schools have a long laundry list of risk factors. Some can be direct triggers to ignite a riot and others might be situations that act as fertilizer for future eruptions. In some cases, we have to live with the risk factors because they are part of adolescent or human behavior or part of growing up in a more congested society. The day of the "Little Red School House" is gone. However, there are quite a few areas that must be addressed because they increase the chance of riots well above the acceptable level.

It is important to know the secret formula for a riot to occur. The two key elements are a large group or crowding combined with an emotional component enough to trigger the group. The emotional component could be anger, rage, jubilation or fear. They all work equally well. A school doesn't have to be overcrowded to be dangerous, although overcrowding adds to the stress and risk. All schools have to do is have a large concentration of students i.e. hall, cafeteria, sports event, dance, etc. and all schools do. Escape / panic riots are the most likely to occur at school. These are the hardest to predict or prepare for. They can be easily triggered by an explosion, shooting, fire / smoke, rumors or natural disaster and the list goes on and on. If exits are limited and can't handle the escaping crowd, crushing and trampling are often the result. The volatility of young people, the threats of school shootings, the weapons brought to school and a host of other factors yet to be mentioned all contribute to the possibility of a panic.

At this point, although it could change, actual external terrorism is probably one of the least likely threats we face. However, fear of or rumors about terrorist threats could provide a trigger. Internal terrorism is more likely. Threats from American groups i.e. Oklahoma City Bombing, or our own children i.e. Columbine, are far more likely. The Russian School event has let the genie out of the bottle. At one point in time, an attack

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like this on a school would have been unthinkable. However, it is always easier the 2nd or 3rd time. Additionally, it gives ideas to wanna-bees who seek that 1 minute of fame. We

have already uncovered cases where teens were planning an attack on their school that would surpass Columbine just so they could go down in the history books as #1.

We must keep in mind that schools are vulnerable and they always will be. In spite of the billions spent in the past few years to “target harden” schools, they are still quite vulnerable. It should also be noted, technology does not eliminate the need for teacher training. Because of their size and the efforts of educators to keep schools a “friendly” place, we could never totally secure a school. Even a police presence can only do so much but I am an advocate for this approach. For a determined attacker, it should be no problem to bring a gun or bomb into a school. Therefore, a law enforcement presence in a school would be a great asset to administrators during a crisis.

Our own children can be the very trigger that spurs a riot either intentionally or unintentionally. Some studies suggest as many as 15 % of adolescents suffer some form of mental health problems. Several studies indicate that 800,000 teenagers suffer from depression each year and over 500,000 make an attempt at suicide that requires medical intervention. Currently, suicide is the 3rd leading killer of 15-19 year olds and it continues to rise. Kids need our help. Unfortunately, these problems are not being adequately addressed. To make matters worse, only half the school children in the U.S. who seek mental health care get it. Excuses often given are “We don’t have the resources, or the money,” or “It is not our job.” “Kids are our job” and as educators we are going to have to accept this additional responsibility. Find the funding and lobby the politicians. A study by Human Rights Watch found there are as many as 300,000 mentally ill prison inmates nationally. Could they be our former students who never received help? Just possibly, if we invested more money in providing screening and counseling services earlier to our children, some of the violence we are encountering in schools might disappear.

Unfortunately, schools tend to be reactive and not proactive. Here is a meaningful quote told to me by Dr. Arun Gandhi, director of The Gandhi Institute of Non-Violence, “Unless we deal with covert violence, it will eventually bubble up and become overt violence.” Some form of covert violence exists in every school and in too many cases it is being ignored or tolerated.

Kids have a tendency to get caught up in the moment. When in a group, there is a contagion factor that makes it easier to do things that one wouldn’t do when alone. Combine this with the excitement of X-treme and dangerous sports very popular amongst the younger generation; a riot to some might sound like “an exciting day at the ranch.” There have been numerous instances where students have brought explosive devices to

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school and exploded them. Actual threats combined with rumors could easily generate fear into panic. This is all you need for a “panic riot.” In the past, the Internet & e-mail has been an easy way of spreading rumors and fear. For those that don’t believe rumors could start a panic riot, just look at what happened in Iraq. As a large number of Shiite pilgrims were crossing a bridge headed for a holy city in Iraq, someone yelled out there was a terrorist with a bomb. The crowd panicked, people were pushed off the bridge and many were crushed. In total, nearly 1,000 were killed. When nerves are on edge, it doesn’t take much to trigger a panic. The rumor of a school shooter, the shooting of a fire cracker or the smell of smoke could be all that is needed in an already fearful school setting.

Every group establishes a pecking order. With most groups it is clearly established by rank, seniority etc. Kids, on the other hand, have an “invisible” pecking order. In order to move up, there is usually fighting or at least threats made in the form of “ritualistic combat.” If fights aren’t stopped quickly, they can easily turn into riots because of the alliances that form in school. These alliances can be in the form of gangs, teams or fraternities. Many of these groups have strong support bonds. In addition to this, sometimes there is tension or hostility between racial, ethnic, cultural or religious groups. All these add to the danger that a fight can easily escalate into a much larger event.

Competition, like anything else, can have a positive or negative influence. Winning at all cost has too often replaced good sportsmanship and honor. Creating school and team rivalries has reached a fevered pitch in many school districts and riots are becoming more common. Many a riot was triggered by an excited athlete, coach or parent. A positive effort by some school districts to curb sports violence includes requiring parents to attend a “fan support seminar” before being allowed to attend sporting events.

Teenage alcohol abuse is responsible for about 40% of all crimes, violent and non-violent, which are committed while under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol is very commonly a contributor in college and sports riots. At many high school events, kids are either coming under the influence or smuggling liquor into the event. Add alcohol to an over excited sports fan and you have a prescription for trouble.

Research and evidence gathered over the year’s points to the importance of teacher presence everywhere in the building and grounds where kids can be found. Bullies operate and fights often start in the absence of teachers or adult supervision. If young people don’t feel safe they might resort to bringing weapons or joining gangs. These are all potential sparks for rioting. However, teacher presence doesn’t fit well with teacher fear. When teachers feel unsafe, they will tend to avoid any disciplinary or confrontational situation with students. To make matters worse, most teachers and even school security guards are not trained in any form of physical violence prevention or

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control. Combine the stress of a riot with no training and you have a prescription for disaster.

Are schools prepared to handle a crisis, panic or riot? Here are some things to consider. In the event of a crisis, can we count on the administrators to lead and communicate instructions to the staff? Can we count on the teachers to take charge? And finally, can we count on the children to follow directions? From what I have seen, most schools do not even have a mobile communication system that would be essential to keep teachers and students informed in most crisis situations. Without training and some practice, we can't expect the teachers and students to perform well during a crisis.

Unless some steps are taken to reduce the risk factors, the next major event is just around the corner. Stay Safe!

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