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Searchlight New Mexico interviews Maryam Ahranjani on the Prisonization of America's Public Schools

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Chalk, books and metal detectors: A conversation about the 'prisonization' of schools

Interview with Maryam Ahranjani

By Sara Solovitch

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In It's a given that every act of deadly school violence – be it at Columbine High School in 1999, Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, or Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., in February – is followed by a demand for more police, more security, more metal detectors.

Maryam Ahranjani is a University of New Mexico law professor with an expert view along with some personal experience. As a girl growing up in suburban Chicago, she lived through one of the first mass school shootings in the United States. The episode occurred in 1988, when a mentally disturbed woman burst into Hubbard Woods Elementary School and shot six children, killing an 8-year-old boy.

Ahranjani was a sixth-grader at the time, and though she had recently transitioned to middle school, the episode made a profound impact on her life. Her twin sisters were fifth-graders at Hubbard Woods, and Ahranjani recalls dropping them off at school in the days after everything changed. "And like a lot of these cases," she says, "we were left trying to put the pieces together."

She writes about the experience in "The Prisonization of America's Public Schools," published in October 2017 in Hofstra Law Review. The article takes a critical stance against what Ahranjani terms the growing "criminal infrastructure" – metal detectors, surveillance cameras and police officers – within our nation's schools.

Ahranjani has worked in Guatemala City for the U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development on projects related to human rights and youth migration. As director of the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, she organized classes on constitutional law and juvenile justice for public high school students around the country. She is co-author of the 2014 textbook Youth Justice in America.

Searchlight New Mexico asked Ahranjani what kind of national response makes sense in the wake of the Parkland mass shooting. Her comments follow below.

Q: Is there a place for police officers in a school?

A: Teachers are overwhelmed and when they see behavior they don't know what to do with and think they need to send [a student] somewhere else - when you have police officers in a school, that somewhere else is the criminal [justice] system.

Most of the time that children act out, there is an underlying reason. A deeper dive into why the child is engaging in that behavior would be a better place to start than just sending for the police officer. I tell my criminal procedures students that telling a police officer not to find a crime is like telling a dog not to use its nose.

Q: In your article, you write that public schools now routinely incorporate tools like metal detectors, drug-sniffing dogs, on-site police officers and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies. What's wrong with those kinds of measures when our schools have become the targets of mass violence?

A: You're right that the mere presence of guns in schools, school-related violence and mass school violence are often conflated. But I disagree that the body counts (in K-12 public school incidents) have increased.

The use of assault rifles may be relatively new, but in fact, there hasn't been an increase in school-associated violent deaths since the Centers for Disease Control started tracking school-related violence in 1992.

According to a new report from Northeastern University, there has been a grand total of eight mass shootings (shootings that kill at least four people) at K-through-12 schools in the United States since 1996. Meanwhile, over the past 20 years, the number of fatal shootings in American schools (of any kind) has plummeted.

Q: Is it possible, then, that all these security measures may actually help keep children safe?

A: It's impossible to definitively measure any deterrent effects prisonization practices may have, but there is no question that the practices are absolutely prone to human error. And any potential benefits (given the relative infrequency of mass violence) are outweighed by the harmful effects.

We've created mini-prisons, where metal detectors and security guards and surveillance cameras are being installed in urban, low-income schools. But episodes of mass violence typically happen in a rural and suburban context. Where, typically, the perpetrator is a white male.

Q: How do you account for that?

A: There is a lot of growing evidence of what we call the school-to-prison pipeline for black and Latino students. Studies show that starting in preschool, children of color are more likely to be disciplined for their behavior than their white counterparts.

Q: Your interest in school violence traces back to your childhood, when your elementary school was attacked by a woman with mental health problems. How did that attack change your sense of security in the world?

A: Before it happened there wasn't any security that I can remember. Then suddenly, after it happened, I remember police officers everywhere and everyone entering the school had to go through one main entrance with a new metal detector; really strict procedures about who could come in and out of school. And I remember also that all that hyper-security didn't last long.

It felt really false to me as a child. I remember thinking, 'If someone wanted to do something really bad, this stuff wouldn't stop it. And later, when they dialed back the security after only a few months, I remember wondering, 'Did the adults really know what they were doing?'

Q: How does our country's gun culture shape the argument around school safety?

A: I have had the pleasure of teaching law students here in New Mexico who themselves are former teachers in the state. Many of them have told me that they absolutely would not have felt comfortable being armed at school, and they simply don't feel teachers should be put in the position of having to wield weapons.

In my view, from having worked in and around public schools and with public school teachers all across the country through the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, the notion that teachers should be armed is another ridiculous, dangerous prisonization practice. Teachers are concerned with teaching, and, frankly, they generally don't even have the resources to be effective teachers. In many places, they don't have chalk.

Q: You argue that the 'prisonization' of public schools, an expression you coined, is incredibly expensive. Is it effective in any way?

A: There are many communities across the country that feel neglected and mistreated by law enforcement and other government actors. To some parents with whom I have spoken, prisonization practices feel reassuring because they feel like they are finally getting some resources and attention. However, we know that there are other ways to address the real problems with real solutions rather than practices that actually further harm children in those communities. Those best practices have been developed and recommended by the American Pediatric Association, American Psychological Association, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Somehow we can't find the funding for chalk and counselors, but we can find funds for metal detectors, cameras, drug-sniffing dogs, and guns for teachers?

I think also you can't ignore the overall societal willingness to give up notions of privacy – be it airport security, federal buildings, and other places we frequent. Given the relative infrequency of school-related incidents resulting in violent deaths, the overarching message we're giving to millions of kids every single day is, 'You don't have privacy anywhere.' The place you're supposed to be the most able to feel like a citizen, a person with rights – that's not what we're teaching with these prisonization practices.

Q: You point out that schools are one of the most important places for kids to learn citizenship and practice democracy. But they do need to be protected, as well. What kind of incidents merit police or court intervention?

A: Discretion should be in the hands of the school principal. Instead of first going to the school resource officer, they should think. 'Is there a way to think about dealing with this behavior internally? What resources do we have?'

A lot of districts have implemented disciplinary procedures that look like criminal codes, while the amount of discretion given to school administrators has increased. I know that in New Mexico, we regularly hear that we don't have the resources. And it's true that we certainly have fewer dollars per pupil. But we can think creatively about what resources we do have and get to the roots of school-associated violence.

Q: That's a long-range answer to a very acute problem.

A: While my research and writing focuses on school-related violent deaths, the fact is that we have to have some much larger conversations about why children have access to and feel the need to bring guns to and around schools.

Unless we want to live in fortresses, increasing prisonization security measures takes us down a dark path. As to why a child may have weapons in and around school, in general, well-trained, culturally competent mental health professionals are in the best position – as compared to police officers and teachers – to investigate, treat, and refer students and families for additional support. These professionals are also in the best position to deal with toxic stress, help de-escalate violence, and generally help young people build coping skills.