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SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. A15**LENGTH:** 834 words**HEADLINE:** **Overkill On Schools;**
Zero-tolerance and our exaggerated images of violence.**BYLINE:** James **Forman Jr.****BODY:**

While two years have passed since Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's rampage through Columbine High School, the memory of their act continues to influence the national debate on school safety and discipline. Unfortunately, the panic created by Columbine and other highly publicized school shootings threatens to undermine rational educational policy.

There is no dispute that the risk of being killed in school is extraordinarily low and getting lower. School shootings have declined throughout the 1990s, to the point at which a child now has less than a one-in-2-million chance of being killed in school. Today a student is more likely to be killed by lightning than in a school homicide. And it is not just school shootings that have declined: According to the Centers for Disease Control and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, fights, gun possession and overall school crime are down, too.

But despite the fact that schools are getting safer, school officials and educators are creating zero-tolerance and other hard-line policies. Lawmakers in Texas have proposed a law that would allow school principals to carry weapons. A North Carolina firearms practice site trains law enforcement officers at newly developed "RU Ready High," a mock school that comes equipped with 16 classrooms and an audio system that simulates the screams and gunfire of a mass shooting. And five students in Mississippi were suspended and criminally charged for throwing peanuts on a school bus, one of which hit the bus driver. According to the sheriff: "This time it was peanuts, but if we don't get a handle on it, the next time it could be bodies."

Why are lawmakers adopting punitive approaches to a nonexistent crisis? Because despite the facts, the public largely believes that youth and school violence are on the rise. Though the overwhelming majority of Americans never will be victimized by a school shooting, 71 percent of respondents to an NBC/Wall Street

Journal poll felt that a school shooting was likely in their community. Similarly, although youth crime is declining steadily, 62 percent of poll respondents felt it was rising.

Who is responsible for the public's erroneous belief that school shooters lurk everywhere? In part, the media. Their focus on school shootings is part of their general infatuation with crime coverage. Though crime dropped 20 percent nationally from 1990 to 1998, network coverage of crime increased 83 percent during that period, according to a recent study prepared by the Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Justice Policy Institute.

But there is another, less likely, culprit: handgun control advocates. Following Columbine and other recent school shootings, supporters of handgun control made a concerted effort to publicize school shootings, in the hope that an outraged public would force politicians to buck the NRA. That gambit failed, however, and the results of two years of hyping school shootings are now in: no meaningful gun control, more punitive zero-tolerance policies.

The school shooting furor echoes another public crisis from the 1980s: the crack cocaine debate. As with school shootings, the uproar over crack cocaine stormed into the public consciousness with rhetoric often outpacing reality. And as with the school shooting debates, some liberals joined in. Reps. Charles Rangel and Major Owens, two leading African American Democrats, led the fight to increase penalties for cocaine trafficking. In 1986 Major Owens said that crack cocaine "is the worst oppression we have known since slavery."

Today, 15 years later, few policy analysts of any persuasion believe mandatory minimum drug sentences make sense. Even a conservative criminologist such as John J. DiIulio, the head of President Bush's Office on Faith Based and Community Initiatives, has argued the "conservative crime-control case . . . for repealing mandatory minimum drug laws now." The Judicial Conference of the United States, the federal Sentencing Commission, the Department of Justice and a raft of Republican-nominated federal judges all have questioned the efficacy of mandatory minimum drug sentences. And a recently released study by the Journal of the American Medical Association eviscerates the case for criminal prosecution of cocaine-addicted mothers by demonstrating the exaggerated nature of the "crack babies" hype.

But the crack cocaine debate also demonstrates another rule of politics: It is easier to enact bad policy than to undo it. Even after public fervor has died, the laws often remain on the books.

Schools today do face tremendous challenges, including preparing students for an increasingly demanding workplace, educating increasing numbers of special education students and providing a quality education to all despite gross disparities in school funding. Given all these challenges, developing zero-tolerance policies for students who toss peanuts on a bus can safely be left off the agenda.

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