

Violence in schools is growing

Les Twentyman

WHEN I started school at Sunshine East Primary in the early 1950s, Mum and Dad always knew I was safe there. There might from time to time be fears about walking to school and back home, but within the school grounds parents thought their kids were **untouchable**.

It's not like that any more.

Do you know there are now some schools in Melbourne that have stricter entry procedures than the MCG or Telstra Dome?

I visited one not long ago, a Catholic school in the suburbs. To gain entry every morning kids have to pass their unique bar code through a security device.

Other schools have strict bag searches and those airport-like electronic screens the kids have to walk through. The searchers are not mostly looking for alcohol, as is the case at sporting venues, but for weapons. That's right, weapons: in our schools.

I have no doubt some readers will think that I'm being alarmist.

Well, tell that to the 16 year-old student at a western suburbs school who was taken to hospital a few weeks ago with a severe head wound. He was attacked by a 15 year-old former student of the school with a machete.

Not outside at the station. Not down at the soccer club. In the school grounds.

Or tell the former principal of a Deer Park school who lost an eye in a vicious attack some years ago, after he courageously tried to break up a fight in his school grounds.

I was talking recently to a doctor who works in the casualty department of a major Melbourne hospital. Once, he told me, when kids were brought in during school hours, it was because of sporting injuries. Now, he said, a large number of visits to casualty results from attacks and assaults within the school premises, including serious knife wounds.

No, I am not being alarmist.

It's worthwhile noting that often such attacks are not coming from bullying students. These are school invasions, where the attackers are outsiders, arriving generally in a pack to target a particular kid or kids. Hence the wisdom of the bar-code procedure I mentioned. That prevents non-students, or ex-students, from gaining entry to the school grounds.

Another common factor in many of the school invasions and attacks is that they occur on a Monday. It seems clear that they are a carry-over from something that

happened over the weekend. Maybe a fight over a girl, a punch-up at a party, a brawl at a takeaway place.

It also seems clear that the incidence of school invasion is a reflection of what happens in the broader society. Kids are afraid, others are angry and lash out, some see no real hope for a decent life in the future.

The annual crime figures for the city of Brimbank, show a 7.6 per cent increase.

While most of this centres round burglary, robbery and car theft, there seems to be an increased level of violence in the such offences. Add to that the incidents of the schoolyard machete attack, a stabbing and two shootings, and is it any wonder local police are extremely concerned.

And, regrettably, all this is happening when lack of police numbers is seriously affecting their capacity to respond. Even to the school invasions.

In the Brimbank area there is a shortage of 89 police personnel, according to official statistics released by the [National Institute of Economic & Industry Research](#).

I find it alarming. No matter what it takes, our community has to come to grips with what is happening in our schools.

I see increased security at schools' point of entry, such as individual bar codes and other search measures, as a sensible and practical step. I also believe that shortages in police numbers must be addressed urgently.

And it is about time, after years of being asked, that youth workers be employed within schools, to act as a link with the community. That's the best way to identify potential trouble and prevent it.

The Victorian Government is preventing adults smoking in cars when there are children present. Fine. But isn't the kids' physical safety at school equally important?

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