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Today's [schools](#) are fortresses, bristling with surveillance cameras and metal detectors, patrolled by armed guards.



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[School](#) districts spend millions of dollars a year on high-tech systems they hope will keep students safe and their buildings secure.

Metro Nashville schools alone boast a \$2.2 million security budget that funds 1,425 surveillance cameras, 121 entryway security stations that allow visitors to be labeled with badges that display their picture, at least two hand-held metal detector wands in every school and four walkthrough metal detectors that can be moved from building to building at need. Not to mention 71 school resource officers drawn from Metro police ranks and one drug-sniffing dog named Batey.

Now a Vanderbilt professor has come out with a new book that argues that high-tech security measures, police officers in schools and zero-tolerance policies for drugs and violence do little to deter crime. In fact, [Professor Torin Monahan](#) argues, they may actually make [students](#) feel less safe, by sending them the message that adults distrust and fear them.

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"Columbine had armed security guards. Columbine had video cameras," said Monahan, referring to the notorious 1999 [high school shootings](#) in Colorado that took 15 lives and sparked a nationwide campaign for heightened school security.

"Generally speaking," he said, "surveillance is not good for preventing crime. It's more useful for catching people after the fact."

In the newly released *Schools Under Surveillance: Cultures of Control in Public Education*, Monahan and other authors found no difference in the crime rate at schools with heightened security [systems](#) — cameras, armed guards, frequent pat-downs and weapons checks, even some with barbed-wire perimeters — and at comparable schools without such measures. The poorer and more urban the school, they found, the more invasive the security measures were likely to be.

Contact Jennifer Brooks at 615-259-8892 or jabrooks@tennessean.com.

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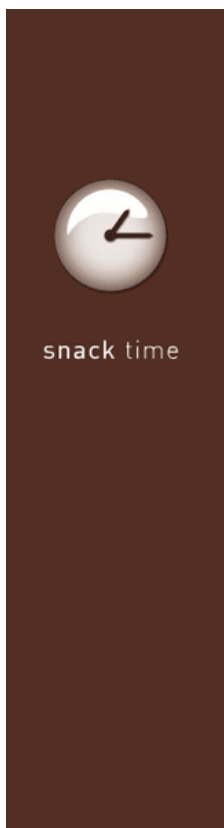
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"Schools are some of the safest places you can be," Monahan said. Students are "significantly safer there than on the streets or at home."



But school safety experts, and even some students, argue that all those security measures are the very reason schools are so safe.

"I feel pretty safe in school," said Hector Lara, a senior at [Glenciff High School](#) in Nashville. He likes the fact that campus security can spot and break up a fight almost before it begins, and he likes the fact that if he's caught in the halls between classes, someone is there checking up on him. "They're there if there's a fight. They're there whenever other kids bring guns or weapons into the school."

Jameshia Fosten, another senior, said she feels good about the cameras monitoring her from almost every corner of the school.

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"If something happens, instead of 'he-said, she-said,' campus security can see what actually happened" on the surveillance tape, she said. "It makes you feel safe. It makes you feel like somebody's looking out for you."

A Long-term Effect

Today's students have grown up in a world with cameras and guards everywhere — from the malls to city sidewalks.

To Monahan, who studies the social implications of surveillance and security systems on society, that's part of the problem.

"We seldom question surveillance," he said. "We don't anticipate how (surveillance [technology](#)) is going to be used. All those things are seen as unimportant when it comes to safety. It's an example of mission creep. Technology that's deployed for one purpose (could be) used for another."

Meanwhile, he said, "We're teaching children that we don't trust them, that we are afraid of them, that we aren't going to be tolerant of any mistakes they make."

It's Thursday morning at Glenciff High School, and students are hustling through the hallways on their way to their next class, under the watchful eye of ceiling-mounted security cameras, a Metro police officer and Ann Watkins, one of the uniformed campus support staff assigned to the school by the district's safety office.

Contact Jennifer Brooks at jabrooks@tennessean.com. 615-259-8892

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"I am surrounded by a sea of untuckedness," Watkins sighed, pointing a warning finger at a pair of youngsters strolling by with their shirttails hanging loose, in violation of the campus dress code. "Young man, I gave you candy two times yesterday!"



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The students grin and tuck in their shirts, eyeing the bowl of candy Watkins keeps near the front door to sweeten her constant reminders to students — tuck in your shirts, take off your jackets, stop loitering in the halls.

Watkins, who stands at least a foot shorter than most of the students she watches over, describes her job jokingly as "being Big Brother-Big Sister to 1,500 kids."

"It shocked me that these big burly football players (pay attention) when I shake my finger at them. I've shaken my finger at a few... They like having somebody watching over them," said Watkins, whose only tool is the walkie-talkie on her belt. "I would much rather have had a setup like this when my kids were in school. I'd have had a lot fewer sleepless nights."

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She's wearing the district's newly retooled uniform — a colored polo shirt, khaki pants and an oxford shirt. The old uniform — black shirt and black fatigue pants — was ruled to be too unfriendly.

This year, the dozens of support staff who work every public high school and middle school in Nashville have been urged to do more than just enforce the rules. Ralph M. Thompson, assistant superintendent for student affairs, wants his security staffers to see themselves as a service to the students as well.

"This year, I want us to become more service-oriented," said Thompson, who has instructed his school security workers to start doing things like holding doors open for people and helping students to cross the street.

If there's one thing skeptics like Monahan and school security experts like Thompson agree on, it's the idea that the best way to keep a school safe is to build trust and improve communication with students. Students who trust authority figures are much more likely to come forward with their concerns.

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"I would love to see, and I often talk to the staff about how we can work toward, the day where we do not have to use cameras," Thompson said.

Security Ramped Up

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Metro's safety efforts have ramped up in recent years, and Thompson says he can see results. In the 1993-94 school year, officials found 38 guns in Nashville schools. In the 2008 school year, they found 11. This school year officials have found three.

Student suspensions have also dipped districtwide in the past year, Thompson said, from 8,184 last November to 6,484 in the same period this year. The change may have something to do with easing a crackdown on dress code violations, but Thompson also credits the deterrent effect of the security measures.

"The cameras do more than watch the children. They often help us solve cases," said Thompson.

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Surveillance cameras and locked and guarded doors help schools keep out dangerous people who might otherwise wander into a school, he said — not to mention bullies who might prey on other students or the thieves who might otherwise walk out with computers and other valuables.

But metal detectors, surveillance cameras and in-house security officers aren't cheap, and the money has grown increasingly scarce in recent years.

Tennessee's school violence protection budget decreased from \$12.1 million in state and federal funding in 2004 to \$9.7 million by 2008, according to a recent [state report](#). This year, the state was prepared to cut \$3.92 million from its almost \$6 million Safe and Drug-Free Schools budget, but was able to restore those funds with the help of federal stimulus dollars.

Next year, when the stimulus money runs out, so does most of Tennessee's statewide school safety budget.

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