

Rural Social Forms

Security

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Abstract

This essay examines discussions over the future of a rural public school through the lens of security, comparing defense-oriented preparations for school shootings with local concerns around declining enrollment and unemployment. It takes stock of the material, financial, and affective resources at stake when the future of rural North America is forecasted through inevitable decline or crisis rather than community investment.

Keywords: futures, school policy, violence prevention

This essay compares two references to security in the everyday lives of public-school administrators and residents of a predominantly agricultural county in southwestern Indiana. The first concerns the installation of surveillance cameras and the second a cement step in disrepair. By comparing these examples, I propose a concept of security that centers not just on defense but also investment, in the face of future uncertainty. How, I ask, can the security of the school encompass broader concerns over how to promote the growth and vitality of this rural community?

The vignettes presented here take place during one of the most well-attended school board meetings of the year. The principals will devote most of their time to describing a series of photographs that depict the schools' infrastructure: parking lots, locker rooms, cabinetry, and landline phones. The speakers on the agenda describe various proposals for the capital projects plan under review, referring at times to "safety" or "security" as rationales for altering the school's physical plant.

Despite the frequent conflation of safety and security, though, I want to emphasize how security measures are distinct in the way that they draw future threats into present awareness and action. Whereas safety concerns typically emerge after an incident, the institutions, resources, and professionals that gather under the label of security strive to predict, prepare for, and even deter impending dangers and threats. Thus, anthropologists have historicized security strategies as part of the United States' military and national defense apparatus beginning with the Cold War and the advent of nuclear attack (Masco 2006). Critically, as Andrew Lakoff (2008) argues, public health and national security officials have prioritized technologies and methods that do not so much seek to ward off future crises as assume that they will arrive. This approach further rationalizes its methods and resources with the passing of each disaster, to the point of disavowing the potential to alter future outcomes through present intervention.

In what follows, one vignette confirms the defense- and crisis-oriented logic of security at the national and state levels, while the second casts a community's extant concerns in terms of declining health and well-being. The first emphasizes the power of violent threats and crises for legitimizing federal spending on technology and defense:

The public portion of the school board meeting has ended. It is nearing 9 p.m. on a Monday. One of the final agenda items simply read "Upgrading Camera System." The superintendent describes a grant that the school has already received through Indiana's School Safety Hub program. The source of the funding is a grant offered through Indiana's Department of Education and the US Department of Homeland Security. Since the School Safety Hub program began dispersing funds in 2013, it has supplied more than \$53 million to public and charter schools around the state.

The cameras, we learn, will not be installed for several months, so there is no footage to study yet. The new technology is meant to support the two part-time Student Resource Officers, both retired law enforcement officers. Each of them details their daily routines, which involve a fair amount of walking and an effort to be visible. Both hope to make students feel safe, but one admits there is only so much they can do to prepare for the horror of a school shooting. They also suggest that finding a full-time replacement will be difficult. The pay is modest and most days, not much happens.

Critical research on security often points to the cost of prioritizing defense and preparation for catastrophic events over more imminent challenges and threats. Since the 1970s, public social safety nets, such as health care and education, have become increasingly privatized and harder for average Americans to access (Besteman and Gusterson 2010). During this same period, the offshoring of labor acutely impacted the US Midwest, whose cities once relied on manufacturing and even weapons production (Markusen et al. 1991). Relatedly, concerns over schooling in many rural regions center at once on declining enrollments and the lack of educated workers for nearby industries (Carr and Kefalas 2010). In this part of Indiana, the sprawling fields of corn and soy belong to relatively few landowners. The other extractive industries, such as oil and plastics, offer fewer benefits and pensions than they did a generation ago.

The second vignette presents a less sensational threat to the school's future, but one that administrators urge audience members to consider as legitimate by framing it, too, as a security issue:

Earlier in the night, near the very beginning of the meeting, an elementary-school principal turns the audience's attention to the photograph of a cement step. It does not even show a series of steps, just one, and she asks her audience to take note of the step's physical condition: "So that concrete, the existing concrete, needs to be resurfaced. That is a safety issue. ... That has to be replaced because that is absolutely a security issue."

As the rough and stained slab of concrete remains on the screen, the principal adds that this repair is "not just for our kids, but also for our community." While the risk that it presents was initially that of a child falling, the danger now shifts and the relative age of the white-haired audience comes into relief. The principal's move to reframe a safety concern as a *security* issue suggests that the deteriorating step poses much more than an immediate threat to an elderly audience. If residents continue to resist higher taxes, the physical state of the school will continue to decay. Like many rural school districts, this one faces an uncertain future with declining enrollments and a shrinking tax base. Aside from the drop in the county's birth rate (roughly equal to its death rate in recent years), the public schools face competition from homeschooling, virtual learning, and charter schools. Declining student enrollments are a continuing source of anxiety for administrators. When funding is reduced, the money for repairing steps and paying teachers is reduced with it.

While taxation could offset some of the losses of federal and state funding, this school board meeting is proving that raising property taxes will require lengthy and tiresome discussion. After two and a half hours, the board votes to move forward, assuring the audience members that there will be more public meetings in the future. The most vocal opposition throughout the evening comes from farmers worried about new taxes and parents concerned about the number of children on free and reduced lunch. However, even some of the most frustrated participants concede that the cement step and other security issues merit the tax increase more than other proposed expenses.

The principal's choice to frame the crumbling walkway as a community-wide risk expands the notion of school security beyond fortification and surveillance. While she may have used the word "security" as a rhetorical move to gain support from the audience, I am more interested in this moment for illuminating the perils of disinvestment to an aging community. Compared to the federal- and state-funded security cameras, this step will require financial investment tied to student enrollments and local property tax. In addition to convincing residents that they should spend their private finances on a public institution, administrators must also persuade aging audience members that there are trajectories other than decline for this community.

How might proposals to secure the school through investment enable alternative visions of the future? What are the constraints to this approach? Setting property tax rates is easier to do at a local level than altering federal funding structures. However, garnering financial and emotional investment from residents can be difficult since it requires a stake in a shared goal. In this instance, the school's security requires agreeing on how the community can overcome current obstacles such as unemployment, aging, and constricted funding. Ultimately, investment requires time to yield results; even then, the future outcome is never certain. Embracing such uncertainty, however, preserves the capacity to improve upon current conditions rather than accept their inevitable decline.

While the analysis offered here is provisional, these vignettes demonstrate how institutions mobilize material, financial, and affective resources around security measures amid uncertain futures. Here and elsewhere, local administrators of this rural school propose an approach to security that calls for financial and emotional investment from the community. Compared to typical conceptualizations of security, this suggests a noteworthy willingness to imagine the future through collective commitment rather than diffuse alarm.

References

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