

Using Search Arches In Schools – Some Issues for Consideration

(March 2008)

As part of the governments **Violent Crime Action Plan**, Jacqui Smith (Home Secretary) has announced a zero tolerance regime for knife and gun crime!

Just a little background

Between 2003 and 2006 the UK experienced a 37% rise in convictions or cautions related to Violent Crimes (rising from 17,590 incidents in 2003 to 24,102 in 2006 - *British Crime Survey*).

There are currently around 200 Gun Crimes recorded in the UK every week and countless knife crimes. Whilst obviously not all incidents result in fatalities, in London alone, there were 27 knife or gun crime related deaths during 2007 (there have been 9 fatal stabbings of youths in London during the first 10 weeks of 2008!) ...and many more around the country.

Worryingly, there seems to be a dramatic and disturbing increase in "Gang Culture" (where carrying a weapon is viewed almost as a necessity), particularly in the more deprived areas of our major cities (for more information on gun & knife crime, visit: <http://www.insight-security.com/facts-knife-crime-stats.htm>).

Faced with the many fatal shootings and stabbings already reported since the new year the Home Secretary has announced the introduction and use of metal detector search arches to screen pupils for knives, guns or other weapons as they enter school, to which end funding is being made immediately available for 100 search arches and 400 hand held metal detectors....but is this really a practical proposal?

Is it practical and are we ready for it?

- There is absolutely no doubt that a "good quality" metal detector arch, when correctly set-up and properly calibrated is capable of detecting and pinpointing the location of weapons carried by anyone passing through the unit, however there are several issues to be addressed before their widespread use in schools will be feasible. Here are just a few considerations;

Guidelines and Authority for using search arches - and what to do when an illegal item is detected?

- At present there are no firm guidelines as to how the units should be used, how pupils with special needs, physical or learning disabilities should be dealt with, what authority school employees have to use such equipment (and what limitations apply), or what action should be taken

(and by whom) in the event that some type of weapon, drugs or other illegal item is detected.

- It must surely be for the government to take a lead in this area and produce a set of national guidelines, which take into account the legal issues, human rights issues and simple practical issues that schools will have to address on introducing metal detectors into school life. After all, however dedicated or progressive, our teachers cannot also be expected to be legal or security experts ...and it surely cannot be a serious suggestion that each school will have to re-invent the wheel by developing a new set of security standards and procedures from scratch!.

- As Teachers do not have the powers of arrest or detention that the police do, it seems likely that a police presence will be mandatory during any screening / search process.

Who will be searched?

- Even the most advanced walkthrough search arches have a 1 second reset time between walkthroughs, so even assuming that on average, each pupil could be screened and the unit reset in just 2 seconds (which is many, many times faster than can be achieved by professional security staff, with a well rehearsed procedure at an airport terminal for example!), for a school with 1200 pupils, even with full pupil cooperation, it would take at least 40 minutes to funnel all pupils through a single metal detector arch ...and that's without any delays arising from having to deal with pupils who trigger an alarm indicating that a target object has been located.

- It is highly likely therefore that some form of "unbiased" random selector mechanism, such as insight's "Random Search Selector unit", (see: <http://www.insight-security.com/random-search-selector.htm>) would need to be employed to reduce the number of pupils actually scanned, without opening the school to claims of prejudice or unfair selection.

Where will the resources come from?

- Funding - search arches are not cheap, as a rough guide, units cost from around £2,000-£4,500 depending on the level of sophistication, reliability and ease of use - who will be funding the equipment, its maintenance and operator costs?.
- Who will operate the units? - teachers?, special security staff employed the schools?, police?
- How will the search time be scheduled into the school day / and at the cost of what?

The Consequences?

- Any weapons detected will presumably be instantly confiscated, however under the governments zero tolerance regime, the carrier will be immediately excluded from school, and will presumably instantly achieve a criminal record (and may even need to be arrested and imprisoned - subject of course to the availability of cell spaces).
- Who will be responsible for notifying the perpetrators family, offering them advice or support, etc. - and how will excluded pupils subsequently be educated or dealt with?

So should we travel this road?

- In principle, it's hard to argue against the case for using metal detectors as "one of the tools" in the armoury to help crack down on the growing weapons culture in the UK. It seems however, that the government has a great deal to do, apart from announcing "the intent" to use search arches in schools, if their widespread use is to become a meaningful and viable option.

It should also be remembered that in gang culture terms, the "Olders" are now the 18-20 year olds, and the "Youngers" can be as young as 9 years old! ...so at what age would we need to start screening our school children?

For details of hand held metal detectors and search arches, visit;

<http://www.insight-security.com/metaldec.htm>