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Samantha Viano
George Mason University

Abigail Beneke
Vanderbilt University

Catalina Valdez
University of Wisconsin—Madison

Alyssa Barone
George Mason University

Benjamin W. Fisher
University of Wisconsin—Madison

Schools are increasing surveillance in bathrooms in response to concerns about student behaviors in the restroom such as vaping, drug use, and vandalism. This study investigates how schools secure and surveil bathrooms and how stakeholders perceive these interventions. We situate school bathrooms as part of the prison industrial complex (PIC) and identify how the carceral logics of surveillance, labeling, and punishment are embedded in discussions on bathroom security. Using a single-case study design, the study draws on qualitative data collected from four demographically diverse high schools in a suburban district in the 2023-24 school year. Data sources include interviews with administrators and focus groups with teachers and students. Findings reveal schools employ a range of strategies including vape detectors, e-hall passes, and staff patrols. While most participants believed surveillance was an appropriate response to problematic behaviors like vaping in the bathroom, administrators were more supportive of surveillance technologies, whereas students and teachers expressed skepticism about security's effectiveness and negative impact on privacy. This study highlights the expansion of carceral logics into intimate school spaces and raises critical questions about the normalization of surveillance in schools. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the ethical and practical implications of bathroom securitization, especially regarding student privacy.

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School Bathrooms: Perspectives on Safety, Surveillance, and Privacy in the Restroom

Samantha Viano[1], Abigail Beneke,[2] Catalina Valdez,[3] Alyssa Barone,[1] & Benjamin W. Fisher[3]

[1] George Mason University

[2] Vanderbilt University

[3] University of Wisconsin—Madison

All correspondence to be directed to Samantha Viano at sviano@gmu.edu.

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The restrooms in schools fulfill a vital need, but school bathrooms are also a common location for breaking school rules and violence. From an investigative series by high school students titled, “Down the drain: Vaping, vandalism, & bathroom safety” to a Washington Post headline decrying “Bathrooms are now some of the most dangerous places,” school bathrooms have been a focus of intense concern around a variety of negatively perceived student behaviors (Asbury, 2023; Laughter, 2023). Schools have responded through enacting an array of security measures including locking bathrooms, limiting bathroom passes, increased bathroom monitoring and installing new surveillance in bathrooms (Arundel, 2023). Despite this attention to concerns about violence and the resulting security put in place, research has tended to focus on security across the school, with maybe an off-hand mention of bathrooms, with limited research specifically engaged with complex questions around safety, surveillance, and privacy in bathrooms.

Ever since the massacre at Columbine High School over 25 years ago, schools have experienced intense pressure to address potential threats to safety, quite often through significant investments in physical security (Addington, 2009; Curran et al., 2020; Madfis, 2014, 2016; C. M. Saldaña & Guan, 2025). Schools have often added security elements like door locks and video cameras, in addition to increased security personnel, in response to fears of school shootings and other perceived security threats (James, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2016; Singer, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). A robust evidence base focuses on evaluating implementation and effects of interventions to reduce school violence, including school security, with limited evidence on efficacy and significant concerns for disparate effects on marginalized communities (Turanovic et al., 2022). However, at the same time, school safety research has overwhelming examined safety and security regardless of location within the school. We have long known that school

violence is unequally distributed spatially across school grounds, and school violence interventions, including security, have been less attentive to sub-contexts including buses, hallways, and, the focus of this study, bathrooms (Astor & Meyer, 2001). However, recent surveillance technology has been specifically designed for bathrooms including digital hall passes (Peetz, 2025) and vape detectors (Munis & McCarthy, 2024).

Bathrooms have specific social dynamics that are distinct from other spaces that are more typically surveilled in schools (Astor & Meyer, 2001). While cameras have long been placed in hallways with grounds patrolled by security, the bathroom has typically been free from surveillance technology. To understand the increasingly carceral approach to "managing" school bathrooms, we situate this study using two, complementary theoretical perspectives: the Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC) and carceral logics. The PIC encapsulates the expansive, interconnected relationship between prison, punishment, and carcerality (Davis, 1995). The PIC draws attention to both more obvious elements of carcerality, like police in schools, as well as more subtle manifestations, such as the companies that profit from surveilling students in schools (Gilmore, 2007). To more specifically interrogate the logics that uphold the PIC in school bathrooms, we use prior theorization of "carceral logics," or "the commonsense notion that the objective of society is to maintain safety and order through unquestioned social control" (Annamma, 2017, p. 16).

Bathrooms are essential spaces that come with unique considerations for privacy and safety, yet research has rarely integrated student, teacher, and leader perspectives on school bathrooms. This study elucidates the emergence of school security technologies focused on surveilling school bathrooms by addressing the following research questions:

1. What kinds of concerns can drive the implementation of strategies and technologies that regulate school bathrooms?
2. How do students, teachers, and school leaders perceive and respond to the surveillance and regulation of bathrooms?

Through a case study of four high schools in a suburban school district, we show how the PIC has expanded through new mechanisms that sought to surveil, label, and punish students in the bathroom. Bathrooms had served as one of the few spaces where students had a measure of privacy in schools that were otherwise heavily monitored by school security measures ranging from security cameras to school police. However, we document how bathrooms became a locus of concern for teachers and administrators primarily concerned about student vaping. These fears translated into the lessening of privacy through multiple strategies and technologies implemented to surveil bathrooms. We conclude with a discussion of surveillance in school bathrooms and its implications for student privacy.

Literature Review

Bathrooms are social venues, a public, non-academic space in schools (Wellenreiter, 2021). Restrooms have been described as “undefined” (unclear responsibility of monitoring, Astor & Meyer, 2001), “unowned” (not frequently monitored by adults, Migliaccio et al., 2017), or “unstructured” spaces (Perkins et al., 2014). Even popular media often use school bathrooms for scenes in which students engage in drug use and bullying (Resnick, 2018). Bathrooms have been described as “bullying hot spots” (Migliaccio et al., 2017) with students often reporting feeling less safe in the bathroom and avoiding the bathroom (Carney et al., 2005; Perkins et al., 2014). Research from the early 2000s found students in bathrooms were more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke (Lee et al., 2007), and theft was more likely to occur in the

bathroom compared to other school locations (Ruddy et al., 2010). In a recent nationally representative survey, the restroom was the location that students were the most likely to report avoiding out of fear of attack or harm (Irwin et al., 2024). Consequently, bathrooms have become a more recent target of school security technology that seeks to control and surveil students to both identify rule/law breaking and deter negative behavior by increasing the perceived risk of being caught (Marlow et al., 2023).

We contribute to a well-developed literature on school security, more broadly, that has examined a variety of types of security from different perspectives of those within schools. Traditional security measures, such as metal detectors, cameras, and school resource officers, have proliferated in response to concerns about school violence and shootings, with public schools spending over $4 billion annually on these safety and security efforts (Anderson, 2025). Despite this investment, evidence on the effectiveness of these measures is mixed. Systematic reviews have found that, while some studies suggest visible security may increase safety, others find it worsens students' perceptions of safety or has no impact on violence (Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2016; Turanovic et al., 2022). Moreover, research consistently shows that security practices disproportionately harm racially minoritized students, particularly Black youth, by reducing participation in school activities and contributing to negative academic and social outcomes (Javdani, 2019; Mowen & Manierre, 2017; Rauk et al., 2023; Sorensen et al., 2023; Steinka-Fry et al., 2016; Weisburst, 2019). Qualitative research has offered conflicting perspectives on school security and surveillance including reports of feeling over-policed, students becoming ambivalent about security, and others in which students and staff report feeling comforted by increased security (Bell, 2021; Curran et al., 2021; Nolan, 2011; Shedd, 2015; Viano et al., 2023). Also noteworthy is evidence of how increased security can lead to a negative expectancy

effect in which increased security can make people in schools feel more fearful, thus justifying the increased surveillance even though there were few security risks beforehand (Curran et al., 2021; Kupchik, 2016). As schools increasingly adopt advanced surveillance technologies—including vape detectors—we have little understanding of how stakeholders might view these technologies differently or if their perceptions differ by the location in which security systems are placed.

Bathroom Use, Misuse, and Surveillance

During adolescence, bathrooms take on a dual purpose, as they are seen as both "safe havens" and sites of frequent violence (Resnick, 2018). Bathrooms are places for socializing where students can converse with one another in confidence. The privacy afforded to students in bathrooms along with a lack of adult supervision is key to bathrooms existing as a social space and one of increased student agency in what are otherwise quite regulated school environments (Millei & Gallagher, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2024; Wellenreiter, 2021). Bathrooms can also serve as a "safe space" for students to use substances. Consider, for example, one study which measured the air pollution in the boys' bathroom of a rural Kentucky high school at 19 times higher than the national standard for quality air due to student smoking (Lee et al., 2007). Despite laws and school rules prohibiting smoking on school grounds, students' smoking habits in school bathrooms are well-documented—especially in recent years with the popularization of e-cigarette use among young people (Dai, 2021; Jackson et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2013).

At the same time, as spaces away from adult supervision, bathrooms are not just safe havens for socializing or substance use—they are also spaces ripe for violence and bullying. Studies have used GIS mapping to locate where students most often identify the occurrence of bullying, and results point to bathrooms as bullying "hot spots" (Migliaccio et al., 2017).

Students feel less safe in bathrooms compared to other non-classroom locations in a school, such as hallways (Carney et al., 2005). These lower feelings of safety in bathrooms link to avoidance behaviors; a nationally representative study of 12–18-year-old students from 2021 found that 2.4% of students avoided school bathrooms because they thought someone might attack or threaten to attack them, the most common of all school locations included in the survey (Irwin et al., 2022). This pattern of bathrooms being the most avoided location in school has held true for decades (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). It has historically been the case that schools are faced with the difficult task of providing students access to bathrooms that not only meet their biological and social needs but are also spaces where they feel safe.

Despite documented bullying, violence, and substance use that occur in school bathrooms and the intense regulation of students in school bathrooms, analyses of school bathrooms remain underrepresented in research (Astor & Meyer, 2001; Cliff & Millei, 2011; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Research has recently examined contemporary debates on school bathrooms and transgender-identifying students, examining how gendered facilities essentialize student identities and have thus been placed at the center of controversy around schools that welcome gender-expansive students (Farley and Leonardi 2021). This study does not directly engage with these debates, instead focusing on behavior in the bathroom as opposed who bathroom access is distributed to. Moreover, very limited research has examined the increasingly prevalent use of emergent school security technologies meant to regulate student bathroom use, like vape detectors, that are being implemented in schools across the country. Thus, our research questions are pertinent for understanding how schools implement strategies to regulate bathroom usage, along with the range of student, teacher, and administrator conceptions of and responses to such action.

Conceptual Framework: Prison-Industrial Complex and Carceral Logics

To analyze the ways schools regulate bathrooms and responses to this regulation, we situate this study in prior theorization of the prison-industrial complex and carceral logics. First coined by Davis (1995), the prison-industrial complex (PIC) is a central organizing principle of life under capitalism. It encompasses the various ways that U.S. society is geared toward profiting from punishment and manifests in overt mechanisms, such as police and jails, and in more covert ways, such as rural communities that rely on prisons for employment (Gilmore, 2007). The PIC has been justified by stoking moral panics about an increase in crime since the 1970s, accompanied by a rollback in state welfare that has left those at the margins of capitalism with fewer resources, paradoxically creating the conditions for violence—what Gilmore (2022) calls "organized abandonment."

Meanwhile, the PIC has created new opportunities for capitalist accumulation by linking government and private business interests. Corporations benefit from mass incarceration and surveillance through, for example, private prison construction, the sale of surveillance goods and services (e.g., security cameras), and the maintenance of social problems (e.g., homelessness, violence) that create further opportunities for profit (Critical Resistance n.d.). As social welfare agencies, schools have absorbed many of the surveillance and punishment functions of the PIC. The school security industry is a key node in the PIC that has emerged over the past two decades, marketing and selling surveillance technologies that are ostensibly aimed at keeping schools safer, but which are supported by limited research (Casella 2006). With a current estimated worth of $4 billion (Anderson 2025), the rise of securitization in schools, driven by state support of the school security industry, is a particularly stark example of the PIC in schools that has intensified rapidly in recent years (Madfis et al., 2021; Muschert et al., 2014). Locked doors,

school police officers, and metal detectors are a few examples of school security measures that have been implemented in schools in the name of school safety, in part driven by moral panics about an uptick in youth violence which are largely disconnected from actual patterns of youth violence (Madfis et al., 2021; Serrano & Del Carmen Vazquez, 2025). In this study, we document the expansion of the PIC into school bathrooms through new or expanding surveillance technologies, such as vape detectors and digital hall passes sold by the school security industry, as well as through other arrangements that benefit the PIC, such as the employment of school security officers.

The PIC relies on carceral logics to ensure the uptake of surveillance as solution to social problems across institutions. Carceral logics are united by the "commonsense notion" that maintaining safety and order requires "unquestioned social control" (Annamma 2016, p. 2). As agents of the PIC in schools, school administrators and educators are encouraged to adopt carceral logics of observing for problems (surveilling), identifying issues (labeling), and fixing (punishing) children (Annamma, 2017; Beneke et al., 2024; Foucault, 1977). Surveillance refers to the ways students are watched and observed. Unlike other ways educators and administrators might keep an eye on students, these observations are intended to capture behaviors deemed as undesirable, like breaking school rules. Similarly, labeling refers to the ways schools differentiate and name undesirable traits, behaviors, or identities. Finally, punishment includes the consequences given in response to those who are labeled as engaging in negatively perceived activities. These carceral logics are all connected in that labeling identifies what is considered deviant, surveillance captures the deviant behavior, and punishments are the distributed consequences. Thus, school administrators and educators can play a role in extending the PIC in

schools vis-à-vis carceral logics that create the grounds for school securitization, regardless of their intent (Serrano & Del Carmen Vazquez, 2025).

Carceral logics provide the justification for the extension of the PIC in schools, including in school bathrooms. For example, in this study, educators used carceral logics in a way that seemingly necessitated the expansion of the PIC. A student caught vaping on camera (surveillance) generated a new "label" for a deviant behavior (i.e., "vaping"), which fed into the justification of more extreme surveillance in the form of a vape detector and pat downs by school security. Students caught by the vape detector could then receive punishment in the form of in-school suspension. Elements of the PIC in schools—from technology sold by for-profit companies, such as vape detectors and security cameras—to the employment of security guards, are mobilized via carceral logics.

In this study, we examine the strategies and mechanisms through which the PIC manifests in the securitization of school bathrooms and the carceral logics that support them. Though bathrooms are typically thought of as one of the few places where students have some measure of privacy, in this study, we document new ways in which the PIC has expanded to school bathrooms. Our study contributes to the literature on school safety, security, and surveillance by documenting the carceral logics that animate securitization of school bathrooms, including how school administrators and educators view bathrooms as a locus for surveilling, labeling, and punishing children. Furthermore, we show how students, teachers, and school leaders perceive and respond to the surveillance and regulation of bathrooms.

Methods

We draw on data collected from a larger project on school safety and security in high schools in the 2023-24 school year. We focus on how schools surveil bathrooms, why this

surveillance is in place, and stakeholder experiences with this surveillance using a case study design. A single case study design allows us to examine how district-wide norms shared across the four school sites under study, and school-wide norms unique to each school community, contributed to their perceptions of bathroom security (Yin, 2009). With data collected from various school stakeholders, a case study design allows for the exploration of the relationship between the school community, personal identity, and perceptions of school security by examining these complex relationships through in-depth data collection and analysis (Noor, 2008).

Setting and Sample

The sample included students, teachers, and administrators from four high schools in a large, county-wide school district. The county has a population of approximately 500,000 with about 80,000 students enrolled in the school district. Similar to the larger ongoing trend of demographic change in the suburbs, the county has experienced population growth and increased racial and socioeconomic diversity in recent decades (Diamond et al., 2021; Frey, 2018; E. E. N. Miller & Schugurensky, 2025) such that schools have diversity of enrollments by students' racial identity and socioeconomic status. We purposefully selected four high schools that best represent this diversity across several dimensions, see Table 1. These high schools represent both suburban and town locales with schools representing four distinct demographic profiles: predominantly White (Washington), predominantly Hispanic/Latine[1] (Pierce), majority Asian American (Roosevelt), and plurality Asian American and White (Buchanan). Sampling schools with this mixture of demographics was particularly important for this project given research finding the different ways security is placed and used at schools serving predominantly White versus

[1] We use language that is complex in relation to racial identity in ways that reflect the complexity of these identities, including terms like Hispanic, Latine, and others throughout (Viano et al., 2024).

predominantly racially minoritized students (Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Steinka-Fry et al., 2016). While we are not capitalizing on the potential comparisons between schools for this study, this case will represent the variety of experiences in this setting by position in the school.

Data Collection

The on-site research team responsible for conducting the administrator interviews and teacher focus groups included a faculty member and a doctoral student. For student focus groups, the research team included two undergraduate students trained in qualitative focus group methods. The interviews and focus groups took place from December 2023 through June 2024. We interviewed four principals, 12 assistant principals. We conducted eight teacher focus groups and 13 student focus groups.

At each school, the researchers collected data in the same order, beginning with administrators followed by teachers and students last. However, the Pierce principal was not available on the day we conducted administrator interviews, so we interviewed the principal last at that school. Every school in the district has one acting principal and three assistant principals totaling four administrator interviews at each school. We conducted administrator interviews throughout the school day.

To organize the remaining teacher and student focus groups, the research team collaborated with the administrators and school staff at each school. We conducted two teacher focus groups at each school. We asked the schools to organize a diverse sample of teachers based on their role in the school (i.e., not demographically, but professionally diverse), and the focus groups included teachers from different grades, subjects, academic levels as well as both classroom teachers and specialized teachers (e.g., special education teachers) and novice and veteran educators.

The school administration organized the focus groups to take place during students' study halls and teachers' planning periods. One school organized the teacher focus groups to occur on a teacher professional development day. Our diverse teacher sample helped us gain an understanding of how the teachers' different roles shaped their experiences with safety and security. To conduct teacher focus groups, we used a semi-structured protocol similar to the school administrator interview guide. The protocol prompted the teachers to share their perception of their school community, experiences with discipline enforcement, experiences with school security, and ongoing issues at the school.

The student focus group protocol did not align directly with the administrator or teacher protocol. Instead, we co-developed the protocol with the undergraduate research assistants (RAs), both of whom recently graduated from public high schools in the same region as our study took place. We revised the protocol based on RA personal experience, informal piloting with RA peers, and emergent themes from the administrator interviews. For instance, we learned early in data collection that vaping was a significant concern across schools. In the final version, the protocol asked students about their experience at their school, ongoing problems (with a purposeful focus on vaping), perceptions of discipline and safety, and their experience with school security measures.

We asked the schools to gather students from diverse backgrounds that represented their schools' student population and requested to conduct four student focus groups. We actually conducted a range of one to seven focus groups at each school with only one school attempting to recruit a diverse sample of students, the others relying on a convenience sample (e.g., all students with 1st block study hall who returned a parent/guardian consent). Note that there were significant challenges in organizing student focus groups with many more students willing to

participate than had completed parent/guardian consent – not due to parent/guardian concerns but out of challenges of securing paperwork from high school students. While we did not complete the ideal arrangement of focus groups, including several focus groups with only one student, this was the research team's best effort to collect student perspectives given our limitations. We include these student perspectives even though the focus groups were not as large or purposefully selected as we would have liked because we believe these student voices add valuable perspective.

Data Analysis

The research team used cycles of inductive and deductive coding alongside constant comparative methods to begin coding followed by the use of PIC/carceral logics when analyzing higher-level findings to answer the research questions. First, the interviews were transcribed by Rev. Seven researchers (five of which are authors of this paper) were responsible for coding. Researchers include four faculty, one post-doctoral associate, and two doctoral students. Two to three researchers coded each transcript. To begin, the researchers employed first cycle coding (J. Saldaña, 2013). While coding, the researchers were cognizant of the participants' roles and demographics since one of the intended outcomes of this study was to understand if perceptions of security differed based on participant race and socioeconomic status. Based on the initial codes, one researcher created two codebook options using inductive and deductive codes. This codebook was intended to identify patterns and themes found in the data. The research team reviewed the two codebooks and selected one together. We then revised the chosen codebook based on the researchers' experiences during first cycle coding. The research team employed this revised codebook to code two selected transcripts. Each researcher coded the two transcripts individually and then shared their results as a group to check for reliability. We made revisions

based on the team's experience using the codebook with these two transcripts. We then conducted a second cycle of coding using the revised codebook (J. Saldaña, 2013). After this second round of coding, one researcher ran a query in Nvivo of all files—transcripts and field notes—for each school in the sample.

We then wrote interim case summaries, one for each school in the sample (Miles et al., 2014). The case summaries allowed us to examine and compare broader common themes across the schools in the sample. Individual members of the research team completed an initial interim case summary for one school in the sample independently. After team member completed their case summary, groups of two to three read their partner(s) case summary(ies) and met to discuss the findings, paying close attention to any discrepancies. Once satisfied their findings were consistent, each team member wrote a case summary for each school in the sample. After completing all case summaries, the researcher team reconvened to discuss their findings, again looking for similarities as well as differences in their summaries.

For this specific study, we included these case summaries as well as returning to our codebook to pull data that pertained specifically to bathrooms. We use the case summaries and codebook (RQ1) to identity the strategies and technologies in bathrooms and how participants discussed implementation of these strategies and technologies in bathrooms followed by (RQ2) differentiating these responses by participant type. We integrate our conceptual framework to discuss the findings to identify how the PIC is manifested through bathrooms in this case, identifying in our data carceral logics in how problems are observed (i.e., surveilled), how issues are discussed (i.e., labeling), and how problems are "fixed" (i.e., punishment).

Findings

Bathroom Surveillance Mechanisms, Rationales, and Punishments

Carceral logics of surveillance, labeling, and punishment were pervasive across the four high schools. We learned of intensive efforts to surveil bathrooms through both advanced technology (e.g., vape detectors) as well as human resources (e.g., security guard patrols) across all four schools. Participants discussed the need for increased bathroom surveillance as driven by a combination of health, safety, and "behavior management" concerns. Often noted across sites were the dangers posed by vaping, substance abuse, mental health issues, and physical altercations. We heard at all schools about how the use of surveillance technologies, staff monitoring, and access control measures was all seen as part of a comprehensive approach to manage these challenges. Students identified as potentially engaging in these sanctioned behaviors in bathrooms could be subjected to searches, restrictions of their movements in the school, or in-school suspensions. Thus, though bathrooms have likely long been part of the PIC, we show new mechanisms through which the PIC has expanded in school bathrooms, supported by carceral logics of surveillance, labeling, and punishment.

Observing Problems (Surveilling)

Surveilling refers to the ways in which staff watch students in order to identify what is believed to be deviant behavior. Each school employed various strategies and technologies to observe for problems in bathroom use, driven by concerns for health, safety, and "behavior management" with some attention to privacy. Surveillance technologies included vape detectors, hallway cameras, and e-hall pass. While the vape detectors were consistently referred to for their functionality at detecting vaping, it is also often noted that these devices have other functionality including detecting more than one student in a stall at one time. As one principal described these detectors:

> I think it just, it reads the body. There are a couple of things that, in my understanding, is you've got both the vape and you've got length of time and no motion. So, it's able to see

> if there's, I don't know if it's the heat sensor, my guess it's something along those lines, that's going to register if you've got two different heat sources in there or sources. And then it'll also note that if someone does go in and there's, after a period of time, no motion, that alarm go off too.

Vape detectors in the bathroom were intended to surveil students in many more ways than solely vaping. An assistant principal offered this description of their understanding of the capabilities of the detectors, "If you're there eight minutes, it'll alarm. They have the gunshot, apparently, detector in bathrooms as well. They just implemented that. It's a light over the door. When it starts blinking a certain color, it's supposed to detect the vape." Across these two quotes and the interviews more generally, school stakeholders made statements suggesting the promise of vape detectors to identify many different kinds of behaviors, although they were unclear exactly how.

Staff monitoring was another critical component of surveillance. Teachers and security staff were stationed near bathrooms to observe student activity. Schools also had regular patrols of hallways around bathrooms by security guards, including occasional checks inside bathrooms. As an assistant principal noted:

> Vaping's becoming a bigger problem as it becomes more ingrained in the culture. They know they shouldn't do it. They know they're not allowed to do it, and some of them are addicted enough, they still do it. And some of it's just seeing if I can get away with it or nobody's going to bother checking. But we actually had one just caught here a little bit ago. And again, our security guards being visible in the bathrooms curtailed a lot of that.

The perception is that students knowingly break school rules by vaping, hiding their behavior in the bathroom. However, school staff assume students will be less likely to do so if they see the bathrooms are monitored by security guards, increasing students' risk of being caught.

In addition, schools often limit bathroom use. First, schools often locked bathrooms seen as being especially hard to patrol, forcing students to rely on a smaller set of bathrooms. Second, schools all used the e-hall pass, an app students install on their personal phones through which teachers can grant them an e-hall pass. As noted by an assistant principal:

> Students, if they're out of the classroom, they should be out on the e-hall pass. We often have a security guard at one of our most common locations for our restrooms. They check the passes before they walk in … [Security guards] look at [the e-hall pass], make sure it's still a live pass, then they're able to go inside the restroom.

Unlike traditional paper hall passes, the e-hall pass times students to deter being out of class for an excessive amount of time as well as alerting security officials which students are out of class and for how long.

Identifying Issues (Labeling)

The ways schools differentiate and name behaviors seen as undesirable is referred to as labeling. One of the primary concerns driving the implementation of increased surveillance in school bathrooms is the widespread issue of vaping and substance abuse. Administrators and staff have noted that students frequently use bathrooms to vape, often in groups, making it difficult to monitor and control. As we noted in the quote above, the addictive nature of vaping has exacerbated this issue with many students finding creative ways to conceal their activities. As one administrator mentioned, "vaping is definitely a persistent challenge" and has led to the installation of vape detectors and increased staff presence near bathrooms.

Staff perceptions of students' mental health challenges are also seen as increasing the need for enhanced bathroom surveillance. Staff note students engage in behaviors seen as disruptive or harmful in the bathroom, such as vandalism or substance use. The return to school post-pandemic saw an increase in such behaviors, partly influenced by social media challenges. As noted by an assistant principal:

> We also have pranks where when we first came back from going through the pandemic, the kids had spent a lot of time on TikTok, therefore all these challenges and these crazy things were taking place. So that was frustrating. They would destroy or damage bathrooms. There are drug issues, I think every school has kids who are using, vaping, or things like that. Or potentially selling too.

Whether it be social media related or relate to substance abuse, staff expressed the bathrooms were sometimes sites of violence and substance abuse. For instance, a teacher noted that having a classroom next to the bathroom led to them believing regular altercations occurred in the bathroom, “I had a couple of boys who, because my classroom's right next to a bathroom, they like to have some sort of, I don't know if it was a fight club in the morning, but basically there'd be hollering happening and I couldn't obviously go into that restroom, so I'd be running to find somebody.” In this way, teachers interpreted loud noises from the bathroom being indicative of physical fights.

Staff have observed that students sometimes use bathrooms as a place to escape from class or engage in activities that they find comforting but are inappropriate, such as sitting on the floor and talking or eating lunch. As we heard from an assistant principal, “And they bring their lunch in there and will sit on the floor and talk or whatever they're doing.” Staff perceive the bathrooms have become hotspots for students looking to skip class or avoid schoolwork. Staff reported that students often use the pretext of going to the bathroom to leave class and then spend extended periods there, either alone or with friends. As a teacher noted, students will, “take a five-minute bathroom break and then 10 and then 15 and then 20.” Bathrooms were seen as place for students to go when avoiding being in class.

Fixing (Punishing) Children

Within PIC, punishment is the primary method through which adults address behavior labeled as undesirable or deviant in order to “fix” students’ behavior. Schools employ various punitive measures that applied to both students who engaged in labeled misbehaviors or are simply in the bathroom. Security guards and administrators conduct searches if there is suspicion of drug use or possession. This includes patting down students and checking their belongings.

"We have a reasonable suspicion and we can search anybody, and that's what we end up doing sometimes," stated one assistant principal. Note that these searches could be performed on any student regardless level of suspicion. For instance, if the vape detector was triggered, all students in the bathroom when the security guard arrived would be searched.

In-school suspension (ISS) was a common punishment for a variety of offenses. More severe punishments, like out of school suspension or expulsion, were rare in this school district. ISS typically increased with repeated punishments, although punishments did not accelerate beyond a few days of ISS. As discussed below, staff perceived the school to be too lax on punishments for students who repeatedly were labeled as having deviant behaviors.

Comparisons between Administrators, Teachers, and Students

We documented how bathrooms are part of the PIC and mechanisms through which current approaches to bathroom "behavior management" and new surveillance technologies integrate carceral logics. In this section, we distinguish between the responses to bathroom surveillance based on position in the school to identify student, teacher, and administrator perspectives on bathroom surveillance. We begin by summarize commonalities of experience with bathroom experience across these groups as followed by differences in perspectives on bathroom surveillance.

We heard widespread agreement on several of perceived problem behaviors in the bathrooms including vaping and fighting. Across schools and stakeholder groups, participants discussed the need to surveil for vaping and punish students who are vaping or fighting in the bathroom. For instance, a teacher noted the dangers of vaping in this way, "Vaping is somewhat of a problem. I think it's just for their personal wellbeing, it's a problem" similar to a student, "Vaping is terrible for you, first of all... It's definitely happening every single day." In student

focus groups, we probed to understand student perspectives on vaping, consistently hearing a similar sentiment about vaping being addictive and a risk to the vaper's health. Likewise, students expressed similar concerns to teachers and administrators about fighting in the bathroom, "There's assault in the bathrooms. They should be in jail for that, and they do it multiple times." Labeling fighting and vaping as serious concerns as well as suggesting punishments for these "offenses" related to the bathroom was common across stakeholders.

Across interviews and focus groups, we heard many positive or neutral responses to increased bathroom surveillance by security guards and other school staff members. As a student said, "When [security guards are] walking around, sometimes they'll stop in the bathroom and make sure no one's vaping or doing anything in there. And then they'll just walk around and see if anyone's skipping or just walking." A teacher similarly noted, "Security guards are constantly patrolling, like on lunch duty they're by the cafeteria and they're constantly circulating by the bathrooms and going around." We heard universally positive feedback on teachers and security guards who monitored bathrooms, both from the hallways as well as walking through the bathrooms periodically. Students noted this increased surveillance often made them feel protected and staff believed it deterred deviant behavior.

Staff and students differed on their perceptions of more advanced surveillance technology in the bathrooms as well as the security tactic of locking the bathrooms. While school administrators discussed surveillance in the bathroom as successful, "we have minimized the opportunities, for the most part" as stated by an assistant principal, teachers and students discussed the failures of surveillance technology. A teacher expressed that even when vaping has occurred, it is difficult to actually locate who is vaping, "they could search 20 boys at one time. So, there is a response. Now the search is book bag, and then shake your pants, pull out your

pockets, and that's not going to do anything, because they stick them elsewhere." Students expressed similar pessimism, "I feel like the way people are addicted, they'd just find a way around it." Students often expressed that all of the efforts to surveil for vaping were not worthwhile:

> I feel like putting a vape detector in the bathroom is like they're just going to go in there and then they're going to know it's going to go off or something, and they're just going to walk back out. And either way, even if they do get caught, I mean, they're not going to really care.

Students expressed vaping as a problem that would not be resolved with increased surveillance, that students who were addicted would find a way to vape and surveillance and punishment were unlikely to deter them. However, while administrators primarily expressed the benefits of surveillance technology in the bathrooms, one assistant principal who spoke candidly during the interview did offer this illustrative quote about the limitations of surveillance technology in the bathroom:

> When you're talking about 10 students in a restroom, who did it and then when it goes off, if you're not standing right there, they couldn't easily just walk out and leave a cloud of smoke and you don't know who did it. As far as detecting the actual vape, we don't have that other than just searching. We have a reasonable suspicion and we can search anybody, and that's what we end up doing sometimes.

As described previously, these advanced surveillance technologies have many functionalities, but most of those who use the bathrooms or are familiar with (although not directly involved in) their use express skepticism about their utility.

Staff and students also disagreed about locking bathrooms as a punishment tactic to reduce the opportunity for students to use the bathroom for these (perceived) illicit reasons. For instance, students at Pierce reported only one bathroom in their school is open for student use, "they open one bathroom. It's like a scavenger hunt looking for a bathroom." To which another student responded, "So there's not as many inappropriate things happening in the bathroom, but

they're also all closed.” Meanwhile, many administrators denied that they lock bathrooms, even though it indisputably a common practice, “Locked bathrooms? No. Only locked bathrooms that are locked are, no, I'll say no.” as an assistant principal said in their interview. These kinds of responses, which we received from administrators at multiple schools, showed likely awareness that locking bathrooms was something that was unsavory to admit to. As another assistant principal said, “We do have locked bathrooms, but then we don't have locked bathrooms.” This was a practice that many felt uncomfortable with, although students were the ones more likely to suffer from this policy.

To summarize these differences, we found administrators had the most positive outlooks on social control of bathrooms with students being the most skeptical. Administrators tended to emphasize the importance of security measures and proactive strategies. They see bathroom security as necessary and are primarily optimistic about the effectiveness of vape detectors. Similarly, teachers appreciated the increased surveillance in the bathrooms but also expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of vape detectors and the disruption caused by vaping and misbehavior. Finally, students viewed increased patrols and monitoring by adults positively but were frustrated by locked bathrooms and feel that vaping is a significant issue that was unaffected by surveillance efforts.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to and extend existing literature on school safety and surveillance by focusing on a space that has recently become subject to increased scrutiny, school bathrooms. Prior research has documented the proliferation of school security measures in response to perceived threats, particularly following high-profile school shootings (Addington, 2009; Madfis, 2014, 2016). However, much of this work has focused on school-wide security

practices (e.g., school resource officers) without attending to the spatial specificity of perceived threats and security in place to address these threats. Our study addresses this gap by centering bathrooms as a unique and underexamined site of surveillance, control, and contestation.

We found students and staff alike are increasingly in favor of intensified school security measures, as panic over the safety in schools resulted in a rapid expansion of securitization in schools (Addington, 2009; Madfis, 2014, 2016). We both confirm earlier findings that bathrooms are perceived by students and staff as behavioral "hot spots" (Carney et al., 2005; Irwin et al., 2024; Migliaccio et al., 2017) and refine this understanding by showing how these perceptions serve as justification for the expansion of surveillance technologies and punitive practices in bathrooms. Until recently, the uptick in security measures in place at schools—even when a threat to safety was not present—typically focused on securing the building from outside intruders or threats to safety (e.g., bringing a weapon or drugs into the building). While monitoring student behavior in bathrooms is not a new phenomenon in schools, monitoring by securitizing bathrooms is and it highlights how the PIC is already embedded, and continues to become more prevalent, in the structure of schools. Our findings extend previous research on student perspectives of school spaces (Wellenreiter, 2021) by showing that, while students and adults may agree on the presence of problematic behaviors, they diverge significantly in their assessments of surveillance technologies' effectiveness and appropriateness.

Bathrooms have primarily functioned as a place where students can find privacy, address biological needs, and socialize in unstructured spaces, but also where they engage in "undesirable" behaviors-such as fighting, smoking, bullying, or drug sales—without the supervision of adults. However, the increasing desire of school administrators to monitor student behavior in ways that reflect the PIC have led to an increased focus on bathrooms and the

behaviors that take place within them. While previous research has often explored surveillance as an expansion of PIC into schools (V. Miller, 2025; Sheikh et al., 2024), this phenomenon presents a unique dilemma for administrators in that they want to increase surveillance and identify any problematic behaviors, but those behaviors are taking place in the one place that has previously been seen as difficult to surveil. We identified how staff integrate carceral logics to surveil, label, and punish behaviors in the bathroom that had previously been undetected.

Our findings suggest that there are intensified efforts to expand school surveillance into school bathrooms. Schools employ a combination of traditional security technology, advanced security technology, and human resources to surveil student activity in the bathrooms. Surveillance served two primary purposes. First, visible security such as security guards patrolling the hallway or teachers on duty checking e-hall pass were intended to act as a deterrent for undesired behaviors to occur. Second, when illicit activity such as vaping did occur, security measures (e.g., security camera footage) were used as evidence to identify and punish the students engaging in the behavior.

We found students, teachers, and administrators had areas of agreement and disagreement in their perspective on bathroom security. The participants expressed a positive response to employing human resources to surveil bathrooms. Indeed, similar to prior research on SROs (Curran et al., 2021; Viano et al., 2023), student participants felt that seeing security guards patrol the hallways and periodically walk through the bathrooms to check for illicit activity or undesired behaviors made them feel the bathrooms were safe. Administrators and teachers also believed human resources effectively deterred undesirable behavior. While prior research has documented student resistance to surveillance (Bell, 2021; Shedd, 2015), our findings show that

students may simultaneously appreciate adult presence in bathrooms while rejecting technological surveillance.

However, administrators disagreed with other school stakeholders about advanced security or more invasive security practices. Students and teachers did not believe the advanced surveillance technology, like vape detectors, or invasive security measures, like locking bathrooms, were effective. Similar to their desire to increase school security, administrators expressed a feeling that the vape detectors in the bathrooms were effective, even when they could not articulate how the technology worked or what it could actually identify.

Disciplinary power is apparent in our finding that school administrators and teachers alike center fixing/punishing children; they act as agents of the PIC since they see surveilling, labelling, and punishing deviant behaviors as one of their main responsibilities. Stakeholders focus on surveilling and punishing deviant behaviors, therefore it is unsurprising their locus of attention would be the bathrooms which are a hub for student behaviors that could not be performed anywhere else in a highly surveilled school building. However, as the securitization of schools increases, security measures will also expand to surveil more of the school to identify crime, violence, or deviant behaviors. Indeed, the prevalence of in-school suspension and our finding that teachers and students alike are in favor of security guards surveilling bathrooms may lend evidence to suggest this behavior is normal, or at least that the benefit of surveilling and punishing these undesired behaviors justifies any drawbacks. Our findings lend support to a noted trend of heightened surveillance of youth in order to identify and punish students, sometimes before they even engage in problematic behavior (V. Miller, 2025).

Interestingly, we found consensus across stakeholders that certain problem behaviors by students in the bathroom (e.g., vaping, fighting) both exist and necessitate increased surveillance

and subsequent punishment. This comparison between administrators, teachers, and students contrasts with Wellenreiter's (2021) discussion of a mismatch between how adults and students understand the same behavior in school spaces, including bathrooms. However, from a different perspective, our findings mirror Wellenreiter (2021) in that we also observe a mismatch between stakeholders—not regarding perceptions of the same behavior in bathrooms, but regarding perceptions of the same security technology in bathrooms; school administrators typically perceived the technology as effective at curbing student misbehavior, while teachers and students primarily expressed skepticism toward the technology's efficacy.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Heightened anxiety surrounding school safety is driving greater stakeholder interest in the implementation of security protocols. As a result, school monetary and human resources are being diverted to cover security costs over other school needs (C. M. Saldaña & Guan, 2025). Similar to other fields, the advancement in technology is outpacing the ability to study the effects of these new technologies (Nichols & Garcia, 2022). In this study, we found that administrators were eager to implement new bathrooms with vape detectors without fully understanding what the bathrooms could detect and how the bathrooms detect the presence of people or vapes. Without understanding how the technology identifies people, administrators cannot guarantee these items do not compromise students' privacy.

School agencies should fully consider the efficacy of a product when implementing a new security technology. Schools are increasingly eager to implement new security measures, often without fully considering the associated costs, such as infringements on student privacy rights or the potential disruption of the learning environment. Notably, as observed in the schools included in our study, security technologies are often being implemented in the absence of any

clear evidence of crime or violence. This raises important questions about the necessity of such securitization efforts and the specific threats they are intended to address.

Implications for Research

Future research might build on our findings in several ways. Methodologically, future research might incorporate more robust observational data to better understand school stakeholders' daily experiences of social control in bathrooms. This could allow researchers to follow-up on particular moments witnessed in real-time (e.g., a particular instance of a vape detector going off). Teachers and security guards, for example, might reflect on their response to students, and students might likewise reflect on their experience of the vape detector. However, we recognize the challenges involved with bathroom-related privacy concerns and can imagine there might rightly be ethical challenges to such observational research.

Scholars might surface whether students from different demographic groups and with differing experiences with school punishment have differing experiences with the expansion of PIC in bathrooms. It is possible that groups of children who have historically been subject to the most punishment in schools—especially Black, Latine, Native American, and students with disabilities—might hold unique perspectives on bathroom security, especially given prior research suggesting that historically marginalized groups do not uniformly reject school securitization (Bell, 2021; Shedd, 2015). Likewise, White children, who are often imagined as "innocent" (Freidus, 2020) may have more limited experiences of punishment, yet may be acutely aware of how carceral logics are unequally applied in school bathrooms (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Finally, we can imagine new directions for research that examines alternatives to and resistance against securitizing school bathrooms. Given our skepticism that further surveillance

of children in bathrooms is likely to improve school safety or their flourishing, more broadly, future studies might document and learn from schools and districts that are approaching concerns about school safety in bathrooms through anti-carceral, liberatory logics. Documenting both the benefits and challenges of such approaches might provide a hopeful alternative to increased carcerality in school bathrooms, while surfacing roadblocks other schools and districts are likely to face.

Conclusion

Security has expanded into bathrooms—long considered off-limits for invasive surveillance due to privacy concerns—yet research has largely overlooked this shift. Addressing this gap, our study examines how carceral logics manifest in bathroom surveillance across four high schools. We find that administrators, teachers, and students largely agree on the presence of problematic behaviors but diverge in their views on surveillance technologies. By centering bathrooms as contested spaces of safety, surveillance, and privacy, this study highlights how the PIC continues to shape school environments in increasingly intimate and normalized ways.

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Table 1

Enrollment Demographics by School

	Locale	Racial Identities	Economically Disadvantaged	English Language Learners	Students with Disabilities
Buchanan HS	Suburban, Large	40% Asian 40% White 10% Hispanic 10% Black	10%	10%	10%
Pierce HS	Suburban, Large	80% Hispanic 10% Asian 10% White	70%	60%	10%
Roosevelt HS	Suburban, Large	50% Asian 20% White 10% Hispanic 10% Black	20%	10%	10%
Washington HS	Town, Fringe	80% White 10% Hispanic	10%	0%	20%

Note. Percentages rounded to the nearest 10 to protect confidentiality of the schools. Racial identities only included if they round to at least 10% of the student population.

Table 2

Student Focus Groups (SFG) by School

School	Students' Gender/Race by Focus Group
Buchanan HS	SFG #1: 4 Black females, 1 White female
	SFG #2: 4 South Asian males
	SFG #3: 2 White males, 1 Black male
	SFG #4: 1 Latino male, 1 White male, 1 Middle Eastern female
	SFG #5: 1 Middle Eastern male, 1 Black male, 1 White male, 1 White female
	SFG #6: 2 White males, 1 Latino male
	SFG #7: 1 Middle Eastern male, 1 Middle Eastern female, 1 White female
Pierce HS	SGF: 3 Latino males, 2 Latina females, 1 White male, 1 Middle Eastern male, 1 Asian male, 1 Black male
Roosevelt HS	SFG #1: 1 White female with a disability, 1 Black female
	SFG #2: 1 White female, 1 Black male
Washington HS	SFG #1: 1 White male
	SFG #2: 1 White male
	SFG #3: 1 White female