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Columnists

Gene Healy: Snooping on teens reduces their American individualism

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By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
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Downtown D.C.'s booming Gallery Place corridor has lately been plagued by disruptive, loitering teens. Two weeks ago, after meeting with District officials, business owners hit on a novel solution: installing the latest in crowd-control technology outside the Chinatown Metro entrance.

Like a reverse dog whistle, the "Mosquito" emits a piercing beep at a frequency only young ears can hear. "Cool stuff," brags a spokesman for the British company selling the device. "Drives kids crazy."

Nobody likes getting jostled by unruly punks, but there's something a tad creepy about "fixing" the problem with a human "bug zapper" -- a machine that harasses guilty and innocent alike.

Kids are getting used to this sort of thing, though. This generation has been poked, prodded, monitored, and controlled more than any other in American history.

When you look at our public schools, which educrats are busily turning into high-tech dystopias, you wonder how the regimented teen is supposed to grow up into an independent, free-thinking citizen.

Several school districts have begun tracking students' whereabouts with radio-frequency chips in student ID cards. "Information from those sensors is displayed on a map of the school," explains a Richmond, Calif., administrator, letting school officials, like counterterror agents on "24," pinpoint the students' location at any time.

Earlier this year it emerged that a Pennsylvania school district used "anti-theft" software in school-issued laptops to surreptitiously take thousands of webcam snapshots of students in their own homes. The federal government recently declined to prosecute the administrators, but such programs clearly bring enormous potential for abuse.

Public education is increasingly coming to resemble a 12-year shuffle through a giant TSA security line, with drug-sniffing dogs and "zero-tolerance" policies that make pocketknives and aspirin grounds for arrest and expulsion.

Children raised in this atmosphere grow up far more deferential to authority than their elders. William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of "Millennials Rising," call the generation born after 1981 "America's New

Conformists," favoring "political order" over individualism.

Millennials' confidence in the federal government is 14 percent higher than older generations', according to a new report from the Obama-phile Center for American Progress. That study purports to explain "why and how the Millennial Generation is the most pro-government generation and what this means for our future."

I can answer that last bit. It means: Be afraid; Be very afraid.

Generational changes in parenting philosophy have surely contributed to Millennials' pro-authority bent. Gone are the days when mom shoved you outside in the morning, telling you to get home by dark.

Howe and Strauss document a rapid decrease in unstructured free time for kids growing up in the '90s. But even if government policy isn't the only factor driving the new conformity, the schools shouldn't strive to make it worse.

Britain has been a pioneer in building a school system that conditions students for life in a cradle-to-grave surveillance state. It's no surprise that the "Mosquito" is a British import.

That may be changing, thanks to the civil-libertarian-leaning Cameron-Clegg government. Among the coalition's first moves were revoking schools' authority to demand children's fingerprints, and shutting down Labor's ContactPoint database of personal information on all 11 million Britons under 18 (slogan: "every child matters.")

"The culture of snooping and mistrust has become so ingrained that we must tackle it with renewed vigor," said Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

Too often today, our schools actively promote that culture, quashing independence in the name of student security. The good news is, as our cousins across the pond are showing, that trend can be reversed.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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