

Pranks not just harmless fun

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To the teenage mind, the mischief seems harmless enough: egging cars, toilet-papering houses, knocking on doors and fleeing.

In Ohio and elsewhere, however, such antics have at times proved dire, ending in trips to jail, hospitals and even funeral homes.

The stakes -- both human and legal -- are as high as ever, according to police, prosecutors and school officials. As a result, the authorities agree, young people today pull pranks at their own peril.

"You just can't risk it," said Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. "You don't know what's funny from what could be dangerous."

A *Dispatch* review of news accounts nationwide reinforces the point: During the past five years, what began as innocuous tomfoolery resulted in at least 12 deaths, 11 serious injuries and 336 criminal charges.

Among the scenarios that ended badly:

- A 23-year-old man was fatally shot after he and some friends pelted cars with tomatoes and paintballs in Ohio's Amish country.
- A 16-year-old Florida boy, mistaken for a burglar while pulling a front-porch prank on a neighbor, was shot and killed.
- A group of Massachusetts teens dragged tractor-trailer tires into a road in hopes of forcing a driver to stop and move them; instead, a 21-year-old motorist struck one of the tires, crashed into a tree, became engulfed in flames and died at the scene.
- A Wisconsin high-school student was hospitalized after classmates tested a prank seen in a movie by putting Visine into his drink.
- Five Michigan teens who sprayed fire extinguishers, broke eggs and spread toilet paper in a high school pleaded guilty to malicious destruction of a building, receiving identical sentences of a \$4,664 fine, 70 hours of community service and probation.

"It's truly a different world today," said Genoa Township Police Chief Robert Taylor, a 35-year veteran of law enforcement.

"And some of the pranks these kids think are funny are far from it."

Violent reactions

As part of a late-summer custom in Holmes County, a dozen people ages 15 to 23 waited in a cornfield for cars to approach, then took aim with tomatoes and paint-balls.

When they struck the aging Cadillac of Marion Weaver, however, the 58-year-old driver became furious. He returned with a shotgun and opened fire.

Steven Keim, 23, a Mennonite who worked on his family's farm, was struck by more than 100 pellets. He died that September night in 2003.

Five years later, the outcome of the case still haunts Prosecutor Steve Knowing: The jury hung 11-1 on Weaver's murder charge, convicting him instead of negligent homicide. He spent about six months behind bars.

"There was someone who actually could see his point of view," Knowing said. "That bothers me -- still bothers me to no end."

The case serves as an extreme illustration of the sometimes-violent reaction of people who fall victim to pranks.

The response, said Aaron Kennard, executive director of the National Sheriffs' Association, seems indicative of the times.

"Things have changed drastically, from a society that has accepted some of these pranks to a society that has suggested that we've got to look out for ourselves," Kennard said.

A month after Keim was killed, a Florida youth met the same fate.

In suburban Boca Raton, Mark Drewes tied fishing line to a neighbor's door knocker, planning to hide and "knock" from a distance.

The neighbor, thinking he was being robbed, grabbed a semiautomatic pistol, opened the door, saw the boy's tall frame, and shot Drewes in the back.

The teen was pronounced dead shortly afterward.

And in October, a group of Michigan teens who were draping a friend's trees with toilet paper were mistaken for intruders by the friend's father. The man loaded a shotgun with birdshot and fired at the youths, sending one of the boys to the hospital.

The state of society, experts say, make such tragedies less and less surprising.

"Examples like Columbine, like Sept. 11, have heightened our fear of bad things happening," said Nancy Udolph, chairwoman of the Department of Social Work at Ashland University and a longtime counselor who has worked with teenagers.

"And I guess maybe in some way, the old phrase 'kids will be kids' we're just not very tolerant of anymore."

Several recent incidents in central Ohio support that notion:

- In August 2006, [Rachel Barezinsky](#) of Worthington was shot after she and some friends had crept onto a "haunted" property in the suburb. A resident of the home, apparently weary of being taunted, fired a gun into the dark, striking Barezinsky, 17, as she and her friends circled the block in their car. She was left with short-term memory loss and limited use of her left arm and leg.
- Four months later, in December 2006, 14-year-old Danny Crawford was fatally shot on the West Side after he and two friends egged cars. A person in the SUV hit by an egg chased Crawford into an alley and gunned him down. No arrest has been made in the case.
- In August 2008, 16-year-old Garrett Burton, the son of a police officer, was shot execution-style after he and a group of guys tossed eggs at vehicles on Hilliard-Rome Road.

"This idiot had any number of options to resolve the situation without putting a bullet in my kid's head," said Garrett's father, George Burton.

Sgt. Dana Norman, the Columbus detective investigating both egg throwing-related slayings, is at a loss over such responses.

"I can't explain it," he said. "Why would you go to that extent to shoot at somebody for throwing eggs at your car?"

Unintended consequences

Other pranks turned tragic in a different way.

At least a half-dozen times before, a group of Massachusetts teenagers had created makeshift roadblocks by dragging tractor-trailer tires or other objects onto a rural road.

They found it funny, forcing drivers to stop their cars, get out and clear the roadway.

The last time they pulled the stunt, in December 2003, Edwin Keach apparently didn't see the tires. The 21-year-old hit at least one, lost control of his sport-utility vehicle, smashed into a tree, and was engulfed in flames.

Less than a mile from home, Keach died.

A similar scenario played out in central Ohio three years ago when Bobby Roby, 18, and friend Dustin Zachariah, 17, swerved to avoid a "deer" on a rural road near Kenton and crashed their car. The deer was a decoy placed there by five Kenton High School students.

Roby spent four months in hospital rooms and nursing homes and might forever walk with a limp; Zachariah's body was ravaged, too, and he was left without short-term memory.

The biggest problem with pranks, experts say, is that most young people don't work through the potential consequences before acting.

And, they're unusually vulnerable to peer pressure.

"These pranks are almost never done by one person; they're done by a group," said Bill Connor, a behavioral-health social worker at Nationwide Children's Hospital who has counseled adolescents for more than 30 years.

"And it takes tremendous risk and courage to turn to the other kids and say, 'Let's not do this.' "

Pop-culture influences haven't helped matters, said James Backstrom, a former chairman of the juvenile-justice committee of the National District Attorneys Association.

In Hastings, Minn., where he lives, a youth was badly burned several years ago after emulating a prank seen in *Jackass: The Movie*.

More recently, the film *Wedding Crashers* inspired five Milwaukee high-school students to spike a 16-year-old's drink with Visine. Wanting to test whether the eye medicine would actually cause digestive problems, they soon found out: The youth ended up in a hospital intensive-care unit.

"Some of it gets out of control," Backstrom said. "It is important that kids realize these things are wrong, that they be held accountable."

Criminal punishments

Even when pranks didn't go wrong, authorities often responded with arrests, charges and zero-tolerance policies.

Kevin Cottle was 11 years old last year when he toted his slingshot to middle school in Tavares, Fla. He zipped a pellet down the hallway, leaving a welt on another boy.

Cottle was arrested on charges of firing a "deadly missile" in a public building; handcuffed; taken to jail; and transferred to a juvenile-detention center, where he spent four days.

Eventually found guilty of misdemeanor battery, he was sentenced to probation.

"I think they totally went overboard," said his mother, Pamela, who spent thousands of dollars in legal fees to fight the charges.

"To handcuff an 11-year-old child, read them their rights without their parent present, and haul them off to jail -- he was petrified."

Some central Ohio teens, too, have learned lessons the hard way.

Last year, for example, a group of Olentangy High School seniors were charged with disorderly conduct and unlawful restraint after they pinned a classmate in her driveway with their cars while playing "senior tag," a game in which teams shoot each other with Nerf guns.

The charges eventually were dropped, but the experience proved far more serious than any of the teens anticipated.

"I think the word *pranks* still exists as a word and a concept," said Evan Dahn, one of the three arrested. "It's just the outcome that has changed dramatically.

"It's not like 'Ha, ha -- good one!' anymore. It's like, 'Hey, we're going to throw you in jail for 25 to life.' "

Less than a week after the Olentangy incident, a group of young people emerged from a van at Westerville Central High School, grabbed a student and drove off.

A school official called police to report what appeared to be an abduction.

In reality, it was another friendly game of senior tag.

But Police Chief Robert Taylor and school officials decided to punish the four "abductors." Each was charged with disorderly conduct (although their charges, too, were eventually dismissed).

"It's just a more serious world," Taylor said. "I believe the citizens today expect law enforcement to address the issue criminally."

The chief knows life wasn't always this way.

When he was a kid, he used to soap the windows of friends' homes -- a prank that surely would yield consequences these days, he said.

"Today, you could get shot (doing that). And today, I guess it would be considered criminal trespassing and criminal damaging."

Taylor's peers, too, say they feel compelled to address such antics seriously.

"The discretion has somewhat been taken away from law enforcement," said Kennard, of the National Sheriffs' Association. "It's now a litigious society where people will sue at the drop of a hat -- including (suing) law enforcement for failure to act."

School officials, too, say they have little choice but to assess strict punishment for pranks.

"We're in a time when safety is a different issue than it's ever been before," said Gregg Morris, superintendent of Gahanna-Jefferson Public Schools. "So you sometimes might chuckle a bit. And yet, when you look at the full scope and the injury that could occur and the dangers there, it's an issue that has to be addressed."

Yet Paul Houston, former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, sees the push toward zero-tolerance by both schools and society as reason for concern itself.

"Kids do stupid things -- that's why they're kids," Houston said. "Part of the whole process of growing up is to learn better judgment."

The adults in schools need to help those kids, he said. "And the rest of adults in society need to lighten up."

Morris, though, wonders whether he and his school colleagues have a choice in such matters.

Last year, for example, many central Ohioans thought it was funny when Gahanna-Lincoln students stole the 7-foot, 500-pound Big Boy statue from Frisch's Restaurant and planted it on the high school roof.

The prank might have appeared harmless, Morris said, but what if the statue had fallen?

"Let's say the high-school principal chose to laugh at that and think it's cute, and next year, there's something like that and someone's hurt," he said. "You see the position the school administrator's in?"

Morris wants his schools to be fun, but he needs them to be safe.

"And those pieces," he said, "don't always exactly fit together."

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