Rooting Out the Bad Seeds?

By Kelly Patricia O'Meara

A pilot program to identify dangerous kids currently is being conducted in public schools without the knowledge of most parents. What will the government do with the data?

To ensure that America's youth enjoy good mental health, psychologists have been deployed to learning institutions to diagnose behavioral problems and distribute psychotropic drugs such as Ritalin. Insight's groundbreaking articles on this issue have excited commentary from the New York Times to Time and Newsweek.

Survivor: Six-year-old Brandon Barnefske, a classmate of the young shooter in Flint, Mich., in February.

But, as with the gunmen at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., or the 6-year-old shooter in Flint, Mich., crimes continue to occur in schools despite the growing network of prescription drugs and psychobabble.

For parents who are becoming just a little crazed about all this psychological evaluation of their children, the newest initiative to weigh and record the state of mind of every student in the public schools may put them over the edge.

Mosaic 2000, a "method" designed to identify potentially violent children, is being tested at random in high schools throughout the country. The problem for those wary of educators caught up in such psychological experiments is that parents will not have a clue about what soon could amount to criminal profiling of every child; nor will they know where, beyond the immediate school officials, the information obtained from their children is sent or how it might affect their future.

It is about as easy to contact Gavin de Becker Inc., the California-based consulting company specializing in personal security, as it has been to get White House officials to produce missing e-mails. The designer of the Mosaic 2000 system is in hiding and does not respond directly to questions. Its Website, however, purports to provide a detailed explanation of its brainchild, and Insight has reviewed carefully its descriptions and claims.

This would-be electronic mind reader isn't the first of its kind. Mosaic computer-profiling systems have been used for years by several federal law-enforcement agencies, including the Secret Service, the U.S. Marshals Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, or BATF. Contrary to media reports, the BATF is not "involved in Mosaic other than assisting de Becker in the preliminary screening," according to Jeff Roehm, chief of public information for that agency. Roehm explains: "We had a couple of folks who sat on the panel and shared their expertise in law enforcement. They helped in fleshing out the questions that may be asked, but de Becker is a private company offering it to schools."

BATF is just one of the law-enforcement agencies that played a major role in developing criminal profiling of kids through Mosaic 2000. According to de Becker, Gil Garicetti, the Los Angeles County district attorney; Richard Devine, the state's attorney for Cook County, Ill.; and Donald W. Ingwerson, superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, are the "three leaders who partnered to facilitate the development and testing of the new system for evaluating threats in schools."

So what did the best and brightest
in law enforcement come up with to help their partners seek out and identify the next Columbine shooter?

The Mosaic 2000 is described on the de Becker Website as a “computer-assisted method for helping evaluate situations involving students who make threats and might act out violently.” But it is not a test that students are asked to take. Children are questioned by school or law-enforcement officials and the information fed into the Mosaic system (the children are not told who will evaluate the information or how it will be analyzed). The system then produces a report on the child being evaluated for criminal tendencies.

The computer-assisted system already has divined questions as well as possible replies. After a subject’s answers are run through the computer, they are rated on a scale of 1 (low potential for violence) to 10 (high potential for violence). School officials or law officers then make a “threat assessment” of the student.

Critics say the worst potential problems with Mosaic 2000 are encapsulated in what the company stresses never would occur. For instance, de Becker says, Mosaic 2000 is “not a computer program. It will not share information about the students (at least in the field tests), student names will be automatically deleted from the system after the evaluation process is complete and, because Mosaic 2000 helps evaluate situations not students, it does not explore any demographic questions such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic situations, etc.” In other words, students are not being evaluated—“situations” are evaluated. The information that is fed into the system about the “situation” is not shared with anyone and there is no record of the “assessment.”

If that is the case, say critics, what is the purpose of all this? And why are parents who become aware of the Mosaic system refused a list of the questions it poses? The most important element of the system, the questions, are carefully guarded and simply unobtainable for independent evaluation. “We don’t know if this thing is fish or fowl. We don’t know how the information is going to be used,” Ted Deeds, chief operating officer of the Law Enforcement Alliance of America, a Virginia-based coalition of law-enforcement officials, victims and citizens united for justice, tells Insight. “First, if the data does work, what the hell do you do with it? Will the schools segregate the potentially violent students, isolate them, carry out more locker checks or send them into counseling? What’s the review mechanism? They all say it’s not a profiling of the student, but we’re not convinced.”

Struggling to find a rationale for Mosaic 2000, Deeds comes up only with more questions: “How do you train personnel for using such a system? How does one know that the answer is truthful and whether the kid understands the questions being asked? No one has addressed these questions. Remember, we’re dealing with kids, not adults. Parents would be insane to allow their children to be put into this kind of database — it could show up for the next 20 years. Does anyone really believe that this information won’t be used by other law-enforcement agencies? Just look at the Social Security number, which we were promised would never be used for general identification. We’ve seen these promises before. This isn’t anything new; the spin is just a little different.”

Officials participating in the trial program immediately are defensive and provide conflicting views of Mosaic 2000. Aaron Ross, assistant superintendent of Reynoldsburg School District in suburban Ohio, tells Insight, “We’re trying to use the system, but we haven’t found anyone to test. That’s the good news.” Questioned about Mosaic 2000 as a form of profiling for potentially violent students, Ross suddenly is emphatic. “Some people,” Ross declares, “have said to me that Mosaic 2000 is profiling. That is just stupid. This system doesn’t profile kids. It’s just 20 questions. It’s a piece of software that contains 20 questions that ask the investigating officer, principal or counselor about a specific situation. What Mosaic 2000 permits that would not otherwise be available is [the gathering] information that is organized into 20 categories that are relevant to risk assessment when the situation arises.”

“The principal,” Ross continues, “can make a decision with the additional information that has been delivered by Mosaic 2000 with greater confidence in determination of the risk. It’s a nice system. It takes the information from the answers provided by the student and organizes them into relevant categories. There is no rating of kids or situations. In fact, it can be completely anonymous. The point of the program is to help the investigator. When he’s done, the notes will be thrown away.”

Ross harbors doubts, nevertheless. “I have no idea if someone is keeping a record of this information. The same can be said, however, of every other piece of information we keep on our stu-
Ill., state's attorney, one of the three leaders who partnered to come up with the system, says he is aware of Mosaic 2000 but, like Ross, does not have a copy of the profiling questions — even though Mosaic 2000 is being tested in three suburban Chicago high schools.

"This system," explains Benjamin, "is a consequence of what happened at Columbine. What we're trying to find out is who is in such personal trouble that they might do something that may endanger another student or themselves. I don't think parental consent is necessary before the test is given. Everyone involved wants to see how this program will work.... The tests are ongoing and it will take time to assess the system."

Everyone concerned with this project agrees that Mosaic 2000 was born out of the tragedy that occurred last year at Columbine High School, and that its purpose is to identify the potential for violent behavior in schoolchildren. But according to data released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, or BJS, and the National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, schools are safer now than they have been in years. In fact, according to a recent BJS/NCES report, "a child is more likely to be a victim of a violent crime in their community or at home than at school."

In 1996 (the most recent data available), there were 255,000 incidents of nonfatal but serious violent crime at school, but that figure nearly triples to 671,000 incidents concerning children away from school. The data further show a "decline in school crime and a reduction in the percentage of students carrying weapons to school." The data for the 1996-97 school year show that "10 percent of all public schools reported at least one serious violent crime to the police or a law-enforcement representative. Forty-seven percent of public schools reported less-serious violent or nonviolent crimes and the remaining 43 percent of public schools reported none of these crimes."

It is precisely this kind of information that has critics questioning the Mosaic 2000, as well as its methodology. "We've heard them say that they aren't going to use this information for anything," says Deeds. "So why are they taking it? The federal government likes to flush money away, but most of the time they do it with some purpose."

As a civil libertarian concerned about law enforcement, Deeds is both knowledgeable and aware of the slippery slope. "Let's face it, the federal government has been profiling people for years," he says. "It's exactly like what happened with the National Instant Check system, or NICS. They said they weren't going to keep the records of the people who passed the firearms check, but they have. The people who cleared the system are not criminals, yet they remain in the system like they are. This administration keeps records on 99.9 percent of the people who aren't criminals. Remember Filegate? The administration was using secret or classified data from their Republican opponents. They've proved what they're about and they seem willing to do anything to push their political agendas."

It is unclear what Mosaic 2000 is about and whether the information it collects on students will be shared with other agencies. But it isn't difficult for many in law enforcement to see it moving in that direction, especially because it is based on controversial profiling systems already in use by federal law-enforcement officials. Of such concerns de Becker writes in his Website, "The first step toward understanding Mosaic 2000 is to recognize that it will not fit neatly into methods you may have encountered in the past. Though similar approaches are used in several sciences (most notably as part of medical diagnoses and decision-making), few people have encountered Artificial Intuition."

Apparently de Becker is suggesting the computer-assisted system has a kind of sixth sense. Of course, critics say that relying on this sort of "evaluation" amounts toookery and increases the possibility of labeling innocent kids. Such worries may not be too big a leap, considering that some law-enforcement officials have been labeling as extremists motorists who display political or religious views on bumper stickers. For instance, according to a December 1999 article in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin titled "Vehicle Stops Involving Extremist Group Members," if motorists "sport bumper stickers with antigovernment or pro-gun sentiments ... and show other extremist signs such as presenting a copy of the Constitution, a Bible or political literature," law enforcement is trained to handle the situation with caution.

The Constitution? A Bible? No wonder civil libertarians are complaining about profiling.