



Trauma of School Strip Searches

School strip searches can be a traumatic experience. Sara Libby, legal editor at the Los Angeles *Daily Journal*, [recounted her story about female classmates having been strip-searched after gym class](#) when makeup, money, and CDs were reported missing. And even though she personally was not strip searched, the embarrassment of being featured on a *Dateline* TV special, and the anger and betrayal she felt toward her parents and the school is vivid to this day:

Soon after the ordeal took place, I overheard my parents and grandparents discussing it, saying they didn't think the administrators and police officers who orchestrated the search were wrong. I fled the house in tears, aghast that my own family thought it would have been OK for me to have been made to undergo a humiliating act in front of a group of strange adults.

Libby's closest friend at the time says that even 11 years later, having been searched so intrusively has left her with a deep emotional scar:

In all the meetings and interviews afterward, the police and vice principal made it sound like they were just doing it to protect us. But they didn't care about protecting us in that locker room, when girls were crying and begging to call their parents.

Libby blames the use of such abusive tactics on a "zero tolerance" policy many school districts have adopted. She notes that teens in general show a complete lack of understanding of basic constitutional rights and that at the very least, teens should not have to shed their clothes along with those rights when they enter the school building:

If students are going to be subjected to increasingly restrictive policies — no cellphones, iPods, painkillers, etc. — certainly administrators should have to operate under some limitations as well. And having rules in place to prevent kids from being forced to expose their bodies (something they'd be punished for if done by their own volition) might be a good place to start.

But the [attitudes of the justices that heard arguments on Tuesday](#) regarding the strip-search of Savana Redding don't seem to coincide with Libby's.

Justice David Souter did some role-playing, putting himself in the shoes of the vice principal. "The thought process in the principal's mind is: Better embarrassment than the risk of violent sickness and death. What's wrong with that reasoning?" he asked.

Redding's Lawyer Adam Wolf asked the court to draw a line between "ordinary searches" and strip searches, arguing that the vice principal had no reason to believe pills were hidden in Redding's underwear. The accusation, now known to be false, was from a fellow student, and that student did not even claim Savana was in possession of the pills, let alone that pills were hidden in her underwear; she only claimed Savana was the source of the pills.

Some of the Justices' comments suggest that the Fourth Amendment prohibition against "unreasonable search and seizure" may not be what determines their decision. Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. wondered how a school administrator is supposed to know the level of danger involved, asking, "He sees a white pill and doesn't know if it is something terribly harmful, even deadly, or if it's prescription-strength ibuprofen." Justice Anthony Kennedy asked whether the nature of the drug was irrelevant. And Justice Stephen Breyer noted that it is "a logical thing" for teens to hide contraband, implying that it was "logical" to do the strip-search.



Written by [Ann Shibler](#) on April 23, 2009

In all, it seemed the judges deemed the strip-search itself a rather trivial event, embarrassment. But it goes far beyond embarrassment. And surely this is not gender-based insensitivity; one writer at Reason.com [described](#) the issue thusly:

There are two kinds of people in the world: the kind who think it's perfectly reasonable to strip-search a 13-year-old girl suspected of bringing ibuprofen to school, and the kind who think those people should be kept as far away from children as possible.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between drug warriors and child molesters.

And beyond the trauma of exposing breasts and pelvic area, is the matter of the Fourth Amendment, which there seemed to be little discussion of in the Supreme Court on Tuesday.

— *Photo of Savana Redding: AP Images*



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