

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: CAUSE AND CURE

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THIS subject is often discussed as though it were a peculiarly modern problem, and one to which a complete solution should be found. It is of course neither of these things, but a permanent factor to be reckoned with in the up-bringing of the young. It is surprising, however, that only of recent years was separate provision made for child criminals, though one would have thought that their immaturity of mind and body cried aloud for recognition in any Christian community. In the eighteenth century a child of eight was hanged for arson, and there is a spot in Holborn I never pass without a shudder, for here a poor waif of twelve, convicted of many robberies, was literally dragged to the gallows screaming pitifully for mercy. At the end of the last century little children were still being committed to adult prisons, where they were subjected to unwholesome extremes of petting and harshness. Separate courts for children and a more suitable range of punishments, including probation, began under the inspiration of a group of Quakers in Birmingham in 1850. In 1908 appeared the Children's Act, which has been most unjustly represented as a gratuitous attack on parental rights, but was in fact an essential instrument for the protection of children from gross ill-treatment and abuses for which the common law gave no remedy. A new era of humane and constructive approaches to the delinquencies of youth had begun.

Forty years later, when a revised and much more generous Children's Act became law, some 40,707 boys and 3,770 girls under seventeen were convicted of indictable offences, and 27,435 youngsters of non-indictable offences. Very disappointingly, this represented a rise amounting to 26% over the previous year (1947) in those between eight and fourteen years and of 23% in those between fourteen and seventeen. When all the obvious war-time excuses have been made the figures for boys are too high to be contemplated with complacency. Let it be noted that the figures for girls are still very low; for Catholic girls it is probable that they are almost negligible, except in a few localities.

Where have we gone wrong and why? How is it that for all

our costly machinery of humanitarian reform our children still lapse so frequently and so seriously? There is no simple answer, not even the obvious one that religious teaching and family moral standards have declined grievously although material conditions have improved. In looking for causes of juvenile misdeeds, I think we have tended to isolate 'the child' too much and to forget that the influences which affect him are as wide as the community in which he lives. The delinquent child's problem is not only the business of a department of the Home Office, it is the whole problem of original sin. Take, for example, two familiar items from the classical lists of causes of child delinquency—lack of discipline and lack of moral training. Mr Stott, whose book is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and whose conclusions I cannot wholly support, has done great service in demanding closer examination of these phrases. Of 'lack of discipline' he remarks that ineffective discipline cannot be separated from other faults in the parental character. Unless a parent is reasonably loving, consistent and well-behaved himself, strict discipline, especially if enforced by corporal punishment, is likely to do more harm than good. Imitation counts for much also, and if the adults in the home set a bad example, no amount of formal moral teaching is likely to be of much avail.

A very potent though often neglected influence on children's standards of conduct is the general attitude towards law-breaking in the community. No one who saw the effects of prohibition in the United States, as I was privileged to do, could have been surprised at the results of the multiple controls and many shortages in the war and post-war years in this country. Adults of any nation crack under excessive strains on their desire for primitive satisfactions, and their children crack with them. In an American city famous for lawlessness I was told by a psychiatrist on the Child Guidance clinic staff why he was resigning a well-paid post. 'I've got all the professional help I want' he said, 'but what use is it? The Governor of this State has notoriously removed several million dollars from the Treasury; two members of my Committee are known to be racketeers. From this window you can see an illicit brewery run by an Alderman and a garage owned by another town official and used for receiving stolen cars. . . . The delinquent children who are sent to me know all this as well as I do—and I'm quitting.' We cannot hope to rival

this picturesque record here, but more simple and sordid pilfering by adults from the docks, on the railways, and from shops, thefts often most inadequately punished by the courts, undoubtedly have had evil reactions on the honesty of the children in the homes to which these stolen goods were taken.

A few words should be said about 'broken homes', those fruitful breeding grounds of crime, because Catholics are perhaps too apt to describe them as associated solely with divorce. Disastrous as this practice is in the long run, the fact should be faced that violent tempers, drunkenness, immorality in the home, create an atmosphere as poisonous for the children in certain cases as divorce and a remarriage. Some of the most wretched homes I have ever known were those ravaged by an insane or mentally deficient parent. It is a grave problem, now agitating the minds of social students, how measures can be devised for protecting children in such homes without making dangerous inroads on parental rights.

Let us turn from the contemplation of the multifarious causes of juvenile crime to the measures taken to deal with it. There is no space available, and indeed no need, to rehearse the now familiar story of recent legislation for the protection of children, or to describe the elaborate machinery built up by the Home Office for the care and training of the delinquent over long years. In spite of recent increases in convictions and of certain defects to be mentioned later, it is an achievement in which we may justly take pride, and it excites the admiration of foreign visitors. The approved schools are particularly signalled out for praise by those who know them well. It may be most profitable to discuss the weaker spots in the defence against crime, and later the special case of the Catholic child.

Children's Courts. Many of our Courts are outstanding both as regards method and personnel. The good sense, firmness and ripe wisdom of many Children's court magistrates is beyond praise. But others are still a source of anxiety, in that they have not outgrown a dangerous fallacy of the early pioneers that children's offences against the law should be treated like mere domestic naughtiness. The Law is not a kind of social service; it is something deeper and more majestic, more essential to the maintenance of a civilised state, and every person who comes in contact with it should be made to realise this truth. Though many

of the offences are trivial, others are very serious and of evil omen.

Some of the major offences of which I have known magistrates to be guilty are: failure to bring the parents sufficiently into the picture, failure to bring home to the child the seriousness of its acts and their possible consequences, failure to realise the importance of the Intelligence Quotient, failure to convey to the child the meaning of probation and the duties that the probation officer owes to the Court if the misbehaviour is continued. Probation can be badly misused by unimaginative magistrates who do not recognise its limits. How can an unfortunate social worker 'supervise' effectively a girl of fifteen or sixteen whom she has never seen before, who has contracted immoral habits and whose parents are un-co-operative? An arch offender is the too credulous magistrate who believes anything a child says even against the word of responsible adults. He or she gives direct encouragement to lying, and reinforces all the youngster's resistance to decent influences. I know how very difficult it is to do anything with a child who has had such a demoralising experience. I once overheard an illuminating conversation between a solicitor and his client in the corridor of a magistrate's court. 'Remember that everything you say in contradiction of the Probation Officer will be checked up, and Mr Blank (the magistrate) doesn't like perjury'. 'Then I'd better think again, culley!' replied the young man, rather sadly. . . . Finally I would include in the black list magistrates who can find no use for psychologists (lay or medical), and their colleagues who with equal lack of good sense allow psychologists to run their Court.

Here we come to one of the most vexed questions in the whole problem. What, if any, is the place of the psychologist¹ in the apparatus of justice? To many persons the answer is quite simply *none*. We have all been children, they say, many of us are parents; what more do we want to know about childhood? In the current phrase, what has the psychologist got, we haven't got? This specious line of argument ignores the human characteristic of forgetting past experiences, the strange veil that hides the workings of one human being's mind from another, the disability we all suffer that prevents us from 'seeing the wood for the trees' where our emotions are involved. It ignores, too, the experience of the past thirty years.

1 I am using the term psychologist to cover medical and lay practitioners.

On empirical grounds one can call in evidence the invaluable practical contribution to the welfare of the *normal* child made by psychologists. It was not necessary, we may concede, for psychologists to teach parents to love their children, or to show that early influences in childhood are important. But it was necessary, and still is, to emphasise the importance of personal relationships in very early life, the need of love, tenderness and security (recognised as such by the child) as a condition of healthy growth. The further lesson, that from lack of these things a child may drift into neurosis or misbehaviour, apparently quite unrelated to the original events in its life, was certainly not superfluous. Lastly the psychologists ask us to believe that if a child's bad conduct is due to lack of love or security, the appropriate remedy is more love and greater security and not more severity. If our ancestors did fully appreciate these facts, then their treatment of children, especially of what are now called 'deprived' children, was wholly inexcusable.

The services which psychologists have rendered to the abnormal, feeble-minded or maladjusted child are more clearly recognised. For these children the technique of the Child Guidance Clinic was devised in America, and has been widely copied in this country, notably by Sister Marie Hilda at the Notre Dame Clinic in Glasgow. It is deplorable that a few magistrates to this day never find a child who requires full investigation of this sort; they are the masculine equivalent of the mother who rejects the advice of the health-visitor for an ailing baby on the ground that she has 'buried six'. I have known of feeble-minded children birched for offences they could not understand, a child suffering from the after-effects of sleepy-sickness repeatedly punished, children treated as delinquents who were the victims of bad home conditions or physical disabilities quite unexpected by a know-all Bench. A careless and misapplied policy of leniency may have nearly as unfortunate results.

The critics of psychologists and certain psychological clinics have of course a strong case owing to the follies of a minority. To Catholics their most serious fault is the absence of a moral code (though this is the exception, not the rule, as is wrongly supposed) or of any understanding of religion. Others, who have apparently a more rational conception of morality, would base it only on the shifting sands of human relationship, the knowledge

and love of God being regarded as superfluous 'extras' in education.

Nor is this the only criticism psychologists have to face. Busy magistrates complain that they are overwhelmed by voluminous reports dating back to the infancy of the patient, couched in unintelligible jargon and recommending impracticable treatment. One recalls the story of the too-eloquent French barrister, defending a client charged with petty larceny who began: 'Before the creation of the world. . . . 'A thousand pardons, Monsieur' interrupted the alarmed judge 'but I am rather busy this morning. Let us pass on to the Deluge'. In practice most psychologists have no difficulty in coming to an understanding with the magistrates they are advising on the kind of reports they require.

One can sympathise also with the distrust that a Court feels for psychologists who, like good determinists, tell the child that they 'know he cannot help what he does'. The aim of psychological treatment should be to free and strengthen the will, and not to deny its existence. Another source of discord is the reluctance to accept a simple motive for a criminal offence. The risk of looking too far afield—in defiance of philosophy and common sense—is illustrated by an experience of the Cretan campaign. The first German parachutists captured were found to be excessively and inexplicably thirsty. And this was attributed by an ingenious psychiatrist to a resemblance between being dropped by parachute and the act of birth. Naturally the infantile memories revived a demand for the maternal breast. Some time later it was found that all German parachute troops had been dosed with hyoscine (a thirst-producing drug) to prevent air-sickness. It was really too bad for the theorist.

A specific fear which keeps many Catholics away from Child Guidance clinics is a fear that the child will be subjected to unwise or even immoral teaching on sex. This factor is much exaggerated, but it is certainly justified by the teachings of some extremists. It is only fair to point out however that children do suffer from anxieties and mental disturbances associated with sex, and if such a case is brought to the clinic, it is not fair to blame the clinic. Doctors do not always get the calm and rational co-operation from parents and teachers which they are entitled to expect.

I have been at pains to examine the case against the clinics, for I feel from a considerable experience of them, here and in the

United States, that when all is said and done the balance is handsomely on the right side. They help children no one else can help. But they should either be in Catholic hands or the staff should include some Catholics, and there should be a complete understanding of Catholic principles.² There is no wholly Catholic Child Guidance clinic south of Liverpool, and in the present state of school finances none is likely to be started. It would be deplorable if Catholic child delinquents were wholly deprived of psychological advice and help.

Other constructive proposals for our own children are gravely hampered by lack of detailed knowledge of the position. It is known that a considerable number of Catholic boys appear before the Courts, larger than should be found in this situation in view of the special advantages of their upbringing. I feel that our conditions are so special that an intensive enquiry into a limited number of cases of Catholic delinquents, and a more superficial survey of the field in all dioceses, would be a most valuable piece of work. What part is played by mixed marriages, by employment of mothers outside the home, by technically intact but grossly unhappy marriages, by lack of healthy recreation in city areas? We speculate and discuss endlessly but we do not know, and until we know more we can do very little. Any enquiry should include a school record and an employment record and a frank assessment of school and home discipline, whether it is too lax or too severe. Another point on which one hears criticism is the lack of skilled after-care for children coming out of Catholic approved schools, though the schools themselves appear to be steadily improving.

Our children have a great heritage and it is worth while to put out great efforts to save those who are threatened with disaster. An analysis of cases would not only help them, it would be a substantial addition to the enquiries being made so profitably by non-Catholics in the same field.

² Many Catholic children attended the London Child Guidance Clinic at Highbury before the war, with satisfactory results.