

PSYCHOLOGY OF JUVENILE CRIME

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INTRODUCTION

In my work as a clinical psychologist consultant to a juvenile probation department I am requested to evaluate juvenile offenders and make recommendations as to their suitable treatment and placement. I approach each case much like a detective. But instead of trying to figure out who did the crime, I try to figure out why it was done. What were the factors in this person's background that enabled him or her to commit the crime? What were the immediate precipitants of the crime? Then, before making a recommendation regarding disposition, I also consider the seriousness of the crime, the history, if any, of prior offenses and how they were handled, the strengths and weaknesses of the offender, the ability of the family to make changes needed to prevent future acting-out behavior, and finally, the rehabilitation and treatment resources available in the community.

At first each case was a unique puzzle to me, but after a while certain patterns began to emerge. Some cases seemed to be primarily a subcultural expression. Others seemed to reflect deep psychological problems. Still others seemed related to genetic, neurological, or psychological developmental insufficiencies. As the patterns became clearer and clearer, I developed the idea of presenting them in a book to help others identify and appropriately deal with psychological problems leading to criminal behavior in the young.

In the case of parents, teachers, counselors, and therapists, it is hoped that increased awareness of these problems will help ward off criminal behavior in potential offenders. In the case of probation officers, lawyers, and judges, it is hoped that this material will be useful in arriving at suitable dispositions for offenders whose criminal behavior is due primarily to psychological problems or developmental inadequacies, in contrast to offenders whose criminal behavior is primarily related to a delinquent subculture.

Since all the material in this book is based on clinical observations, insights, and judgments, no statistical data are presented. However, this categorization of juvenile offenders may raise questions that statistically minded researchers might want to investigate.

Chapter 2 is a survey of research on juvenile delinquency. Chapter 3 discusses the significance of school adjustment in juvenile delinquency. Chapter 4 discusses the rationale and effectiveness of various rehabilitation efforts. Chapters 5 through 14 deal with particular psychological patterns underlying criminal behavior. These chapters are arranged in approximate order of increasing psychological impairment. While each juvenile offender usually exhibits some combination of these patterns, it is possible to categorize offenders by their major characteristics and thereby determine the general level of psychological functioning. Finally, Chapter 15 deals with patterns of behavior in parents of juvenile offenders.

Chapter 1

RESEARCH ON CAUSES OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Historical Overview

Historically, sociologists have been more involved than psychologists in the study of juvenile delinquency. As a result, public discussions have focused on the social conditions in urban, industrialized societies that are most strongly associated with juvenile crime, including low income, substandard schooling, deteriorating neighborhoods, lack of recreational facilities, and exposure to criminal activities. Although criminologic research demonstrates that these conditions are linked to a higher rate of delinquency than exists in materially more advantaged environments, it has also become obvious that these social conditions are neither sufficient nor necessary explanations of juvenile delinquency. Many youngsters growing up in materially disadvantaged environments manage to avoid delinquent involvement while many youngsters growing up in materially advantaged environments seek out delinquent companions and activities.

These observations have caused sociologists to shift their attention to more specific environmental factors precipitating juvenile crime, in particular, homes broken by parental death, desertion, or divorce. But here again it has become obvious

that while there is much evidence that these situations are related to a higher incidence of delinquency, they are neither sufficient nor necessary explanations. Many delinquents come from intact families and many youngsters from nonintact families grow up perfectly law abiding. Besides, the relationship between broken homes and delinquency is not entirely clear. Andrew (1978) reported: "Some authorities have found the intact family may, under some circumstances, produce more violence than the broken family." Andrews examined family variables for 214 delinquents and discovered: "The most violent delinquents were males from large intact homes." She concluded: "The pathogenicity of the large intact family for males may be difficult to recognize because of cultural bias." Eagly and Anderson (1974) suggested that the large intact families may evoke stereotyped sex roles, including violence in males. Robins, West, and Herjanic (1975) suggested that having a pathological father may be more damaging than having no father at all.

Evidently, it is necessary to go beyond the bare statistics, beyond the formal structure of families, to study the quality of parenting and the interactional patterns in these families, including supervision, discipline, and emotional warmth. But even that is not enough. The fact that very often children in the same family exhibit widely differing behavior points to the necessity of also studying the inner workings of juvenile offenders to understand specific personality factors entering into their delinquent behavior.

These realizations have prompted psychologists to join sociologists in the investigation of juvenile delinquency. The word "join" is very apt even though sociologists and psychologists approach the phenomenon from opposite ends of the spectrum—the former focusing on societal factors, the latter focusing on individual factors—with the family as the midpoint and common meeting ground between the two. It is obvious that neither field has all the answers; both have valid contributions to make. Moreover, a full understanding of the phenomenon depends upon the integration of insights from both, in much the same way that individual functioning cannot be explained by a summation of separate variables, but instead

requires a holistic understanding of mind-body, self-other interactions.

The following review of the literature on juvenile delinquency is intended to highlight major research approaches and findings.

Defining Juvenile Delinquency

The most basic research on this subject is defining the phenomenon. In their 1961 book, *Measuring Delinquency*, Eaton and Polk indicated that the average delinquent is not dangerous. "Slightly less than $\frac{1}{3}$ conformed to the 'criminal model.' Slightly more than $\frac{1}{3}$ involved unacceptable impulse expression and about another $\frac{1}{3}$ involved minor violations." Moreover, "the formal charge against a youngster has little diagnostic utility in determining why the youngster is in trouble or what should be done to rehabilitate him. It is more descriptive of the community context in which it occurred." Lewis (1976) concurred that "the severity of the offense is not necessarily a reliable measure of severe psychopathy."

In line with Eaton and Polk's observation that less than one-third of juvenile offenders are true criminals, many researchers, e.g. Friday and Halsey (1977), reported that the majority of juvenile delinquents grow up to be law-abiding adults.

In their 1940 book, *Juvenile Delinquents Grown Up*, Glueck and Glueck compared reformed and nonreformed delinquents on numerous background variables. They concluded:

Those who abandoned their criminalistic behavior were more favorably endowed and raised in better circumstances than those who continued. . . . Earlier reformation of some offenders may be accounted for by their better innate equipment, early environment, more intelligent discipline by parents and the apparently helpful effect of earlier arrest and contact with the juvenile court [relative to the onset of delinquent behavior]. In other words, there is a better chance of stopping delinquency if it is "nipped in the bud."

Lewis (1976) pointed out: "The younger the age of the child at the first offense, the greater the likelihood of larger numbers of subsequent offense, the greater the likelihood of larger numbers of subsequent offenses and the greater the likelihood that psychiatric treatment would be required in adulthood."

In a study of the relative effectiveness of probation vs. detention for different types of delinquents, Saunders and Davies (1976) found: "Most of the scales [on the Jesness inventory] that predicted failure in the sample of probationers also predicted failure with the detention centre boys. This suggests that the same type of offender is succeeding both on probation and at the detention centre." The neurotic juvenile offenders are most likely to stop their delinquent behavior. The unsocialized, aggressive, antiauthority, unempathic boys are most likely to continue in their delinquencies.

According to the Gluecks, maturation is the chief explanation of the improvements shown, but this normal process is retarded by poorer resources. Offenders whose criminality is due primarily to adverse influences rather than any deep-seated personal weakness eventually outgrow their delinquencies. In contrast, those with innate and early conditioned deficiencies continue to be criminal until later years when they "burn out" due to a loss of energy and aggressiveness. However, as already indicated, there is mounting evidence that this population is likely to have serious psychiatric problems in later life (Lewis, 1976).

Crimogenic Factors

The next most basic research involves searching for causal factors. Dudycha, in the chapter on juvenile delinquency in his 1955 book, *Psychology for Law Enforcement Officers*, pointed out the necessity of looking for a pattern of factors in delinquency, rather than a single cause. Accordingly, he grouped numerous factors under the following subheadings: social, physical, psychological, and conflict within the home. His social factors include culture conflict between generations, as well as the

usual sociological findings related to poverty. The physical factors listed were glandular conditions, physical defects, diseases, and brain injuries. His psychological factors dealt with faulty learning patterns and conflicts between drives and society. Under conflict within the home he cited stability of the home, the parent-child relationship, and excessive parental permissiveness or domination. One of Dudycha's most interesting observations was that delinquent activities "indicate a desire to escape from restraint, experience adventure, or find oblivion in the group. . . . [in situations where] . . . homelife is dull, emotionally cold, or full of conflict."

General Psychological Findings Related to Criminal Causation

Shore's 1971 article, "Psychological Theories of the Causes of Antisocial Behavior," is the most comprehensive and intensive study of criminal causation in the literature to date. The main points will be summarized here, but it is strongly recommended that all persons interested in further study of juvenile crime read the original article.

In reviewing the developmental research work of McCord and McCord, Sears, Maccoby and Levin, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, and Levinson on the effects of discipline, Shore concluded: "These findings are consistent with experimental studies of punishment. Punishment is effective in bringing about short term conformity, but does not lead to internalization of moral values or behavioral controls useful in other situations over long periods of time." Shore further stated that the induction methods of explanations and withdrawal of affection are more effective in producing internalized controls than sensitization techniques of verbal and physical attacks which make a child anticipate punishment from an external source.

In reviewing developmental research on social learning in criminal behavior, Shore discussed Bandura and Walters' theory that: "The violence to which a child is exposed during the period of his growth when imitation and identification are important cause him to model himself after the aggressor." In

this connection, Shore noted Kohlberg's description of two types of identification: personal and positional. The former, involving close emotional ties and a wish to be like the parent, is related to moral learning through the capacity for empathy and guilt. In contrast, positional identification involves a wish to usurp the parent's power role and is not related to moral learning.

In his review of psychodynamic theories of criminal behavior, Shore cited Johnson and Szurek's work on "how parents can unconsciously gain satisfaction from their child's antisocial behavior that they subtly provoke and perpetuate." Shore also referred to Erikson's concept of a "negative [against society] identity" which for many is a defense against "no identity."

In his review of social psychological theories related to criminal behavior, Shore outlined the research findings of Reckless, Dinitz and Murray, Bandura and Walters, and Massimo and Shore, which indicate that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to pressures toward delinquent behavior than individuals with adequate self-esteem.

Shore concluded his review of the literature with the following observation: "No single factor has yet been found to be most decisive in preventing crime. Any program for crime prevention must be comprehensive and multidimensional."

Testing of Specific Theories of Causation

The most promising new research on the subject of juvenile delinquency involves the proposing and testing of specific theories of causation.

In his 1976 article, "Investigating the Interrelations Among Social Control Variables and Conformity," Rankin discusses the new control theories and tests some of their hypotheses. According to control theorists, everyone experiences pressure or motivation to deviate. Therefore, what is needed is an explanation of conformity. Control theorists reason that the weaker the individual's commitment to the

common value system of society, the greater the probability of delinquent activity.

Rankin indicated that one control theorist, Reckless, predicted that inner containment is more important than outer containment in controlling crime. Inner containment is measured by such variables as educational expectations, attitude toward the law, and attachment to school. Outer containment is measured by such variables as number of delinquent companions (the greater the number, the less the containment) and participation in conventional activities. Rankin's research (1976) failed to support Reckless's hypothesis. The number of delinquent companions was found to be the strongest factor in predicting delinquent behavior.

Another control theorist, Hirschi, predicted that high stakes in conformity are associated with lower delinquency. Rankin (1976) found this to be true when the adolescent had no delinquent friends, but the opposite was true for adolescents with delinquent companions. Evidently, a high need for conformity can lead to either prosocial or antisocial behavior, depending upon the group with whom the individual is associating.

In his 1976 article, "Testing Alternative Models of Delinquent Causation," Hepburn schematically contrasted the causation theories of Sutherland, Glueck, and Hirschi as in the figures on pages 16 and 17.

Hepburn's research data (1976) supported Hirschi's model more often than the other two models and Glueck's model more often than Sutherland's. Moreover, the following revised Hirschi model gained even greater support, although not to the complete exclusion of the other two models.

In contrast to Rankin's findings that point to the significance of number of delinquent friends as a predictor of delinquent behavior, these data point to lack of family support as the strongest predictive factor in delinquent behavior. Rankin (1976) depicted Hirschi's explanation of the significance of lack of family support as follows: "Lack of attachment to parents is directly conducive to delinquency because the unattached child does not have to consider consequences of his actions for his relationship with his parents."