



HENRY W. THURSTON

*Concerning* JUVENILE  
DELINQUENCY

*Progressive Changes in Our Perspectives*



*Columbia University Press • New York*

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK

*First printing 1942*  
*Second printing 1943*  
*Third printing 1945*  
*Fourth printing 1947*

Published in Great Britain and India  
by Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press,  
London and Bombay

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THIS BOOK does not discuss the techniques of case work with the individual juvenile delinquent.

It tries to make clear that perspective as regards both cause and treatment is essential for successful case work with juvenile delinquents. In so far as he is familiar with the whole range of opinions on the causes of juvenile delinquency—has historical perspective—the case worker will be helped to understand the causes of delinquency in each juvenile delinquent whom he knows, and to see him as a total personality in a total situation. And the case worker and the community will be helped to choose and to provide successful methods of treatment for each juvenile delinquent to the degree to which they are familiar with the whole range of treatment processes hitherto used.

In short, as a guide to our own next steps in service to juvenile delinquents, I have tried to describe some of the beginnings and some of the processes of change from old to new perspectives that have already been made. Both as individuals and as communities, in order to do our best to understand, to treat, and to prevent juvenile delinquency, we need an evolutionary time-perspective.

In the words of Walt Whitman in *Passage to India*,

For what is the present after all, but a growth out of the past?  
As a projectile formed, impelled, passing a certain line, still keeps on,  
So the present, utterly formed, impelled by the past.

If Whitman is right, each today will be a part of the past to impel each tomorrow. Each today should do more and more to impel a tomorrow that will have less juvenile delinquency.

### *Acknowledgments*

In my efforts to make the progressive changes in our perspectives concerning juvenile delinquency as clear as possible, I have made many quotations from newspapers, magazines, organizations, publishers, and press departments of universities and from the words and writings of individual men and women many of whom are no longer

with us but whose words are still alive and working for a more abundant life for juvenile delinquents. For each of these quotations I have tried to show my appreciation by giving in a footnote the publisher, the publication, and the author. As consents by publishers have usually included permission to quote from the speakers and writers involved, I have not made personal contact with some of the persons whose words I have gratefully used. A special written consent has been given me by each of the following:

*Newspapers:* Boston Herald, Chicago Daily News, Chicago Tribune, New York Herald Tribune, New York Sun, New York Times, New York World-Telegram, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Record.

*Magazines:* American Magazine, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, Current History, The Family, Opportunity, The Survey.

*Publishers:* D. Appleton-Century Company; Charles Scribner's Sons; Harcourt, Brace and Company; Little, Brown and Company; The Macmillan Company; McGraw-Hill Book Company; New Republic; Stratford Company.

*Social Organizations and University Presses:* Judge Baker Guidance Center, National Probation Association, Russell Sage Foundation, University of Chicago Press, Harvard University Press, University of North Carolina Press, Yale University Press.

*Individual Men and Women:* Dean Edith Abbott, Dr. Clairette P. Armstrong, Dr. Amos F. Baker, Dr. Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, Dr. Augusta F. Bronner, Editor William L. Chenery, Charles L. Chute, Henry E. Drewry, M.D., Professor Thomas D. Eliot, Joseph Fishman, Dr. Eleanor T. Glueck, Dr. Sheldon Glueck, William J. Harper, Shelby M. Harrison, Dr. William Healy, J. Edgar Hoover, Karen Horney, M.D., Commissioner Austin H. McCormick, Professor J. B. Maller, Columnist Westbrook Pegler, Dr. James S. Plant, George H. Preston, Edgar Rickard, M.D., Dr. Frederick M. Thrasher.

For coöperation with me in the planning, writing, and editing of this book, I am especially grateful to these persons:

Leonard W. Mayo, Dean of Applied Social Sciences, Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, who not only wrote Chapter XIII

but also helped me, while we were both in New York School of Social Work, in my first tentative plans for writing a book in this field.

Paul T. Beisser, Secretary and General Manager, St. Louis Children's Aid Society, who studied my manuscript and gave me detailed critical and constructive advice as to final formulation and sequence of chapters and as to purpose and scope of the book as a whole.

Miss Mabel P. Ashley, New York School of Social Work, for critical reading of galley proofs; and Miss Mildred Prinzing, Editorial Department, Columbia University Press, who helped make my sentences and their sequences express my ideas with greater clarity.

In these days of increasing maladjustment in social relations, all the way from the family to the world, there is danger as never before in our times that increasing numbers of our youth will experience such frustrations as to make them juvenile delinquents unless they have our help in all communities. It is a time for each one of us to do his best to understand, to treat, and to prevent such frustrations.

HENRY W. THURSTON

*Montclair, New Jersey*  
*July 22, 1942*

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*Part One:* DELINQUENCIES AND  
THEIR CAUSES



## Chapter I: JUVENILE DELINQUENCIES FROM MISCHIEF TO MURDER

THE PROBLEM of understanding, treating, and preventing juvenile delinquency is only the first part of the positive and larger problem of helping youth to be good citizens. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States declares that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." By this authority boys and girls are citizens; they do not need to wait until they are twenty-one. Many persons confuse "citizen" with "voter," and sometimes even noted speakers who are giving advice to young people when they are graduated from the elementary or high schools use the expression "when you become citizens" when they mean "when you become voters." It is important that, as we face the problems of juvenile delinquents, we remember that we are facing the problems of young citizens who will one day be voters.

For a historical perspective on the treatment of juvenile delinquents I cite here these sentences pronounced by judges in England in 1819 and 1821: on a fourteen-year-old boy who stole a cotton gown, value two shillings, "Seven years transportation"; on a thirteen-year-old girl for stealing a hat, "To be imprisoned six months"; on two boys, eleven and thirteen, accused of stealing about seventeen shillings, "Guilty—Death."<sup>1</sup>

For perspective on the range of delinquent acts of our youth there is a decided advantage at the outset in keeping our eyes open to the things done frequently by boys and girls in our own homes, on our own streets, and elsewhere in our own towns. Some ways in which we may do this are: to observe and ponder the meaning of the ques-

<sup>1</sup> Wilbur M. Stone, "Juvenile Crime a Century Ago," *New York World*, January 28, 1929.

tionable behavior of boys and girls in our own homes and neighborhoods; to talk with teachers, recreation leaders, policemen, probation officers, and others about what they know concerning bad citizenship in youth; and also to read in the daily papers printed reports of unsatisfactory citizenship activities of boys and girls in different parts of the country. Most of the examples which follow have either been observed by me or have been mentioned in the New York papers which I habitually read. So far as my travels have permitted, I have also sampled, for brief periods, the daily papers of other sections of the country; for example, New England, the Chicago area, and our northwestern coast. Activities similar to those of boys and girls in the Eastern area have also been found described in these sections. Furthermore, if it be objected that such casual personal observation and such limited newspaper stories may lack some scientific detail, this fact is readily admitted; but at this stage of our discussion the use of stories of unsatisfactory citizenship activities of boys and girls, based on personal observation and newspaper accounts, is defended on two grounds: first, that such sources of information are open to everybody; secondly, that there is in a vast majority, even of newspaper stories, sure indication of behavior of youth that challenges parents, teachers, and other citizens to ask *why* children behave thus and *how* they can be helped or taught to behave differently.

It is my hope that all my readers will feel a sacred obligation, personally and collectively, to help meet the challenge of the youthful behavior that probably lies behind the stories which follow even though these narratives are somewhat impressionistic and may possibly include some errors in statement of actual details. My mistake, if any, at this point, is not that I accept the evidence of my own observation and believe that there is at least some basis in fact for most of the newspaper stories of the unsatisfactory behavior of young citizens, but that I have stopped with the mere observation and casual reading or, at most, have said in effect "Well, it is just too bad, but what can we do about it?" Whether or not such newspaper stories as follow are accurate to the last detail, their effect on us should be to stimulate us to more persistent questions, such as, "What, in full detail, did these children actually do?" "Why did they do such

things?" "How can they and other children be taught better citizenship activities?"

The activities of the young citizens now to pass in rapid review before the reader range from thoughtless mischief to individual and group murder. Other illustrations will be given in Chapter VII. It is hoped that the questions "What?" "Why?" and "How?" as used above will be continually in the reader's mind as he sees these boys and girls in action.

### *Children Throw Stones before Passing Automobiles*

The first story to be told is one of thoughtless mischief. On a hot summer afternoon I was looking through the window of my own house on a residential street in Montclair, New Jersey. I saw, sitting in the shade, on the curbstone before the front door, an eleven-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy, (picking up loose stones, some of them as large as hens' eggs, and throwing them just in front of the wheels of many automobiles that were passing swiftly. The street is of hard, smooth asphalt, slightly rounded toward the center, but there were some stones in the gutter. Already at least two dozen stones lay scattered over the street. It would have been very easy for a wheel to skid far enough on one of these stones to cause one car to graze or sideswipe another.

### *Boys Throw Stones at Passenger Trains*

The following story comes from a city newspaper. A city superintendent of schools recently reported that eighteen passengers had been severely injured in three months by stones thrown at trains which passed to and from the center of the city. A three-year-old girl had lost an eye. The superintendent also reported that considerable damage was done to plate-glass windows by the use of air rifles and guns.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Pensacola Janitor's Report*

A clipping from a paper, without date or reference, kept by me for many years, quotes this letter (spelling is as in the clipping):

<sup>2</sup> *New York World Telegram*, May 13, 1934.

"Dear Sir: I regret the circumstance which insinuates a duty, to report an irregularity, that has assumed abnormal toleration, and threatens a stampede among the tenants at the East Side apartment. In short; room 24 has two boys who are instructed that they have as much right on the premises as anybody else, and they measured up to the peaceful relationship that exists among tenants. Some of the causes, that I personally know, are the pounding of the floor with hammers; scrapping with other children; tearing up the toilet paper; occupying the bath up to the point of indurance; and leaving the room in a compromising condition, punching holes through the bottom of old chairs; howling in a boisterous way; putting things on the railway tracks; leaving of bread and trash in the main passway, and before other tenants doors. I submit these prerogatives to you for regulation; personally I have no kick to make, Janitor and trash makes a job. Yours truly. . . ."

*High School Students Throw Pies and Tomatoes at Police*

A newspaper account of activities of high school boys reads in part:

"About 1500 students went 'raw bottom' yesterday at the . . . High School . . . St., and . . . Ave. and a dozen policemen who tried to quell them were routed with a barrage of pies, apple cores, pop bottles and ripe tomatoes.

"The disturbance started when police shooed away a group of boys eating lunch on the steps of . . . West . . . Ave., the residence of Mrs. E. It seems that Mrs. E. objected to dripping of mayonnaise on her front steps.

"The boys retreated, but only to the school yard where they slammed the gates and went to work on the police. A Keystone comedy didn't have a thing on the ensuing scene, and quiet was restored only when the ammunition gave out. Then the boys filed back to classrooms to resume their study of *civil government*."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Philadelphia Record*, June 7, 1934. Will the reader please note that this reference to the study of Civil Government (education in citizenship) is made by the newspaper reporter, and not by me?

*Gunplay by Boys in the Streets*

I have personally seen dramatized gunplay almost under the shadow of two great universities. The first occasion was in the summer of 1931, near the State University in Seattle, Washington. I was looking out of my window toward a church on the opposite side of the street. This church had outside steps leading to the basement, and the curbing above was covered with ivy. Suddenly a boy about ten years old came running from the east, looking back over his shoulder from time to time as he ran. When he reached the area steps he jumped down and, crouching behind the ivy, brought a three-foot toy gun to his shoulder and snapped the trigger. I saw no boy in pursuit, but evidently the boy was satisfied that his shot had killed his pursuer, for he came quickly out of the area and walked away.

The second incident occurred in Chicago. Early in October, 1931, I walked from Dorchester Avenue west on Fifty-eighth Street to and through the grounds of the University of Chicago. It was Saturday morning, and I saw three separate groups of boys with toy guns playing shooting games—in each case against a visible enemy of one or more boys. There was attack, retreat, pursuit, hiding behind flower beds, hedges, corners of houses, and so forth. One boy, who had fled across Fifty-eighth Street from the north, was brought down by an imaginary fatal shot by his pursuers. He lay as if dead until two boys from the firing line came across the street and turned him over, limp and lifeless. When they had gone away, the “dead” boy got up and walked off.

Whether, and to what degree, the current craze for wearing holsters with pistols in them and for carrying various types of gun is an evidence of good or bad citizenship in youth is a pertinent question for every reader.

*Youth Activities near the “L” on the South Side, Chicago*

A columnist in a New York newspaper thus describes some of his own youthful activities on the South Side in Chicago. This is valid testimony.

"I grew up in a moderately crowded neighborhood of Chicago on a street of three-story apartments, where most of the families had freckled, buck-toothed ordinary children. The 'L' ran behind the row and the young blades of the neighborhood, up to the age of, maybe, 14, got up as early as four o'clock in the morning to go running in short pants and undershirts, training for the next Marathon race of the Illinois Athletic Club. Marathon racing was the fad of the moment, and you could see leggy little brats, built like mosquitoes, staggering around and around Graceland Cemetery, at least three miles per lap, I should say, early on summer mornings, building up their wind, as they thought, and close onto rupturing their hearts, training for the twenty-six-mile Marathon of the I.A.C.

"After training thus, a man naturally would find himself tired and without immediate occupation, the family being not yet awake and life not yet astir in the town. The milkmen went around, however, cat-walking up and down the wooden back stairs on their sneaker soles, setting down a quart of Grade A here and a few cents worth of cream for the coffee on the kitchen steps. And the pie wagons from the wholesale bakeries were making the rounds of the neighborhood delicatessens in the dawn, dropping stacks of pies and bushel sacks of cinnamon rolls and coffee rings into wooden lock boxes, which stood on the sidewalks in front.

"The young bucks used to follow the milkman around, a few minutes behind, and steal the milk and drink as much as they could and wantonly smash the other bottles against the pillars of the 'L,' and presently, somehow, a stencil of the master key to the pie boxes fell into our hands and we followed the pieman around, too, swiping, which is a euphemism for stealing, merchandise of value.

"We had other vices. We would hop on the streetcar and ring up ten or a dozen fares on the poor conductor, while he was inside poking coal into the stove, and hop off and run. We rigged the slots of gum-vending machines with paper wads, a trick too marvelous to explain in detail, to steal a few pennies per machine per day, and we were pretty bad characters weight for age.

"There were two pioneer automobile thieves in our set, who used to steal Ramblers and Sampsons and chain-drive Queens in the eve-



ning and drive them until they gave out. Some of us could have been taken in sin for going along with them a time or two on these exploits.”<sup>4</sup>

*Activities of Youth on Jones Street, in New York*

The activities of New York city youth in a slum area are also described in a newspaper article written long ago by the present editor of *Colliers*, William L. Chenery. This also is the valid testimony of a competent eyewitness. His description reads in part thus:

“My place of observation is Jones Street. A blacksmith shop, a piano factory, not to mention numerous small stores and decrepit tenement houses, are my neighbors. In these last, hundreds of children are gathered. The Jones Street gang has quite a reputation in our neighborhood. Whenever a howling mob of dervishes is heard rushing toward some errand of destruction, the old denizen shakes his head and mutters, the Jones Street gang again.

“I first became aware of the group early one morning. As I left my lodging I saw two little chaps of six or seven on the door stoop. They were shooting craps. They invited me to join in the game. On my assertion that I didn’t know how to play, they offered to explain the rules. They did. It would have been hard to find a gang of wandering Negro laborers who were more expert at ‘African golf.’ At seven my neighbors are proficient gamblers. . . .

“I do not think less of them for it. Rather I think more. It shows how unconquerable is their spirit. New York can distort it, but it cheerfully lives on. From early morning well on to midnight, fair weather and foul, the Jones Street kids are driven by circumstances to gamble. When they have pennies, these are the stakes. When they have no money, but are not quite bankrupt, Liberty Loan buttons will serve the purpose. If they are below the poverty line of childhood, the tin tops of beer bottles take the place of coin. But whatever the medium and whatever the game, they gamble.

“So universal is it that none familiar to the scene notices it. Policemen usually do not interfere. Parents approve lest something worse be done. In truth the entire adult neighborhood would view with re-

<sup>4</sup> Westbrook Pegler in *New York World Telegram*, January 29, 1934.