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## Predelinquency

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## PREDELINQUENCY<sup>1</sup>

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Arrests for serious crimes in the United States during the past fifty years seemingly indicate that the number of crimes is in proportion to the population despite stringent laws, improved police methods, juvenile courts, industrial schools, reformatories, jails, penitentiaries, probation, parole and prisoners' aid societies. This may be interpreted to mean that crime prevention is impossible, or that there is need for an enlightened policy of dealing with delinquency and delinquents, and more intense study of the causes of crime.

When one of the many criminal gangs that abound in every large city commits a crime that attracts attention, or when crime waves prevail, the public, being uninformed regarding the basic causes of delinquency, merely sees the effect and decides that something must be done for the immediate protection of society. Mental decision is followed by some sort of physical action. Police are criticized and changes in the personnel suggested. Drastic laws are enacted and occasionally mob rule usurps the powers of constituted authority; real or supposed offenders are dragged to the nearest telegraph pole or tree, where they are put to death amid the plaudits of the lawless assemblage. Perhaps this summary manner of dealing with felons does have some deterrent effect upon the criminally inclined, but the fear instilled subsides and they quickly return to their nefarious trade. Such vigorous methods are not lasting in their effect and the sooner we appreciate that fact, the earlier will we approach a rational plan for reducing the number of criminals, and this without additional expense to taxpayers or radical changes in our present institutions.

Dr. Bernard Gueck examined 608 prisoners who were committed to Sing Sing. A summary of his findings may be found in the *Journal of Mental Hygiene* of January, 1918. Suffice it to say that more than fifty per cent of the convicts examined deviated from the normal person in their mental make-up. Approximately the same results were obtained by Dr. Paul Bowers at the Indiana State Penitentiary, Dr. Charles Goring in an English prison, and experts in various institutions in this and other countries. Of utmost importance in the study

<sup>1</sup>Read at the International Convention of Chiefs of Police, held at St. Louis, June 7, 1921.

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of delinquency is the conclusion reached by eminent criminologists, viz., that nearly all of the habitual criminals manifest anti-social tendencies during the early and formative periods of their lives, growing worse in character and less reformable as they approach maturity. Supplementing and confirming the results obtained from the examination of adult prisoners, is the interesting study of youthful repeaters in the juvenile courts of Chicago by Dr. Wm. Healy, who found that mental peculiarities and abnormalities entered as a major factor in 455 cases out of 823 examined. Here it must be mentioned that other causes contributed to their delinquency, such, for example, as drunken or immoral parents, bad companions, poverty, unemployment and unsatisfied interests. Nevertheless, the chief factor in juvenile delinquency is the unstable or stunted mental make-up of the children.

Believing that an examination of school children might throw further light on the subject, Dr. Jau Don Ball examined all of the children in the first six grades of one of the public schools in California and demonstrated that it is possible to detect in children of pre-delinquent age the mental peculiarities and abnormalities found by Healy in juvenile delinquents and by Gueck, Bowers, Goring and others in adults confined in penal institutions.

While some might debate the question of who is a criminal, policemen are in accord in their belief that any person who commits a felonious act in violation of law is a criminal. Moreover, from the fullness of their experience, they are of the opinion that delinquency is not the result of a single misstep, but is an accumulation of failures on the part of the individual to conform to the regulations of the home, the schools and the community. Why they fail to conform baffles the policeman. Scientists are attempting to answer that question, and though the surface has merely been scratched, if the knowledge that has already been acquired by criminologists was disseminated among and utilized by those charged with the responsibility of law enforcement, there would be fewer names of our coming generation inscribed on the police records of arrests. Assuming that policemen are correct in their conviction that the habitual offender's criminalistic tendencies were displayed by non-conformity to regulations at a very tender age, and in this opinion scientists concur, does it not seem reasonable that our efforts to check crime should begin before the habits are so firmly fixed that it is too late to correct evil inclinations that forever blight a child's chances of making good in this world? Is it not better to devote a few hours toward guiding him along the paths of rectitude that he may acquire essentials of character which prevent

him from becoming a social menace than to spend days attempting to unravel a murder, robbery or other vicious act which may follow our neglect of preventive police work? Among the children in our schools today are to be found the gangsters, thugs and murders of tomorrow, and, inasmuch as we have had pointed out to us by scientific studies and our own observations that the majority of our professional crooks were troublesome children long before they became criminals, it behooves the policeman to concentrate his attention upon the problem child during the predelinquent period. We cannot expect to undo the follies of past generations in a few years of careful training, nor perform such miracles as furnish intelligence to an imbecile, but we can help every child by securing for him the environment best adapted for the development of his potentialities, after carefully considering his intelligence, temperament, physical and mental health, aptitudes, tendencies, tastes, habits, disposition and abilities. Be it remembered, however, that not all problem children become habitual criminals, but it is from their ranks that they, our social misfits, are largely recruited.

Two questions confront us. Who are problem children, and secondly, what can we do to help them. The first question may be best answered by submitting a description of the mental traits of a few delinquents selected from the police records.

CASE I. A was a stupid boy, poor in scholarship and a habitual truant; disobedient at home and in school. In his play he was overactive, bragging, noisy and profane, with occasional violent fits of anger. He had an abnormal and characteristic tendency to be peevish, irascible and ready to take offense upon the slightest provocation; extremely touchy, and unable to accept from either teacher or parent an ordinary reprimand. He was easily discouraged and always drifting into new lines of work before completing the old.

CASE II. As a very young child B was hungry for excitement and sought satisfaction in a variety of boyish escapades, seeking newer and more dangerous adventures as he advanced in years. Quick-tempered, impulsive, hard to manage, disobedient and quarrelsome, though occasionally he was extremely well behaved. He was very bright and had no difficulty in learning his lessons when he wanted to; usually attacked the work which was set out before him with considerable force, but lost interest quickly and became mentally lazy. At times he was fidgety and would drum on the table. Upon the slightest provocation his eyes would fill with tears. Among his companions he was a show-off, smart-aleck type who thought he was wise and wanted the world to know it. Among inferiors he acted the part of a bully, but when any of the larger boys were around, or boys who could take

his measure, he was recognized as an arrant coward. With a highly imaginative mind and an unlimited capacity for lying, he was untrustworthy in his dealings with others.

CASE III. C's mother said he was different from other children since birth, being seclusive and solitary, a shut-in individual who never got along well with children of his own age; in fact, never liked them. Frequently he would run away from home and remain away for days and then would be found by the police and return, refusing, however, to give any explanation of his conduct or wanderings. Extremely moody, even at an early age, a period of depression being followed by unwarranted elation. His teachers said that he was always unreliable, untruthful and difficult to manage. School rules had no meaning to him, and punishment seemed never to fit his case. He was maliciously destructive, broke his own toys, destroyed his own clothes, smashed the windows in his own and neighbors' homes and uprooted beautiful and expensive plants. He derived pleasure from injuring animals and was finally dismissed from school for throwing rocks at little girls.

What can the policeman do to help these youngsters overcome their defects of disposition, temperament, intelligence or character, prevent them from becoming social liabilities and secure for them the health, food, clothing, education and an opportunity in life that every child is entitled to? Obviously the unsocial behavior of children must be ascertained at an early period from the parent, teacher, or any person who may be in a position to observe or learn of their wayward conduct. The most fruitful source of information is the school. Hence a friendly relationship should be established with teachers, principals and superintendents, who will always co-operate with the police, provided they can be assured that the information furnished will not be used to the detriment of the child. From whatever source the data is obtained, it should be recorded on maps showing the residence of the child, and by the use of colored pins the special type of problem may be indicated. For instance, blue may be used to denote that the child is troublesome; red, immoral; green, pugnacious; yellow, light-fingered; black, habitual truant; white, mentally defective, etc. With the potential delinquents on his beat located as to residence according to the position of the pins, and their irregularities classified by colors, the policeman should next acquaint himself with the factors underlying the individual's inability to cope successfully with his environment. This may be accomplished through health dispensaries, child research or welfare bureaus, psychopathic clinics or any institution whose staff includes specialists in the study of human behavior. These experts, after careful examination of the boy or girl, will diagnose the case

and outline all of the factors that have been or may be contributing to the individual's misbehavior. In addition to their diagnosis, the report will include recommendations, which, if followed, should aid in preventing potential delinquents from becoming permanent social failures and outcasts. Thus armed with facts, not fancies, and with a constructive program for the mental, physical and moral health of the subject, the policeman is in an enviable position in so far as the future of the child is concerned. With a higher social ideal, with a broader vision of his position in the community and with the power of the state behind him, he can command assistance from parents, teachers, preachers, recreation supervisors, welfare agencies, dispensaries and every other health and character building organization in the community, all of whom can contribute their share in preventing the growth and prevalence of delinquency.

Policemen measure success in life by service. Here, then, is an opportunity for every policeman to be successful. What service can be more ennobling to the officer, more beneficial to the child and contribute more happiness to the relatives, and greater industrial efficiency, healthier social conditions, better political order in the nation than the rescue of children from a life of bars and stripes?