

1926

Character-Trends versus Mental Deficiency in the Problem of Delinquency

C. O. Weber

J. P. Guilford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

C. O. Weber, J. P. Guilford, Character-Trends versus Mental Deficiency in the Problem of Delinquency, 16 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 610 (May 1925 to February 1926)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

CHARACTER-TRENDS VERSUS MENTAL DEFICIENCY IN THE PROBLEM OF DELINQUENCY

C. O. WEBER¹ AND J. P. GUILFORD

The army intelligence test (form 7) was given to 90 white prisoners at the men's reformatory at Lincoln, Nebraska. Four of these had language difficulties, and their records were excluded from the final computations, which consist accordingly of 86 cases. This institution is an extension of the state prison, and houses the younger offenders, especially those whose conduct demands less rigid supervision than is the case with the regular prison inmates. Their average age is 21 years and 9 months. This average was not computed "to the nearest birthday": years and months were averaged as given, but a difference of 16 days or more was considered a month. The subjects were asked to report the highest grade reached in school. Only 33 responded to this request, and the grades reported vary from the first to the twelfth grade, the average being the seventh grade.

The test results were as follows: The average score secured was 77.47 points. This means that this group ranks *above* average in intelligence, if we take the army standards as basis for comparison. The following table gives a comparison between the letter ratings of these cases and that of the white draft of the army.

Letter Rating	Per Cent White Draft	Per Cent Reformatory Inmates	Cases Reformatory Inmates
A	4.1	9.3	8
B	8.0	16.3	14
C—Plus	15.2	24.4	21
C	25.0	30.2	26
C—	23.8	12.8	11
D	17.0	4.7	4
D—	7.1	2.3	2
Total	100.2	100.0	86

The supposed relation of mental deficiency to delinquency is more and more becoming an object of doubt. At the Cambridge meeting of the Psychological Association in 1922, Walter F. Dearborn and William Healy expressed their decided doubt about the importance of this factor in delinquency. Tests given to prison inmates in a half-

¹Wells College, Aurora, N. Y.

dozen important prisons² seems to indicate that about 27.5 per cent of all inmates are mentally deficient. But, perhaps, as Dearborn and Cyril Burt contend, the standard of normality previously adopted by psychologists is far too high, that it should be nearer an intelligence quotient of .50 rather than .70 or above. The use of the army tests especially supports this view. It is known that the army tests are not strictly tests of intelligence (at least, in the current acceptance of this term); but they are at least based on what the *average man can do*. Psychological data from the army indicates that the relation of intelligence to delinquency is by no means clear.³ A brief report of this data will serve as a verification of our findings:

Disciplinary cases of the army whose intelligence ratings were secured consist of 939 whites and 484 negroes from Camp Dix, 65 cases from Camp McClellan, 597 cases from Camp Cody, and some 3,300 records from the disciplinary barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The white cases from Camp Dix may be averaged with the 65 cases from Camp McClellan. When this is done we find that 30.4 per cent of them got E, 12.3 per cent got C (normal), and 1.8 per cent got A. Normally, about 4 per cent would get A, 25 per cent would get C, and 7 per cent would get E or D. Thus, these cases show a positive relation between delinquency and mental deficiency, but it is not at all marked. The Cody cases deserve to be ignored since they comprise only 25 per cent of the cases of delinquency in that camp. The other 75 per cent were removed before mental tests could be given. The 484 negroes tried at Camp Dix seem to show an excess of mental deficiency, but it is not at all marked in view of the fact that 39 per cent of all negroes rated E, and none of them got A. Of this group of delinquent negroes, 39 per cent rated above E. As for the Leavenworth cases, they are average, in fact, slightly above the average in intelligence. What is most remarkable, is that the Leavenworth cases represent the serious offenders.

It would seem that mental deficiency can become a cause of delinquency only when combined with certain 'character trends.' At least, psychology and common opinion are agreed that instinct, habit, emotion and sentiment are the true forces that determine conduct. We are having our first successes in measuring such factors, and in an age when problems of delinquency are so harrowing, every endeavor should be made to perfect such tests and to employ them in studying the baffling problem of the psychology of misconduct.

Animated by this interest, the authors administered to the above

²Anderson, V. V., "Mental Disease and Delinquency," *Mental Hygiene*, Vol. III, No. 2, April, 1919.

³*Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. XV, 1921, pp. 799 ff.

group of men, the well-known "Pressey X-O Test."⁴ The papers of subjects who exhibited a lack of comprehension as to the nature of the test were carefully excluded. The remaining papers show significant results, which we may indicate under four headings:

1. The "total affectivity" of these cases (47 reports) shows that, on the whole, they are less affected by experiences than normals. However, they are more subject to *unpleasant* affectivity. They show a strong tendency to be affected unpleasantly by words which suggest fear or self-reference. They are less affected by words which refer to the disgusting or to sex. The normal person is most strongly affected by disgusting terms.

2. Their average "idiosyncrasy" (their deviation from the normal as regards individual words) is more marked than that of the normal. This substantiates the impression of "queerness" that is so often the atmosphere of the chronic delinquent.

3. They differ widely from the normal in their moral ideas. They have peculiar notions concerning blameworthy acts. They show a tendency to blame others for wrong actions (projection); and exhibit a tendency towards ideas of persecution.

4. They show a decided tendency towards hypochondria.

The ideas of persecution and the tendency to fear complexes, and the hypochondria might be the result of court and prison experiences, and not due to the original nature of the criminal. The characteristics which probably exist before their incarceration are the tendency to unpleasant affectivity, and to peculiar individual associations of ideas. The former may be a sign of general weakness of character, and the inability to face disagreeable realities, and the latter to warped habits of thinking. While they realize that human action is subject to moral judgment, they show a warped perspective concerning the relative seriousness of wrongs.

⁴This test consists of four lists of words. Each list consists of 25 lines of five words each. The words are of four classes—disgust, fear, sex, and self-feeling words. The subjects are instructed to underline every word which impresses them as unpleasant, those which are associated with given words, those which suggest wrong to them, those which have caused them some worry.