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JUVENILE DELINQUENCY A PRODUCT OF THE HOME

T. EARL SULLENGER¹

That basic and most essential unit of social organization, the family, has been carefully studied by many authorities, all of whom have agreed that in it lie tremendous forces which determine the behavior of youth. McDougall says, "The stability of the family is the prime condition of a healthy state of society and of the stability of every community."² The family is the prime determiner of social behavior. From it comes youth indelibly stamped with high ideals and noble aspirations, or with low, vile, anti-social attitudes toward life. At present the family is undergoing a transition which is a period of adjustment. Ross says that the family is less stable than it has been at any time since the beginning of the Christian Era. Society and the child have to pay the penalty for this instability. Divorce has rapidly increased, which is one criterion of social disorder. Out of this situation comes much of our juvenile delinquency. In this discussion we hope to point out a few of the most potent factors in the home which are determinants of juvenile delinquency.

The child has the inherent right to have a home with parents living together harmoniously; a home which has reasonable comforts, enough wholesome food for nourishment and growth, and surrounded by opportunities for the healthy development of the physical body. Loving but not over-indulgent parents have much to do in making a family stable. A child who fails to experience the warmth of love and sympathy or who has his efforts toward self-expressions constantly checked is likely to produce behavior problems. Many cases show that where these legitimate satisfactions are not met in the home the child is prematurely driven to the streets or other outlets are resorted to, such as excessive day dreaming, timidity, temper tantrums, lying, stealing, running away, setting fires and the like.

We find that delinquency cannot be explained in terms of any

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²*Social Psychology*, p. 268. Quoted by Ellwood in "Instability of the Family as a Cause of Child Dependency and Juvenile Delinquency," *Survey*, 24:886-9. September 24, 1913.

one or a few causative factors. It is a by-product of a vast number of minute social responses which most frequently originate in the home. In it we have interplay of emotions, personality and social experience, which closely touch the child. In the rich homes as well as in the poor ones we find behavior problems, but not so numerous.

The lack of knowledge of child training and care on the part of the family is appalling. We found this ignorance not confined to the busy mother of the lower economic stratum. Miriam Van Waters, in speaking of conditions in the family which contribute to delinquency, says, "The fact is, delinquent children are very often unwanted children. The only child, pampered, spoiled, over-indulged and sheltered, frequently becomes delinquent because his parents are too engrossed in personal ambitions, careers of business or other absorbing occupations to be really interested in a child."³

In this study we have not attempted to analyze in detail the subtler features of family life, parental attitudes, methods of discipline, and emotional relationships between the children, all of which features are very important. We found in many instances children who had been confronted from infancy with drunkenness, immorality, obscene and vulgar language, and poor living conditions. For example, in 125 cases in Omaha in which we obtained data on the environmental conditions in the home, in 20 cases, or 16 per cent, the father had been before the court for some misdemeanor. In 22 cases, or 17.6 per cent, other children of the family had been before the juvenile court, and in eight cases, or 6.2 per cent, the mother had been arrested for some offense. From these same cases 37 homes, or 29.6 per cent, were rated as fair; 26, or 20.8 per cent, as good, and 62, or 49.6 per cent, as poor. Among our observations we found such conditions as insanity, chronic illness, epilepsy, drunkenness, over-bearing and cruel father, theft, no privacy, over-crowdedness, immoral mother, illegitimacy, no apparent affection for the children, abusive parents, making and selling intoxicants, harboring women in the home for immoral purposes, uncalled-for begging, and just ordinary shiftlessness. Drunkenness and the factors that go with it were present in about one-fourth of the cases. In Columbia 24, or 32 per cent, had either father or mother or both with criminal records. Summarizing, we find that 39.8 per cent in Omaha had offenders in their immediate families. Such homes are breeding places for delinquents and criminals. How can we expect children

³"Unwanted—and Delinquent," *Survey*, 54:228.

to behave when their parents misbehave?⁴ Impressions which can never be entirely eradicated are made on the plastic minds. Very often in the individual delinquents who commit the graver offenses of personal assault, serious property damage, theft and the like, one finds a basic feeling of antagonism toward authority and a profound distrust in it. The family background of such offenders is nearly always tense with hatred and mutual suspicion. As the children become old enough, there is a strong tendency for them to adopt some means of defense or some way to secure recognition in the community.

The family performs a vital function in the social order. When it is broken in any way or rendered insufficient by estrangement, it cannot properly perform its function. The result is apparent in the lives of the children. Burt's study in London showed that 60 per cent of 200 delinquents were handicapped by broken homes.⁵ We found that of the 1,145 cases in Omaha 50.7 per cent came from broken homes. Homes are broken in many ways, the most tragic of which are the death of one parent or both, desertion or separation, and divorce.

In a previous study by the author, of 1,415 cases of divorce, it was found that in 37.7 per cent there was one child or more. "The mere divorcing of two individuals does not present a very disastrous consequence as far as society is concerned, but the effect upon the lives of the children is far reaching and often wrought with moral disaster. The children are not only denied wholesome homes and family life, but the love and respect of one parent or both is lost. The child's whole outlook upon life has changed. The children very often fail to understand what it is all about; yet at the same time they are keenly aware that something vital and terrible is taking place in their lives. A great percentage of the juvenile court cases are children of divorced parents. Our high school principals tell us that their most difficult problems are caused by children of divorced parents. The children's injury cannot be measured; it may even extend to several generations."

The following tables show the distribution of normal parental conditions (both parents alive and living at home) and abnormal conditions:

⁴Compare with Bedford, "How Can Children Behave if Parents Misbehave?" JOURNAL OF CRIMINAL LAW, XVIII:568.

⁵Sullenger, "A Study of Divorce and Its Causation in Douglas County, Nebraska." *University of Omaha Bulletin*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1927.

TABLE Ia

HOME AND PARENTAL CONDITIONS OF 1145 DELINQUENT CHILDREN IN OMAHA, 1922-1927

	— Total —		— Boys —		— Girls —	
	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Total number of cases.....	1,145	100.0	808	100.0	337	100.0
Number from normal homes..	564	49.3	443	54.8	121	35.9
Number from broken homes..	581	50.7	365	45.2	216	64.1

TABLE Ib

HOME CONDITIONS OF 581 DELINQUENT CHILDREN FROM BROKEN HOMES IN OMAHA, 1922-1927

	— Total —		— Boys —		— Girls —	
	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Total number of cases.....	581	100.0	365	100.0	216	100.0
Father dead	120	20.6	78	22.3	42	19.4
Mother dead	91	15.6	59	16.7	32	14.8
Both parents dead	32	5.6	20	5.5	12	5.5
Step-father	115	19.8	72	19.7	43	19.9
Step-mother	37	6.3	26	7.2	11	5.0
Parents separated	49	8.8	33	9.1	16	7.5
Parents divorced	104	18.2	65	17.8	39	18.1
Father deserted	15	2.5	6	1.6	9	4.2
Foster parents	8	1.4	2	.6	6	2.9
Two step-parents	1	.1	1	.2	0	0
Guardian	1	.1	0	0	1	.4
Living with grand-parents.....	1	.1	1	.2	0	0
Other conditions	6	1.0	2	.6	4	1.9

As we examine the data given in Table I we see that 50.7 per cent of the 1,145 delinquents came from broken homes.⁶ Eight hundred and eight, or 70 per cent of the total number of delinquents were boys, and of this number 365, or 45.1 per cent, were from broken homes. In comparison we see that of the 337 girls, 216, or 64.1 per cent, were from broken homes, and 121, or 35.9 per cent, from normal homes. Thus a greater frequency of abnormal parental conditions is found as a causative factor of delinquency among girls than among boys. This is in accord with other studies in this field.⁷ The reason for this situation is no doubt found in part in the nature of the two sexes, and to the fact that the boy is subjected to a wider range of environmental influences, and also to a different set of social standards.

⁶Shidler estimates that 19.3 per cent of the child population are from broken homes. The census data on this subject are not available. Shidler's estimate, if correct, would indicate that broken homes produce delinquents 2.6 times as frequently as chance distribution would lead us to anticipate.—"Family Disintegration and the Delinquent Boy in the U. S.," *American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, VIII:709-732.

⁷Cf. Bushong, "Family Estrangement and Juvenile Delinquency," *Social Forces*, V:79.

Death of the father is tragic to the behavior of both boys and girls. The greatest number of delinquent boys from broken homes had lost their fathers. It was almost as serious for the girls as having a stepfather. This appears to be an overlapping, but we were careful to see that very few, if any, were duplicated. The conditions as shown in the table was the status at the time the cases were before the court. In Omaha, 120, or 20.6 per cent, of the cases from broken homes were without the guidance of a father. Loss of the mother was not reflected so strongly in the behavior problems of either boys or girls. A stepfather is also a prominent factor in causing delinquency among boys. In most cases the stepfather and the stepchildren are antagonistic toward one another.⁸ Friction easily arises, and thus lack of sympathetic coordination results. The total rate of delinquent cases having stepfathers was 29.8 per cent. Homes broken by divorce furnished the next highest number of delinquents. In Omaha 17.8 per cent of the boys and 18.1 per cent of the girls, or a total of 35.9 per cent, were from such homes. Desertion of the father was nearly three times as great among the girls as among the boys. Otherwise, as Table I shows, the parental condition seemed to have about the same influence on the behavior of the sexes.

In concluding this discussion, we may well say with Healy and Bronner in speaking of the influence of the home, "Where to place a large measure of responsibility, where to direct a strong attack in treatment and for prevention of delinquency, stands out with striking clearness."⁹ The modern home, as we have seen, too frequently becomes a breeding place for the criminals of tomorrow. Its stability is at stake. Maladjustments and disintegration are expensive. It behooves society to remedy this condition and thus remove one of the chief groups of determinants in juvenile delinquency.

⁸The fact that the step-father figures as a factor in delinquency to a greater extent than the step-mother may be due in part at least to a difference in tendency to bring children by former marriages into the new domestic situation. In the interval between the prior and a subsequent marriage the father tends to make arrangements for the care of his children apart from himself and to continue such arrangement after remarriage, while the mother tends to remain with her children during the interval between marriages and to bring her children with her into the new home. Thus men to a greater extent find themselves encumbered with undesired step-children, who become a source of family discord. The extent of this tendency, however, cannot as yet be measured statistically because of a lack of adequate data.

⁹*Delinquents and Criminals, Their Making and Unmaking*, p. 129.