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A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL BACKGROUNDS OF LIFE INMATES AT FORT MADISON PENITENTIARY

Fred Otto Erbe¹

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this research is to study the social backgrounds of one hundred and fifty life inmates of the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison. The investigation undertakes to ascertain the conditions under which these men grew up in a rural state like Iowa, and to compare the life backgrounds of the three major types of lifers in this institution—murderers, property offenders,² and sex offenders.³ The groups consisted of one hundred murderers, thirty-two property offenders and eighteen sex offenders. A picture of the conditioning circumstances in the lives of these offenders was secured, and the three major kinds of lifers were compared to determine whether there were any significant differences to be found in these groups.

In all cases, personal interviews were carried on with the subjects, the interview being based upon a prepared questionnaire. All interviews were supplemented and corrected by the social history found in the records

of the institution and in the "lifers' files" in the Governor's office at Des Moines.

There is a need for some caution relative to the reliability of the data in the schedule. Here and there certain categories called for judgment on the part of the interviewer.⁴ Although the number of such categories used in the analysis was not great, yet these few demand careful consideration in any generalization. There is, however, a possibility that such bias as may have been present in one direction in regard to an item in any given case may have been cancelled out by a similar bias in the opposite direction in another case. Furthermore, in the subjective categories, there may be some differences in the data due to the mental set of the prisoners. A difference in the circumstances of the prisoner at the time of the interview may have affected his memory and attitudes.

Similar studies have been made in other states. In Massachusetts, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck have

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² The property offender group is composed almost entirely of bank robbers, this offense being punished by a mandatory life sentence according to Iowa law. Of the 32 members of this group, 25 were sentenced for bank robbery, 6 for burglary, and one for arson.

³ All sex offenders serving life sentences are guilty of the crime of rape. In July 1925 the

state legislature repealed the mandatory life sentence for rape. During the ten years which followed, 195 men were sentenced for rape but only 11 of these received life sentences.

⁴ Such items as "cruelty and favoritism in the home," "reputation of parents," "subject's interests and activities," "marital friction and differences," and the like, are illustrations of such categories.

studied the inmates of the reformatories for men and women, and have published the results of their investigations in three volumes.⁵ From 1924 to 1926, W. T. Root directed a survey of prisoners in the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania.⁶ Professor John L. Gillin of the University of Wisconsin has completed studies of the social backgrounds of murderers, property offenders and sex offenders in the Wisconsin State Prison.⁷

The author is under obligations to Professor Gillin for aid in this study. His investigations suggested and also served as a model for the present study, and the questionnaire and outline for the prisoner's autobiographies are to a considerable extent based upon his work.

LIFE BACKGROUND DATA OF 150 IOWA LIFERS

What is the Iowa lifer like? What kind of a home and family life did he have? What facts stand out in his life from the time he left home until he was confined in prison for life? This study was made in an attempt to answer some of these questions.

⁵ Glueck, Sheldon and Glueck, Eleanor. *Five Hundred Criminal Careers*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1930.

Glueck, Sheldon and Glueck, Eleanor. *Five Hundred Delinquent Women*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1934.

Glueck, Sheldon and Glueck, Eleanor. *Later Criminal Careers*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1937.

⁶ Root, W. T. *A Psychological and Educational Survey of 1,916 Prisoners in the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania*. Published by the Board of Trustees of the Western Penitentiary, 1927.

⁷ Gillin, John L. "The Wisconsin Murderer," *Social Forces*, Vol. XII, pp. 550-556, May 1934.

Gillin, John L. "Social Backgrounds of Sex Offenders and Murderers," *Social Forces*, Vol. XIV, pp. 232-239, December 1935.

In 16% of the cases his home was on the farm, although as much as 60% of the Iowa population is rural; in 29% of the cases his home had been on the farm, but he had left that setting for the town or city. His family took part in church activities as a whole in 45% of the cases, not at all in 41%. Almost half of the families were active in some recreational interest, usually through lodge membership.

In many cases, it would seem he came from a family in which there were unfavorable circumstances. Thus, in 43% of the cases he had lost by death one or both parents before he became of age, in 29% before he was ten years old. By necessity then, a part, or, in some cases (10%), all of his childhood and youth was spent in homes other than his own. The Iowa lifer, in 19% of the cases, came from a home broken by separation or divorce.⁸ In one out of every four families there was constant strife between the parents and a spirit of cruelty, fault-finding or indifference was manifested by one or both parents toward the lifer. This frequently (53%) made for a display of favoritism either on the part of one

Gillin, John L. "Backgrounds of Prisoners in the Wisconsin State Prison and of their Brothers," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. II, pp. 204-212, April 1937.

Gillin, John L. "The Making of the Criminal," (Address at the American Prison Congress, St. Paul, Minn., 1938), printed in the *News Bulletin of the Osborne Association*, February 1939.

⁸ The percentage of divorce for males and females 15 years old and over in the general population of Iowa was 1.3% in 1930. A person who has been widowed or divorced but has remarried is reported in the census as married, so that the returns for widowed or divorced persons do not represent the total number of persons now living who have been widowed or divorced.

Among the Iowa lifers, 10% came from homes broken by divorce and 8.7% from homes broken by separation.

of his parents toward him or on his part toward either father or mother.

The mother worked outside the home in 14% of the cases. Most commonly the father was a farmer (42%), or an unskilled laborer (33%), or a skilled laborer (17%).

About half of the breadwinners were renters, and, though regularly employed in 81% of the cases, earned an annual income of \$1,000 or less to support an average of five children per home; about 30%, however, received between one and two-thousand dollars per year. Much more commonly than in the Iowa population at large (16% as compared with 0.7%) the lifer was a Negro. He was of foreign or mixed parentage somewhat less often than in the population at large (20% versus 24%). In over half of the cases (53%), he had to contribute to the family by working, and this at an average age of fourteen. It is easy to understand, therefore, that the group, which was occasionally or frequently truant in 35% of the cases, left school at an average age of fifteen, with an average grade achievement of 6.7, and that the reason for their leaving school was in 40% of the cases economic; lack of interest as a cause showed a similar percentage.

The lifer classified his parents as of good reputation in 78% of the cases, in the rest either the father or mother or both had a questionable standing in the community. In one out of four cases some member or members of the family had a jail, industrial school, reformatory, or prison record. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that

the family lived in a questionable neighborhood in 23% of the cases, and in a bad one in 15%. Perhaps that explains, in part the fact that the activities and interests of 17% of the Iowa lifers was questionable during their youth and that 13% were members of criminal boys' gangs, to say nothing of 9% who periodically engaged in stealing, gambling or bootlegging. Tensions, conflicts and complexities caused the lifer to run away from home for good in 18% and for short periods of time, in 21% of the cases. In 13% of the cases there was a history of insanity, epilepsy, mental defect or queerness in the family. Such is the story of his family background as gleaned from the records. Now, what is his own history?

He was sentenced to the State Penitentiary for life at the age of 32, an age slightly lower than that for the rest of the prisoners at Fort Madison. He had left home at the age of 18, in many cases (27%) to secure work, in others to marry (15%), and 12% to wander about the country. That he was quite a wanderer is shown by the fact that his mobility was in two-thirds of the cases equally divided between "average" and "great." He regarded himself as financially independent at the age of seventeen and the average age for his first full-time job was sixteen. He took this job in most cases (60%) to support himself, but 40% of the men also aided their families with their earnings. First of all, the lifer was an unskilled laborer (68%), and next, a farmer (27%). In 45% of the cases he had held ten or more jobs and in only 16% less than five, the

average length of his longest job being four years and eight months. In 50% of the cases he had been employed at the time of his arrest. But his occupation had not been satisfactory to him, for in half of the cases there was an indication that he would have preferred another kind of job.

In 43% of the cases he was single; if married, he had in 11% of the cases been married more than once; in 14% of the cases he had been widowed; in 30% he had been divorced before imprisonment, in 37% after, and, in 10% of the cases he was separated, without divorce, at the time of imprisonment. Most commonly (46%) his wife had a better education than he did; her religious and economic background did not differ materially from his; she most commonly had similar interests; she had had one or more previous marriages, usually broken by divorce; and, she possessed a questionable reputation at the time of her marriage in 22% of the cases. Disruptive factors in these marriages were many. Constant strife was reported in 35% and occasional strife in 15% of the cases. In-law relationships were cited as partially responsible for friction in 24% of the cases. Apparently economic factors were not an important cause of friction, for 89% of the men insisted that they offered regular support for their families, which average 1.7 children per family. Family friction caused 6.6% of the men to murder their own wives. One-third of the men admitted having indulged in either pre- or post-marital illicit alliances with one or more women.

The Iowa lifer had not been a particularly serious offender against society. In almost a fourth of the cases he did not even have an arrest record; in almost a half, he had nothing worse than an arrest record; in a fifth of the cases he had been arrested, and had had an industrial school sentence or jail sentence or both; one-third of the men had been sentenced to institutions for felonies, fifty men sharing seventy-nine separate felonies or prison sentences among them.

In 25% of the cases the Iowa lifer killed someone as an incident in connection with another crime; an immediate quarrel caused a murder in 16% of the cases; domestic discord was responsible for murder in 8%; a triangular love situation brought on murder in 6%; a sex attack resulted in murder in 2% of the cases. Twenty-one per cent of the lifers were sentenced because of offenses against property (bank robbery or burglary), and 12% for sex offenses (rape). Hence the Iowa lifer is largely a criminal by passion.

In 51% of the cases he was a moderate drinker, but in 33% he confessed that his use of liquor was excessive. Only 3.3% of the lifers were dope addicts.

The majority (69%) feel that they had a proper chance in life. Twelve per cent claim that they lacked a real home, 10% an education and 9% money; 56% state that they lacked nothing. Such opinions come from men who possess an average I. Q. of 79, several points higher than that of the prison population at large.

In short, the picture we get of the

Iowa lifer on the basis of one hundred and fifty cases is that of a boy born of not a very good heritage, into a home which was rather poor, with many opportunities for adjustment to the complexities of his surroundings denied him in his formative years; thrown upon the world to support himself at an early age; denied the usual amount of education; forced to put up with low wages because of lack of capacity and training; unhappy in his domestic relations; or without the social ties of the family; somewhat emotionally unstable, and because of the peculiar trends of events in his life fated to offend against society in a major fashion.

Comparison of Murder, Property, and Sex Offenders

In comparing these three groups, there were not many items which showed a difference which was statistically significant. In the comparison, attention is called to differences where the critical ratio⁸ equals two or more. Thus, where a difference is mentioned, it will indicate that a critical ratio to the extent of at least 2.0 existed; where the difference was statistically significant, that is, 3.0 or more, special mention is made thereof.

Murderers

The murderers came from a purely rural background to a greater extent than did the property offenders. There was a statistically significant difference

between the murderers and sex offenders in respect to the great number of the former who, after spending their childhood and youth on the farm, migrated to the town or city. The murderer's father was both a farmer and a skilled laborer more frequently than was the father of the sex offender.

Compared with the families of the sex offenders, the families from which the murderers came were far more likely to be non-churchgoers; to a greater extent than the murderers, the families of the property offenders contained single members who were active in church affairs; the property offender group also showed a high percentage of families which were entirely without church affiliations. The church failed to function in almost half of the families of the total group, and especially in the families of the murderers and property offenders.

As far as home treatment is concerned, the statistics show that there was about an equal amount of cruelty shown by members of the family toward the members of these three groups, but a detailed analysis of the data in the case-studies reveals that a situation where both parents were cruel to the subject was especially common among the families of the murder group as compared with those of the sex offender. Also, the murderer was more often the favorite of the mother, although entertaining a neutral attitude himself, than was the sex offender.

A statistically significant difference

$$\sigma \text{ diff.} = \sqrt{\frac{\sigma^2 \text{ mean}_1 + \sigma^2 \text{ mean}_2}{N_1} + \frac{\sigma^2 \text{ mean}_1 + \sigma^2 \text{ mean}_2}{N_2}}$$

For percentages (p_1 and p_2),

$$\sigma \text{ diff.} = \sqrt{\frac{P_1(1-P_1)}{N_1} + \frac{P_2(1-P_2)}{N_2}}$$

⁸The critical ratio between two measures was determined as the ratio of the difference to the standard deviation of the difference.

In the case of comparison of means, the standard deviation of the difference was defined as

existed between the murderer's family and the sex offender's family in the matter of irregular employment, the former suffering the most. In the medium income group (\$1,000 to \$2,000), murderers' families were less numerous than those of the sex offender (23% as compared with 50%). A significant difference existed in that the murder group was 21% colored, while the property offenders were without exception white. The reputation of the parents in the murderer's family was "good" less often than it was in the family of the sex offenders; similarly, these two groups differed in that the father possessed only a "fair" reputation, the mother a "good" one, to a greater extent in the murderer's family.

Twelve per cent of the murderers were members of a criminal boys' gang, while the sex offenders had no such affiliations, thus making for a statistically significant difference. Six per cent of the murderers left home to enter an industrial school, no members of the other two groups gave this reason for their first departure from home; five per cent of the murderers never left home, while the sex offenders had in all cases severed their home ties before the commission of their crime. A significant difference existed between the murderers and the sex offenders in the number of murderers who left their homes because of marriage.

Again statistically significant was the number of separations which followed marriage among the murderers, as compared with none among the property offenders. Property and sex of-

fenders unanimously characterized the interests of their spouses as being the same as theirs, but, to a significant degree (24%) the murderers, who in 8% of the cases murdered their own wives, claimed that their wives had interests foreign to their own. Both sets of in-law relationships accounted somewhat for the marital friction, where it existed in the murderers' families, and to a greater extent than in the families of the sex offenders.

Four per cent of the murderers were given to the use of dope, while none of the sex offenders were similarly habituated. Denying that they had had a proper chance in life with greater frequency than the sex offenders, the murderers, with significant differences between themselves and the sex offenders, stated most frequently that they lacked an education and a home. The sex offenders, in no case, cited these two values as missing in their lives, but most commonly stated that they had lacked no special value in life.

In summary, then, we find that the murderer is most commonly of rural origin. He differs from the sex offender in the following respects: he comes from a family without church connections more commonly; both parents were cruel toward him to a greater extent; he was the favorite of his mother, though neutral in his own attitude, his parents experienced irregularity in employment far more; they were less commonly members of the medium income group (\$1,000 to \$2,000); the parents possessed a "good" reputation less often and the father's reputation was only "fair" in more cases; to a

significant extent he was a member of a criminal boys' gang and he was sent to an industrial school more commonly; marriage was a more frequent cause for the murderer's leaving home; he and his wife differed from each other in interests and activities to a greater extent; in-law relationships, from both sides, were interfering factors in marriage more commonly; he was more likely to be a dope addict; and he felt more keenly the lack of some value in his life, such as education or a home.

The property offender and the murderer did not have so many differences in background. Twenty-one per cent of the murderers were colored, none of the property offenders were. The murderer was sent to the industrial school more commonly; where married, he was separated oftener and he and his wife differed in their activities and interests to a greater extent.

Property Offenders

Least often, the property offender was living on a farm at the time of his crime, but he had lived there originally to a greater extent than had the sex offender, and almost to the same extent as the murderer. His family, in almost one out of every two cases, was without church connections, and here he differed markedly from the sex offender; his family, as a whole, was less active in church affairs than were the families of the murderer and the sex offender, in the latter comparison the difference was statistically significant.

To a greater extent than the sex offender, the property offender was reared in a home which was not his

own. He was the favorite of his mother to a greater extent than the sex offender. His parents experienced irregular employment to a greater degree than the other two groups, especially in a comparison with the sex offenders where the irregularity equalled only 5 per cent. There were no colored offenders in this group.

The property offender lived in a "fair" and a "poor" neighborhood more commonly than the murderer and sex offender. A significant difference existed between him and the murderer in that he, less often, had activities and interests which were approved by society, and between him and the sex offender, in that he was a member of a criminal boys' gang to a greater extent. The property offender was more truant than the other two, and he left school because of a lack of interest much more than did the sex offender. Least often, his parents possessed a "good" reputation in the community and there was a significant difference between the property offender and the sex offender in the number of fathers of the former who had only a "fair" reputation; they exceeded the murderers also in this respect. Fifteen per cent of the property offenders never left home before the commission of their crime, differing from the sex offenders all of whom had left. Sixteen per cent left home to marry; none of the sex offenders advanced marriage as a reason for leaving home. In reflecting on their life, 19% stated that what they had missed was a real home.

The employment situation among the property offenders was the least favor-

able of the three groups. Only 3 per cent had held less than five jobs during their life, a far smaller percentage than that which obtained in the other two groups. Sixty per cent claimed that they had held between five and ten jobs, differing from the murderers to the greatest extent (32%). The mean length of their longest job was around two and three-quarters years, while that of the other two groups nearly doubled that figure. Significant differences existed as regards the employment condition at the time of arrest. Thus, 72% of the property offenders were unemployed, 44% of the murderers and only 28% of the sex offenders. The property offenders gave less constant support to their families, where married, than did the other two groups, differing especially with the sex offenders. It is not surprising, then, that they indicated dissatisfaction with their occupation before imprisonment to a greater extent than the other two groups, especially the sex offenders. Furthermore, they were better equipped mentally to hold a job; the property offenders possessed an average I. Q. of 89.5, significantly higher than the 69.2 of the sex offender, and better than the record of the murderer which was 77.7.

Summing up, the property offender was, least of all, a farmer at the time of his crime; he was less likely to have come under the influence of the church; employment conditions were worse in his childhood home, and he lived in "fair" and "poor" neighborhoods, where his activities and interests were worse and his truancy the most frequent,

more than the other two groups; of the total group, his parents had the poorest general reputation. In his personal employment history, the picture was the blackest on almost every count, despite the fact that he had the highest I. Q.

Sex Offenders

The sex offender comes from a predominantly urban setting (78%), especially as compared with the murderer (48%). Unlike the other two groups, his family, in no case, is above the medium income level (\$1,000 to \$2,000), and in this level 50% of the families fall. He differs especially from the murderer in that only 56% of his parents are native born, while the murderer, in only 14% of the cases, has parents who (one or both) are not native to the United States. In the case of the sex offender, both parents are foreign-born to a greater extent (39%) than is to be found in the murderer (11%) or property offender (12.5%) group. In school, his grade achievements (5.9) is the lowest of the three groups (6.5 for the murderers and 7.5 for the property offenders). This situation is not surprising when we notice that his I. Q. is only 69.2, the lowest, as compared to 89.5 for the property offenders, the highest. In marriage, he fathered more children than the other two groups, 3.4 children per marriage as compared with 1.3 for the property offenders and 1.5 for the murderers. He was the oldest at the time of commitment to prison, being 36.4 years of age as compared with 31.8 for the murderers and 29.3 for the property offenders.

The picture, then, of the sex offender is that of a person who is most likely to be from the town or city, of a medium or low income group to a greater extent than the others, and of foreign or mixed parentage in nearly half of the cases (25% of the property offenders and 14% of the murderers were of foreign or mixed parentage), with the low school grade achievement of 5.9, and the lowest I. Q. average 69.2, the greatest average age at the time of commitment to the prison.

GENERAL SUMMARY

In larger numbers than the general Iowa population, the Iowa lifer comes from the town or city. The statistical data, supplemented by the case studies, indicate that he was forced to face various crises in adolescence, brought on by unusual conditions in family, school and personal temperament. An unregulated social life, and a somewhat unstable and trying employment history, paved the way for the catastrophe

which landed him in prison for life. The study supports the importance of harmonious domestic relations and it brings out the destructive effect of questionable and criminal associates.

Certain conclusions are suggested in the comparison of the three types of offenders. The murderer appears to be quite unstable emotionally, and he reacts impulsively in a crisis situation. This emotional instability is also to be found in the sex offender, but here its seat is sexual passion and not anger or hatred. Generally, the sex offender impressed one as an apathetic individual. The property offender seems to be the product of an unfortunate economic and social background, where reverses and lack of constructive influences destroyed his values. This resulted in a markedly unstable adult employment history. Of the three groups, the sex offender presents the best general social background, but low intelligence, emotional instability and foreign culture patterns stand out in his history.