

1943

Our Schools Make Criminals

Arthur C. Jr. Johnson

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

Arthur C. Jr. Johnson, Our Schools Make Criminals, 33 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 310 (1942-1943)

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.

OUR SCHOOLS MAKE CRIMINALS

Arthur C. Johnson, Jr.¹

For several years I have suspected that our schools condition some criminals—that for many school-age children, present educational practices backfire in their social intent. But I couldn't put my finger on the how and why of it until I visited a children's court recently.

There I saw a little tike start out along a road which had begun in his school classroom and which probably will end at a prison gate. I know, for after twenty years equally divided between public and prison educational work, I know both ends of that road.

The youngster made a brave pretense at toughness—apparently the only test of manhood he knew—but behind the attempt was just a frightened boy. I have seen this same reaction in youthful offenders too often to be fooled by it.

"Your Honor," a court investigator testified, "I know this case well. John's teacher and the principal of his school agree that he is a confirmed truant and trouble-maker, who refuses to respond to proper influence and treatment."

I have read hundreds of juvenile case histories without realizing that a second-hand opinion may become prosecutor and jury for what in effect constitutes a criminal trial. There could be no defense—John *was* a truant, and he certainly appeared to be a trouble-maker.

The judge sealed the fate of the sullen lad. "John Doe, Jr., on the evidence, this court has no alternative but to declare you a delinquent under the law, and commit you to (institution named) until such time as the authorities there are convinced that your attitude and conduct have changed. That is all."

Consistent in his role of tough guy, the kid glared at the judge and snarled, "A'right, send me away an' see if I care! I'll show 'em I c'n take it."

What a perfect start for a criminal career!

On the objective evidence, no one could take exception to the court's finding—it was too late for compromise in this case. But experience told me that, taken in time, John *could* have been saved.

In some such manner 18,000 youths a year are herded into institutions for corrective treatment—over one-half committed as habitual truants from school and incorrigibles. Many times that number are placed on probation—for the courts *do* compromise, whenever possible. *Why do so many boys run away from school?*

¹ Educational Supervisor in the State Prison, Attica, N. Y.

Negative School Influences

Personal contact with over 7,000 prisoners made me ponder the investigator's statement: ". . . refuses to respond to proper influence and treatment." To what "influence and treatment" had John been subjected in school? What constitutes "proper" influence and treatment *for John*? We can answer rather definitely for an average child, but John was not an average child or he wouldn't have been in court. Had his teacher and principal actually tried to supply proper influence and treatment—had they worked with John to help *him*—or was he merely the nuisance-discard from a class and school? That these are valid questions is shown by actual statements by other Johns:

- (1) "The teacher tried to make me wear better clothes like the other children. I finally told her to go to hell and walked out. I swore then that I would have better clothes if I had to steal them and I did."
- (2) "I had a stutter. I was put in a class with a lot of screwballs. My pals kidded me and I quit."
- (3) "My mother was going nuts and I was worried about her. One day the teacher called me crazy too. I never went to school regular after that."
- (4) "I was fired from school because I wouldn't study my history. When they brought me back and tried to make me study history again, I started to skip school."
- (5) "I just couldn't recite in class. The teacher nagged at me and to avoid trouble I left school."
- (6) "I don't know why I ran away from school. I couldn't get along in a crowd, that's all."
- (7) "I was put in a class with a lot of dumb clucks. It was too much for me and I quit."
- (8) "One day I got to school late and was told that if I couldn't get there on time, not to come at all, just to spoil the class record. I took them at their word."

Equally obvious end-products of illy considered school "influences" are to be found in any prison. If these boys had been handled sympathetically and understandingly at the right time, many would not, today, be where they are.

In the past, I always accepted the occasional trouble-maker as an inescapable headache for the school. I now know that the school was frequently an even greater headache for that child. For as I better understand the attitudes which underlie antisocial behavior, I see that they often hinge on little things for which the school alone was at fault.

It is so easy to dodge embarrassing issues by treating the problem boy as a discipline case, waiving all personal responsibility by turning him over to the social worker and the courts. These are too often so concerned with opinions of other and untrained observers that they have neither time nor opportunity to study the boy, his personal problems, the real causes for his sorry plight.

Altogether too many youngsters are being *judged* bad and, in their youth and pliability, in fact are being *made* bad.

The juvenile institution is, in the main, a tardy answer to America's dilemma of delinquency—side-stepping the real issue, extravagant in taxpayer dollars, and utterly wasteful in ultimate human values. We must counterbalance the effect of delinquent influences while the child is most susceptible to them, not create them ourselves.

Result of the School's Failure

That it is a school problem is clear. In a group of 634 consecutive prison commitments, 258 were recidivists of whom 194, or 78 per cent, had truancy as the first entry in their crime ledger. Of the 376 first offenders, 231, or 61 per cent, got the same start. On their own admission, 140, or 67 per cent of the remainder, had been off-the-record truants. *This is a serious indictment of our schools.*

It is a present problem. Of these 565 truants, 67 were under nineteen; 182 were between nineteen and twenty-one; and 197 between twenty-one and twenty-seven years old when last committed.

It has been said that of every one hundred boys of school age, eighty are average, healthy, normal youngsters. Being slow mentally, ten have to be "pushed." Highstrung and rebellious against restraint, the remaining ten become behavior problems and "must be sat on." *It is with this ten per cent that the school fails.*

Hark back to our own schooldays for a picture of the boy who must be "sat on." There was a John in our class. For any of many reasons, this boy was made to feel alien—a misfit in the group. He got less consideration than we. Sooner or later, he accepted our attitude as a challenge and reacted accordingly.

Reaction followed one of two characteristic patterns: either the boy started an indiscriminate bedevilment of teacher and pupils alike; or abandoning the social approach, he became moody and sullen, subject to violent outbursts of temper on the slightest provocation. Either attitude required ever increasing effort to maintain itself.

Failing to reach goals gratifying to his bruised ego, John eventually ran away from what he realized had become an untenable position. And with him into truancy went the rankling acknowledgment of personal defeat—to be compensated for at any cost.

In this sequence of attitudes and conflicts lies the germ for a fixed manner of behavior—abandonment of the conventional self and the adoption of a reputational personality. The expression, "I may as well have the game as the name," sums up the whole distorted outlook. Continued, it may lead to delinquency and crime.

Left to his own resources, John will grow up conditioned to a

tempo of excitement and social insecurity, antagonistic to the humdrum, nomadic, agitative—a mentally maladjusted individualist for whom the term psychopathic personality applies. In everyday language the psychopath is a bundle of nerves; emotionally unstable, impulsive, self-centered, non-cooperative, hence socially embarrassing. He is intelligent, but he rarely uses his intelligence to his own ultimate best interest and frequently employs it to antisocial ends. Thirty per cent of present prison populations possess these abnormal personality traits.

One prisoner—always in trouble, even in prison, told me: "I believe in all or nothing. When held down, my mind is never at peace. The reaction is dissatisfaction with my lot and a desire to wreck whatever barrier suppresses my will." Disgruntled with the world about him, he would wreck it—but he succeeds only in wrecking himself. This is a characteristic psychopathic reaction.

No one can say with certainty what underlies the condition. It appears to result from external maladjustments "exploding" to form internal conflicts or neuroses which often baffle the combined knowledge of all the sciences. It appears, at least partially, a by-product of the age in which we live—one dedicated to speeds which in a generation have stepped man from the horse and buggy into the stratoplane. One father aptly expressed it in the statement: "I put my son on a merry-go-round and forgot to take him off."

Unless we master the speeds we are creating, they must destroy our children. This is our basic social problem.

Of 196 instances of prison adjustment and discipline, 92 were definitely psychopathic and 63 showed closely related conditions. We may assume that 155, or 79 per cent of the group were from that ten per cent of boys who "must be sat on."

The Job Ahead

The potential trouble-maker forms but a small yet constant group in the school population. With native intelligence, instinctive cleverness, personal courage; he is tense under the lashing of emotional stress, perpetual restlessness, easily aroused antagonism—an unnatural blending of positive and negative character traits readily discernible to the observant.

In our prisons, penitentiaries, jails, and juvenile institutions are thousands of these boys—now adult social outcasts. In our schools and yet to enter school are other thousands, boys as they once were, doomed to travel the same road to the same end, unless the school of tomorrow does something for them which, today, it is not doing. We can't lump the intelligent but unstable John with "a bunch of screwballs" and "dumb clucks," and expect to cure all by the same process.

Very little attempt is being made by the school to correct the

existing situation. Only a handful of American communities have planned crime prevention programs originating there. The school is the one agency contacting all children in the traditional setting and natural manner essential in such a program. From his first day at school, the overly restless and emotional child must be identified and quieted, before his character is set and he becomes a *mis-behavior* problem—antagonisms developed, rebellions established, emotional barriers erected—a case for correction not prevention.

Dropped in their laps by the times, schoolmen have a vital situation confronting them. They must not approach it by assuming that techniques of demonstrated value to the normal boy will correct deficiencies in John. And John must not be made a scapegoat to rationalize their failure. We need a new approach to a new problem having aspects in common with experience.

Prevention involves occupational therapies peculiar to each boy. The effect of causes behind abnormal behavior must be neutralized by activities of individual interest and occupational worth. Education, as such, must be so organized and motivated as to appear but the integral part of a desirable whole. The larger purpose must be met whether one single other thing, now deemed educationally essential, is accomplished or not. With so much at stake, we can't afford to quibble over ways and means for doing.

Trade Training Not Enough

Historically, trade schools developed with one eye on the academic misfit. Many still function primarily as first aid in the cure of the delinquent. Vocational training has a very real place in the education of a run-of-the-mine boy. It would seem to be twice as valuable for our John. But prison experience demonstrates that a skilled trade—circumscribed with personal repressions and occupational restrictions as it is—may pyramid mental and social unrest in the emotionally unstable. Here is the training-conditioning underlying a flat refusal to do maintenance work.

"I guess I was a trial to my teachers. Finally the principal had me transferred to the vocational school. I was put in the carpentry class, but I didn't like it and got out by the simple method of refusing to work. I did the same in the print shop. When I found the plumbing shop just as bad, I ran away and have been on the loose ever since. That kind of work tied me down too much."

Vocational educators confuse the creation of desirable habits of work with trade training, on the false assumption that the one may be secured only through the other. Too often they fail to realize that the prospective trainee must be guided into employment on the economic level at which he may adequately maintain himself, and therein they fail as teachers.

The utilization of vocational activities and materials for therapeutic purposes is not new. A few schools have developed out-

standing programs based on this concept. Their methods and results have been so publicized that they need not be repeated here. Even the casual visitor will recognize the vitalizing personality of one man or woman as being responsible for the success of each.

At one such school, I was greeted with;

"See what (the principal) lets me do! No one ever let me do things like this before. So what? I'm always in trouble. I ain't any more."

At another I heard:

"Gee! It's swell here and I'm doing fine. I ran away from home to get out of going to school—but this ain't no school, mister, get that straight."

This hard boiled little egg didn't realize that he *was* in a school. How different from most juvenile institutions, where escape is a matter of almost daily occurrence!

If there is a recipe for effective educational work with boys who "must be sat on," it is contained in those words: "but this ain't no school, mister, get that straight."

We may summarize a crime prevention program: it is one of sympathetic understanding and guidance—not impersonal and mechanized techniques of the laboratory now so commonly substituted for it. The first step with each boy is to "get under his skin," not "in his hair." Men and women who can attract boys becoming hardened to life and suspicious of motive must be brought into the work.

Our job is to establish emotional control, create habits of humility in thought, consideration in action, responsibility in performance—all attitudes of approach, *not necessarily skills for doing*. We will succeed only when we apply the simple formula of individual persuasion by personal example, *and apply it in time*.

We have streamlined our economics. But the human cycle is constant—we cannot streamline human conduct or correct faulty behavior by production line methods.

Old Problems Streamlined

Problems of delinquency caused, or apparently brought about, by war conditions are not necessarily new problems. Nine out of ten of them are, upon close scrutiny, found to be old acquaintances decked out in streamlined attire. War itself is as old as history and its problems remain, in most respects, basically the same.—E. R. Cass at the N. Y. State Conference for Social Work, Syracuse, Nov. 11, 1942.