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# JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND ADULT DISORGANIZATION

Hans von Hentig

"The problem of juvenile delinquency" has not yielded to institutional organization and coordination. Professor von Hentig of the University of Colorado, and Director of the Colorado Crime Survey, invites us in this article to consider what we adults can do for the problem as a consequence of our own self-examination.—Editor.

## *The Main Problem*

The main problem of juvenile delinquency is not its momentary, often innocuous status. It is momentous as a symptom of fundamental derangements. It is vital as an indication of graver future disorders.

We point at the disrupted war-time family. Yet in doing so we do not dare to admit two things: first that this institutional breakdown, this cave-in of old and time-honored taboos, that this social disorganization is above all personal disorganization; and further that the present affliction, contrary to current beliefs, is vastly a grievance born of abundance.

It seems that uncontrolled plenty can be as sure a cause of disorganization as uncontrolled and unsupported destitution. Like other dangerous matters, dynamite, for instance, car driving, marriage and voting, it can not be expected to be managed correctly by inexperienced and immature youngsters.<sup>1</sup> In rural sections of the country 100 dollars a month will mean more affluence to a 15 year old boy than \$10,000 to a fifty year old banker. Money, in adult and competent hands, means freedom from want. Under different circumstances it means premature freedom from control, premature sense of all-competence, premature sex relations,<sup>2</sup> a distorted picture of social and human relations. By living in an artificial boom situation youngsters build up false adjustive mechanisms. They will enter the hard struggle of the post-war world equipped with misleading ideas and brittle weapons. Wars, by concentrating on one aim, are disruptive forces. Fathers, as far as they have not joined the fighting divisions, have occupied the front of production. Internal migrations of unprecedented magnitude are taking place. The attraction of high wages, good life and the feeling that they belong to the elite of "essential citizens" carry

<sup>1</sup>And immature adults, of course.

<sup>2</sup>The interference of cash renders sex relations much more direct and indiscriminate. At this early stage of life it is an utterly disorganizing factor.

fathers far away, sometimes never to return. Little can be done to cushion these disintegrating processes. However, modern warfare, resting on machines and chemicals, has taken another heavy toll. Many married women with two, or three or more children have invaded plants, shipyards and a thousand other war-time jobs. They are well paid, have entered a new, independent,<sup>3</sup> in many ways "glamorous" life,<sup>4</sup> and in addition they serve their country as best as they can. Yet wherever the figures of juvenile delinquency rise—and the magnitude of the phenomenon surpasses by far our feeble statistical attempts—these married women have unwittingly done a disservice to their nation. They have seized and bravely held an important part of the home front—by abandoning a more strategic section.

Will it be possible to "repatriate" these mothers and to re-settle them in their homes? Can we induce them to take charge of other war-workers' children in educational collectives, block by block, as an equally glamorous and feted war effort? Moral pressure and persuasion alone will not do. Material incentives must come from federal or state funds. But above all we must arouse public opinion. War loan drives must be. We put money, prestige, a tremendous suggestive endeavor into such operations. Shouldn't we be able to spend half of the energy we use in these directions and some of the money we invest therein on other equally big issues?<sup>5</sup> No campaign was ever inaugurated for a better and greater end.

After having demobilized the working mother as far as possible we must turn our attention in another direction. We must stop being scared by the allegedly coercive nature of the situation. We must stop the violation of child labor laws. There is, of course, a big demand for workers. There is furthermore, the want of many parents, the indolence and the greed of others. Thousands of boys, getting relatively high wages, believe that schools are an out-dated road to independence that offer no opportunity anymore. They overwork. They overdraw "relaxation" and amusement. They buy or steal motor-cars; in either case they have to steal gasoline-coupons. They have to outbid the soldier for girls, and since they cannot balance the fetish of the uniform, they have to look for other inducements. Hence the robbed whiskey and the enormous amount of cheap jewelry stolen in all communities of the western states. Larceny was already in peace-times mostly a sex-offense

<sup>3</sup>See the often disruptive effect of share-the-ride car pools on the female war worker. It is an important divorce reason.

<sup>4</sup>They have won their place on the screen alongside with Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamar. It is a dream's fulfillment with millions of women.

<sup>5</sup> . . . "The prospect . . . was that while minor excitements would continue to disturb the more sensitive, the industry itself would go on abundantly satisfying the mass yearning for dramatic banalities, selling soap, automobiles, mouth wash and skin lotions more and more efficiently—and disappointing everybody who seriously considered its magnificent educational possibilities." L. J. Carr *Delinquency Control*, Harper, New York, 1941, p. 236.

with juveniles. Gifts were their way of competing with one another and with adults. The seasonal curves of larceny and sex-crimes coincide: they have a common pre-summer peak. Now money and puberty are going to their heads. This is not the only form of intoxication. They are eager for marihuana cigarettes. Boys 13 and 14 years old are found drunk on park benches. In a whirl-wind of progressing disorganization the ages of our delinquents become younger and younger. When arrested the boys are utterly intractable and hard-boiled. They have already started building up semi-rigid attitudes of rebellion.

For the time being the situation is more critical on the female side. Some communities report that cases have doubled or trebled. Others of course, have not noticed any change. The disorder has invaded the high-schools. School-girls are found carrying contraceptives. Police and many courts are helpless because many girls of good families are involved and therefore only a few cases are brought to their attention. Public opinion, especially in smaller communities is silenced by the magnitude and the diffusion of the phenomenon. Parents refuse to believe the plain facts.<sup>6</sup> Asked to look at the ocular evidence they tell you that they never would set foot upon such places. Parents are afraid. In a sort of paralysis they look on, bewildered and helpless. In this crisis they do not dare to intervene with firmness and understanding. No one can deny that this mounting wave of delinquency is a symptom of adult incompetence rather than of youthful wickedness. Never was the necessity of adult education and the danger of adult immaturity more evident.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Parental Status and Other Factors*

The writer is aware of objections. His theory of the unbalancing effect of money in the hands of youngsters is open to argument in a world which is so patently imperfect and which is tainted with the morbid subject of poverty. It is however a fact with the majority of youngsters<sup>8</sup> and some adults. When the peak of the relief load was reached in February 1933 in North Carolina the number of delinquency cases handled by the juvenile courts was

<sup>6</sup>"There is a profound civic defensiveness in ordinary American citizens. They do not want to think that their community has any of the blemishes which other communities may have . . . Merely to bring the facts to light would "bring the town a bad name." More important still, it would "disturb them emotionally." Carr: *ibidem* p. 276.

<sup>7</sup>"It is certainly true when Carr says (*ibidem* p. 359): as a matter of survival in a world of dictators and totalitarian governments, democracy must either reduce the power of the ignorant and the immature, or reduce the amount of ignorance and immaturity."

<sup>8</sup>After having stolen from his aunt's handbag the unexpected amount of four pounds Spenser, a burglar, says: "With all that money I felt like a millionaire . . ." I spent the evening riding donkeys on the beach." James Spenser: *Limey breaks in*, London 1934, p. 18.

only 196, "while the average monthly number for that year was 222, and for the five year period, 220.<sup>9</sup> Similar reports came from Michigan. "In 1922 when the employment index was down to 63.9 there were 2061 complaints filed in the juvenile court (Wayne County, Michigan) and in 1929 when the business index was at its height the number of delinquency cases reached the peak of 3755."<sup>10</sup> Did the scourge of unemployment at least keep the parents at home? Enforce a united family front in face of danger and destitution?

Girls are more affected than boys by a disrupted family life. We know that the broken home (broken by death, divorce, desertion, separation for other reasons) breeds more female delinquency than male misconduct. A study of offenders disposed of by 68 juvenile courts in the U. S. arrived at these results:<sup>11</sup>

Delinquency by parental status—1932. Percentages

Status of parents	Boys	Girls
Parents married and living together . . . . .	67	51
Broken home and status not reported . . . . .	33	49

Mere separations broke 10 percent of the boys' homes; it was 17 percent on the girls side. The present situation is therefore more detrimental to the development of our girls than of boys. Since female delinquents are harder to reform and have a higher recidivism rate than boys every corrective effort should be turned in that direction.

However there are other detrimental forces to which the boy is subject.<sup>12</sup> More than ever the boy draws his models from the movie. The material offered to his uncritical mind varies. He seems to enjoy the idiocies of the Superman. Western outlaws and fearless sheriffs are his delight. The heroes of the air and the sea teach comradeship, devotion, lasting virtues. In some pictures, on the other hand, alarming procedures are shown and glorified. We think of some commando techniques exhibited in the most realistic way, blackened faces, glittering knives, the death rattle of victims caught in an ambush from the rear, gushing blood in technicolor. They give an exciting lesson how to follow an enemy and to throw a wire-noose around the neck of the unsuspecting man.<sup>13</sup> The criminologist of some experience knows that we shall meet these stratagems again, when the war is over, in the nocturnal

<sup>9</sup>Figures of Dr. Walter Cutter as reported in Walter A. Lunden: Systematic source book in Juvenile Delinquency, University of Pittsburg 1936, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup>Ibidem, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup>Juvenile Court Statistics. 1932. Washington 1935, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>The writer does not enter into the problem of the girl or the boy as a victim of foul play.

<sup>13</sup>The method was shown by a well-known magazine in a series of pictures from the stealthy approach to the final strangulation.

streets of New York, Detroit, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles. They are necessary in combat, but they should not be impressed upon the venturesome phantasy of our youngsters, surrounded by the halo of admiration and approbation.

*The Root of Adult Crime*

If the juvenile delinquency of the present days were to ooze away at the end of the war when the men come back and families re-unite we need not have sleepless nights. But there are two sets of facts which render the problem utterly threatening. First there will be the great crisis of re-shaping and re-conditioning our industrial and agricultural life. Secondly, the youngsters of to-day will be the adults of to-morrow, carrying the lessons and experiences, the desires and habits of war-times into the conditions of peace.

We need not repeat the truism that adult crime is to a large degree<sup>14</sup> rooted in the delinquency of early life. This nearly compulsive evolution is proved by the study of recidivism among juveniles proper, as seen in the following figures:<sup>15</sup>

Delinquency cases disposed of in twenty-nine Juvenile Courts in the U. S. with Percentages of previous court experience

Age	Boys		Girls	
	White	Colored	White	Colored
13 years .....	16.8	20.4	15.6	16.2
14 years .....	27.9	24.6	30.0	30.8
15 years .....	34.3	23.8 <sup>16</sup>	42.4	37.3

Recidivism comes upon the scene already in early youth, rises fast and can not easily be brought to a halt when the frictions and conflicts of adult life are added.

Meditative criminals have stressed again and again the coercive power of these concatenations. Mark Benney's mother was a prostitute. As a small boy he watched the smart set which swept in when the pubs closed.

"Vivid people, vital people they were, whose garments had an exuberance and whose gestures an ardour that set them, even to my inexperienced eye, apart from the common run of men. The vigour and assurance of their personalities, their knowing ways, the utter zest of their living—everything about them compelled my admiration . . .

I came to feel, rather than understand, with Mother's friends that

<sup>14</sup>Figures differ, but vary between 42 and 77 per cent. See *The Delinquent Child*. White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, New York, 1932, pp. 242-244 where some of the findings are given.

<sup>15</sup>Compiled from Juvenile Court Statistics, 1934, Washington, 1937, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>This anomaly is explained by the fact that records are not always available.

society has but two classes—the Wide people, and the Mugs, who exist solely to be fleeced by the Wide people.”<sup>17</sup>  
A pickpocket gives the following picture of his models:

“At the end of the block, on which we lived, was a corner saloon, the headquarters of a band of professional thieves. They were known as the Old Border Gang, and among them were several very well known and successful crooks . . . When I saw one of these great men pass, my young imagination was fixed with the ambition to be as he was . . . We would . . . go ’round to the corner, to try to get a look at some of the celebrities in the saloon. A splendid sight one of these grafters was, as he stood before the bar, his cigar on the corner. Well dressed with clean white linen collar, a diamond in his tie, an air of ease and leisure all about him.”<sup>19</sup>

If youth is the period of experimenting adjustment it is utterly dangerous to let youngsters get adjusted to transitory and artificial situations. We do everything in our power to harden our soldiers. For their own sake we try to bring about a maximum of adjustment to future and inevitable hardships. The opposite policy is carried on or at least tolerated with our youngsters. They are permitted to grow soft, to develop inopportune habits of thought and action and to adapt to conditions which will never come back as long as they live. They will suffer grievously in the leanness of future years, will revolt and seize upon any ideology which may offer an excuse for their own failure.

But it should not be forgotten that the adolescent is only a part of the total population, although “specially susceptible to influences, arising from within and without.”<sup>19</sup> The youngster of to-day must be considered in conjunction with that crime-wave, five years hence, which will be composed of grown-up people returning from war or war production. In this future combination of younger and older age groups, recruits and gang-leaders, rests the greatest threat of the present situation.

### *A Challenge*

Playgrounds, enforcement of school attendance and child labor laws, police patrols and curfews are like tablets of aspirin applied to a seriously sick patient. They may relieve symptoms for a short while, but do not affect the causes of the ailment. Social services to families broken by the war have been proposed. Why don't we try to cure the broken family, the indolent neighborhood, the inactive community? Let us stop discussing juvenile delinquency—in some way a symptom again—and enter into a contest with the main and real issue . . . our own personal and social disorganization.

<sup>17</sup>Mark Benney: *Low Company*, London, 1937, p. 25. He goes on: “The Mugs are respectable, honest, hard-working, moderate-living, dull, church-going, fundamentally stupid and credulous. The Wide people . . . live gaily, love promiscuously, drink vastly, sing loudly, lie brazenly, swagger outrageously and hate dangerously. Above all they never work.”

<sup>18</sup>Hutchins Haggood: *Autobiography of a Thief*, New York, 1903, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup>W. Healy and B. S. Alper; *Criminal Youth and the Borstal System*, New York, 1941, p. 4.