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EXTREME ORDINAL POSITION AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

J. Asa Shield and Austin E. Grigg

It has long been a moot question—the influence of the size of a family upon the personalities of its younger members. The authors who are respectively, Consulting Neuropsychiatrist and Psychologist on the research staff of the Virginia State Penitentiary, here examine the question from the viewpoint of the criminal behavior.—Editor.

Some investigators believe that the size of the family and the serial position in it are factors that precipitate behavior problems and delinquency. This article reports a study of the serial position in the family of 300 recent consecutive admissions into the Virginia State Penitentiary.

Francis¹ demonstrated that of all environmental factors, parental attitudes had the most influence on the personality of the child and were a deciding factor as to whether or not the economic and social condition of the home and neighborhood had an ill effect upon the child. Ordinal position of an individual in a family group is at least one source of differential parental attitude. One's position in the family implies not only a change in companionships and perhaps in affectionate relationship with the parents, but also certain other external changes such as age of parents, socio-economic conditions brought about by altered family size, schooling, etc. An exact measure of these various factors is difficult and not generally known.

Hart and Axelrad,² after studying the case records of 37 only children and 133 children with siblings, concluded that the only child was significantly more often emotionally unstable over-aggressive, seclusive, disposed to lie and to run away. Children with siblings displayed more feelings of revenge, suspiciousness, temper outbursts, leadership and association with undesirable companions. Ward's³ findings verified those of Hart and Axelrad when she found in 100 cases of only children that lying and truancy (running away) was more frequent than among children with siblings.

Other studies have demonstrated the influence of ordinal position in the family on delinquent behavior. Levy⁴ found that 37% of 576 problem cases were oldest children while only 31% of his 41,000 control sample of the general population were first born. Only children constituted 10.5% of the delinquent group. In a study of 500 inmates of a Michigan prison, Bearss⁵ found that

¹Francis, K. W.—“A study of the means of influence of socio-economic factors upon personality of children.” *J. Juv. Res.*, 1933, 17. 70-88.

²Hart, H. H. & Axelrad, S.—“The only child delinquent contrasted with delinquents in large families.” *J. Crim. Law Criminol.*, 1941, 33. 42-66.

63% were either the oldest or only children. Wile and Noetzel,⁶ on the other hand, were unable to discover any significant relationship between maladjustment or neurosis and order of birth among 500 cases with IQ above 70.

For the present study, extreme ordinal position is used to describe the first born, the last born or the only child. No attempt has been made here to determine the relationship of other individual serial positions to delinquency. All other ordinal positions are here grouped together and designated "other." To control racial differential, the cases have been divided into white and Negro.

Table I shows that among adult white male prisoners studied, fifty percent of those convicted of crimes against property have an extreme ordinal position. First born represent the greatest number of the group from extreme ordinal position.

TABLE I

Extreme Ordinal Position and Crimes Against Property—Adult White Males	No. %	
	Extreme ordinal pos.....	32
Last born	9	14.1
First born	16	25
Only	7	10.9
Other	32	50
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Total N	64	

TABLE II

Extreme Ordinal Position and Crimes Against Persons—Adult White Males	No. %	
	Extreme ordinal pos.....	21
Last born	9	20
First born	10	22.2
Only	2	4.4
Other	24	53.4
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Total N	45	

Table II shows that among adult white male prisoners, over forty-five percent of those convicted of crimes against persons have an extreme ordinal position. The difference between first born and last born is here not so great.

Among Negroes studied, extreme ordinal position appeared to have a somewhat greater differential influence than among the white prisoners. Both in crimes against persons and those against property we find the individual of extreme ordinal position dominating rather significantly.

From the above tables it may be safely concluded that both among white adult male prisoners and among Negro male prisoners there are more individual inmates representing extreme ordinal position than would normally be expected by chance. The

⁵Ward, Anne—"The only child: A study of 100 only children living at home with both parents, referred to a child guidance clinic." *Smith Coll. Stud. in Social Work*, 1930-31, 1. 41-65.

⁴Levy, John—"A quantitative study of behavior problems in relation to family constellation." *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 1930-31, 10. 637-654.

⁶Bearss, H. A.—"A study of selected factors in the prison records of 500 inmates of the State Prison for Southern Michigan at Jackson." *University Lithoprinters*, 1941. pp viii-67.

⁷Wile, Ira S. & Moetzel, Elinor—"A study of birth order and behavior." *J. Soc. Psychol.*, 1931, 2. 52-71.

TABLE III

Extreme Ordinal Position and Crimes Against Property—Adult Negro Males	No.	
	No.	%
Extreme ordinal pos.....	67	67.6
Last born	27	27.2
First born	28	28.3
Only	12	12.1
Other	32	32.4
Total N	99	

TABLE IV

Extreme Ordinal Position and Crimes Against Persons—Adult Negro Males	No.	
	No.	%
Extreme ordinal pos.....	58	63
Last born	27	29.3
First born	15	16.3
Only	16	17.4
Other	34	37
Total N	92	

present study does not attempt to investigate the various factors in family life, but seeks only to demonstrate the fact that extreme ordinal position appears to be at least a contributing factor in criminal activity in more cases than could be expected by chance. Every child occupies a unique position in his family and this position itself is the source of some degree of differential reaction toward the individual by parents, siblings, relatives and friends. The influence of this differential reaction may appear subtle on cursory observation, but there is evidence in the preceding tables that some differential factor is involved which carries over into adult life and may be demonstrated in criminal statistics. More thorough sociological investigations into the various constellations of factors involved in shaping the role of extreme ordinal position on criminal conduct must be made before a final explanation can be given.

Among the white prisoners studied there is a slight tendency for the oldest child to be the most frequent offender among those of extreme ordinal position. This is in accord with findings by Goodenough⁷ and Leahy that the first born is somewhat more prone to behavior problems. But our Negro statistics do not support this contention.

Among Negro prisoners, only children appear significantly more frequently in both types of crimes than is the case among white only children. Negroes last born commit more crimes against persons than first born Negro inmates or only children. There is almost no difference between Negro first and last born and frequency of crimes against property.

Table V shows the median mental age of the groups studied. This table is here included because some investigators have pointed out that intelligence exerts a differential effect on certain types of crime. The classification of crimes included in this article is so general that it is highly doubtful that mental age could account for the differences between the various groupings.

⁷Goodenough, F. L. & Leahy, A. M.—“The effect of certain family relationships upon the development of personality.” *Ped. Sem.*, 1927, 34. 45-71.

TABLE V

Median Mental Ages of Ordinal Position Groups			
White	Mdn. M. A.	Negro	Mdn. M. A.
Last born	10-9	Last born	9-6
First born	11-6	First born	9-10
Only	12-2	Only	11-7
Other	11-6	Other	9-9

The above figures are in agreement with previously reported findings that only children, in general, possess higher test intelligence than other children. While the data in this report agree with that of Phillips⁸ who found that, of 226 children, the youngest children have the lowest IQ, the findings do not agree with those of Steckle⁹ and Thurstone and Jenkins¹⁰ who found that in general the IQ increased somewhat with increasing birth order. It is interesting to note that Phillips's study was conducted on mostly psychopathic children and that our findings on criminal subjects are in agreement with his study but not with those conducted on normal children. Our figures also indicate that the criminal group is generally a retarded group.

To gain some measure of control over size of family, Table VI shows the mean size of family for the grouping studied, both Negro and white combined.

TABLE VI

Number of Children per Family of Groups Investigated—Combined Races	
	Mean No.
Last born	5.7
First born	5.7
Other	6.5

It is obvious, therefore, that our prisoners studied who are in the extreme ordinal position grouping come from smaller families. While in both white and Negro, those of extreme ordinal position combine to give a higher mental age than inmates with younger and older siblings (see Table V), these findings are in keeping with variously reported negative correlations between intelligence and size of family. Another factor which enters here is the finding that larger families are found in lower socio-economic levels and that low socio-economic level is itself correlated with low IQ status. Theoretically at least, these factors as well as differential reaction attributed to unique position within

⁸Phillips, Arthur—"Sibship: Intelligence and Behavior." *Psychol. Clin.*, 1931-32, 20.

⁹Steckle, M. L.—"Intelligence and birth order in family." *J. Soc. Psychol.*, 1930, 1. 327-344.

¹⁰Thurstone, L. L. & Jenkins, R. L.—"Birth order and intelligence." *J. Educ. Psychol.*, 1929, 20. 641-651.

the family may enter the picture and play some measure in the frequency of extreme ordinal position among male adult prisoners. It is to be suspected, however, that influences within the family rather than mere socio-economic level exert the greatest influence.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) A study of 300 male inmates of the Virginia State Penitentiary reveals that a significant number of the offenders come from extreme ordinal positions within the family: first born, last born, only child.

(2) White only children committed more crimes against property than against persons. Negro only children committed more crimes against persons, but the difference was not as great here.

(3) Among the Negro prisoners, only children and first and last born appear significantly more frequently than among white prisoners studied.

(4) Among the white prisoners studied, first born inmates occur significantly more frequently in crimes against property than those of the other two extreme ordinal positions.

(5) White first born prisoners occur more frequently than those of the other two extreme ordinal positions. This is in accordance with previous findings that the first born is somewhat more prone than other to behavior problems.

(6) Mental age statistics on the groups agree with those made on psychopathic children when it was found that youngest children have the lowest IQ, but do not agree with various other findings among more normal subjects that IQ increases as birth order increases. This demonstrates, in a rather unique manner, the relationship between psychopathic personality and general criminal personality.

(7) Size of family was large for all groups studied (with natural exception of only child group) and possible relationship with other factors indicated.

(8) This demonstrated relationship between extreme ordinal position and criminal behavior is most likely linked to differential reactions to unique ordinal positions within the family and its in-group.
