

1945

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### Recommended Citation

Milton Lessner, Controlling War-Time Juvenile Delinquency, 35 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 242 (1944-1945)

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# CONTROLLING WAR-TIME JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Milton Lessner

The author is a Project Services Advisor in the San Diego Federal Housing Area where his principle effort is directed toward community organization. Aware of the campaign to fix blame of delinquency totally on parents, the author exposes this falsehood, and in its place presents what he considers a more profound and critical analysis of the causes and prevention of war-time offenses.—(EDITOR.)

As the nation faces the outcome of World War II and recognizes the necessity for national unity and teamwork, grave concern is being focused upon the problem of juvenile delinquency. With unity being jeopardized as a result of youth' ambiguous place in our present struggles, juvenile delinquency becomes a national, political issue. It is essential that the energies of the people must be concentrated on winning the war. Obviously any impediments, such as the delinquencies of youth, serve to retard the progress of the war. It must be remembered that the spread of juvenile delinquency gives aid only to the enemy.

Reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, statistics gathered by local, state, and federal probation offices, and editorials in leading newspapers reveal the damaging and distracting influence juvenile delinquency is having on a nation at war.

In discussing the problems of maladjustments of youth with a lay-executive of the Boy Scouts of America it was his viewpoint that the total blame should be placed upon the parents. He was opposed to mothers employed in war production plants and accused them of neglecting their children. Despite the crippling effect it would have on war manpower he suggested that these women should remain in the home. To enforce this he proposed that the court punish the parents for any offense committed by their child. By suggesting to the scout executive that perhaps the problem was of such proportions that the community and the "city fathers" might assume some of the responsibilities, he merely retorted that this line of thinking was inextricably tied to the public ownership and "government interference" program. In contradistinction he preferred to keep the problem pigeonholed within the family unit. That he is a proponent of the school of "rugged individualism," now obsolete and ineffectual, goes without saying; but the fact remains that large sections of the press and the public favor such sentiments.

Aware of its seriousness an editor of the San Francisco Chronicle writes: "A heavy influx from many portions of the country, working in war industry with the children largely unsupervised in new surroundings, adds to the normal problem and to some extent justifies fixing blame. But it is not sufficient to blame, or to threaten to discipline parents whose children are found to be undisciplined, and dismiss the matter at that."

One cannot dismiss the subject by accusing the Boy Scout Executive of being narrowminded and superficial. On the contrary, his concepts must be analyzed and exposed as a precondition to the introduction of scientific methods applied in combating juvenile delinquency. Let us examine the facts.

To presume that juvenile delinquency is brought about only as a result of poor parent-child relationships to the exclusion of any other factors is to theorize that the family lives in a vacuum. Thus it is possible to deduce that if the fault is not with the child it must be with the parents. This oversimplified explanation may be heard by quack authorities and rumor-mongers. Fixing the blame on mothers and fathers falls utterly short because it deliberately excludes some of the most fundamental social factors which strike far beyond the parents' control of the situation and are directly or indirectly contributing to the increase of child crime.

After visiting 35 counties and consulting with 156 public officials in war production areas John P. Plover, State Supervisor of Probation in California reports: "poor housing conditions, unsatisfactory school care, and neglect of recreational facilities which naturally follow abnormal population growth . . . have been prominent factors leading to delinquency in those communities."

To cite some examples: George and Henry Q., age 11 and 13 respectively were found in a vacant house with other children by the police. They had committed some damage which finally brought them to the attention of the court. An investigation showed that the boys' step-father was in the army. The family consisting of the mother and six children occupied an old two-room frame house in the rural district. The crowded conditions in the home were not conducive to any type of play, and the lack of recreational facilities in the neighborhood prevented a normal outlet. Hence, the disparaging home conditions and the inadequate play facilities were contributing social factors over which the mother had absolutely no control.

Jimmie P., age 15, got along very well with his parents, but he was frequently absent from school without cause. His mental age was slightly below normal, and he had, more or less, reached his capacity in so far as academic work was concerned. Though he was literally "fed up" with books and theory, he rated very high in mechanical aptitude. School facilities were limited and offered little to hold his interest. When the authorities exerted pressure on the parents to force Jimmie to attend classes, he merely ran away from home.

Jesse W., age 16, was a bright adolescent who ran away from home, forged some checks, spent the money recklessly, was

involved in an automobile accident, and was finally brought to the juvenile court where a thorough investigation was made by the probation officer. It was learned that the boy's mother was a strong-willed, aggressive person who dominated her son to the extent that he was entirely dependent upon her for his decisions. Mrs. W. had stripped Jesse of any initiative until he finally rebelled by running from home. Once on his own he was at a loss to know what he should do. The above case typifies the extremely attentive and over-protective mother who never wanted her son to grow up. She disciplined him until he was the "model" boy.

Some parents are inadequate in rearing their children. This is true despite the fact that they are sincere in their effort and earnestly try to do the right thing for their children. Obviously, punishing Jesse's mother would be a worthless gesture on the part of the court.

The above are a sampling of families daily coming before the juvenile courts. Professional social workers would find these problems most familiar. Fixing the blame on parents automatically with the intent to correct the difficulties would only lead to more corruption and strain within the family. Under pressure of the authorities, parents would find it necessary to use threats and force on their children. Severe whippings and lock-ups would become justifiable measures to the parents who know of no other methods. The strain on the parent-child relationship plus the emotional wounds taking place in the child would have a critical effect on the child's development.

Enormous funds are spent yearly by public and private agencies toward the *correction* of delinquency; but comparatively little attention and money is given to the *prevention* of youths' offenses.

The public is slow to realize that once a crime is committed the child's act is symptomatic of a personality difficulty. Administering preventive measures necessitates treatment to the maladjusted child, thus diverting him from the path of delinquency. Agencies and protective societies have been established in some cities to carry on this work, but this in itself does not suffice. Possibly the greatest challenge to the public is the establishment of social and cultural practices that will abolish the very causes of juvenile delinquency. Legislators are giving the problem serious thought.

For purposes of expediency, this article will confine itself to the delinquency problem of boys between 14 and 18 years of age, categorically labelled the "critical age." Statistics on child crime show marked increase at these age levels. This is not unusual when the facts are made known.

Children want to be grown-ups. They constantly imitate and assume adult characteristics. Their basic drives toward adulthood find expression in imagination, imitation, and experimentation.

Though many in their early teen age are mentally equipped to exercise simple adult responsibilities, they are handicapped by immature physical and muscular development. They are not large and strong enough to do strenuous, manual work. However, many boys of the 14 to 18 age level have developed physically to the degree that they can perform commensurably with adults. Deprived from active participation because of state and federal legislation, adolescents must find an outlet in other directions.

Children like adults have strong feelings which reflect themselves in the type of behavior they employ. If frustrated from exercising their natural drives or inclinations, they assume the feeling that they are "different" or unacceptable to those who control adult social standards. Significantly, the frustrated boy feels that he has failed, and frequently finds his outlet in hostile feelings or acts toward, perhaps, the school, or his parents, or the police, or, even, himself. This feeling of "not belonging" is the most salient, contributing factor motivating juvenile delinquency. Methods of combatting it are varied and complex, but for the present let us analyze the feeling of "belonging."

Every child wants to be part of something. He desires to be inextricably tied-up with a group in which he plays a definite part. That group may be his family, his school, his fraternal organization, his church, or just his neighborhood buddies. He wants to feel that he is needed; further, that he can so expedite his part as to make him feel wanted and necessary to his group. He must be assured that if he should try to experiment in the form of an adventure or risk, and perhaps fail, he will not necessarily be ostracized from his group. He must know that after achieving his immediate goal he is given proper recognition by the group in the form of attention, respect, or promotion. To recapitulate on the above, there is evidence to prove that the need for adventure and recognition coupled with the need for "being wanted" when satisfied constitutes precise guarantees for the personal security of the child.

Generally speaking, the delinquent child feels insecure because in his own inimitable way he senses that he does not belong. His frustrations and hostilities make him vulnerable to unwholesome activities and influences which inevitably bring him before the juvenile court. To be explicit, let us examine a few typical cases.

Billy W., a young lad of 15 years, stole a gun and ammunition

from a farmhouse near his own home. On a subsequent date he broke into another home in his neighborhood, and took some money. Later, he entered a school building escaping with a variety of inconsequential articles that he could not possibly use. After being apprehended he could not explain his motive for stealing. When questioned, he said: "I don't know why I did it. I guess I sort of got a kick out of it."

A search into his home and school life revealed that Billy was unhappy because he received little attention both at home and in school. Though his step-father treated him "good" he still felt estranged, while his mother just took him for granted. In school his grades were below average and Billy found the competition too difficult. Because of his weak heart he could not enter into any strenuous play. The other children without any knowledge of his deficiency resented this fact. Frustrated in his efforts to succeed through normal channels Billy resorted to delinquent patterns. Stealing without being caught signified achievement and success. In his own estimation he was clever and outstanding because of his thievery. His thirst for recognition and adventure was satisfied by his achievement in overcoming the risk of being apprehended, and his ability in gaining the loot. Some of his "pals" were aware of his activities, and apparently admired him as "a kid with guts."

In view of his unstable status at home and in school Billy unknowingly felt insecure. Unable to compete with boys of his age he found himself discredited and ostracized by them. Deflated by the fact that he was not wanted, Billy endeavored to do something unusual and exceptional, so that by his achievements he would be adequately compensated, hence, his delinquent activities.

John J., 16 years old, was a chronic truant in school, and beyond the control of his parents. Regretful because of his own lack of education John's father tried to force the boy to attend school, but finally lost patience and applied to the authorities for assistance.

John was a heavy-set, strong, young man who displayed superior mechanical aptitude but was decidedly dull in academic subjects. He failed in all his courses with the exception of those requiring manual dexterity. To attend school full time was turning out to be most discouraging and humiliating to John because of his incessant failures. While his classmates succeeded in their schoolwork, John had become distraught with failures until the gap between them widened to the degree that John felt he no longer belonged.

Jesse B., a 16-year-old Negro boy, was brought before the court for frequent fights and disorder on the schoolgrounds. He

was also apprehended by the police for working late at night shining shoes in a bar. He also had a long record of truancy in school. Scholastically he had failed in practically all his subjects despite the fact that he has a superior rating in intelligence. When interviewed, Jesse professed that he hated school because the "white kids" always teased and provoked him. When Jesse attended junior high school he was well accepted by the children, but his promotion to senior high school resulted in his being an unfortunate victim of racial prejudice. Suffice it to say, Jesse felt unwanted. His feeling of not belonging to the school group was evidenced by his defiance, pugnacity, and continued absence from school.

Martin F., a lame, underweight, emaciated-looking young man of 17 years was apprehended for auto theft. During the past two years he established a long juvenile court record of car thefts. It appeared that he could not resist the temptation of stealing automobiles for short rides around the town. Martin was hungry for companionship, but the children in school and in his neighborhood avoided him. Presumably his lameness and his repulsive appearance were responsible for this unfortunate relationship. As a result he became shy, taciturn, inwardly hostile, and entertained strong feelings of inferiority.

Martin F. was intrigued by automobiles. Behind the wheel he felt the power of the car under his control. Inspired by his ability to command the car was a source of enormous personal satisfaction. This single achievement compensated for many of his deficiencies in other lines. Elevated by a sense of importance as the pilot Jesse felt equal to those who shunned him.

The above cases categorically illustrate that each adolescent was suffering from "feelings of not belonging." The boys typify thousands of minors brought before the juvenile court each year.

Assuming for purposes of expediency that juvenile delinquency has increased noticeably during war times, it becomes essential to pry into the reasons underlying this condition.

Generally the sphere of interest of children during peace times was focussed on the family, the school, the neighborhood, and the home town. Their interests were emphatically localized and inclined to be provincial. War has extended this sphere of interests to the nation at large, and its relationship to other nations. The transfer of "Main Street" consciousness to "one world" thinking may be accounted for by the following reasons: members of the family entering the armed forces, regrouping of populations to meet war industrial needs, and the change of women's status as active participants in the war effort. These immediate and spontaneous changes have left children with a feeling of insecurity, instability, and bewilderment. Their diffi-

culties in adjusting to such changes have been intensified by the fact that they were *not included as a vital auxiliary in the war effort.*

Some progress has been made toward overcoming this situation. In San Diego, California the 11th Naval District has established an apprentice course for boys between the ages of 16 and 17½ years. These young men are employed forty-four hours each week on the assembly and repair of airships, and are required to study 4 hours each week under supervision in the plant with pay. The advantages listed by a naval officer are: 1. the course provides minors an opportunity to learn a trade; 2. absenteeism is discouraged on the principle that absence from the course means loss in pay; 3. it provides an incentive to advance; 4. it gives the boys the *feeling that they are directly connected with the war effort.*

The Boy Scouts of America, the Girl Scouts of America, and the Camp Fire Girls are among those youth organizations who have established a program based on war service. They gather tin, paper, and other war-essential products as well as roll bandages, knit, etc.

A Junior Fire Marshals club was recently organized by the San Diego Bureau of Fire Prevention. The youthful members are taught to be vigilant and report any potential fire hazards to the authorities.

Adolescent members of the above described organizations are doing a genuine war service. They feel very much needed and "wanted" by virtue of their part in the war effort. By directing their energies toward helping the nation win the war, they are made to feel secure. It is obviously true that their endeavors will satisfy a need for achievement, adventure, and recognition, and further, give them a "sense of belonging" to "Uncle Sam."

This, briefly, is the broad blueprint which must be flexibly applied to meet the ever-growing problem of juvenile delinquency in war times. It is essentially a community problem and demands community thinking and action. Youth must be organized on a program based on war service so that they can assume the role of junior citizens. Any serious-minded student of social problems would concur that the fullest application of the Four Freedoms translated in terms comprehensible and workable to teen-agers is the solution.

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