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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Mental Deficiency, Psychopathy, and Delinquency

J. E. Wallace Wallin (Guest Editor)

Since 1932 Dr. Wallin, our Guest Editor, has been Director of the Division of Special Education and Mental Hygiene in the State Department of Public Instruction, Wilmington, Delaware. He is a well known psychologist. His numerous books and published articles are for the most part within the area that is covered by the phrases "mental deviation" and "mental hygiene" with particular reference to younger folk. He is in considerable demand as a lecturer, director of forums and of psycho-educational investigations.—EDITOR.

Question 1: Is feeble-mindedness the tap root of crime and delinquency?

Answer:

During the early part of the second decade of the century feeble-mindedness was considered by many as the tap root of almost all of our social ills: poverty, vagabondage, prostitution, inebriety, delinquency, crime, and recidivism. This conclusion was, in the main, based upon the concept of the high grade moron as a feeble-minded person with an intelligence level of from ten to twelve years as determined by the Binet scale (which was a very imperfect instrument in the higher ages at that time). The following percentages of feeble-mindedness among various groups are typical of these highly exaggerated findings: 68.8% for white and 90.2% for colored convicts in the Kansas State Prison; 70% for white and colored criminals in Virginia; 68.2% for prostitutes in Chicago; 58% ("a moderate estimate") for inmates in the Girls' Reformatory in Ohio; 84.5% for boys in the Boys' Courts in Chicago; and 66% ("distinctly feeble-minded") for children in the Newark, New Jersey, detention home.

With the passing years, the findings have grown more and more conservative, as shown by the following median percentages of feeble-mindedness among juvenile delinquents based on many investigations (as compiled by E. H. Sutherland): for the period 1910-1914, 51%; for 1915-1919, 28%; for 1920-1924, 21%; for 1925-1928, 20%.

Question 2: Do these figures indicate that delinquency is becoming less prevalent among the feeble-minded than formerly?

Answer:

A part of the decline may have followed as a by-product of the improved training of mental defectives at large in society, of an improvement in the social milieu of some crime-breeding geographical areas, and of the colonization of a larger ratio of mental defectives. But the main causes for the decline are the greater caution displayed by examiners in the diagnosis of feeble-mindedness upon the basis of clinical test results, the more critical standards of diagnosis of feeble-mindedness now in vogue, and the keener appreciation of the role of various exogenous or environmental factors in the production of delinquent and criminalistic behavior.

Question 3: Do these findings justify the conclusion that there is no relation between low mentality and behavior disorders or criminality?

Answer:

By no means. More recent studies justify the conclusion that delinquency among children of low intelligence level is four or five times as high as among those of higher intelligence and that the average I.Q.'s of malbehavior or delinquent juveniles fall in the low 80's (an average of 82 at the Chicago Montiflore School for truant and delinquent boys; a peak of 85 in Detroit). My St. Louis findings many years ago, based on 2,774 consecutive school cases—mostly referred because of mental retardation, that the average Binet age was higher for the delinquents than for the non-delinquents, justified the conclusion that it is the dull backward child rather than the feeble-minded child who creates the problems of discipline in the schools and who is more aggressively criminalistically inclined and that feeble-mindedness is not a prime cause of delinquency or criminality. The vast majority of the feeble-minded are not outspokenly or aggressively criminalistic. But many drift into crime primarily because of lack of proper training, inadequate support or protection, defective powers of control or inhibition, temperamental instability, lack of moral insight, lack of foresight or capacity to envisage distant motives, overcredulity, imitativeness, or high suggestibility. They can easily be led astray or be victimized by the unscrupulous and more intelligent evil designers in the community. They are often the guileless victims of a bad society. Subnormality in general often becomes an important factor of antisocial conduct because of its frequent correlates: the low intelligence, limited schooling, illiteracy, marginal economic condition, indifference, and inefficient discipline of the parents; the crime-producing environment in which they reside; school retardation and dissatisfaction, etc. Investigation shows that about 95% of mental defectives and 85% of delinquents come from the three lowest economic groups as determined by the Minnesota Scale for Occupational Classification.

Question 4: Are we to infer from these conclusions that criminalistic tendencies are non-existent among the mentally defective?

Answer:

Definitely not. Some of the feeble-minded of moron and imbecile grades are conspicuously lacking in the power of inhibition or control, are highly irresponsible, and aggressively criminalistically inclined. Some of the feeble-minded possess a genius for mischief-making and unless properly controlled, may become consummate plotters in spite of their lack of intelligence.

But the outspokenly criminalistically inclined mental defectives constitute the exception rather than the rule.

Question 5: What about the statement that "all feeble-minded persons are potential criminals?"

Answer:

It is evident from what has been said that the answer is in the negative. This is another patent exaggeration. Perhaps all persons, normal as well as subnormal, may become criminalistically

inclined if the provocation is sufficiently exasperating. While the feeble-minded as a group are more easily led into antisocial conduct than the normal, some are actually less potentially criminalistic than normal persons. Some cuffed, beaten, or abused idiots and imbeciles will make far less effort to defend themselves or to retaliate by aggressive reactions than will normal children when subjected to the same provocations. Some mental defectives rate lower on the scale of potential criminality than do many normals.

Question 6: What is the relation of psychopathy to conduct disorders and criminality?

Answer:

This is an ill-defined category that became very popular toward the close of the century's second decade when it was discovered that the army of delinquents and criminals who had been classified as middle and high morons were, after all, of borderline and dull normal mentality, no more intellectually retarded than millions of law-abiding and self-determining citizens at large in society. It then became customary to classify many of these so-called morons and some others as "psychopaths." The assumption made by many diagnosticians was that these delinquents were neither outspokenly psychotic nor outspokenly mentally defective, but that they constituted a large, ill-defined borderland group between these categories whose chief characteristics were emotional and temperamental instability, moral obtuseness, and delinquent or criminal behavior.

That emotional and temperamental defectives exist admits of little doubt; but that much is gained by the application of a label such as psychopathy, which is not a definite nosological entity, may well be questioned. The application of labels, even when they are definite and precise, is, after all, merely the first step in any adjustment program and means little without effective measures of treatment and control.

Question 7: What is the relation between personality maladjustments and conduct disorders?

Answer:

Many conduct disorders are merely symptoms of personality distortions. They represent efforts to overcome, suppress, conceal, evade, escape from, disguise, or compensate for feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, bitterness, resentment, inadequacy, insecurity, or failure to win recognition or success in studies, play activities, occupational pursuits, or social relationships.

The application of sound methods of child rearing and of the principles of mental hygiene, especially in their positive and preventive aspects, in the nurture, training and treatment of children in the homes, schools, churches, and community centers will remove the causes of much malbehavior. Investigations demonstrate that properly adjusted instruction, especially in efficiently conducted special classes, will prevent much juvenile truancy and delinquency, while efficient psychotherapeutic treatment will remedy delinquent tendencies in many children.

Question 8: Does transfer to special classes completely eradicate truancy among mentally deficient and retarded children?

Answer:

No, not entirely. But it does result in a considerable reduction, as shown by the following quotation from two systems of special classes that have been under my administration:

"Of 787 pupils enrolled in the St. Louis Special Schools for Individual Instruction (for mentally deficient children) from September 1918 to April 1921 only 4.5% had been runaways a half a day or more (38 boys and 4 girls). Five boys were responsible for 71% of the total number of days of truancy (291 days out of 408). While nearly all the children responded to the special-class regime, a few continued to be 'bad customers,' one having absconded 113 days and another 65 days during this period. Confirmatory evidence of the holding power of the special classes came from a survey conducted at that time under the auspices of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene of the city industrial (residential) school for delinquent boys. Although the examining psychiatrist reported that the large majority of the 186 boys were mentally retarded, only four of them had been in the special classes. The other retardates came from the regular grades where, apparently, the instruction was not adapted to their interests or capacities. In a day class for truant boys taught by an understanding man, the percentage of attendance for several years averaged in the nineties.

In Wilmington, Delaware, in the school year 1935-36 only 3.7% of the enrollees in the special and opportunity classes for the mentally deficient and retarded were truant one-half day or more, eight boys and one girl (of whom four were colored). Two of the boys (both colored) were responsible for 86% of the total days of absenteeism. The girl (colored), admitted to a special class at the age of 11-3, Binet I.Q. 68, attended the regular grades very irregularly prior to her admission to the special class. In fact, she finally refused to attend at all. But she was perfectly willing to attend the special class although she was an occasional runaway, being absent 8 days out of 92 during the year 1935-36. In February, 1937, however, at the age of 14-7, she was transferred by the principal, unbeknown to the department head, to the sixth grade in the belief that contact with normal children would prove beneficial. The transfer proved disastrous because she immediately reverted to her former habits of truancy. She was absent 22 out of 27 days before her nomadism brought her into conflict with the law, resulting in her commitment to the girls' industrial school on the charge of thievery."

Question 9: Has the present social upheaval produced by World War II increased truancy among these special-class children?

Answer:

Not among special-class pupils in the small schools in Delaware; but there has been some increase among Wilmington special-class pupils, as indicated by the following quotations from my annual reports on the incidence of truancy and delinquency among these children:

From the 1942-43 report: In Wilmington "the percentage of truancy this year was 5.5% in the special and opportunity classes

compared with 3.7% in 1935-36, although only two teachers in these classes reported that the condition was worse this year than before. Truancy was far worse in the prevocational classes for the older retardates than in the opportunity and special classes for the younger children, 18.8% vs. 5.5%. Nine girls (all in the prevocational classes except one) had played hookey as compared with 46 boys. Three teachers reported that the truancy situation was worse, four no worse, two better, while five did not answer the question.

Thirty-six boys and nine girls were reported as having been guilty of some form of delinquency during the year. Ten and six-tenths per cent of these were in the special and opportunity classes and 9.6% in the prevocational classes. The proportion of boys involved was about twice as large as the proportion of girls. The incidence of delinquency was probably heightened this year, although only one teacher reported that this was so. Comparable data are not available for previous years."

From the 1943-44 report: "On the whole, no alarming wartime behavior problems seem to exist among the retarded children in the rural schools of the state." In all except one or two of these schools the conditions were as good as during normal times or even better. In Wilmington the truancy conditions also showed an improvement. In the special and opportunity classes 1.7% of the boys and none of the girls were truant as compared with 7.0% for boys and 1.7% for girls last year. In the Bayard prevocational (for boys) 6.1% of the boys were truant this year as compared with 35.9% last year." (One school with most of the prevocational classes failed to submit the report this year).