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JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND HOUSING IN A SMALL CITY

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On the whole, sociologists agree that the etiology of crime is found primarily in group experience and cultural factors. This appears to be supported in an earlier study of juvenile delinquency.¹ It was pointed out then that behavior is never the result of a single factor. The simple dichotomy, heredity or environment, is a meaningless oversimplification, when one is trying to explain so complex a thing as behavior. The earlier article was a report on the number of organizations to which parents belong. It represented an attempt to discover the extent to which this factor of family association contributed to the causation of delinquency. It would appear that the lack of such membership on the part of fathers does not necessarily indicate a maladjustment to the culture in which they live, while in the case of mothers it seems to be otherwise. The hypothesis that mothers' belonging to organizations contribute to the delinquency of their children was not supported by that study. Apparently children become delinquent if the mothers do not belong to organizations.

As an extension of that study this article attempts to evaluate the significance of the physical environment of the housing accommodations in the causation of juvenile delinquency. It is immediately apparent, of course, that there is no direct causation between a lack of inside plumbing, as suggestive of poor housing, and delinquency of the children living in such a place. The important element here is that unpleasant physical surroundings may impel children to associate with delinquent children in an attempt to escape from their unpleasant homes. There can be no doubt that there is an indirect relationship between poor housing and juvenile delinquency.² It is generally assumed that the larger the city, the more significant such a factor as poor housing becomes. The present study would tend to indicate that the size of the city has nothing to do with the relative significance of poor housing in causing juvenile delinquency.

Boulder, Colorado has a population of 20,000, not including the students attending the state university in the city. The author conducted a survey of housing in that city, in conjunction with a survey of organizations in Boulder and their membership, conducted by Dr. Frederick A. Bushee, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado. The housing survey classified all the houses in Boulder according

¹ PARENT ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATION AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY. By *Gordon H. Barker*, *JOUR. OF CRIM. LAW, CRIMINOL. AND POL. SCI.*, Vol. 44, No. 2, July-August 1953.

² For an excellent statement of the importance of good housing and the effects of bad housing upon behavior, see Chapter X, pages 207-209, in HARRY ELMER BARNES AND NEGLEY K. TEETERS, *NEW HORIZONS IN CRIMINOLOGY*, Second edition, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, 1951.

to certain criteria, which were arbitrarily selected. It was assumed that the greatest number of houses would be average in every respect: size, materials used in construction, size of lot, upkeep, etc. A certain designation was given this group. Houses belonging to the well-to-do reflect the economic level of their owners in superior construction, better materials, situation on larger lots, etc. These houses received a separate designation in our study. It became clear that there was still a third group of houses that were better than the average, but were not of the same quality as the homes of the well-to-do. Still another designation was given them. The below-average houses were those without running water, or central heat or utilities. There were gradations of these below-average houses also, and different designations were given these groups. The lowest level comprised the houses that, in our opinion, the public health department should close. This housing classification information was added to the information secured about juvenile delinquency in Boulder. The isolation of this particular characteristic in the experiences of juvenile delinquents becomes important only when the frequency of this variable in the non-delinquent population is compared with it. Hence a control group of non-delinquents of the same age group of 10-17 was secured. A random sample of this group was used in comparing the delinquent group with the non-delinquent group. An evaluation of the housing of the non-delinquents was made in terms of the designations of the groups referred to above.

The observed facts in the instance of juvenile delinquents and their housing was contrasted with the expected frequency of delinquency. The overall picture appears to be that with a Chi square of 2.447 this deviation would be significant approximately 75 percent of the time, while random errors from sampling could cause an equivalent variation about 25 percent of the time. Upon examining the findings it is of interest to note that in the Upper Class Housing the expected and observed frequencies are almost identical. In the Middle Class Housing—the so-called average type of housing—it is noteworthy that delinquency is far less than anticipated. If one were to assume that the American middle class lives in middle class houses, one might conclude that the great American middle class not only establishes the mores, but also observes them with greater diligence than do either the upper or lower classes as is indicated by the relative amounts of violations of the mores in the form of delinquencies. In the Lower Class Housing the observed frequency of delinquency is greater in a significant degree than the expected frequency. Children, living in houses which are below the average, commit a disproportionate number of delinquencies.

It must be noted that the criteria for judging the housing are not standard. They pertain to a particular study made in Boulder, Colorado. Nevertheless the findings do support the conclusions which have resulted from studies of housing in relation to delinquency in large cities. Children who live in inferior houses, marked by a lack of essentials deemed necessary for decent living, tend to become delinquent in disproportionate numbers. This statement becomes significant only when one realizes that the absence of such standards enters into communal definitions, which undeniably have their effect on persons living in such houses. Definitions of status, "pleasant surroundings," "comforts" become involved. This conceivably could involve family

relationships and interaction, for some members might withdraw or become isolated from such relationships when the physical surroundings are below average. To the extent that this is done, contact with anti-social patterns and isolation from such patterns may be increased. Housing then becomes of importance for its indirect relationship with delinquency. It is one factor of many that cannot be ignored in considering juvenile delinquency. Thousands of children living in sub-standard homes never become delinquent, but a disproportionately high number do. This statement is true for small cities as well as large cities, as borne out by this study.

Those children who live in down-and-out houses and who do not become delinquent, no doubt have very strong parents. They are able to effect such family relationships and such family interactions of a positive nature that they outweigh their "negative housing." They, therefore, afford one more forceful argument for our giving intelligent and persistent effort to training young people to carry their later responsibility as parents.