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A PHENOMENON IN SEARCH OF A CAUSE

WILLIAM W. WATTENBERG AND JOHN B. MOIR

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In 1953, there was a sharp increase in the number of boys picked up for felonious or aggravated assaults by Detroit police. This serious offense involved 203 boys that year as compared to 128 in 1950, 92 in 1951, and 83 in 1952. The authors were asked by the Youth Bureau of the Detroit Police Department to try to find the reason for this abrupt upsurge of serious fighting. The Youth Bureau opened its files and offered full cooperation.¹

A number of hypotheses were promptly advanced to account for the phenomenon. Here are a few of what then appeared to be the most promising:

1. The boys who in 1943-44 were "door key children," and had been deprived of parental protection and supervision due to working mothers or fathers in service had become old enough to get into trouble. The assaults were a delayed reaction to early childhood neglect.

2. The fighting was a product of race antagonisms resulting from Negroes moving into formerly white residential neighborhoods following the Supreme Court decision on restrictive covenants.

3. The upsurge was spurious and represented merely a change in the police classification of offenses formerly listed only as simple assaults.

4. Youth was turning to violence because of the examples held out in television programs.

As a first step, the authors made a tabulation of the location of the offenses, by police precincts, and classified these by racial occupancy into three groups: predominantly white, mixed, and predominantly colored. The results of this analysis are shown in Table I.

As compared with 1952, there had been little change in the location of incidents, certainly nothing to warrant a finding that there was a serious outbreak of juvenile race wars. However, racial differentials plainly were involved. Therefore, this next

¹ The authors wish to express their appreciation to Ralph Baker, who was at the time Inspector in charge of the Youth Bureau. Patrolman Christ Kotsopodis spent hours of his own time helping with the statistical work.

TABLE I
LOCATION OF OFFENSES IN PERCENTAGES

Year	Number of Boys	Racial Composition of Precinct		
		White	Mixed	Colored
1950	128	10	38	52
1951	92	25	27	48
1952	83	18	42	40
1953	219	16	43	41

drew our attention. A series of comparisons with statistics for 1952 were made, and the following facts established:

1. In 1953, there had been an increase of 65 percent in white boys charged with felonious assault but an increase of 268 percent in Negro boys so charged. Apparently, the phenomenon we were studying tended to be concentrated among Negro youngsters.

2. There had been an increase of 41 percent in white boys charged with other (less serious) assaults and a 222 percent increase in Negro boys so charged. Apparently, the phenomenon was not merely a product of police classification of offenses. The ratios between simple and aggravated assaults had remained constant.

3. There had been a 91 percent increase in white boys picked up for carrying concealed weapons and a 182 percent increase in Negro boys so charged. Apparently, then, there was a rise in fear of assault or preparations for assault among boys. This rise was proportionately greater, as compared with assaults, among white boys. Also, the police vigilance was being directed as much toward white boys as toward Negroes.

4. There had been an overall increase of 5 percent in white boys picked up on *all* charges and a 44 percent increase in Negro boys. The rise in felonious assaults was much sharper than in other juvenile delinquency, but Negro delinquency in general had risen.

5. There had been a tremendous rise in number of girls picked up for assaults of all kinds. In 1952, these involved 10 white girls and 14 Negro girls; in 1953, 40 white girls and 100 Negro girls. The phenomenon then extended to girls.

A field investigation was made of a series of incidents. With rare exceptions it was found that the victims of the assaults were of the same race as the assailants. This much had been ascertained: our search must be diverted to locating some factor or factors which in a very short time had produced an increase in open aggression and which operated more strongly among Negroes. Of the four original hypotheses, two had been denied by data in the preliminary investigation: the rise in assaults was clearly not confined to changing neighborhoods, nor was it due to a change in classification of offenses.

The next step in the investigation was to compare the boys involved in felonious assaults with all other boys in trouble with the police. Advantage was taken of the existence of history sheets, forms filled out by Youth Bureau officers after they had interviewed each boy and visited his home. These sheets contain some fifty items of information or rating.

The history sheets of the 203 boys charged with felonious assaults were compared with those of the 3,890 other boys picked up by the police in 1953. For each item on the sheet, a tabulation was prepared and the chi-square test used to test the null hypothesis as to differences between the two groups. On this basis, statistically significant differences were found for seventeen items. These items appeared to cluster around three major factors: the assaults were largely among older boys, Negroes and gang members. The significant items follow: Boys who commit felonious assaults were:

1. more likely to be in the age group 14 to 16 than in the age group thirteen or under. (Significant at the one percent level.)
2. . . . are more likely to be repeaters or on probation. (Significant at the one percent level.)
3. . . . prefer dancing or going to amusement parks as their favorite form of entertainment. (Significant at the five percent level.)
4. . . . are more likely to have chores around the house than other boys. (Significant at the one percent level.)
5. . . . are more likely to receive money from parents in the form of pay for work around the house and less likely to receive an allowance. (Significant at the five percent level.)
6. . . . are more likely to come from families where the parents approve of dating. (Significant at the two percent level.)

The next group of items all were found linked to race in a previous study.²

The boys who commit felonious assaults:

7. . . . were mostly Negroes. (Significant at the .001 level.)
8. . . . are more likely to be Protestant. (Significant at the .001 level.)
9. . . . are more likely to be living with a single parent, stepmother and father, or grandparents. (Significant at the one percent level.)
10. . . . were more likely to live in flats or apartments than single homes. (Significant at the one percent level.)
11. . . . were more likely to come from homes whose condition could be characterized as sub-standard or in need of repairs. (Significant at the one percent level.)
12. . . . are more likely to come from neighborhoods rated as slums or below average. (Significant at the two percent level.)
13. . . . are more likely to come from families in which the parents are separated. (Significant at the .001 level.)

With one exception the remaining items all bore upon gang or group membership.

14. Boys who commit felonious assaults are more likely to belong to the Boys Club or similar groups and to participate in recreational programs (Significant at the one percent level.)
15. . . . are more likely to belong to a gang or a regular group than to be "lone wolf" offenders or members of loosely knit crowds. (Significant at the two percent level.)
16. . . . are more likely to belong to groups whose activities were rated by police officers as aggressively assaultive. (Significant at the .001 level.)

² WILLIAM W. WATTENBERG, *Factors Linked to Race among Boys in Trouble with Detroit Police*, 1948, *JOUR. OF NEGRO EDUC.*, 1954, Vol. 23, Pp. 186-189.

17. . . . are more likely to come from families in which there are no siblings. (Significant at the five percent level.)

Although this phase of the study did not verify any of the original hypotheses it did narrow somewhat the nature of what we were seeking. We now knew we were looking for a force or combination of forces resulting in group activity among older youth. The prevalence of broken homes did not seem to meet the standards set because there had been no rise sharp enough in any one year to account for the phenomenon we were investigating.

The third step was to engage in intensive interviewing of boys in detention for felonious assault. Twelve such interviews were held.

The immediate outcome was to cast doubt on the remaining two of the original hypotheses. The fathers of eleven of the twelve had not been in the armed services during World War II. The mothers of only three had worked, and all but one boy was sure there was someone at home daytimes to care for him during the war years. Incidentally, the interviews confirmed the present prevalence of broken homes; only two of the boys came from families where both parents were living in the home in 1953.

Television did not appear to be a major factor. Although all twelve interviewees had TV sets at home, their taste in programs paralleled that of the general population. Comedy was most frequently mentioned. Four of the boys liked to watch fights and five, detective stories. None acted out or attempted to live out scenes from television shows.

The interviewing produced an interesting picture of the fighting. All boys agreed there had been an increase in violence. Six attributed it to gangs, and three to a desire to show off. There seemed to be considerable antagonism to the police; all boys told of incidents in which friends had been physically abused by police officers. The boys also reported that the adults they knew were uneasy lest there be an economic depression.

As to the actual fighting, the boys interviewed agreed that a great deal took place around schools. They said that girls enjoyed watching the battles, that some boys fought to get a reputation of being tough. Another locale for fighting was at parties, which someone tried to crash. All but two of the boys habitually carried weapons. Five recalled drinking being a factor. Nine said that the fights seemed to be sudden in their outbreak; only three remembered fights that had brewed for one or more days. None recalled any inter-racial fighting. The general atmosphere was revealed by the boys' answer to the question as to what they would do if they found themselves in trouble with another gang or with a bigger boy. The unanimous answer was that they would either get a bigger boy to act as their champion or they would call out their own gang.

At this point in the investigation we found ourselves in the unhappy position of having substantially disproved all our original hypotheses. Worse than that, new ones were being destroyed as rapidly as they could be dreamed up.

A police report of action to prevent a gang fight finally provided a helpful clue. At one of the high schools attended largely by Negro students there had been a series of ominous skirmishes. A gang, whose fighting costume consisted of distinctive jackets, had precipitated fighting in the hallways. To prevent further trouble all were picked

up on a day when reports of a pitched battle at a bus-loading point were received. Interestingly, of the 29 arrested, only two were enrolled as students. The remainder had all quit school. All were unemployed.

At the time there was a slackening in production. On the hunch that finding jobs might have been more difficult for Negro youth, the matter was pursued.

A series of questions on unemployment was introduced into the interview schedule in time to be asked of ten boys. Six declared that of their friends or fellow-gang members, most were out of school. All ten made statements to the effect that "everyone" was out of work and the prospect for employment was poor. One boy said his friends had money but robbed to get it. All said that most boys they knew were short of funds and, as a result, were restless for lack of things to do.

A key question was whether or not the unemployment had struck Negro youth more heavily than white youth. A check of the police reports on boys picked up in 1952 and 1953 revealed that among the white boys 1,643 had no job of any kind in 1952, and 1,656 in 1953. Among Negro boys, total unemployment had affected 902 in 1952 and 1,321 in 1953. The chi-square test indicated the difference was significant at the .001 level. (A boy was considered unemployed if he had no full-time or part-time job, regardless of his school status.)

Here, then, was a change which met the specifications of our search. It had taken place in one year, touched older boys, and was brought to bear mostly on Negroes.

The final stage of the investigation consisted of trying to trace out the dynamics of the situation. This was complicated by the fact that the jurisdiction of the Youth Bureau of the Detroit Police Department extended only to 16-year-olds, and many of the most serious incidents involved older boys. Legal school-leaving age in Detroit is 16. Only ten percent of the boys on whom we had records of felonious assault were out of school.

However, it was possible to trace developments in a number of incidents involving groups which included youth who were technically adults as well as juveniles. In many of the gangs, the older members were unemployed, and the hunt for time-filling excitement had been a factor. In a number of incidents, the sequence of events revealed that in their eagerness for "fun" older boys had acted as instigators of fights involving younger boys.

Undoubtedly, other factors were operating and quite possibly the change in the employment situation acted more as a trigger than as the only cause. Further partial verification of our findings became apparent in 1955, when production in Detroit approached boom proportions. Police reports of gang-fighting incidents showed a large decline over previous years.