

Delinquent and Neurotic Children

CHARLES BURNS

The title of this article is also that of a recent book on the subject¹, which is a worthy attempt to evaluate certain hypotheses against an objective study of social and psychological factors. The author says: 'Our fundamental aim was to make a comparison, critical for our theoretical understanding of later social maladjustment, of the divergent routes taken in emotional development by neurotic and delinquent children, from their early years'.

There is no hard and fast distinction between the two groups, any more than there is in any category of human beings, but by trying to find the relative frequency and importance of the various factors in the two groups, it was hoped to throw into sharper relief and render more clear, those factors which are most important in the making of delinquents. The stress of the book is in the main on delinquency rather than on neurosis, as is evident from the excellent 'Historical Background' of the first chapter. It is rightly stressed, and this cannot be repeated too often, that: 'The term "delinquent" is in no way a psychiatric or diagnostic entity in the proper sense, but gives a description of certain types of behaviour in many recognizable personality types'.

The study was undertaken by the teams of the three child guidance clinics in West Sussex under the direction of Dr Bennett, who is a psychologist, originally from Australia. She gives credit to the late Dr Kate Friedlander who originated the project when she was psychiatric Director of the West Sussex child guidance service. One hundred children, fifty 'delinquent' and fifty 'neurotic', were selected out of a much larger number, and half the book is taken up with full clinical descriptions of the cases. It is not claimed that anything new or startling emerged from the research, which covered familiar ground, but it confirmed and sometimes disproved, many previous observations, assumptions and theories, and it is free from jargon and needless new terms.

If there was one main conclusion as to the conditions that go to the making of the two types of disorder it would be that neurotic children

¹*Delinquent and Neurotic Children*, by Ivy Bennett; Tavistock Publications; 45s.

come from 'stable' homes and delinquents from 'broken' ones; but, of course, this statement would be open to much qualification and extension. For example the word 'stable' here simply means that the parents live together without violent or marked disturbance, but there may be all sorts of psychological tensions and disharmonies in these homes, as well as faulty upbringing, which tend to produce neurosis. The 'broken' or 'unstable' homes again are of many kinds, and there may be deeper factors which bring about the broken home and the associated delinquency as well; for example, constitutional instability in the parents.

Another important feature, noted by many observers, past and present, is that inconsistent discipline, i.e., gross frustration alternating with gross gratification, is very frequently found in the homes of delinquents, whereas overstrict discipline or too high a standard of behaviour is more often associated with neurosis.

It is obviously impossible in a short article to discuss other factors, of which over twenty are considered in the book under review, and evaluated statistically. It has been said above that 'delinquents' do not form a homogeneous body or category; far from it, for they are of many types and varieties. Hence it is foolish to generalize as is so often done, as to what should be done with them or about them. Some of the non-experts will say that all they need is punishment, and corporal punishment is often implied; some of the experts claim that all they need is treatment, but the sensible experts would mostly agree that some need punishment, some are made worse by punishment and need treatment, while others need both.²

There are many possible ways of classifying types of delinquents; in this book, nine different groups are described, of which the following might be mentioned here:

- (1) The dull or handicapped delinquent, often from a poor inadequate home, unable to withstand much pressure of any kind, owing to poor endowment from birth.
- (2) The more 'normal' type who have lacked sufficient outlets and have had inadequate training in social behaviour. We might add also those who are out for a bit of fun and excitement.
- (3) The 'deprived' delinquents who have lacked adequate home life;

²I need hardly say that this is not a matter for 'experts' in sociology or psychology only. The question of human responsibility, of restitution by acceptance of punishment, and so on, are of tremendous importance. Experts in Ethics and in Law must play a part, and indeed so must an educated 'laity'.

who have been grossly neglected or rejected, or been reared in unsatisfactory Institutions. Shading off from these are the so-called psychopathic types. Much will be heard of the latter in future, since the new Mental Health Act has created a category of these, and envisages special provision for their treatment.

(4) The neurotic delinquents, which is itself a vague group containing various sub-divisions. Though not a large percentage of delinquents in general, they form an important category because they are not influenced fundamentally by environmental treatment, and may be made worse by punishment.

The study of juvenile delinquency in general has now a long and respectable lineage going back for half a century. Healy, a psychiatrist in America, started his work in connection with the Juvenile Court in Boston as far back as 1909, and published his first study, *The Individual Delinquent*, in 1915. This was followed by others, with his colleague Augusta Bronner, up to 1936. Burt produced his now classic book, *The Young Delinquent*, in 1925, with a fourth edition appearing in 1944. The Gluecks gave us another important work in 1950, *Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency*. These are only the best known works in the English language; many other books and papers in other tongues could be found. And yet we are constantly being told that we know little about the subject and that much further research is necessary. Such for example is the impression given in a recent book by Lord Longford, *The Causes of Crime*, and in the animadversions so pungently expressed in Lady Wootton's *Social Science and Social Pathology*. It is now the tendency to become as objective as possible, and to validate the results of questionnaires, inventories of multi-factors, test results, and so on, by Chi-squaring and other statistical methods. This critical attitude and refinement of methods is no doubt all to the good, because we can never plumb human behaviour to the depths; nevertheless, I at least would maintain that we do know a lot about the subject. At least there is no excuse for ignorance, and for the kind of statements that are constantly being made by all and sundry in the Press and elsewhere. There is also too much repetition of opinions and facts which have already been churned over at innumerable conferences and congresses.

There took place last summer in London a large congress on the subject, sponsored by United Nations, which to many appeared as a microcosm of national and ideological differences and disagreements rather than anything else; this may be rather too cynical a view, and no doubt it had its uses: any international exchange of views may bring a

little more knowledge, a little more understanding. The remarks of the genial Secretary of the International Union for Child Welfare, Mr Mulock Hower, writing in their News Letter, are worth quoting (he ought to know because he runs most excellent institutions for delinquents of both sexes in Holland, which I had the pleasure of visiting once):

Reading the reports and hearing what was said at the discussion in London, one feels inclined to say: not very much news from the West, nor from the East. How many times has it been said before that we need more insight into the causes, into how to prevent and how to treat, and therefore more research and more reliable comparable figures?

How much has not been written about the biological, sociological and psychological aspects of juvenile delinquency? Sure, we are living in a rapidly changing world, and family life is without doubt disintegrating. Who does not know this? We realize too that the high-income countries have different problems in regard to juvenile delinquency than the low-income ones. Again and again we are told what the effects are in our field of urbanization, industrialization and migration, and how harmful the commercialized entertainment industry is for growing children, and how they ought to be protected against the poisonous influence of sex, violence and crime films, garbage literature, and how the wrong use of mass media such as press, radio and T.V. contradict the moral values and standards of society.

Sure, we know all this, and we know too that we have to establish or increase family counselling services, crèches, nursery schools, playgrounds, clubs, vocational guidance bureaux, child guidance clinics, special police brigades, observation centres, detention homes, residential treatment homes, juvenile and family courts, parole services, after-care, and above all the training of personnel. We know we should make more follow-up studies, and so on.

The song is so well-known that we ought to make a record of it and play it before the start of every conference in the field of juvenile delinquency, so as to avoid senseless repetition and the producing of 'new' recommendations which are in fact never new but often as stale as yesterday's loaf.

The last White House Conference reported clearly what is lacking and what ought to be done. In London, the Lord Chancellor in his opening speech stressed what the shortcomings are in the United Kingdom and what plans should accordingly be realized. That is what we should do—realize these plans—instead of getting into a panic about the increase in juvenile delinquency.

It is not the juvenile delinquents who worry me, but the adults. Society does not give enough attention to Problem No. 1, which is education and how to improve it; nor to Problem No. 2, which is the steps that should be taken in the fields of prevention and treatment.

In the report prepared by the Secretariat of the United Nations, it is stated: 'At present, opinion is growing in a variety of quarters, that, if juvenile delinquency is to be reduced, discipline, moral values and social responsibility should be stressed in every society more particularly among juveniles'. I think the adults should first set the example.

To the last sentiment one can accord a hearty hear hear. For one thing in this country the housing situation is a blot and a disgrace. I cannot but believe that if 'Operation Housing' were forced on the Government and Local Authorities by public outcry, the problem could be solved in a quarter of the time allotted. The bulge in young delinquents is to a large extent due to the fact that the children of delinquent age now are those who suffered the greatest disturbance from the war years when they were round four and five years old. This is fairly conclusively shown in a recent Government publication, *Delinquent Generations*, a Home Office Research Unit Report, prepared by Leslie T. Wilkins. It also points to the importance of the active presence of a reliable and adequate father in preventing delinquency; this, though seemingly obvious, has been rather neglected as an important factor, but has recently received confirmation in Andry's careful study, *Delinquency and Parental Pathology*. Many of these children have suffered from gross overcrowding and lack of playing facilities as well; and yet we are so shocked by their behaviour.

The most deprived or handicapped, and the psychopathic type (who are probably the most handicapped of all) are the ones who form the great bulk of cases in Approved Schools and Borstals. Although these institutions are no longer the rigid, regimented, loveless places that they once tended to be (though there are still some black spots), nobody can be quite satisfied with their results. They are hampered by their numbers, by the poor material that they get, and most perhaps by the difficulty of giving individual attention to the children. Among the ones that have to be sent away from home by the Courts there are a certain proportion for whom Approved Schools are not suitable because they are too disturbed, too neurotic, or just too depressed and unhappy—particularly those who have been cast off by their parents. There are also the great numbers who have been orphaned by war, their homes destroyed, and who have wandered in gangs in the big towns of Europe.

For these there have sprung up special types of schools, colonies and 'boys' towns' started by devoted and inspired individuals in all countries. We must not forget that the originator and exemplar of these was

St John Bosco, who was apparently unique in his time, and has left the Order of Salesians to carry on his work. The work of Fr Borelli in Naples is inspired by exactly the same ideals and methods: St John Bosco's boys were also 'Scugnizzi'. Then we had Fr Flanagan's Boys' Town in the U.S.A. and his memorable remark: 'Crime and happiness are like oil and water: they don't mix'.

In the year 1936, there appeared two books of some importance describing the experience and methods of two different men: one was *The Road to Life* by A. Makarenko who did remarkable work with the 'lost boys' of the Russian revolution, and the other by A. Aichhorn, translated into English with the title *Wayward Youth*. The methods of each were based apparently on quite different foundations, Aichhorn being trained in the ways of psychoanalysis, and Makarenko working on horse-sense and personality. Then in this country, there is David Wills, who has run three different establishments, and has written three books about his work in each. Almost at the same time as his recent book, *Throw away thy Rod* (he does not agree with Solomon's unfortunate remark!) there has appeared another book by F. G. Lennhoff entitled *Exceptional Children*. The latter, though trained in Berlin, speaking imperfect English, and employing mostly Swiss girls as helpers, yet manages to make contact and get excellent results with English boys. (Having acted as visiting psychiatrist to both the above establishments, I speak from personal knowledge of their integrity and their results.)

What is it, one may well ask, that these workers of widely differing nationalities, temperaments and beliefs have in common? Dr Bennett, in her first chapter suggests one answer (she is actually speaking of Makarenko): 'The basis for success lay in his profound belief in all types of children and individuals; in his provision of a relationship of tolerant and infallible friendship, and of a model or ego-ideal commanding respect from the whole group'. They also had, in different ways, a faculty for exploiting an emotional situation, to overcome the child's defences and elicit a response. They made use of the 'moment of surprise', one might say: of the 'moment of truth'.

Such individuals are very few, but their experience and inspiration can be handed on, and certain principles emerge, which gradually filter down, if all too slowly in some quarters.