

Youngsters in Trouble

PHILIP B. GILLIAM

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY is not a new problem in this country. It is with us at all times both in peace and in war, in depression and in good times.

What is new perhaps is the added interest on the part of the public regarding this subject. Never before has there been so much discussion and widespread interest. Newspapers throughout the country have played up the reported and expected increase in juvenile crime and delinquency. Radio, magazines, and other publications have made feature articles out of it. In all of this national awakening to the juvenile problem the cry is not punishment but justice for the child.

Reports from over the country indicate a slight increase in juvenile delinquency but not nearly as much as one would be led to believe reading the news articles. In many cities the number of cases handled by the Juvenile Courts are less than during the depression years and the years immediately following. However, there is a marked increase in

the number of girls' cases handled in the courts.

There are many causes for the increase in delinquency. Were it not for the fact that many agencies are working to combat it we could expect it to become the number-one problem on the home front. The adjacent war industries and camps, the corresponding increase in population with its resulting housing problem, all contribute to increased delinquency. Mothers employed in industry with the resulting loss of home supervision and fathers entering the armed services or away from home on war work tend to make the home insecure for the child. Thus delinquency may be his answer to this adjustment.

The breaking down of home supervision partially explains the increase in complaints filed in the courts. This is verified by the rising number of complaints entered by parents themselves, regarding their ungovernable child, runaways, and sex delinquents. The broken home presents one of the greatest difficulties in dealing with the problem of youth delinquency. No satisfactory substitute has ever been found for a good home. It is still the center of our social order. There is, therefore, still much to be done in the field of training young people how to be worthwhile parents. Parenthood should be looked upon as the greatest of professions and not as an accident due to a biological urge.

To combat juvenile delinquency, we would be wise to pool the knowledge and experience of all groups concerned with the problem. In this article Philip B. Gilliam, Juvenile Court Judge of Denver, Colo., whose writing reflects a sane and understanding interpretation of young people's problems, talks with teachers about what he has learned of children and youth through his court-room experiences.

The glamour of the soldier and sailor coupled with the lack of home restraint has caused an increase in the delinquency of girls, especially regarding sex offenses. The shifting about of families from place to place and the resulting loss of proved companions account for part of the juvenile problems. The influx of large numbers of families from rural areas to the cities creates problems of adjustment for the children who must adapt themselves to urban ways and conditions. The employment of a greater number of young people at high wages furnishes them more money to spend. Not being accustomed to having large sums of money, they frequently spend it for pleasure and excitement. This at times leads them into trouble.

Johnny in Juvenile Court

The lack of proper supervision is the greatest single factor contributing to juvenile maladjustment. It has been the experience of the Denver Juvenile and Family Court that better than 90 per cent of the delinquency of juveniles could have been prevented had the child had better parental supervision. This lack of supervision is due either to a "don't care attitude," ignorance or, in some cases, to a willful neglect on the part of the parents. Our greatest problem is to provide the proper supervision for the child through either the schools and related agencies or through the court and its related agencies.

The character of the cases and the attitude of the Juvenile Court toward these cases are in marked contrast to the Criminal Courts of our country. The Criminal Courts are concerned primarily with determining the guilt or innocence of an individual and have a

tendency to be satisfied with these findings without looking into the causation factors behind the case. The Juvenile Court is concerned with causes and the treatment necessary to remove or mitigate them. This court, then, resembles a clinic more than it does a court of law.

Juveniles are brought before the judge in his private chambers much the same as a patient would go before his doctor. All aspects of the case are presented to the judge by a trained probation officer. This worker spends considerable time and effort learning as much as possible about the boy or girl—about the youngster's home conditions, his school life, his neighbors, friends, companions, parents, or relatives. Any other facts that might have a bearing on the case or that might give an insight into the nature of the individual and the best solution to his particular case are carefully studied. All existing social agencies with information regarding the case are called upon to help in arriving at a just solution to the problem.

During the hearing before the judge this same probation officer acts in the capacity of the child's lawyer, being sure that all of the known facts are presented in the interest of the child. Thus the judge can more easily arrive at an equitable solution to the case. After a decision is rendered by the judge, the probation officer acts to enforce the court order.

Delinquency can no longer be looked upon as a wrongdoing that must be stopped because of its effect on society. The delinquent must be understood as a personality. We need to understand the motives at the base of his behavior:

his desire for security in the home, his sense of achievement, his social contacts, and the recognition afforded him as a personality. All these desires cry for assertion in the delinquent, as do they in the non-delinquent. When these natural yearnings fail to find a suitable outlet, they lead to dissatisfaction and delinquent behavior. If our society can find no activities to offset this unrest, the child is then left to work out a solution to his own problem. Too often he does not have inhibitions strong enough to check his delinquent impulses.

He Is Not a Born Criminal

When a child becomes delinquent and goes contrary to law, why are so many people eager to demand his incarceration? Mothers drag their children to the Juvenile Court and ask the judge to put the fear of God into them.

No child is a born criminal. But no child respects the property rights of others until he is trained to do so. Drastic punishment or sentimentality is no cure for delinquency. Young people want to grow up. As a temporary escape from insecurity and a sense of frustration, youth seeks activities that take them out of themselves. This search for security manifests itself in the continual testing of authority. Note the critical regard of youth for adults and for authority. There is a growing cynicism on the part of youth. There is also a desire to dramatize their part in the war effort and a distaste for the dull, routine home duties.

In this period of adventure and excitement many communities have failed to maintain their educational and recreational activities at a high enough

level to satisfy the increased desires of young people. They have failed to supply wholesome outlets for the natural desires and urges of youngsters so that these children have been forced to turn to delinquent behavior in an endeavor to fulfill their needs. To work with delinquents requires limitless patience, and at times it seems almost an endurance test to those so engaged.

Present Agencies Can Help Him

In combating delinquency new agencies are not necessary. The greatest help will not come from the purely recreational agencies. It will come from those centers firmly established and already functioning, such as the home, school, court, and church.

It is usually during his school days that the child's most serious delinquencies develop. The school is therefore most seriously involved in the whole problem. The fact that nearly all juvenile delinquents are of school age does not mean that the school is responsible for their delinquency. But a child's revolt against school authority and discipline may be an indication of some difficulty that is deeply rooted in his past or home environment. Truancy is often an early indication of some maladjustment in school or at home.

It is impossible to make a definite list of the factors that lead to dissatisfaction with the school. They may include such things as the physical and mental make-up of the child, parental indifference, parental ambition, and over-protection. They may also include such school factors as exaggerated academic learning and unsympathetic teacher-pupil relationships. The school must recognize the need for preventing and solving cer-

tain problems of maladjustment and delinquency. The school should provide health services available through the school physician, dentist, and nurse and a counseling service where attendance officers or visiting teachers may advise parents, teachers, and pupils, after a study of the child in his home and school surroundings.

Special classes should be organized on the basis of treatment needed rather than the offense committed. Such classes would be for those who are hard of hearing, for those with little or no sight, for the mentally handicapped, and for the mentally gifted. Counselors are needed to make adjustments in the educational programs of all pupils in order to prevent discouragement and help keep them in school. Child-guidance or behavior clinics should be a part of or available to each school.

Schools Can Give Him Security in a Complex World

The school is in an enviable position, but naturally it can never substitute for the love and security of the home. But those connected with education can play a paramount part in shaping the lives of these young individuals. The school can build up in the child a feeling of security to somewhat offset that which is lacking in the home. The teacher can foster the recognition of the

individual as a person and devise means for expressing desires so that a sense of achievement is built up in the delinquent. This may be accomplished through music, art, drama, public speaking, manual arts, handicraft, and athletics. Countless thousands of cases bear witness to the success of such undertakings. Educators through a counseling and guidance program have a wonderful opportunity to help young people adjust to life's complexities.

Many delinquents have a hearty dislike for school. Their schools have given them neither security nor freedom. They appear to the child as a place of oppression. It must be remembered that the teacher in many respects represents a foster-parent. She can work to modify the unbalanced pattern of the child's life or she can add to the distortion.

Most schools are doing a splendid job in helping prevent delinquency, as well as helping the youngster to readjust himself once he becomes delinquent. Our hope is that the schools will continue to maintain these programs. It is hoped that they will not allow the pressure of war emergency to force the abatement of any phase of the work due to the loss of trained personnel or public support. We are fighting a war to save our country for our children. Let us be careful also to save our children for our country.



I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.—Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Life on the Mississippi*.

Copyright © 1943 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.