

# Combating

## Juvenile Delinquency

### Through Schools

Several extreme proposals advocated by some for combating juvenile delinquency are examined and answered in this statement.

WITH THE rise in juvenile delinquency, the medicine men are once again prescribing their favorite panacea. For prevention and cure of delinquency, we are advised to "get tough," "go back to the woodshed," "apply the nightstick." A feature article urges, "Let's Get Tough with Delinquents." A religious personality tells his television audience that juvenile delinquency has increased in direct ratio to the decline of razor strops and woodsheds. A letter to the *New York Times* from a former official of the Department of Correction of New York City states "that the presence and application of the nightstick by police against young hoodlums will act as a deterrent to delinquency."<sup>1</sup> A metropolitan newspaper editorializes, "A stout strap vigorously used at home can often do more good than repeated summonses to adolescent courts. It can and should also be used on parents themselves when obviously needed to drive home plain parental duty."<sup>2</sup>

More sensible advice comes from Benjamin Fine, education editor of the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Editor, "Curbing Delinquency: Judicious Whack with Policeman's Nightstick Is Advocated." *New York Times*, November 25, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Benjamin Fine, *1,000,000 Delinquents*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York: World Book Company, 1955. p. 132.

*New York Times*, in *1,000,000 Delinquents*. Though Fine is fully aware of the increase in juvenile delinquency, he refuses to surrender to hysteria and adopt the woodshed panacea. His study recognizes that the average increase in juvenile delinquency cases was 45% between 1948 and 1953; more children came before the children's courts in 1953 than in any previous year (435,000); Attorney General Brownell predicted before an NEA convention recently that there was every sign that there would soon be 1,000,000 children annually in trouble serious enough to cause their arrest. Fine writes, "The [woodshed] attitude . . . at its worst and most dangerous, is emotion (in the objectionable sense), reactive rather than thoughtful. It represents the type of identity thinking that we share with the lower animals. Teen-age purse-snatcher with slip-knife-evil-crime-**FEAR-HATE!** Hit him over the head! Lock him up! Punish him! Don't care if we kill him! . . . The woodshed technique may be valuable or even necessary in some few instances. But to advocate it, as some do, as a general philosophy, will do considerably more harm than good. . . . There is no evidence that severe punishment of itself given to children or their parents has

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*William Van Til is chairman, Division of Curriculum and Teaching, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee.*

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*The author's first teaching assignment was in a school for delinquents, the New York State Training School for Boys.*

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any effect whatsoever in curbing juvenile delinquency. Conversely it is difficult to measure its ill effects."<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Leonard W. Mayo, chairman of the National Mid-Century Committee has pointed out that it takes more than just a strapping to cure delinquency. Corporal punishment may merely harden the delinquent in his belief that he is alone in the world and that he has been deserted. Potential and actual juvenile delinquents need understanding more than flogging.

Naturally, the advocates of the return to the woodshed are among the severest critics of modern programs of education. Their editorial spokesmen satirically deride "the bleeding hearts who say education is the answer." A favorite whipping boy is "progressive education." So it is good to hear one of America's great deans of education, Ernest O. Melby, respond: "In a democratic society, the only effective discipline in the long run is self-discipline. It was self-discipline that the progressive school sought to teach and in its best form actually did teach success-

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135, 138, 142.

fully. In some substantial degree practice in self-discipline has found its way into a large proportion of American schools and to the degree that it has been adopted it is a prevention of juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately not nearly as many schools as one might hope for have adopted such disciplinary practices. Therefore, to whatever degree education is responsible for juvenile delinquency, it is the persistence of the 'old school' with its failure to meet the needs of children that is more to blame than the adoption of the newer procedures."<sup>4</sup>

Justine Wise Polier, for two decades a justice in New York City's Domestic Relations Court, has noted an interesting similarity between the drives of the get-tough spokesmen and those who attack modern schools. "It is not surprising that those who would indulge their desire to get tough with children and punish parents are those who scorn the long and tedious process of education and are also among the vanguard of those who are attacking our schools today. In these attacks one finds the same drive to secure conformity and docility through force (sometimes euphemistically called discipline); the same drive to control from the outside; and the same lack of faith in the possibilities of education to help children and adults alike learn self control and their responsibilities and rights in a democratic society."<sup>5</sup>

The woodshed panacea is at best debatable even when conceived only as

<sup>4</sup> Ernest O. Melby, "Five Fallacies About Modern Education." *New York Times Magazine*, November 27, 1955. p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Justine Wise Polier, "The Back-to-the-Woodshed Trend." *Child Study* XXXI (Summer 1954) 3. p. 16.

an emergency measure to curb and control a slum area which has temporarily gotten out of hand. But as a national proposal for the prevention and cure of juvenile delinquency, it is tragically misguided. Juvenile delinquency is complex, multiply caused and multiply prevented. Many of society's agencies must team up to contribute to prevention and control of delinquency.

The good modern school is one among several agencies which can contribute to prevention and cure of juvenile delinquency. Actually and potentially, it is a far more effective agency than the return to the woodshed. This is no sentimental claim; instead, it is based on what we know of the nature of the delinquent.

Good schools with modern programs are needed for all children. But they are particularly needed for the present or the potential delinquent. According to research well-summarized by Kvaraceus,<sup>6</sup> the life of the delinquent is more likely than that of the non-delinquent to be characterized by:

- Living in slum areas
- Overcrowded, poorly furnished and badly kept homes
- Poverty and deprivation
- Bad home conditions
- No family recreation
- Parents less interested in his future
- Home characterized by quarrelling, rejection and indifference
- Discipline, if not completely lacking, depending heavily on physical punishment
- Less mental ability
- Ten points lower than non-delinquents on IQ scales
- Instability

<sup>6</sup> William C. Kvaraceus, *The Community and the Delinquent*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York: World Book Company, 1954. Chapter 4.

- Resentment of authority
- Emotional conflicts
- Inclination to look for adventure away from home
- Disliking school
- Lacking career plans
- Doing poorly in school
- Receiving low grades
- Failing to be promoted
- Behaving badly
- Escaping through truancy.

The delinquent reacts to his inner problems with outward aggressive behavior in a society which finds his conduct bothersome and contrary to how life should be lived.

### Good Schools and Adequate Support

There are two central questions in regard to the school's contribution to prevention and control of delinquency. "What kind of school does America need?" "Will America support the kind of school it needs?" This article will deal primarily with the first question.

How can a school help the potential or actual delinquent to live democratically as a worthy citizen?

The modern school can create an atmosphere in which democracy has a chance to thrive. This is an atmosphere of acceptance, belongingness, affection, being wanted. Delinquents definitely need such an atmosphere. Delinquents are short on acceptance and understanding. They do not find it in their homes. Too often they find it only in the anti-social behavior of their gang. They will not find it in an inadequate school where coldness, suspicion, and tension are in the very air, and where rigidity and unnecessary restrictions rule.

A modern school can build democratic citizenship through giving children a chance to take part. Youngsters learn teamwork through working in groups with others, through speaking out frankly in discussions, through taking part in extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, clubs. To help the active and adventurous delinquent, the modern school stressing participation is preferable to the inadequate school where the children sit passively while the teacher tells them exactly what to do, and exactly how to do it.

If America is to have citizens fit for a democracy, rather than personalities like the cowed slaves of Communism, America needs modern schools which work toward the self-discipline which is characteristic of the democratic man. Obviously, controls are necessary and they exist in a good modern school. But, when possible, the student takes part in setting the rules. Good schools have student councils and governments. Steadily the good teacher, like the good parent, expands the limits of freedom, the area of self-discipline. The inadequate school which struggles to keep the lid on through autocratic discipline engages in bitter eternal warfare with the increasingly rebellious delinquent.

A good modern school can contribute to democratic living through a program which develops a wide range of interests. Potential delinquents need outlets for activity, for expression, for adventure. They need to come in contact with a widening world. The inadequate school which attempts to fill all free hours of potentially delinquent youngsters with extra and increased homework rather than attempts to de-

velop self-propelling, enduring interests, is on a dead-end road.

If we are to build better school programs to contribute to the fight against delinquency, we need schools with modern programs geared to individuals.

A good modern school has a curriculum which includes varied offerings. The program includes vocational education, work experience, remedial instruction such as remedial reading. It includes twentieth century offerings like general science, general mathematics, industrial subjects, home economics, physical education and agriculture—subjects which scarcely existed in 1900. Many classes in a modern school help people to come to grips with their personal and social problems. A program of varied offerings gives the delinquent a better chance to get something out of school.

We must not forget that the typical delinquent is a slower learner than others. He needs remedial help. He also needs vocational education and work experience. But only 20% of all high school students have work experience or training for work. Eighty per cent graduate or leave school without work experience or training for work.

The formal classical curriculum of abstract bodies of knowledge has little meaning for the delinquent. Formal college entrance programs have no relationship to his life. Only 20% of all children entering school continue education beyond high school. Eighty per cent must be prepared for self-support by age 18. Two out of three high school graduates enter the labor force. Only one in three continues education. However capable the college scholars a

school produces, it is an inadequate school if it requires an inappropriate curriculum for most of its youngsters, including potential or present juvenile delinquents.

A modern school provides for the individual student abundant opportunities for guidance. Guidance comes best through both specialized guidance personnel and through classroom teachers themselves. In a good school records are kept. Systematic testing supplies background. Case studies are made. A delinquent needs somebody who will listen. If the guidance personnel also can turn to specialized services when needed, great possibilities for social betterment through the schools open up. To point out that the juvenile delinquent in particular needs guidance and allied help is to emphasize the obvious. An inadequate school, which has no guidance facilities, loses its great opportunity to help the delinquent. Experts say that one counselor is needed for every 250 pupils. But only 20% of schools in America have counselors. Of these there is only one counselor to 525 pupils. In one study, for 6½ million children there were 6,780 counselors or one counselor to a thousand children. We need four times as many counselors.

A good school does its best to see that everyone has some success in the things that an individual is able to do, rather than penalized for failing to succeed in things which by sheer biological make-up the individual is unable to do. The delinquent needs success, not endlessly repeated failure. In an inadequate school, he fails again and again. Low in ability, he is expected to read at the same rate and with equal under-

standing as the better equipped students. He becomes the conspicuous class "boob." Repeated failure contributes to drop-outs.

All too many of our children drop out before completing high school. There are now a million 14-17 year olds out of school. More than 300,000 of them are unemployed. Half of these unemployed are seeking jobs, the other half are not seeking and often are drifting. Sixty-one per cent of the children between 14 and 17 who appear in juvenile court are out of school drop-outs. The chances of court appearances are about one in four for school drop-outs and only one in 50 for those enrolled. To fight delinquency, we need more good modern schools which have holding power, not inadequate schools which lose many students through drop-outs.

The school can also acquaint all of the youngsters within its reach with the pressing social realities of their times.

Specifically, schools can develop programs of family education, helping all boys and girls to understand the problems and potentialities of the American family. Poor family living makes a great deal of difference in the creation of delinquents. Young people can study the total problems of recreation that they, today as young people and tomorrow as adults, can increasingly improve recreational opportunities for all, including potential delinquents.

Many good modern schools also help young people to look directly at their problems of personal living. They learn to understand themselves, their relationships with other boys and girls; understand racial and nationality back-

grounds; the problems of delinquency itself. This is a type of group guidance which develops greater self insight. It is a mental health program which becomes part of the regular content of the classroom.

But these activities will not be engaged in by an inadequate school which conceives its instruction to have nothing to do with the actual on-going life of a young person in society.

In answering the question, "What kind of school does America need if we are to prevent and control juvenile delinquency?" emphasis has been placed on a good school with a modern curriculum.

Obviously the school has still other contributions. For instance the school plant should be used by young and old outside of school hours. Early identification of potential delinquents and consequent handling and referral are of high importance. The development of parent education can be a great help. Above all, the school's efforts should be part of a total planned all-community attack by coordinated agencies.

"Will America support the kind of school it needs?" Who could close without pointing out the crucial importance of this question? For two

things are urgently needed: public understanding and financial support.

School men can develop the kind of modern school described here only if the people, to whom the schools belong, understand its necessity. If the citizenry demands good schools with a modern program of education to meet the challenge of delinquency, good education will prevail. If, instead, the citizenry permits or even demands inadequate practices, these will prevail with unfortunate results.

The schools cannot do their jobs without financial support. In America today we are desperately short on teachers. We are even shorter on good teachers who understand children. Our insufficient classrooms are overcrowded. Our classes are too large for individualization. We haven't space for all of the children of the American people. We now have 7½ million 14 to 17 year olds. In 1960 we will have 9½ million. In 1965 we will have 12 million. We haven't the funds to set up sufficient special services. We haven't the money to make inadequate schools into good modern schools.

Federal aid to education is among our hopes.

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