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CAUSES OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

BY OLIVE M. JONES

Public School 120, New York City

Stated simply and classified as determined by an experience of seventeen years, the causes of truancy and delinquency are:—

I IN THE SCHOOLS.

Putting unfit and unwilling children through the same training as other children; lack of sympathy on the part of teachers; lack of disciplinary power on the part of teachers; large classes and large schools, preventing proper care of the individual child (this last condition is greatly on the increase since the Great War); failure to meet racial differences by appropriate modifications of the course of study and methods of training; insufficient or improper provision for the enforcement of compulsory education laws.

II IN THE STREETS.

Lack of play space; unemployed youths and men; gangs and Fagins; moving pictures, more particularly the posters outside of moving picture theatres; cigarettes; gambling.

III IN THE HOMES.

Inefficient or indulgent parents; working mothers, the absent mother, the mother absorbed in business, the breadwinner-mother cannot train children; widowed mothers; step parents; broken or unhappy homes; parents uninterested in or ignorant of their children's rights of education and of the State's right to demand that children be educated.

IV IN SOCIAL CONDITIONS.

The "top floor back" of a big tenement for the worker, while the children play in the street! Families of five (and more) crowded into two or three rooms; dark hallways, dark corners under stairs; frequent moving, with constant changing of schools and consequent lack of steady habits. Chiefly because large groups of immigrants have been permitted to colonize and perpetuate their foreign customs and languages. Cupidity of employers who use child labor and provide temptation to children to remain out of school. The worse offenders in this respect are not large concerns but the small shopkeeper, the man who wants a package carried, the wagon driver who wants a temporary helper, etc. This is a condition greatly increased since the Great War began in 1914.

V IN CHILDHOOD NATURE.

Conditions incident to adolescence, ages nine to sixteen years; rebellion against restraint unwisely or unduly imposed; temperamental difficulties and inherited tendencies; desire for spending money. This cause was greatly increased after the war began, by the ease with which children could obtain odd jobs and the unwise amounts of money paid them in tips or wages.

VI IN PHYSICAL CONDITION.

Peculiar personal appearance which leads to ridicule, nicknames, feelings of repulsion among adults, loneliness and loss of playmates. Instances: Boy whose face was drawn up and crooked on one side while the other side was normal; boy whose hair was variegated in color, black, white, and reddish, in patches; boy who had no hair except one or two small patches; boy with large birthmark on one side of his face.

Scarcely any one realizes the torture experienced by children with a peculiar personal appearance. The lad listed as the first instance was most repulsive in appearance; he was shoved off by older people, including parents and teachers, and was tormented by other boys until he became a wild tornado of resentment. He used to carry a pocket-mirror and whenever he was unobserved he would pull at his face, trying to straighten it. His mother saw him one day, came to school, and told his teacher, a wise, kind and gentle woman. He had really very fine eyes and his teacher told him so and gradually led him to believe that his eyes would make people forget his face if he made his eyes attractive by good thoughts and good nature. But suppose that boy's trouble had not become known to that teacher!

The partially deaf child suffers worse than a totally deaf child, because he so often hears wrong and because he becomes suspicious of all sound. The child with speech defect suffers from the ridicule of his mates and the impatience manifested by adults over his inability to express himself in speech. The crippled child and the child with sight defect suffer especially from their inability to share naturally in the play of other children. The child suffering from less evident physical disorders reflects them in temper, idleness, and unwillingness to study.

VII IN MENTAL DEFECTIVENESS.

Mental deficiency or mental defectiveness is used in its commonly accepted definition of lack of intelligence, lack of ability to acquire academic knowledge, lack of ability to form judgments. I reject the pedagogically technical definition of mental defectiveness as inclusive of all sorts and forms of mental and moral abnormalities, believing that such use of the term, mental defectiveness, is contrary to common practice, is misleading to the average reader, and tends to inculcate a disregard of the necessity for training the will and the moral nature by seeming to provide a lack of responsibility in the child for his own acts.

GRADE AND INTELLIGENCE SURVEY.

A very careful survey of P. S. 120 was made during the year 1920-1921:—

To discover a quicker and more reliable means of estimating the needs of new entrants into the school than that afforded by the boy's previous grading.

To obtain with scientific accuracy the information needed to adapt the course of study to the individual peculiar needs of the delinquent and to plan suitable, useful occupations for them.

To test out scientifically the truth or error of certain conclusions regarding the problem of juvenile delinquency.

So far as conclusion can be said to be verified by a study of 180 boys, the most important is that any group of delinquent boys will be found distributed as to intelligence in about the same proportion of bright, normal, dull, as any other group of children. In other words, their delinquency is not due to lack of native ability but to a difference in intelligence, a difference in aptitude, from the book-minded child for whom alone our academic courses of study are adapted. I do not mean that the mental defective is not apt to become delinquent, but I do mean that the converse is not true. It is my firm belief after fifteen years, during which P. S. 120 has cared for over 5,000 delinquent boys, that although physical ailments and disturbances may cause delinquency, the removal of the physical cause has little or no effect unless right habits are trained and substituted for the wrong habits acquired during physical disturbance; that, although mental defectives may easily become delinquent unless kept under proper guidance, the great number of delinquents have every bit as much intelligence and ability to guide their own lives as the average human being; that by far the greatest number of delinquents suffer from emotional disturbance, improper environments, and inadequate training in inhibition and right habits, much more than from physical ills or mental defectiveness; and that truants are made by large classes and uniform courses of study, which make impossible the care of the individual child, as much, if not more, than by any other causes.

TYPES OF JUVENILE DELINQUENTS.

The next important phase of the subject of juvenile delinquency on which the average citizen needs better information is the type of child that is classified as delinquent and the acts that make a discipline problem in the regular school and make instruction impossible. I find that after all these years of prison reform and of preventive work, and in spite of scores of agencies engaged in the prevention of crime and in the education rather than the revengeful punishment of the wrongdoer, the general public still says of the delinquent: "Put him behind bars," and the general public still thinks that a delinquent boy is a thief and a delinquent girl is immoral.

He may be a thief and will surely become one if his earlier delinquencies are not overcome.

She may be immoral and she will surely join the unhappy ranks of the prostitutes if we do not check her earlier errors and wildnesses. But the great problem of those who are dealing with juvenile delinquents in our public schools is not the lad who is a thief or the girl who has committed an act of sexual immorality. There is a far more serious and difficult task, one which up to the present time has met little help from the general public. This is the task which has been undertaken, the load that is borne by children's courts, probation departments, school attendance bureaus, and teacher, and they are struggling against an antiquated, mistaken attitude on the part of the general public, while themselves only partially comprehending the great principle that the new thought, the great aim, of all persons dealing with delinquents must be prevention and reform rather than punishment, and that there must be an elimination of every element of revenge, especially when dealing with children.

The great problem of the teacher, of the attendance officer, of the probation officer, of the children's courts, of any agency at work among juvenile delinquents, is to overcome and prevent the more serious offences against society by correcting the earlier delinquencies and seemingly trivial offences which are signs of danger if rightly understood.

There are distinct types of boy who find their way in to Public School 120 because the patience of teachers or parents or both has been exhausted. These types are:—

1. The merely naughty boy. He is mischievous, possibly even malicious in his mischief. If neglected or indulged or nagged or wrongly trained he soon becomes a member of the next class.

2. The temperamentally difficult boy. This group includes the abnormally sensitive, the sullen, the obstinate, the neglected and ill-treated, the misunderstood and mismanaged, the boy with a twist in his temperament, which makes him at once unreasonable and rebellious. By far the greater proportion belongs to this type.

3. The boy with the criminal tendency, which usually takes the form of petty theft. This type includes only a comparatively small proportion of our boys, although the extreme difficulty of the problem they present and the fact that they become known to the courts and the police make them appear to be more considerable in number and importance than they really are.

4. The truant, of the "wanderlust" tendency. Usually innocent enough in the beginning, the result of some freak or impulse, this sort of truant, if unchecked, becomes at last the most difficult and dangerous of all juvenile delinquents. His wandering brings him into association with many evil men, yeggmen, freight jumpers, Fagins, all sorts of enemies to society, and the necessity to secure food and lodging during his wandering leads him into much evil-doing. The

city or school official who disparages or derides the truancy problem or the evils of truancy is himself an enemy of society and of childhood. In itself and by itself truancy is not a serious fault, but it is a danger signal. The first or second time, "playing truant" may be merely an

impulse common enough to all boys, but in New York City, in any large city, truancy means hours of wandering around city streets, subject to temptations and influences which tend to make it true beyond any disproof or denial that a truant is "a criminal in the making."

"WHO'S TO BLAME?"

BY BERTHA HAYWARD HIGGINS

"Oh, dear," said little Miss Berry, the first grade teacher, with a deep sigh, as approaching the school building on the first Monday in September she saw Mrs. White awaiting her, with a baby in the carriage, a small boy clinging to her skirts, and a girl of six or seven walking by her side.

"I didn't know there were any more little Whites."

When Miss Berry had come to Brookville the preceding year she had found in her class of forty-eight "first-graders" Ralph and Paul White, aged respectively eight and nine years. Ralph could do practically none of the first grade work and Paul very little of it, although both had been in school three years.

"What shall I do with them"? she asked the superintendent.

"Well," said he, "perhaps you had better pass them on into the second grade, and let them get what they can from contact with another teacher and another group of children.

But Miss Berry was a conscientious little woman, and moreover she had had kindergarten training and she resolved that something should be done to arouse those two dormant minds before they were "passed on."

So instead of letting them sit in the rear of the room as they had been accustomed to do in the past "looking at a book" or scribbling on a piece of paper she brought them to the front where they could see and hear well. She assigned them definite tasks in the care of the room and assisting the younger children with coats and rubbers.

She provided (from her own small salary) materials for kindergarten hand work and in so far as she could without infringing upon the rights of other children, she planned the general activities of the room, songs, games and stories with them in mind. Ten minutes each per session was all the time she felt at liberty to give them for individual work during school hours, but she took them home with her during the noon hour and visited them frequently in their own home on Saturdays.

Gradually they began to unfold, their faces grew expressive. One Monday morning both children had brought to her home-made Bartlett Looms on which were dolls' toboggan caps made from varied colored twine, and asked her to take

the work off for them.

"Why," she exclaimed, "where did you get your looms?"

"Made 'em," was the laconic reply, "made 'em out o' biscuit boxes, punched the holes with a nail."

"But how did you know how to set up your work?"

"Huh," said Ralph, "I seen you do it, didn't I?"

From this time on the improvement was rapid and by the end of the year Miss Berry was able to pass them on to the second grade ready to do good average work.

These two youngsters were "saved" because at the "eleventh hour," so to speak, they were so fortunate as to come under the tutelage of a teacher who had had kindergarten training.

But the question arises, could Miss Berry in justice to the other forty-six children, afford to give so much time and attention to these two unfortunates? Could she, in justice to herself and her mother, afford to give so much of her time and energy and even of her earnings to accomplish that which should have been done for these children three and four years earlier in a good kindergarten?

These were the questions which arose in Miss Berry's mind when she entered the school yard that Monday morning and saw two more little Whites with the same dull eyes and expressionless faces awaiting her.

And they returned to her with renewed force a half-hour later when she looked up and saw standing in the doorway two beautiful black-eyed Greek boys who had arrived in this country but a short time previous, neither of whom could speak one word of English. When she went home that night she said: "Mummy dear, there will be a kindergarten established in this town before I am a year older or my name is not Maud Berry, and what's more I am going to make a definite effort from now on to do all in my power to see that all the children in this country have the advantages of kindergarten education, even if I have to become a soap-box orator."

Fortunately this was not necessary as she wrote to the National Kindergarten Association, 8 West 40th street, New York City, for co-operation and particulars as to how to work for kindergarten extension and legislation.