

A STUDY OF DELINQUENCY

The Adolescent Criminal

A Medico-Sociological Study of 4,000 Male Adolescents. By Dr. W. Norwood East, in collaboration with Dr. Percy Stocks and H. T. P. Young. Pp. xi+327. (London: J. and A. Churchill, Ltd., 1942.) 45s.

THE inquiry carried out by Dr. East and his collaborators on Borstal boys is by far the most important official study of its subject, and appears at an opportune moment when the general public in Great Britain is much exercised over the alleged increase of delinquency among older lads. It carries forward, and in the main confirms, the earlier studies made of young delinquents of school age.

Between 1930 and 1937 nearly twenty-two thousand lads were received into Wormwood Scrubs prison, and examined in regard to fitness for detention in a Borstal institution. Of these, four thousand were made the subject of an intensive investigation. A medical officer carried out a detailed physical examination and applied tests of intelligence; and supplementary data were systematically collected from parents, police, probation officer and school. Unfortunately, as was almost inevitable, no comparable sample, drawn from the ordinary law-abiding population of the same age and the same social class, could be investigated at the same time, so as to obtain a control-group. To some extent the limitation is corrected by the possibility of comparing the conditions among those convicted for different types of crime or those committing crimes with different degrees of frequency. The causal factors observed are classified under the headings that are now usual in such investigations; and the statistical significance of the differences found has been checked throughout by the appropriate chi-squared test.

The discussion of the results obtained begins with a survey of factors popularly supposed to be 'hereditary'. A family history of crime was reported in 5 per cent of the cases: it was somewhat more frequent among those convicted of offences against property and those with more than one conviction. A family history of insanity was found in 3 per cent: such a history was found more frequently among those convicted of sex offences, but was no more frequent among those with more than one conviction than among the remainder. A family history of psycho-neurosis was found in only 2 per cent; and 'no significant result emerged from this aspect of the investigation'. So far, therefore, hereditary factors would appear to play but a minor part.

Among environmental factors, the home conditions of the delinquent proved, as usual, to be of supreme importance. The average size of the families from which these young offenders were drawn ('5 children alive including the boy himself') was appreciably larger than the average size of comparable families in the population as a whole. There was, too, a significant association between the absence of one or both parents (particularly of the father), or the departure of an older brother or sister from the home, and the commission of multiple offences against persons or property. The presence of quarrelsome relatives, and particularly of quarrelsome parents, appeared to be a not uncommon factor where the offences had been committed against persons or against discipline. Lads under lax, careless, or repressive control, and lads who had lived away from home, showed a greater tendency to repeat offences.

Owing to the limitations of the inquiry, little evidence was available on the connexion between crime and poverty. It was noted, however, that convictions for sex offences were less common among lads coming from the poorer districts. The total percentage of time spent by these lads in unemployment was not apparently any greater than that so spent by the general population of the same sex and age; but at the actual date of committing their offences a large number were temporarily unemployed. Between high earnings and multiple convictions a well-marked association was observed; and Dr. East directs attention to the paradoxical conclusion that seems to follow: "attributes which determine a lad to commit multiple offences (initiative, aggressiveness, selfishness) may sometimes favour his earning capacity".

Turning to the personal characteristics of the lads themselves, we find detailed tables for bodily defects and diseases and for physical conditions generally. But, once again, inferences are difficult to draw owing to our ignorance about the prevalence of such conditions in the general population at this age. On the whole, as Dr. East points out, his data do not confirm Dr. Goring's conclusions, namely, that "thieves and burglars are inferior in stature and weight", and that "those convicted of violence are, if anything, above the average in general physique".

The psychological aspect of the inquiry was limited mainly, though not entirely, to the investigation of definite abnormalities. Nearly 4 per cent of the lads were found to be mentally defective—a proportion far higher than would be found among the general population; and of those who had attended primary schools, scarcely one half had succeeded in reaching the highest class. Dr. East rightly concludes that "the subjects taught in the ordinary elementary school must be made to appeal to this type of scholar, if his activities are to be directed into socially useful channels; and to do this it may be necessary to go outside the ordinary curriculum". On the temperamental side he draws a suggestive distinction between the more active and the more passive type of offenders, and points out that, when it comes to treatment, the latter often requires "little more than kindly guidance", while the more aggressive criminal needs "strict custodial supervision". Adolescent instability was a well-marked feature in many of his cases; but more specific abnormalities were comparatively rare: insanity and epilepsy, less than 1 per cent each, psychoneurosis only 1.4 per cent. What are so often regarded as mental abnormalities calling for medical investigation turn out to be merely exaggerated forms of the normal emotional changes that accompany puberty. "The importance of the biological aspect is shown by the fact that during adolescence certain inborn instincts, namely, those of sex, aggression, gregariousness, acquisitiveness and self-assertiveness, become more direct and importunate"; and, as the detailed classifications show, these characteristics "seem often to determine the direction which the criminal outburst takes". The notion, still popular with medical writers, that crime is a "form of illness" Dr. East most strongly repudiates; and here every psychologist will agree with him.

Of the practical conclusions deduced from this valuable inquiry, the most important is the need for further scientific study. In particular, a "centre for criminological research" is advocated, "from which special forms of research at other penal establishments should be directed".

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