

# AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF DELINQUENTS

T. E. SHANMUGAM.

This paper considers the various social and psychological forces which generate anti-social behaviour in the adolescent. The author points out that any one of the factors considered singly is not enough to produce delinquency. "To understand these different influencing factors requires the skilled co-operation of the therapeutic psychologist, the sociologically trained social investigator and the education." Therefore with Cyril Burt he pleads for the establishment of co-operative Child Guidance Clinics which could help the Juvenile Courts in understanding the psychological factors involved.

Mr. Shanmugam is Research Fellow, Department of Psychology, University of Madras.

The aim of this research is to analyse the various sociological factors involved in delinquency. Of course, anyone who is familiar with the intricate and complex problems of delinquency will be conscious of the fact that mere statistical records are of little use; especially when one knows that the court deals with those delinquents who are apprehended and many serious offenders are outside the influence of courts or reformatory schools.

The present tendency towards the conception of delinquency is to seek primary causes of misdemeanors which are to be found in the environment. Conditions of home, the community and the neighbourhood are counted as important or responsible for the majority of cases. With this assumption in view I collected data regarding delinquents from one Senior Certified School and Borstal School in the Madras Presidency. To secure detailed information regarding the past history, age, health, *etc.*, of the delinquents, I consulted the records and supplemented these by personal interviews with the offenders themselves. The data was collected with the following points in view:

1. Age.
2. Occupation of boys at the time of admission.
3. Occupation of parents (Father's and Mother's occupation).
4. Broken home conditions.

*Age.*—Each individual during the interview was questioned about his age. His age was afterwards compared with the office records. In many cases there were discrepancies. The age the individual gave was often more than found in the records. The difference was sometimes as much as two or three years.

*The Relationship of Age to a Criminal Career.*—A child is regarded as a delinquent when his anti-social tendencies are serious enough to draw the attention of official action. There is, however, no clear-cut line of demarcation between the delinquent and the non-delinquent. But for administrative purposes, age limits are set up. In the eye of the law, a "child" is a person under 14, a "young person" between 14 and 16, a "juvenile adult" between 16 and 21, and treatment or punishment differs from stage to stage.

For a psychologist, however, these classifications appear highly artificial. "These clear-cut lines of chronological cleavage, however convenient for administrative needs, can hardly be accepted by the psychologist." For him, it is not a date in the calendar, but the actual degree of development that makes one person a child a second a juvenile and a third an adult. It is a matter of mental age rather than of chronological age. An individual of 14 or 15 may have mentality far below that of a normal child of 10 or 12; and to infer that the

<sup>1</sup>Burt, Cyril *Young Delinquent*.

former must be responsible and the latter irresponsible simply on the basis of chronological age would be absurd.

Leo Page states that there is no sudden transition from boyhood to manhood according to calendar and no abrupt change to be noticed at successive birthdays.<sup>2</sup> Some adolescents are far more precocious at 18 than many young men at 23. So, a particular delinquent of 17 may be a person for whom the atmosphere of the juvenile court for which he is eligible would not do much good. For the purely extraneous reason of age the court may to-day be forced to award a sentence of imprisonment instead of industrial training. This is surely illogical. The age of the defendant must always be one of the matters to be considered in the decision as to which institution he should be sent. But it is wrong that his chronological age should necessarily determine the class of institution and treatment, as at present is the case.

The age between twelve and thirteen is known as "Pre-adolescence." Health at this stage is ordinarily extremely good and resisting power is distinctly higher than before. The boys have voracious appetites and it has been observed that a child of twelve needs as much food as an adult who is engaged in moderate labour.<sup>3</sup> But many factors operate in preventing the individual

from securing an adequate nutrition. Among such factors should be included parental ignorance. The parents pamper the children and allow them to develop food whims and idiosyncrasies. The most important factor perhaps in the cases studied is poverty, which makes children go without adequate meals. Bad housing and poor sleeping conditions also put a great strain upon the child's mind and body.

Some years ago, it was a common belief that a criminal was an adult individual somewhat middle-aged. During the past thirty years, his age has been steadily reducing until at present it is under thirty years. This is bad; but it is worse when one studies the crime statistics and discovers hundreds of thousands of young men entering upon a career of crime while still in their teens. The reason Averill<sup>4</sup> suggests may be that a career of crime necessitates in these days of swift automobiles for pursuit and escape, a quickness of reaction, a keenness of sense-organ, and a strength and agility of muscle that are possessed typically by younger persons. The elderly or even the middle-aged crook is forced out of the game by the advance in the technique of his art and by the advance in the efficiency of police methods. "Modern crime demands of its perpetrator, coolness, daring, cleverness, coldbloodedness and precision."

#### I. SENIOR CERTIFIED SCHOOL<sup>5</sup> (113).

Age	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
No. of cases	3	8	16	16	29	19	12	5	5	-
Percentage	2.7	7.1	14.2	14.2	25.7	16.8	10.5	4.4	4.4	-

#### II. BORSTAL SCHOOL (117).

Age	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
No. of cases	6	8	27	27	26	10	9	4	-	-
Percentage	6.3	6.8	23.1	23.1	22.2	8.0	7.7	3.4	-	-

<sup>2</sup>*Crime and Community*, Faber & Faber, Ltd., London, pp. 260-283.

<sup>3</sup>Terman and Almack; *Hygiene of the School Child*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup>*Adolescence*, George Harap & Co., Ltd., p. 136.

<sup>5</sup>Senior Certified School (S.C.S.) group consists of boys between 12 and 20 years of age.

<sup>6</sup>Borstal School (B.S.) group consists of boys between 16 and 23 years of age.

The distribution curve has a significant peak at the age of 16 in the table referring to the Senior Certified School group. In the Borstal School group the distribution has a peak at the age of 18, 19 and 20. Evidently, some sort of selective factor or factors are operative in the age distribution of crime. If they are governed entirely by chance, the distribution would show a proportion of delinquents at each age almost equal to the proportion of all boys at that age in the population as a whole.

Comparable statistics are not plentiful in the literature. However Healy and Bronner<sup>7</sup> give a chart showing that they found a sudden and steep rise in the curve of delinquency for boys at the age of 13-14 years in both their Chicago and Boston figures and subsequent fall after the age of 15 in Boston figures. Their inference is that early adolescence is the time of greatest increase in juvenile crime. Dr. Fortes in his study observed a peak at the age of 13.<sup>8</sup>

German and Austrian data relevant to our enquiry are utilised by Charlotte Buhler. She cites unpublished material of Ekenburg and Hersfeld giving the percentage of children 9 years of age and over; peak occurs at 15 with a subsequent fall. Again she refers to Miller who finds that in Germany among all juvenile delinquents between 12 and 16 years of age, the highest percentage namely 33, is found between 15 and 16 years. Buhler herself has made a study of 105 delinquents wherein she has observed two peaks at the age of 12 and 15 respectively.

In Madras, the secretary of the Madras Children's Aid Society in a study of 100 young delinquents points out that most of the offences are committed by boys of 12, 13 and 14 years of age.<sup>9</sup>

At this point it is worth while to consider the theory of "negative phase." Charlotte Buhler is of the opinion that boys and girls pass through a "negative" or "anti-social" phase between 11 and 13 and therefore they are more prone to be delinquents. Gardiner Murphy<sup>10</sup> discusses at length the view about "negative phase" by citing investigations which indicate strongly environmental factors rather than "negative phase."

Dr. Fortes<sup>11</sup> is against the theory of "negative phase." His reason is that adolescence is a time of changing social roles, of contact with new stimuli, of new obligations and responsibilities of social demands which the child has never experienced. All these, coming more or less simultaneously, and to many working class boys without preparation, may well have a disorganising effect on a child's behaviour. He concludes by saying that if we accept Dr. Buhler's interpretation we are doomed to accept the "negative phase" as inevitable, and like measles, to let it have its way with as little damage to the rest of the community as possible. But all boys undergoing this transfer to a new socio-psychological role do not become delinquents. There must be additional factors of selection.

*Occupation of Boys at the Time of Admission.*—In the office records there was as a rule some reference to what each boy

<sup>7</sup>Healy, William, and Bronner, *Making and Unmaking of Criminals*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>8</sup>Fortes, "The Social Behaviour of the Child," *Handbook of Child Psychology*, Ed. by C. Murchison, 1931, pp. 415-417.

<sup>9</sup>Duraishwamy, Kokila, "A Study of 100 Cases of Juvenile Delinquents in the City of Madras," *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 1940.

<sup>10</sup>*Experimental Psychology*, pp. 329-432.

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., p. 415-417.

was engaged in before he was sent to the institution. Study in this direction is important because one of the most precarious experiences in human life is selecting an

occupation. It is largely a matter of chance today whether a young man enters a vocation which is congenial and for which he has an aptitude.

### III. OCCUPATION OF BOYS AT THE TIME OF ADMISSION

	No. of Cases 238			
	S.C.S.		B.S.	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
1. Agriculture	35	30.1	32	27.5
2. Unemployed	32	28.3	18	15.4
3. Student	16	14.2	—	—
4. Cooly (manual)	16	14.2	18	15.4
5. Assistant (Boys in big concerns)	13	11.5	12	10.4
6. Mechanic	5	4.1	9	7.7
7. Domestic servant	3	2.7	4	3.4
8. Smith	3	2.7	9	7.7
9. Painter	—	—	2	1.7
10. Petty shopkeeper	1	0.8	6	5.2
11. Skilled labour	1	0.8	3	2.6

The above table gives the occupational level of the boys at the time of admission. Agriculture is the main occupation. 30.1 per cent in the S. C. S. group and 27.5 per cent in the B. S. group are engaged in agriculture. Next in order comes unemployed; 28.3 per cent in the S. C. S. group and 15.4 per cent in the B. S. group were idling away their time. The number of boys who took to agriculture and the number unemployed put together is 58.4 per cent in the former group and 42.9 per cent in the latter group. In most parts of South India agriculture as an occupation is roughly only for four months; the rest of the year is spent in idle gossips. For young boys it is as bad as being unemployed. Those who are concerned with the care of adolescents will support the statement of W. E. H. Lecky who said: "The main object of human life is the full development of whatever powers we possess."<sup>12</sup> For want of food and for want of excitement the boys shift themselves gradually to nearby cities or railway stations and take to pilfering and pickpocketing. This indicates clearly that the majority of boys resorts to crime by force of circumstances. Healthy adolescent boys

with no proper recreational facilities and suitable jobs direct their energy towards activities which pay them quick returns and give them sufficient excitement. It was also found in the course of interviews with the individual delinquents that they took to particular professions because it was forced on them by their parents or guardians. Majority of the individuals expressed their dislike towards the jobs forced on them. Consequently they stayed away from the working places and to provide themselves with money they took to stealing, *etc.* In the Certified and Borstal Schools, some care is taken to provide jobs to suit the boys' aptitudes and tastes and they are happily adjusted to their jobs which is clearly shown by their enthusiasm and their turnout.

*Parents' Occupation.*—The occupation of the individuals and their parents afford a rough indication of the social and economic status and educational facilities of the group. The occupational level of the groups investigated is distinctively below the average for the general population. Almost all the parents are poor. Their sons remain starved, educationally retarded and socially downtrodden.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by W. McDougall in *Character and Conduct of Life*,

## IV. FATHERS' OCCUPATION AT THE TIME OF ADMISSION

Occupation	S.C.S.		B.S.	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
1. Agriculture	23	20.4	26	22.2
2. Assistant in offices and big concerns	10	8.8	14	11.9
3. Unemployed	11	9.7	14	11.9
4. Domestic servant	7	6.2	5	4.3
5. Petty shopkeeper	7	6.2	3	2.6
6. Cooly	10	8.8	5	4.3
7. Smith	13	11.5	6	5.1
8. Big shopowner	2	1.9	8	6.8
9. Mechanic	4	3.5	3	2.6
10. Skilled labour like fretwork and tailoring	4	3.5	3	2.6
11. Painting	1	0.9	1	0.9
12. Landlord	1	0.9	3	2.6
13. Reverend	—	—	1	0.9
14. Sepoy	1	0.9	—	—
15. Beggar	1	0.9	—	—
16. Father dead	20	17.7	36	30.8

Apart from the low social status, as represented by Table IV there are 9.7 per cent of the fathers unemployed in the S.C.S. group and 11.9 per cent in the B. S. group. Agriculture and unemployed put together are 30.1 per cent and 34.1 per cent respectively. Here the investigation clearly shows the reason for the parental neglect of the children and for the children taking to anti-social activities.

*Mothers' Occupation at the Time of Admission.*—The occupational status of mothers of delinquent boys *i.e.*, whether the mother is or is not engaged in gainful occupation, in addition to taking care of the

home, has been looked upon by many social workers as a factor meriting serious consideration. It has been pointed out that the necessity of mothers going out to work or placing a good deal of their attention on gainful work within the home results in a parental neglect with the consequence the anti-social tendencies in the children develop. These views are mainly based upon qualitative estimates, which are in turn largely shaped out by the impression of the social worker.

To test the validity of these assertions we have collected data and the results are presented in Table V.

## V. MOTHERS' OCCUPATION AT THE TIME OF ADMISSION

Occupation	S.C.S.		B.S.	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
1. Agriculture	14	12.4	17	10.0
2. Spinning	4	3.5	1	0.9
3. Cooly	8	7.2	2	1.7
4. Servant-maid	6	5.3	3	2.6
5. Weaving	9	7.9	5	4.3
6. Fruitseller	1	0.9	2	1.7
7. Sweetmeat shop	—	—	2	1.7
8. Staying at home	54	47.0	67	58.1
9. Dead	17	15.0	18	15.4

The perusal of the table clearly shows that the relation between occupational status of working mothers and delinquency is very slight. It may be, however, one of the contributory factors to delinquency, for

instance, a boy of low intelligence whose mother is obliged to work may get into trouble because he is both dull and does not get the necessary care and attention from his mother,

*Broken Home Conditions.*—It has been pointed out by Slawson that delinquent children frequently come from 'broken homes.'<sup>13</sup> In table No. VI 53 7 per cent of the cases only have both parents alive. Healy<sup>14</sup> reports 48 per cent and 55 per

cent respectively in the two groups he studied of parents being alive. T. M. Bridges reports 40 per cent. The table gives a number of cases where absence of father and of mother are reported.

## VI. STATE OF HOME REGARDING PARENTS

	S.C.S. (113)		B.S. (117)			
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage		
Both parents living at home	73	64.6	50	42.7		
Father Dead	{	before 12 years	12	10.6	16	13.7
		after 12 years	8	7.8	20	17.1
Mother Dead	{	before 12 years	7	6.2	13	11.1
		after 12 years	10	8.9	5	4.3
Both Dead	{	before 12 years	2	1.7	5	4.3
		after 12 years	1	0.8	8	6.8
Father remarried		3	2.7	8	6.8	

From the above table we have considerable evidence which indicates that juvenile delinquency may be closely connected with abnormal family conditions. We have here 18.4 per cent in S.C.S. group and 30.8 per cent in B. S. group who have lost their parents at the time of admission to the institution. Similarly we have 15.1 per cent and 15.4 per cent in S.C.S. and B. S. groups respectively where loss of mother is reported before and after 12 years. 2.5 per cent in the S.C.S. group and 11.1 per cent in B. S. group have lost both parents. Consequently 35.4 per cent in S.C.S. group and 57.3 per cent in B.S. group have abnormal family conditions.

Healy and Bronner<sup>15</sup> found the following frequencies of abnormal parental conditions among their delinquents. In 27 per cent of their cases, one parent was dead;

both parents were dead in 4 per cent of their cases and 16 per cent had step-parents.

Slawson<sup>16</sup> compared delinquent and non-delinquent boys and arrived at the following figures. Among delinquents studied about 32 per cent had last one parent; 3 per cent both the parents. In the non-delinquent group 15 per cent had lost one parent, 0.7 per cent both the parents and 9.1 per cent had step-mother or step-father.

Cyril Burt<sup>17</sup> states that nearly 60 per cent of his delinquent group suffered from defective family relationships. In this group 12.2 per cent had step-mothers. In his non-delinquent group he found only 2.2 per cent.

The Secretary of the Children's Aid Society,<sup>18</sup> Madras, observes that in 22 per cent of the cases of her investigation in Madras the father was dead, in 15 per cent the mother was dead and in 12 per cent both the parents were dead.

<sup>13</sup>Slawson, J., *Size of Family and Male Juvenile Delinquency*, 1925, pp. 631-640.

<sup>14</sup>Healy and Bronner, "Youthful Offender," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1916.

<sup>15</sup>*Delinquents and Criminals—Their Making and Unmaking*, Richard & Co., Badger, Boston, 1926, pp. 122-162.

<sup>16</sup>Op. cit., pp. 354-382.

<sup>17</sup>Op. cit., pp. 64-65; 93-99.

<sup>18</sup>Op. cit., pp. 48-55.

Brecknidge and Abbot<sup>19</sup> found that out of 584 individual cases studied of boys in the Cook County Juvenile Court in the year 1903-04, 43.3 per cent were found to have parents whose marital relation was abnormal, that is, parents dead or separated or divorced. In a study made by the Russei Sage Foundation, 42.9 per cent of the parents of 232 boys from New York City were found to have abnormal marital relations. William Healy found an incidence of 49.8 per cent of abnormal marital relations of parents among his 1,000 repeaters passing through the Chicago Juvenile Court.

The above findings of various authors compare favourably with our findings,

that is loss of one of the parents or both the parents plays a notable part in the incidence of delinquency. Another point also merits consideration *i.e.*, the relationship between step-motherhood and delinquents. In the relation between step-mother and step-child, there is a lack of fundamental bonds, which in turn makes the child develop a sense of insecurity—There always exists a state of emotional tension in the step-children which perhaps explodes into anti-social tendencies in them.

*Size of the Family (Siblings).*—Some investigators have pointed out that the size of the family may have relationship to delinquency.

VII. SIZE OF THE FAMILY

	S.C.S.		B.S.	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
Only child	13	11.5	9	7.6
Upto 3 siblings	54	47.8	61	52.2
Upto 5 siblings	31	27.4	31	26.6
Upto 7 siblings	10	8.9	14	11.9
Above 7	5	4.4	2	1.7

The above table which presents the size of the family along with Table V wherein we have discussed the occupational status of the parents, clearly shows the poverty-stricken state of the family of the delinquents. As Harry<sup>20</sup> points out poverty may by no means necessarily be associated with crime.

Nevertheless some of the concomitants of poverty have much to do with delinquency whose frequency depends on the conditions of life and is greatest among the lowest strata of society. Where people are badly housed, fed, clothed and educated, where they are living in an tinwholesome or immoral environment, there are many delinquents.

Sir Anderson says "there are many people of low morale, very poor, not very

intelligent or well-equipped, either physically or mentally, who under pressure of poverty, loss of employment, severe weather, sickness at home, or other unfavourable circumstance cannot or do not resist the temptation to pilfer and get convicted even many times, who yet do not belong to the criminal."<sup>21</sup>

Major Cadogen<sup>22</sup> who agrees with Cyril Burt in putting defective family relations high amongst the causes of juvenile delinquency points out as other causes poverty and overcrowding with a consequent lack of all wholesome recreations and exercise. Individual disabilities either mental or physical may not infrequently lead to the commission of offences, by making it impossible or unduly difficult for the child to take any part in lawful games and pastimes.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted from the *Delinquent Boy*, Slawson, pp. 354-382.

<sup>20</sup>*Poverty and its Vicious Circle*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup>*Criminal and Crime*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>*The Roots of Evil*, p. 268.

In any enquiry into juvenile offences, therefore, the degree of poverty or want in the home of the offender is of importance. But it is of secondary importance in comparison with knowledge of mental conditions. Such matters as relations of a child with its parents, the relationship between the parents, *etc.* how far they affect the mind must be taken into consideration. In a word, psychological factors are of supreme consequence. Of course, it is by no means easy to discover them. Child Guidance Clinics will be of great value to the courts in this work.

*Summary and Conclusion.*—Although definite ascertainment of the relative contributory strength of the various factors considered in this study of delinquents is not possible, the study reveals the direction towards which any scheme of social reform must be guided.

1. The association which we found to exist between age and criminal career is a fact which deserves serious consideration in any programme of delinquency prevention. Most of the boys studied come between the ages of 15 and 20. This is the period of adolescence and adolescence as already stated is a critical period in the life of the boys.

2. Next in importance is the occupation of boys. It is largely a matter of chance in these days that young men enter vocations which suit their aptitude. My personal contact with the boys has helped me to bring out the fact that most of the boys were unsuitable for their jobs, whilst most of them expressed their distaste for the work. No wonder, the interest one cannot have in one's job, is "directed in different channels, *e.g.*, playing truancy in school, absenting themselves from workshops or from other working places.

3. Investigation regarding parents' occupation and delinquency goes to show that almost all the boys come from poor homes, where both father and mother had to work to maintain the household. Though evidence regarding the working mother and delinquency is very slight, the fact that boys in their early childhood at least need sympathy, love and protection, which they lack when the mother is engaged in gainful occupation, should not be overlooked.

4. The broken home conditions have a demoralising effect on the individual. The fact that a boy coming from a disintegrated home is much more apt to become delinquent than one who comes from a home where harmony prevails is evidenced by our findings. The amelioration of the conditions of the 'broken home' will be an effective step towards delinquency prevention.

Lastly, the economic condition of the family of the delinquent must be taken into consideration. Though writers like J. B. Harry are of the opinion that poverty is by no means necessarily associated with crime, it should be noted that if not poverty the concomitants of poverty have much to do with delinquency and crime. When boys live in the midst of poverty one cannot expect a normal social life from them. Crowded household with small income definitely produces more delinquents.

However it should be noted that there seems to be little, if any relation between delinquency and any one of the factors singly considered. Our findings clearly illustrate how delicately balanced is the system of social and psychological forces which generate anti-social behaviour. They constitute an inter-connected hierarchy ranging from simple social conditions to complex mental make-up of the individuals.

To understand these different influencing factors requires the skilled co-operation of the therapeutic psychologist, the sociologically trained social investigator and the educationist. This has been well brought out

by Cyril Burt in the appendix to the book *Young Delinquent* where he pleads for the establishment of co-operative Child Guidance Clinics to cope with the problems of juvenile delinquency.