

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

TONIO AZZOPARDI

INTRODUCTION

It is a known fact that all over the world juvenile delinquency is on the increase. It is a scourge of which society has been forced to become aware by bitter experience. The threat which it presents to each and every member of society should serve to remind us of the importance of criminological research which is being carried out in this field. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has expressed the wish that the European Committee on Crime Problems should continue its work in the field of juvenile delinquency.

Today society is producing young people who emerge into adulthood better educated and more capable of standing on their own two feet than ever before. In this article I shall deal mainly with the casualties of the social system, but we must not forget its successes.

It is important to explain at the outset why the modern tendency in criminological research is to speak of 'factors associated with delinquency' rather than 'causes of crime'. (The words 'delinquency' and 'crime' are here used indiscriminately). The reason is that it is very difficult to establish a cause of something, especially to determine with certainty whether that cause is operating. One must keep in mind that this field deals with a social science (as opposed to a natural science), and as such does not allow of a hundred per cent certainty. A scientific experiment can be repeated at will, but the psychology of human beings is dynamic. It is possible to say that if factors, x, y, z operate on individual A, then in all probability he will resort to certain types of offences, but you cannot say beyond any doubt that if he is affected by these factors he will become a criminal. Human behaviour cannot be measured. It is possible to venture an opinion on the behaviour which is likely in a given case, but it is impossible to make particular inferences with absolute certainty. It matters greatly at what time a

factor acts, how intensely, and for how long. The relationship between the various factors in a particular case may be of the utmost significance. It is impossible to find any factor which always results in crime or which is always to be found in the criminal background. Dr. Grunhut points out that: 'the course of such studies as the ambitious concept of 'cause' have given way to the modest term of 'factor'.¹ Another eminent criminologist, Professor Leon Radzinowicz asserts: 'I am strongly convinced that the unilateral approach, the attempt to explain all crime in terms of a single theory, should be abandoned altogether with such expressions as crime causation. The most we can do is to throw light on factors or circumstances associated with various kinds of crime'.²

Therefore, since I am assuming free will and an element of mystery or at least uncertainty in human nature, I prefer not to talk of causes of crime or delinquency, but of factors associated with delinquency. Moreover, I propose to restrict myself to juvenile delinquency, though the same might also apply to adult offenders.

It is relevant to say a few words on the principle of 'multiple causation'. Dr. Grunhut comments as follows: 'A study of composite syndromes of configurations and characteristic patterns of life has more and more superseded the search for alleged single factors of crime'.³

The principle of multiple causation argues that crime, whether an act of an individual or a social mass phenomenon, is never due to any single cause, but can only be explained by a coincidence of personal and social factors. In a now-famous study 'The Young Delinquent', Cyril Burt pointed out no less than one hundred and seventy distinct conditions, every one of which was considered as conducive to delinquency.⁴ Mabel Elliott and Francis Merrill make this very interesting statement which portrays a typical combination:

'Elaborate investigations of delinquents give us conclusive evidence that there is no single predisposing factor leading inevi-

¹ Grunhut, 'The Sociological Approach to the Study of Crime' (unpublished paper), quoted in Lord Pakenham, *Causes of Crime* (1958) Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 42.

² *Ideology and Crime* (1966) Heinemann, p. 99.

³ Grunhut, *op. cit.* p. 41.

⁴ Unlike most countries, no statistics on juvenile delinquency are available for Malta; the whole matter is shrouded in an aura of secrecy. This is indeed a pity because I believe that progress in this field can only be achieved by regular detailed statistical surveys.

tably to delinquent behaviour. On the other hand, the delinquent child is generally a child handicapped not by one or two, but usually by seven or eight counts. We are safe in concluding that almost any child can overcome one or two handicaps, such as the death of one parent or poverty and poor health. However, if the child has a drunken unemployed father and an immoral mother, is mentally deficient, is taken out of school at an early age and put to work in a factory, and lives in a crowded home in a bad neighbourhood, nearly every factor in his environment may seem to militate against him'.⁵

Likewise, a history of poverty and overcrowding coupled with lowly status could produce a kind of family life which lacks effective supervision and control of children. This, in turn, could lead to the growth of gangs and other delinquent groups in search of excitement and willing to indulge in various kinds of hooliganism and other kinds of delinquent behaviour.

TWO ELEMENTS

For the sake of correctness and convenience, the factors which form the subject-matter of my article are divided into: (a) personal factors or natural endowment, and (b) environmental factors. The idea of these two elements is universally accepted. Thus, Stephen Hurwitz, a Danish criminologist writes: 'The development and the shaping of criminal behaviour are due to an interaction between inheritance (endowment) and environment. The mutual strength of the two factors ranges over all degrees from person to person and from situation to situation'.⁶ However, it should be pointed out that 'the complex interaction between person and situation hardly permits a separation of the two elements, but in trying to analyse the causes of delinquency it is a useful simplification to think of these aspects one by one'.⁷ Although criminologists agree on the existence of these two elements, there is a conflict of opinion over which element prevails: the sociologist seeks explanations of behaviour in terms of the situation in which a person is placed, while the psychologist is more interested in the variations of personality which make individuals respond differently. In a questionnaire, the Chief Police Officers (United Kingdom), with the persistent offender mainly in mind, submitted the view that 'basi-

⁵ Elliott M. and Merrill F., *Social Disorganisation*.

⁶ Hurwitz S., 'Criminology' quoted in Lord Parkenham *Causes of Crime*, p. 41.

⁷ West D.J. *The Young Offender*, (1967) Cox and Wyman, p. 51.

cally all crime is due to natural endowment'. On the other hand, the Magistrates' Association said: 'We think that criminality is the result of environment rather than heredity'.⁸

PERSONAL FACTORS

By 'personal factors' I mean the endowment with which the young delinquent begins life, including the large hereditary element. In the first place, forensic psychiatrists and legislators agree that crimes committed by youths are very often the result of their immature age and their spirit of adventure, which is common to all youths. This is an obvious factor which is self-explanatory.

Among the personal factors one can easily mark out the urge among youths to associate in cliques. These days the group scene dominates most youngsters' social lives from the age of twelve. Fortunately in Malta this urge has not yet reached the alarming proportions it has reached in some countries. Slum neighbourhoods certainly encourage juvenile gangs, which may be the breeding place of the young offender. In fact, 'the gang provides a reservoir of technical knowledge 'how to procure junk, open merchandise cars, snatch purses, fleece a storekeeper, empty slot-machines...'⁹ It instils 'attitudes of irresponsibility, independence and indifference to law'.¹⁰

When we come to analyse the types of delinquents, some may be brought back into the fold becoming law-abiding citizens, while others are lost forever, ending up as hardened criminals. Such persons are usually aggressive, arrogant and selfish, and they possess a superiority complex. Therefore, negative qualities inherent in man will often result in delinquency. It would perhaps be more correct to say that these qualities are negative if they are uncontrolled: 'I want, therefore I take,' is their motto. The average delinquent thus shows a marked indifference to the rights of others.

An interesting factor which commonly induces crime is dullness of intelligence; ironically this same factor may be preventive in its action. Thus, dullness of intelligence may induce crime by adding to that feeling of inferiority and frustration, yet without doubt this same dullness of intelligence may make an individual easier for authority to dominate; at the same time he is the type to be easily led by bad companies.

⁸ Answers to a questionnaire quoted in Lord Parkenham *Causes of Crime*, pp. 46-47.

⁹ Thrasher F.M., *The Gang* (1927) Chicago University Press.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Finally, psychologists tell us that children who are wayward, bad-tempered, lacking in self-discipline, untruthful and lazy *might* also end up as delinquents. However, in these cases there is only the possibility.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

We now come to the second type of factors – environmental factors. Many of our young delinquents are really victims of circumstances rather than there being in them an extra measure of criminal inclination. This theory was first advocated by Bernard Shaw who said that evil is the product of circumstances, especially the circumstance of poverty. It is not altogether unreasonable to say that poverty is the main factor associated with delinquency, since it breeds crime. As John Barron Mays writes: 'Criminal statistics suggest that crime is closely associated with lower-class neighbourhoods. It has a strong subcultural basis and is a reaction on the part of depressed groups against social and economic frustrations imposed on them by more successful and more powerful classes'.¹¹

All this explains why theft seems to be the most common form of juvenile offence in Malta. Certain poor families live together as a community in slum areas without any opportunity to encounter persons who can improve their character. In such surroundings it is not surprising that we should find a number of habitual delinquents.

Delinquency can also be seen as a result of lack of opportunities.¹² The only sensible way of prevention is then to give opportunities to the deprived youths. But to accomplish this in a slum area means of course that major social changes have to be undertaken. The New York Project submits that the solution lies in 'expanding opportunities for conformity for young people in the lower strata of society'.¹³

Very often the factor of poverty is accompanied by that of unemployment. Temporary unemployment, and hence temporary shortage of the cash needed to maintain an accustomed style of life, increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour. In a survey of four thousand borstal youths, Norwood East found that at the actual times when their last offences were committed, the incidence of

¹¹ Mays J.B., *Crime and its treatment* (1970) Longman, p.130. The same view is also shared by Barbara Wootton.

¹² This is the approach followed by Ohlin and Cloward in *Delinquency and Opportunity* and a New York study called *Mobilization for Youth*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

unemployment was very high.¹⁴ The clear inference was that these young men were much more prone to commit offences during periods of unemployment than at other times.

Many youths consider weekly visits to the cinema, dances, drinking and smoking as a necessity. However, since they cannot afford such commodities they steal in order to indulge in their craze. Ironically, the very pleasures in which they indulge further exploit their character. They fall to the unexpected temptation to become possessed of things at an age when the instinct of acquisition presents its greatest strength. We have all met cases of unemployed youths wanting to keep up with their friends in dress and cigarettes.

UNSATISFACTORY HOME CONDITIONS

Now we come to the major factor associated with juvenile delinquency – unsatisfactory home conditions. Under this heading we include a multitude of sins: wrongful upbringing, lack of maternal affection, bad housing, family conflicts, etc. If the children feel they are not loved by their parents and that they are unwanted or neglected, they are frustrated and they bear a grudge against society. Indeed, John Barron Mays maintains that: 'the quality of home life and family relationships seem to be crucial in deciding whether or not a child becomes delinquent'.¹⁵

When psychiatrists tell us that the first five years of a child's life are intimately linked with the development of the individual character and personality, one cannot over-emphasize the importance of good parenthood, a wholesome family environment and a sound education.

In 'The Young Delinquent', Sir Cyril Burt says:

'Most recent investigators seem to agree that in the causation of juvenile delinquency, the domestic factors – i.e. the psychological conditions obtaining in the family and the home – are more important than social, economic or pathological factors, or the direct inheritance of criminal propensities'.¹⁶

Thus, John Mack in a survey of juvenile delinquency carried out in the U.K. described the main problem revealed by delinquency as 'family disorganization, the failure of families, and particularly of parents, to give their children the two things they most need, as-

¹⁴ East N., *The Adolescent Criminal*.

¹⁵ *Crime and its treatment*, p.131.

¹⁶ *The Young Delinquent* (1943) University of London Press.

surance of continuing love and moral discipline made acceptable by love'.¹⁷

Some criminologists have advanced the view that the fact that the mother takes on a job might be a factor affecting delinquency.

At times we are faced with a very serious problem when we come to tackle a fact-situation where there are unsatisfactory home conditions. The problem is the following: when the parents themselves are in need of probation, how can one expect the children to be brought up in a healthy moral environment? Take the case of a child whose father returns home always drunk and whose mother lives a permissive life; here the remedy would be to remove the child from the custody of the parents altogether. What are we to expect if the parents are always at loggerheads or if the children are unwanted? Not all children get their share of sense of security. The parents quarrel, separate, die, bring home a step-father or step-mother, often with the most disastrous results to the children. The child's mind would be oppressed by anxieties and disturbances which get him or her into trouble. The child misses the consistent upbringing and the sensible supervision which should be found in the home. Therefore, very often, juvenile delinquency is also due to incompetent and unwise parents.

Problem parents are not only negligent or reckless parents, but also those who spoil a child at one moment and repress him harshly at the next. In addition, there are those parents who are over-protective and unduly anxious and from whose constrictive embraces the child sometimes breaks with uncontrollable violence. Very often there is the feeling that many of the young people appearing before the Courts would never have done so bad had they been luckier in their parents.

Overcrowding at home and lack of parental affection cause the youth to seek an outlet to his spirit of adventure outside the home in the company of friends. It is here usually that he first encounters delinquents who unhesitatingly teach him the path to crime. It is easy for him to learn from them ways and means to break the law without being caught. Where the young person perceives or experiences more in favour of crime than against it is very likely that he will become delinquent.

THE SCREEN

A very serious factor associated with delinquency is the show

¹⁷Quoted in Lord Parkenham, *Causes of Crime*, p. 49.

g and glorification of violence and sex in the cinema and in films on television. According to Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey, television is being denounced because of the continued direction of attention to crime, especially violent crime, and the continued presence of sex imagery.¹⁸ Larsen in 'Violence and Mass Media' summarises the contentions of many concerned members of society thus:

(a) The menu offered by television is saturated with violent content, including incidents of persons intentionally doing injury to each other. A Commission reported that between the ages of five and fourteen the average American child witnesses the violent destruction of 13,000 human beings on television alone.

(b) More and more people have already access to the medium. Children sixteen years of age have spent as much time watching television as they have spent in school.

(c) For most persons, but particularly for the poor, television is perceived as the most credible and believable source of information concerning the world as it really is.¹⁹

Television programmes teach children certain criminal techniques. But the major effect of crime dramatization is perhaps the creation and perpetuation of an attitude of indifference to ordinary criminal offences among persons who are not the direct victims of them. Because the impression is created that crime is frequent and usual, the viewing public becomes indifferent to sensational, violent crimes and even less concerned with ordinary offences. Thus dramatization of crime appears to minimize public indignation when crimes are committed and, perhaps, to contribute indirectly to high crime rates. Tendencies towards delinquency which have been derived from other sources may be reinforced by crime films shown at the cinema and on television, and in some cases specific techniques are thus learned.

We now come to the problem of news media and crime. The news media are giving too much publicity to delinquents and criminals. Youths who have an inferiority complex might feel so humiliated that they might try to make up for their frustration by doing something bold and startling. They might feel satisfied when they make the headlines, even if ultimately they are caught. American newspapers and television news programmes have been severely criticized for the part they play in relation to crime. The following

¹⁸ Sutherland E. and Cressey D., *Criminology* (1974) Lippincott, p. 248.

¹⁹ Quoted *ibid.*

charges are made against them:

(i) They promote crime by constantly advertising it and exaggerating its incidence.

(ii) They interfere with justice by 'trial by news media', by distortion of news, and by providing advance information to the public, including the criminals, regarding the plans of the police and prosecution.

(iii) They ordinarily promote indifference to crime, but on occasion create public panic, both of which make consistent and rational preventive law enforcement and judicial correctional procedure very difficult.²⁰

Edwin Sutherland and Donald Cressey do not criticize the desirability of publishing crime news, but rather its amount and style. Fortunately, both in Malta and in England, newspapers and television publish crime news in the form of brief factual statements.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION

We are witnessing a decline in the practice of religion and in moral standards against a background of material improvement. It does not seem to be the case that improvement in material conditions, desirable as it is, necessarily results in an improvement in human behaviour. Martin Neumeyer comments: 'There is considerable difference of opinion on the relation of religion and church attendance to the prevention of delinquency. No positive conclusion may be drawn with respect to the correlation of religion with delinquency, because of few authentic studies on this subject. When religious ideals are firmly believed in and religious observances are adhered to, they can be effective means of controlling human behaviour'.²¹

Delinquency is prevented first and foremost by educating youths. In our modern world, youth clubs perform a very important function, that of keeping our younger generation occupied. In addition to honest and profitable recreation, youth clubs offer help and guidance. Leadership is essential in the sense that youths who are easily led will be able to follow persons who can improve their character.

Some people adopt a pessimistic attitude towards the prevention of delinquency: they say that precipitants of delinquency are

²⁰ Ibid., p. 245.

²¹ Neumeyer M., *Juvenile Delinquency in Modern Society* (1955) Van Nostrand, p. 236.

ound to exist in any environment and that however much the standards of society are raised, there will always be a group upon which the precipitating factors will act.

NOTE ON DRINK

Drink, it seems, has suddenly become the fashionable scene for young people. In England, doctors, social workers and youth leaders fear that alcohol is rapidly overtaking drugs as a teenage anger – a cheaper way of getting away from it all. Drinking, like drugs and sex, is very much a group activity in England. Blum in 'Mind-Altering Drug' remarks: 'On the basis of available information it is plausible to assume that alcohol does play an important and damaging role in the lives of offenders, particularly chronic reprobates, and in the production of crime'.²²

THE WELFARE STATE

The fairly recent advent of the Welfare State has also been mentioned as a possible factor associated with delinquency. To the aged poor who genuinely desire to earn a living for themselves and to whom national assistance is a last resort, unemployment benefit and old age pensions are like a godsend in their struggle for survival. However, with others, especially young people who are born into the Welfare State, the effect is totally different. The amenities provided by the State from their earliest days have had the effect of ruining their character. Such people fail to realize that national assistance is no substitute for personal courage to face life, thrift and self-discipline. They do not understand the true principles at the basis of the Welfare State. They do not realize that these amenities are paid for by other people. The Welfare State has led young people into expecting something for nothing and also to a decline in parental responsibility. This tendency is found particularly in youths who avoid honest work and live by their wits.²³

DISRESPECT FOR THE LAW

Disrespect for the law almost invariably features in the character of delinquents. The attitude of youth towards law observance and enforcement reflects the community attitude. If there is res-

²² Ibid. p. 165.

²³ This opinion is also shared by Frank J. Powell in 'The Magistrate and the Psychiatrist' a contribution in Sir Norwood East *The Roots of Crime*, Butterworth, p. 149.

pect for law, children naturally develop the same attitude. If parents and other adults indulge in minor infractions and wink at similar activities of their friends, children are quick to sense the spirit.²⁴

IS DELINQUENCY A DISEASE?

It is usually quite reasonable to regard the acts of delinquents as symptomatic of mental disorder or disease. However, the reason (according to Desmond Curran) is not that criminal behaviour is always a psychiatric case, i.e. a manifestation of disease, but that delinquents show other symptoms in addition to their criminal behaviour.²⁵

The vast majority of criminals should not be regarded primarily as medical problems at all, though a small minority are in fact medical cases. We can also discern an overlap group to which medicine and psychiatry can contribute.

All psychiatrists agree that psychopathic personality is a factor associated with delinquency though they differ on the extent.²⁶ The term is used to refer to persons who are regarded as emotionally abnormal; the patient tends to burst into violent and anti-social behaviour. Some psychiatrists have classified psychopathic personalities in three groups – the egocentric, the inadequate and the vagabond. In addition to the psychopathic personality, there are other personality deviations which are classified diseases, like mental defect (mental retardation) and psychoses. Psychiatrists today speak of 'maladjustment' with its numerous subdivisions.

Lady Barbara Wootton argues that 'the presence of a psychiatric syndrome or of a disturbance of part-functions does not, of itself, necessarily explain, still less does it necessarily excuse, disregard of social norms. Even at the level of mere explanation, the link between the two needs to be demonstrated ... We do not assume, and we are not entitled to assume without evidence, that these morbid conditions have anything to do with their standards of social behaviour'.²⁷ Therefore, while mental disorder might be a factor associated with delinquency, it cannot be said that all

²⁴ See Neumeyer M., *Juvenile Delinquency in Modern Society* (1955), p. 300.

²⁵ 'A Psychiatric Approach to the Offender' a contribution in *The Roots of Crime* by Sir Norwood East, p. 41.

²⁶ Sutherland and Cressey, *Criminology*, p. 151.

²⁷ Wootton B., *Social Science and Social Pathology* (1967) Allen & Unwin p. 239.

delinquents suffer from a mental disease; each case must be examined on its own merits.

In particular cases the mental aspect of the problem could assume a very important role in determining the delinquent behaviour. Thus, for example, a sense of inferiority could lead to crime: in the first place you could have cases of physical inferiority, for instance, young people who have some physical defect often resort to crime in a search for compensation. Secondly, according to Dr. Stewart and Dr. Carlton, mental inferiority may lead to crime in a number of different ways: a boy may be easily led, or he may develop an inferiority complex. Thirdly, there is emotional instability: Dr. Stott says that the rule is that boys take to delinquency to escape from an emotionally intolerable life. On the other hand, Dr. Roper argues that there is a possibility that the association between mental abnormality and crime has been overstressed, largely because the psychiatrists see the mentally abnormal.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Once we have located these factors associated with delinquency we can do something about 'the problem' in the form of treatment or prevention. Once we know what these factors are, the obvious thing to do is to begin to develop techniques for the prevention and reduction of acts of delinquency. For instance, I have indicated earlier that poverty is considered by most criminologists to be the main factor associated with delinquency. Now, if the scourge of poverty were to be alleviated there might not be a cessation of delinquent manifestations (because we would be left with the possibility of a host of other factors operating simultaneously) but it would definitely amount to a step in the right direction.

We cannot only consider a list of possible deleterious factors and find out to what extent they are productive of crime, and then set about removing them; it is also necessary to consider the assets of the particular individual. Looking into the factors associated with delinquency, we are neither working out an addition, nor even an addition and subtraction, but a complex and changing equation with many variables.

I propose to conclude this article by indicating the utility of this study of 'factors associated with juvenile delinquency'. Dr. Grunhut comments that 'the study of factors associated with crime

²⁸ Vide Pakenham, *Causes of Crime* pp. 82-84.

has been turned into a rational instrument of crime prediction'.²⁹ John Barron Mays argues that 'the rationale of prediction is clear enough. If we could only spot children with delinquent proclivities before they commit their offences, we might conceivably save them from ever falling foul of the law, perhaps by giving them and their parents additional support and by providing facilities lacking in the environment.'³⁰ With that objective in mind, I have submitted – wherever I thought possible – a remedy by way of preventive methods. My feelings are that not until we know how things happen can we prevent or assist their happening. It is to make things happen, or to prevent their happening, that all our endeavours are directed.

²⁹ Unpublished paper quoted in Pakenham, *Causes of Crime*, p. 42.

³⁰ Mays J.B., *Crime and its treatment* (1970), pp.116-117.