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The Extent of Juvenile Delinquency in a Stable Metropolitan Area

JOHN C. BALL*

There is widespread controversy among lawyers, police officials and criminologists as to the extent of juvenile delinquency in the United States. A report of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee estimated that 20 percent of the male population is likely to appear in court before adulthood.¹ At the same time, local police and court officials throughout the United States frequently take the viewpoint that delinquency is an insignificant problem which does not affect 99 percent of our youth. Who is correct?

It is of pervasive importance that the extent and characteristics of juvenile delinquency be accurately described. As in the instance of many diseases, a first step in prevention or treatment is knowledge of the incidence. With regard to juvenile delinquency, it is imperative that we know whether 20, 30 or even a larger percent of the boys are arrested or whether we have antisocial behavior which involves less than one percent of boys.

In the following report the extent and characteristics of juvenile delinquency in Fayette County, Kentucky, during 1958 are delineated. Particularly, the 350 boys and girls who appeared before the County Juvenile Court constitute the subjects for analysis.

The Lexington Standard Metropolitan Area is coterminous with Fayette County and this is the jurisdiction of the county juvenile court. The population of the Lexington Standard Metropolitan Area in 1960 was 131,906. Of the 350 juveniles who ap-

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¹ Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, Report on Juvenile Delinquency S. Doc. No. 137, 86th Cong. 1st Sess. 3 (1959).

peared before the Court in 1958, 297 were boys and 53 were girls. Thus, 85 percent were males and 15 percent females.²

With respect to race, 83—or 23.7 percent—of the 350 juveniles were Negroes. This figure may be contrasted with the percentage of non-whites in the 5 to 9 year ages in 1950—17.4 percent. The somewhat higher proportion of Negroes among the delinquents probably reflects the higher rates which are prevalent in the lower socio-economic classes.³

From Table 1 *infra* it may be noted that the most common age was 15 years. Although the range was from 6 to 18 years, 82 percent of the delinquents were between 13 and 17 years of age. In view of the high incidence of recidivism in this group, it seems reasonable to conclude that most of the delinquents commenced their antisocial behavior before age 15.⁴

With respect to place of residence, 68.3 percent of the 350 delinquents were from the city of Lexington, 21.7 percent were from the county area outside the city limits, and 10.0 percent were from outside Fayette County. Of the last group—35 from outside the county—31.4 percent were from the six contiguous counties, 48.6 percent were from other counties in Kentucky, and 20.0 percent were from other states. These figures reflect a considerable influx of juvenile boys from non-metropolitan areas to Lexington for excitement and delinquent acts. Comparable figures pertaining to the incidence of delinquency in rural and urban areas by boys from metropolitan areas were not available.⁵

The relationship of school attendance to juvenile delinquency in Fayette County is tabulated in Table 2 *infra*. In all, some 29 percent of the delinquents were not in school. Perhaps signifi-

² This sex ratio is comparable to the national ratio of 4 to 5 boys per girl. "Juvenile Court Statistics—1958," U. S. Dep't of Health Educ. and Welfare, Children's Bureau, Statistical Series No. 57, 1 (1960).

³ These differences between Negro and white delinquency rates are less than those commonly reported. See Tappan, *Crime, Justice and Correction* 57 (1960); also Block and Flynn, *Delinquency* 45 (1956).

⁴ The early onset of delinquency has been reported in numerous studies. In New York City the model age was found to be 13-15 years, Robison, *Juvenile Delinquency* 49 (1960).

⁵ Within the Lexington Standard Metropolitan Area, the predominance of delinquency in the lower socio-economic areas adjacent to the central business district followed the general ecological pattern previously described for Chicago, Seattle and other cities. Shaw and McKay, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (1942); Schmid, "Urban Crime Areas: Part I," 25 *Am. Soc. Rev.* 527-542 (Aug. 1960), and "Urban Crime Areas: Part II," 25 *Am. Soc. Rev.* 655-678 (Oct. 1960).

cantly, the percentage was higher among girls than among boys—41.5 percent against 26.3 percent. Of those attending school, 71 percent were elementary or junior high school students. Again, the early age of the delinquents is notable. In addition, marked educational retardation is indicated among the delinquents. These data support the usual sociological interpretation of lack of achievement orientation among delinquents and lower class children generally.⁶

The offenses committed by the 350 boys and girls are presented in Table 3. Crimes against property—including larceny, burglary, auto theft and other offenses against property such as vandalism—constituted 67 percent of the charges against the 350 juveniles. Crimes against property (principally stealing) were more frequent among the boys than among the girls—70.7 percent against 43.7 percent. Conversely, incorrigibility was more frequent among the girls—49.1 percent for the girls against 22.9 percent for the boys.⁷ Incorrigibility includes ungovernable behavior in the home, running away, truancy and association with immoral persons. The term incorrigibility refers, then, to behavior which is antisocial and usually associated with a breakdown in family cohesion.

The pattern of delinquent behavior portrayed by the above offenses is one of stealing among the boys and ungovernable behavior among the girls. For the girls, petty stealing, vandalism, and conflict with parents is a frequent precursor of later sexual delinquency for those who persist in antisocial activities.⁸

Of the 350 juveniles, 70 appeared more than once in the Fayette County Juvenile Court during the year of 1958. Of the 70 court recidivists, 17 appeared three times. This figure of 20 percent court recidivism is unquestionably an underestimation of the extent of criminality in this group as it does not include those who committed offenses prior to 1958, offenses charged by other courts, those previously committed to reformatories or those who

⁶ Even at an early age, delinquents tend to be educationally retarded; Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, ch. XII (1950).

⁷ The pattern of delinquency reported in this study is similar to that usually found among juveniles. Tappan observes that some of this behavior involves only trivial misdeeds and should not be considered "truly delinquent," Tappan, *op. cit. supra* note 3, at 52.

⁸ Ball and Logan, "Early Sexual Behavior of Lower-Class Delinquent Girls," 51 *J. Crim. L., C. & P. S.* 209-214 (July-Aug., 1960).

were known by the police or court to have engaged in repeated delinquency.⁹ Thus, the particular definition of recidivism employed in this study—repeated appearance before the same juvenile court during a single year—reflects a high rate of recidivism among this juvenile group. It seems likely that the actual incidence of recidivism in this group—merely with respect to two or more arrests—exceeds 50 percent.

Of the 350 juveniles who appeared before the county court during 1958, 210 were boys from the Lexington Standard Metropolitan Area between the ages of 13 and 17. This constituted 5.9 percent of the total male population 5-9 years in 1950, or 4.8 percent of the estimated 13-17 population in 1958. This incidence of juvenile court appearance was comparable to that reported for the United States in 1958—3.0 percent of the 10-17 age group for both sexes.¹⁰

The magnitude of juvenile delinquency as a national problem is not, however, reflected in the annual court statistics. There are two reasons why juvenile court statistics seriously under-represent the extent of delinquency in the population. First, police arrests usually exceed considerably the number of court cases. Thus, in the city of Lexington there were 565 arrests of juveniles in 1958. This was almost twice the number of juvenile court cases from the city (300) during the same year.

Second, the annual rates do not indicate the percentage of the juvenile population at risk who have a police or court record before age 18. *In the Lexington Metropolitan Areas, a conservative estimate based upon the present data is that at least 30 percent of the boys will have been arrested or appear in court before their eighteenth birthday.* This figure is comparable to those recently reported in other sections of the nation. In a state wide sample in Minnesota, Hathaway, Monachesi and Young found that 34 percent of the boys had a police or court record by 17.5 years of age.¹¹ In Philadelphia, Monahan reported that 22

⁹ Of the 350 juveniles, 40 percent were known by the court to have previously committed acts of delinquency at the time of their *first* appearance during 1958. A further indication of recidivism is the extent of institutionalization, since juveniles are infrequently committed following a first offense. Of the 350 juveniles who appeared before the county court in 1958, 40 percent were committed to the Welfare Department.

¹⁰ "Juvenile Court Statistics—1958," *op. cit. supra* note 2, at 11.

¹¹ Hathaway, Monachesi and Young, "Delinquency Rates and Personality," 50 J. Crim. L., C. & P. S. 435 (Feb. 1960).

percent of the boys were destined to appear in court before age 18.¹² All of these rates refer to behavior which has been officially recorded.

Conclusion

In the present report it is conservatively estimated that at least 30 percent of the boys in a stable metropolitan area will have a record of delinquency before age 18. This rate of delinquency is comparable to those recently reported in Minnesota and Pennsylvania. Thus, it seems evident that juvenile delinquency is a national problem of considerable magnitude—that it involves a major portion of our youth and may, in low socio-economic neighborhoods and among particular groups, include the majority of boys.

What should be done? A definitive answer to this question, considering our present state of knowledge, can be given.

The principal need is for detailed, accurate, and comprehensive information pertaining to delinquency. Our present knowledge on the state and national level is so inadequate that efforts to formulate prevention or treatment programs are necessarily premature. Aside from the fact that we are only now beginning to have data on incidence, we know little or nothing about delinquency in rural areas, about the after effects of institutionalization, or about etiology on a national level.

Two steps must be taken in order to secure the needed information. First, a Bureau of Juvenile Delinquency needs to be established in each state. The principal function of each Bureau would be to supervise and compile detailed statistics for the state. It would be advisable to establish uniform national standards for the reporting and compilation of these data.

Second, there is a need to undertake carefully designed studies pertaining to particular aspects of delinquency. It is necessary that further studies of etiology be undertaken. But it seems likely that research directed toward the question of "cause" of delinquency, or the effects of treatment will be most efficacious if based upon sufficient knowledge of city, state and national delinquency rates.

¹² Monahan, "On the Incidence of Delinquency," 39 *Social Forces* 66-72 (Oct. 1960).

TABLE 1. AGE OF JUVENILE BY SEX AND RACE

Years	Boys		Girls		Boys No.	Girls No.	Total
	White	Negro	White	Negro			
6		1			1		1
7		2			2		2
8	2	2			4		4
9	3	2	1		5	1	6
10	7				7		7
11	11	3		1	14	1	15
12	8	5	4		13	4	17
13	19	4	10		23	10	33
14	30	14	7	5	44	12	56
15	52	13	9	1	65	10	75
16	45	8	8		53	8	61
17	46	18	3	4	64	7	61
18	1				1		1
Unknown	1				1		1
Total	225	72	42	11	297	53	350
Mean	15.2	14.7	14.8	15.4	15.2	14.7	

TABLE 2. SCHOOL LEVEL OF JUVENILE DELINQUENTS BY SEX AND RACE

School Level	Boys			Girls			Total	
	White	Negro	Percent	White	Negro	Percent	Number	Percent
Elementary	44	18	20.9	4	3	13.2	69	19.7
Junior High School	60	20	26.9	19	2	39.6	101	28.9
Senior High School	47	19	22.2	2	1	5.7	69	19.7
Not in School	63	15	26.3	17	5	41.5	100	28.6
Unknown	11		3.7				11	3.1
Total	225	72	100.0	42	11	100.0	350	100.0

Difference between boys and girls in school level:

$$X^2 = 13.36, P < .01$$

TABLE 3. FIRST OFFENSES OF DELINQUENTS DURING 1958
BY SEX AND RACE

Offense	Boys			Girls			Total	
	White	Negro	Percent	White	Negro	Percent	Number	Percent
Larceny	81	36	39.4	4		7.5	121	34.6
Burglary	28	12	13.5	3		5.7	43	12.3
Auto Theft	18	3	7.1				21	6.0
Other Crimes								
Against Property	29	3	10.8	15	1	30.2	48	13.7
Sex Violations	3	2	1.7	1	1	3.8	7	2.0
Injury to Persons	5	2	2.4		2	3.8	9	2.6
Incorrigible, etc.	55	13	22.9	19	7	49.1	94	26.9
Traffic	6	1	2.4				7	2.0
Total	225	72	100.0*	42	11	100.0	350	100.0

* The underscore indicates that the sum of the column does not precisely equal the total percentage given due to rounding error.

Difference between boys and girls in types of offenses:

$$X^2 = 43.36, P < .001$$