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A THEORY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Everybody has problems. There are a multitude of types of problems. One group of problems is distinguished from personal problems and called social problems. They are distinguished from personal problems because they carry a societal responsibility beyond the personal. Of course, there is scarcely any personal problem that does not have its implications for social problems. And, social problems evolve from individual, personal problems. In the context of this discussion social problems refers to problems of a society, meaning a group, community, region, or nation, which shares a common social experience, history, and government.

It is necessary in the analysis of this theme to distinguish between the afflictions of society and its basic problems. Lawrence K. Frank pointed out that afflictions besetting mankind, diverse as they may appear in their outward forms, are simply variegated manifestations of the same basic pro-

blems¹. It has been the general practice to think of a social problem as any difficulty or misbehavior of a fairly large number of persons which we wish to remove or correct, and the solution of a social problem is evidently the discovery of a method for this removal or correction. We find large numbers of adults and children breaking the laws of property and person, so that, as individuals and members of society we see our rights and liberties menaced. We call this the problem of crime and delinquency. In the same manner, we speak of the nutrition problem, the housing problem, the problem of child-welfare, of discrimination, of unemployment, and so on.

Also, each of these conditions called social problems is concerned with, or arises in relation to, a social institution. By social institution we mean a system of social relationships that serves or has served to satisfy basic societal or group needs, and has been surrounded by sanctions to preserve the behavior and relationships involved.

Illegitimacy, divorce, prostitution are considered to be related to the institution of the family; the housing problem and unemployment to the economic institutions of society. It is seen, of course, that as institutions are interrelated in their functioning so, also, the problems are related to more than one institution.

In the literature concerning social problems there are many definitions. Louis Wirth says, «a practical social problem is a situation in which there is either (a) a conflict of values, a failure to realize values agreed upon, or a threat to existing values; or (b) disagreement on the instrumentation of means»².

Francis Merrill declares that «we may define a social problem as a situation that threatens an established social value and that is believed to be capable of amelioration by appropriate social action»³.

Arnold Rose defines social problems as «conditions which affect sizeable proportions of the population which are out of harmony with the values of a significant segment of population, and which people feel can be improved or eliminated»⁴.

From another point of view, Don Martindale and Elio Mo-nochese state, «when it can be demonstrated that there is a gap between what individuals are expected to achieve and

what individuals are actually able to achieve, a problem situation exists⁵.

Professor Hassinger of the University of Missouri in an unpublished mimeographed study sees three elements of common factors in these definitions. He says, «As a working definition we may define a social problem as: a situation that is *viewed* as *deficient* for a *significant number* of people».

Viewed means a frame of reference from which a situation is judged. Bloch begins his discussion of disorganization presenting a concept of Frame of Reference. This is «the standpoint, intellectual of otherwise, from which a certain social problem, fact, or issue is perceived, appraised, and analyzed»⁶.

Deficient indicates a discrepancy between what *is* and what *should be*. Synonyms are inadequate, bad, undesirable, gap, tension situation, lag.

Significant number is a vague term. It really distinguishes a social problem from an individual problem. A single act of vandalism is not a social problem, but organized patterns of destructive behavior are.

Having re-viewed these elements and definitions of social problems theory it seems to me that social problems must be viewed objectively. That is, the frame of reference is from the point of view of the trained observer—the sociologist, economist, etc.—who may bring them to the attention of the public, the government, or the institutions responsible for social action in the society.

From this point of view it seems that a social problem may be defined as any situation in which the social organization (in terms of the structure and resources of its institutions) is inadequate to meet a threat to the established norms, or to mediate, or adjust, a conflict between norms arising in the society. It is a social problem situation as distinguished from an individual, family, business or other type of problem, when the personal, family, or business resources are inadequate to cope with the norm threat or conflict, and the society's resources as a whole are considered necessary to ameliorate or resolve the situation. Although the indication is that a significant number of people are involved in a social problem, yet from our point of view it is seen that a single case of discrimination in relation to national voting rights on the basis of

race may go beyond the personal resources of the person discriminated against and the resources of the constituted national government are required to adjust or resolve the situation. This would be considered a social problem in the area of civil rights.

This concept is not so much a theory of social disorganization as of inadequacy of social organization. Except in extreme situations of disaster and panic, society maintains organization. Until the institutions of society (as defined early in this paper) are flexible enough to meet the change occurring in all societies we will have social problems. Change is the basis of social problems. The slower the rate of change the more chance the social institutions have to affect adjustment to needs in problem areas. Rapid social change reveals great inadequacies in current social organization, and too rapid change in the form of flash floods, fire, earthquake, bombing, etc. may bring complete social disorganization. The basis of the organization of civil defense is precisely to cope with social problems in the event of too-rapid social change.

It seems to me that there are three general problem areas in social organization. Deficiencies in any or all of these areas are the real social problems. The evidence of these deficiencies is delinquency, unemployment, divorce, dependency and others. The evidence is not the problem. The problem lies deeper.

The first problem area is a weakness in the social structure. This is an area of pure lack of organization to meet new and growing needs of society. A lack of structure in the United States of America to care for health needs of the increasing number of aged in the society is evident. What constitutes a proper and adequate structure is under debate.

The second problem area is in the inadequate functioning of the society. This refers to the relation of resources to the structure so that the needs of a society can be met properly. Social planning seems to be a «must» if resources, material and human, are to be articulated with the institutions, or «structure», facing the needs of society. Efficient use of these resources should be made in terms of such items as training teachers for school needs, reeducation and rehabilitation for displaced and incapacitated workers, vocational guidance, and

others. Some institutions are trying to serve a modern generation with resources adequate only for «turn of the century» social conditions.

The third area in which social problems occur may be called the area of group morale or the psychology of group relations. It is the composite of spirit, ideals, attitudes, and aspirations which give «tone» or character to the society. This condition is recognized by names given to groups such as «ambitious», «progressive», «satisfied», or «conservative».

Now in the light of this theory I shall attempt to consider the social problems involved in the increase in juvenile delinquency. According to Federal Bureau of Investigation reports¹ the percentage of arrests of persons under 18 years of age in the USA has increased from 1955 to 1960 as follows:

Larceny	61%
Robbery	49%
Burglary	44%
All sex offenses	41%
Aggravated assault	39%
Murder	37%
Auto-theft	26%

Yet the population of youth aged 10-17 has increased only 25% in the same period. This report speaks only of police «record» behavior. Much other «anti-social» behavior may be assumed in addition which is «adjusted», or «referred».

There are many theories concerning delinquency. It is not my purpose to review them here. There are some myths that have arisen out of these theories that may be examined briefly². Probably the most overworked of these misconceptions are the working mother and the «broken» home as causes of delinquency. These may be factors in some cases of delinquency but as studies have shown, «the working mother will not suffice as a simple, neat causal explanation of delinquency» and «labeling a child a potential delinquent simply because he comes from a broken home or explaining away his behavior on this basis is an ever-present danger. Putting all the blame at the door of the broken home is a neat, but too easy way out»³.

Other myths frequently heard give mental retardation, or physical attributes or heredity as reasons for misbehavior. There is little scientific support for the idea that delinquents have a lower I. Q. Many delinquents turn out to be extremely bright when they are viewed within the context of their own milieu. There is no solid evidence for any close connection between norm-violating behavior and hereditary components.

It is not possible to deal with other misconceptions about causes of delinquency in this paper, such as, delinquency as social or emotional maladjustment, lack of playgrounds, bad companions or an evil gang leader, idle hands, slums area, and inadequate laws. Each and all of these may be factors in one instance or another but they cannot be held as general causes of delinquency. The Pennsylvania chiefs of Police Association meeting in Philadelphia in August, 1960, adopted a report which said, «the broken home and unemployed and socially handicapped type of youth can no longer be solely blamed for juvenile crime». Senator Dodd of Connecticut, chairman of a Senate subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency said that the increase in delinquency rate was due to «new, white-collar delinquency in the urban and rural areas... We now have a group of youngsters who cannot be accounted for» in the usual way.

To make a brief application of the theory of social problems to the evidence of juvenile delinquency, let us consider it in the light of (1) weakness or deficiencies in our social structure, (2) inadequacies in the functioning of our social institutions, and (3) the lack of «social spirit» or morale in our society.

In this modern era of great communication-media probably the most obvious weakness in structure is our lack of communication between social groups or classes. We live in our own little social «worlds», reading about other «worlds» in the newspaper, or see and hear incidentally about them on the television or radio. But we are not truly aware of the living circumstances of other social classes, races, or religious groups. It becomes very annoying when one is confronted with the fact that people of other worlds may become involved in our social groups, as for example, when a Negro or a Jew attempt to buy or rent the vacant house next door, or a \$10,000 home is projected on the vacant lot across from our \$30,000 home. The

crucial lack is our lack of understanding of the different values, ideals, and norms that are basic to each of these social groups. We have not developed a sufficient common body of accepted American values, ideals, and social norms.

Weakness in the social structure may be seen in our concept of zoning. Real Estate developers apparently think in terms of exclusion, land values, and profits. The vast suburban development shows a pattern of economically segregated groups. One area will be cheap housing. Another area will be a vast middle income development. Then one will find an exclusive development for the executive «Cadillac» crowd. Even low cost public housing is set apart in vast enterprises in deteriorated neighborhoods as an effort to renew this run down area. Are our economic values so dominant over our social values in relation to our social structure? Why can't a \$10,000 home be built next to a \$30,000 one? Are the people of a small house dirtier, or their children not dressed properly to play with the children of wealthier families? Of course, there are customs and interests which are different in each of these families, generally related to education and income. But if social planning could mix the classes in judicious amounts by zoning regulations is there not the possibility that more common norms will be developed in the resulting interaction? I venture that it can be validated that so called upper-class norms will prevail over lower class norms if there is a more or less equal interaction between the groups. The «one bad apple spoils the barrel of apples» theory does seem to hold in social relationships.

Probably one of the most adequate theories concerning delinquency is the delinquent sub-culture theory¹⁰. Cohen sees delinquency as an appropriate solution offered to status discontent as a common core of motivation generally found and developed among males of the working-class. But delinquent behavior is not developed in isolation. There must be the possibility of a group of frustrated boys in a situation where a gang or delinquent subculture can be developed. «There is a certain chemistry in the group situation itself which engenders that which was not there before, that group interaction is a sort of catalyst which releases potentialities not otherwise visible»¹¹.

Another important element relating to the values of our

social structure is the way that both «typically American» and «pathological» behavior can spring from the same value motivation. «The same value system, impinging on children differently equipped to meet it, is instrumental in generating both delinquency and respectability»¹². Bredemeier and Toby have written a book dedicated to this idea that social problems are generated through frustrations, generally of a structural (social class) nature, in the pursuit of common american values¹³. Dr. Samuel A. Stouffer summarizes their conception in the Forward with these words:

The American pursuit of success, the authors show, can be conceptualized in terms of four major governing principles: materialism-secularism, self-reliance, competition, and negotiated exchange. These set standards and rules as to how we come in contact with what we want and as to which members of society have control over what scarce facilities¹⁴.

The male element in delinquency suggests a social structure in which the definition of the male role or roles has not adequately kept pace with modern changes, such as women becoming more independent, taking a place in the work-world outside the home, or decision making and home management being given over to women, and norm and value orientation generally influenced by female interpretations.

Inadequacies in the functioning of our social institutions may be more apparent in relation to delinquency. The lack of trained teachers in our school systems, inadequate facilities and overcrowding, as well as deteriorated buildings, have received publicity across the country. Changes in the functions of social institutions are seen for example, in the overloading of the school and social control (government) systems with functions such as, learning rights of others and recreation, which formerly were functions of the family of orientation, and which the modern family of procreation no longer can manage as effectively. The church as a whole seems to be declining in its functions. Only a few major functions seem to remain, such as its consolation and, to a lesser extent than formerly, its religious education functions. The rise of marria-

ge clinics and institutes of family relations have cut into its counseling functions. And news editors and columnists seem to have absorbed some of the prophetic function that was the prerogative of the pulpit.

The ineffective articulation of resources with areas of need—where social change is more rapid and devastating—is also evident as related to the creation of frustrations related to delinquency. Areas of deteriorated housing need renewal funds. Industrial and business expansion creates areas of social need in terms of highways, parks, recreation areas, and in relation to high population in small areas, including concentrations of laboring class or low income groups. Nursery schools and kindergartens will continue to grow and be added to school systems. Counseling or guidance services will increase in the general population and in schools. More resources will need to be allocated for these specialized services.

Another area of malfunction of society in this regard is the lack of coordination between agencies, both private and public, which are devoted to service in the areas of prevention and correction of delinquent behavior. Many social service agencies of churches, charitable clubs, and government are trying to meet the needs of deficient social situations. But sometimes one area finds a duplication of services, while another area has none. There is no coordination of services, no clearing-house of information, no common approach to delinquency, no long range planning concerning the needs of youth in relation to the economic and other areas of expansion of the country.

Finally, the morale or spirit of our society today seems to be lacking something. The youth of today have no «place» or «function». This is seen to be more true in lower and middle class social groups. A basic personality need is to feel worthy, as fulfilling a function in our social milieu. Dr. Kvaraceus, cited earlier, thinks that modern youth lack a function. This lack is developing in middle class society. He asks, «What is the function of youth in the community in suburbia?» Then goes on to answer his own question. «Youth appear to have little or no function... They have a cosmetic function; they are supposed to look pretty. If they get dirty we do not like it... I think we need to be concerned with a positive program in

terms of giving youth something real and important to do, not busy work, not a neat little camp... Delinquency provides a real function. This is a part of the function of some youth in our society... This is one way to be something, this is one way to do something vital and important»¹⁵.

Another way of saying this is that the spirit of modern American society lacks challenge for young people. There is no real challenge in making money to use on one's own self. There is a kind of pessimism in terms of a power stymie in international relations, and we go through life with a negative sense of slavery to a massive military defense system. A few youth get in on the «struggle of labor», or «building the Kingdom of God», or pacifist and anti-nuclear crusades. But the great bulk of our teen-agers are deliberately kept out of political, labor, race, and other great social issues. To be sure they are taught to observe the struggle and the participants in these issues, but they are relegated to the side lines as spectators. How they would like to play the great game of life and make their contribution! Recently the idea of a peace corps has been developing, as a means for using the youth of our land in worthwhile, real function of developing international understanding. The idea has possibilities, but it tends to skim select youth from upper levels of society for its program. What about function and challenge for our lower-social-level youth?

I have been saying that it appears that a social problem is a situation of inadequacy in the social organization to meet a threat to the social norms, or to adjust a conflict of norms, arising out of conditions of change in the society. Certain evidence such as delinquent behavior will bring to light these lacks. The delinquency is not the problem. The social deficiency which gives rise to this behavior is the problem. Delinquency was considered briefly in terms of its relation to (1) weakness in our status structure, (2) inadequate functioning of our social institutions and the lack of coordination of their functions with our social resources, and (3) the morale or spirit of challenge that seems to be lacking in our complex defensively oriented society.

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2. LOUIS WIRTH, *Contemporary Social Problems* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1939), pág. 5.
3. FRANCIS MERRILL, *Social Character and Social Problems*, "Social Problems", vol. 3, núm. 1, July 1955, págs. 7-11.
4. ARNOLD ROSE, *Theory for the Study of Social Problems*, "Social Problems", vol. 4, núm. 3, Jan. 1957, pág. 190.
5. DON MARTINDALE and ELIO MONOCHESE, *Elements of Sociology*, pág. 608.
6. HERBERT A. BLOCH, *Disorganization: Personal and Social*. (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1953), pág. 11.
7. *From a news report by Bernard Ganger*, "We live in a Crime Explosion", *The Miami Herald*, February 1, 1962, pág. 3-AW.
8. SEE WILLIAM KVARACEUS and WALTER B. MILLER, *Delinquent Behavior; Culture and the Individual*. Vol. I (Wash., D. C.—National Education Assoc., 1959).
9. *Ibid.*, págs. 34-35.
10. ALBERT K. COHEN, *Delinquent Boys*. (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1955).
11. *Ibid.*, pág. 136.
12. *Ibid.*, pág. 137.
13. HARRY C. BREDEMEIER and JACKSON TOBY, *Social Problem in America*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1960).
14. *Ibid.*, pág. vii.
15. *Report of the hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile, Delinquency*, Washington, D. C., 1961.