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JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: SOME SHIBBOLETHS

«Our youth now loves luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority. They show disrespect for their elders, and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers.»

Translated into idiomatic language these comments are familiar and in current vogue. This 'current vogue' has been operative since Socrates (500 B. C.) whose quotation, indeed, it is. One wonders when the 'good old days' were or whether the selectivity of memory structures our responses in the interest of ego - defense.

Unfortunately, most observers and describers of the adolescent milieu are adults who may be considered as often responding to the generational hostility with which we defend ourselves against the inexorable fact of aging. Consider briefly how one often feels when watching a group of young people

engage in a physical struggle. Suppose they are pushing and shoving among themselves, no old ladies are threatened, they are only moderately boisterous; but they are animal, physical and aggressive. One often responds with annoyance at the sheer violence of their activity and resents their difference. The perceptive questions that many adolescents direct concerning the inconsistencies of adult standards are a potent source of discomfort to many adults. The well behaved, non-delinquent acting adolescents offer many challenging areas to adult understanding, and the delinquent adolescent offers a field day for adult pontificating, pseudo-psychological comments and the posture of expertness.

The shibboleths have considerable range: the comic book, the broken home, the decrease in religiosity, the nature of religiosity, the permissive parental attitude, the authoritarian parental attitude, the educational approach, the lack of significance of the educational approach, the privileged area, and the slum area. This list is certainly not definitive of the various explanations offered and which purport to define the causes of delinquent behavior among young people.

To examine one, most interested adults would agree the slum areas are evocative of a higher incidence of juvenile delinquency. There is unquestionably a higher incidence of *reported* delinquency in most under-privileged areas as compared with privileged areas, but according to some observers there is a frequent bias on the part of the police and the courts. The correlation between juvenile delinquency and slum areas could be a statistical artifact produced by these social attitudes. Warner and Lunt state: «This disparity of lower and upper class arrests is not to be accounted for by the fact that 'criminal behavior' is proportionately higher among lower class juveniles or that there are more ethnic members whose children have been imperfectly adapted to Yankee City. It must be understood as a product of the amount of protection from outside interference that parents can give the members of their families»¹. Another study by Thrasher² calls attention to the existence of delinquency in overprivileged as well as underprivileged communities.

There are, as well, studies which attempt to support the correlation of juvenile delinquency and social class, with the

higher relatedness to the lower class. Kvaraceus³ studied 761 cases of juveniles in the files of the Passaic Children's Bureau. He concluded that poverty was the prevalent characteristic of the group.

The evidence appears to indicate that considerable caution must be exercised in evaluating delinquent juvenile behavior and its relationship to class and neighborhood. Consider this cautious summary by Cohen. «We grant then, that delinquent behavior is by no means confined to the working class level and that an adequate system of criminological theory must eventually cope with the fact. It does not follow, however, that the popular impression that juvenile delinquency is a primarily a product of working-class families and neighborhoods is an illusion. Egalitarian proclivities and humanitarianism dispose us to minimize the disproportionate concentration of delinquency among the less prosperous, powerful and respected. The lively concern of middle-class adults, into which category most of the readers of this volume will fall, about the lapses of their own middle-class children dispose them to view with exceptional alarm and to magnify the volume of the delinquencies of the children of their own class. Nonetheless, the best evidence tends to support the traditional and popular conception of the distribution of juvenile delinquency in the class system⁴.

Clearly, the disciplined study of this problem results, as it does in most mature educational processes, in a careful and deliberate limitation in the assessment of causes. It is for the psychologically naive that the gross manifestation of maladjustment which we call juvenile delinquency, is readily definable as to cause and correction, either in Puerto Rico, or any place.

It is difficult to determine the number of maladjusted young people except as they evidence their emotional difficulties and attract the attention of formalized institutions. One such institution, active in reporting juvenile delinquency is, of course, the police.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF POLICE ARRESTS OF MINORS IN PUERTO RICO
FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Arrests</i>	<i>Index (1948-49 equals 100)</i>
1948-49	553	100
1949-50	626	113
1950-51	1,229	222
1951-52	1,581	286
1952-53	1,698	307
1953-54	1,644	297
1954-55	1,629	295
1955-56	2,542	460
1956-57	4,040	731
1957-58	8,572	1,550
1958-59	12,193	2,186

Source: Division of Statistics, Office of the Police of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, *Annual Report, 1958-59*, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The considerable increase has to be weighed against the factors of improved reporting, the raising of the legal age definition of juvenile to 18 years of age from 16 by the Police Department in 1955, and a more strict police enforcement policy. There is, nevertheless, a significant rise, specially in the absence of a proportionate population growth.

Another institutional indication of emotional difficulty is contained in the report of the Juvenile Report.

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF CHILDREN REFERRED TO THE
JUVENILE COURT

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of children against whom complaints were filed</i>	<i>Number of children whose cases were resolved at intake</i>	<i>Number of children referred for court action</i>
1956-57	3,812	1,567	2,245
1957-58	4,368	2,031	2,337
1958-59	5,239	2,424	2,815

Source: Annual Reports of the Administrative Director of the Courts, 1958-59 Office of the Administration of the Courts, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Dr. E. D. Maldonado Sierra in an unpublished monograph from which these tables were extracted reports his impression that «the Puerto Rican family seems to show much malintegration and disintegration. That this societal disintegration has had a disrupting influence upon the personality of the Puerto Ricans and their children appears self-evident.» In attempting to assess the causes of this delinquent behavior he points out that as a result of the migrant movement on the part of Puerto Rican males, some 75,000 to 100,000 children are left without the direct supervision of their fathers for approximately five months each year.

It was the intent of this brief paper to present some aspects of the balanced disenchantment with the sacred cows of juvenile delinquency. It is this writer's hope that the reader finds at least one of them somewhat milked.

1. W. LLOYD WARNER and PAUL S. LUNT, *The Social Life of a Modern Community, New Haven*. Yale University Press, 1941, pág. 427.
2. FREDERIC M. THRASHER, *Prevention of Delinquency in an Over-privileged Neighborhood*, Proceedings of the National Conference of Juvenile Agencies, XI, April, 1944, págs. 96-106.
3. WILLIAM C. KVARACEUS, *Juvenile Delinquency and the School*, World Book Company, 1945, pág. 98.
4. ALBERT K. COHEN, *Delinquent Boys and the Culture of the Gang*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1955, págs. 21-58.