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Truancy and Stealing

A Comparative Study of Education Act Cases and Property Offenders

By T. G. TENNENT

Introduction

Truancy has been called the kindergarten of crime (Healey and Bronner, 1926) and it is very common to find delinquents with a history of truancy (Glueck and Glueck, 1950). Children who truant are also frequently convicted of criminal offences later (Schulman, 1928). It is, therefore, not surprising to find great similarities in the backgrounds of truants and delinquents.

Murphy (1938) compared 50 truants with 50 delinquents in whom truancy was not considered a major problem, and concluded that apart from an excess of minor physical defects there were no differences between the groups. Young (1947), in a study on 40 habitual truants, found a high incidence of factors often associated with delinquency. Thus, there was a high degree of poverty, family overcrowding, defective discipline and defective family relationships. Croft and Grygier (1956) found that truants and delinquents were viewed very similarly by their peers. Similar sociometric ratings were obtained for both truants and delinquents, but they concluded that the truants on the whole seemed to be more maladjusted socially than the delinquents. Whereas the truants had little social interaction at all, the delinquents tended to be involved in social interaction but an interaction of a conflictual type. Fernando (1952) also suggests that truants may be more maladjusted than delinquents. He compared a rather small group of truants with a group of delinquents within the same remand home, and although finding marked similarities in the social background of the two groups comments that psychiatric symptomatology was more commonly reported as present in the truant group. Unfortunately his numbers were too small to assess the significance of this.

The aim of the present study was to compare a group of truants with a group of delinquents, and in particular to investigate the hypothesis that truants show a greater degree of maladjustment than delinquents.

Method

The study was carried out at the London Remand Home which receives boys aged between 12 and 17 years referred from the Inner London Juvenile Courts. 75 per cent of the admissions comprise boys remanded for a 2–3 week assessment period before re-appearance in Court, of whom 90–95 per cent are examined by a psychiatrist and tested by a psychologist. The other 25 per cent of admissions fall into a number of categories, the largest group comprising boys awaiting allocation to an Approved School. Of the admissions approximately 80 per cent are for offences against property and only 4 per cent are cases referred under Section 40 of the 1944 Education Act.

Selection of study groups

(a) *Education Act cases.* All boys remanded for assessment during the year 1 September 1966–31 August 1967 were studied. This group consisted of 68 cases, 65 of whom were remanded for psychiatric reports.

(b) *Property offenders.* Selection of a truly representative sample of property offenders remanded for assessment is made difficult because of the different categories of admission and the fact that many boys have more than one admission in a year, for admissions are recorded rather than boys. A sampling frame was, therefore, constructed of all boys aged between 12 and 15 who had been remanded for assessment during the period 1 January–31 December 1965. With the aid of this sampling

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frame a one in four random sample of property offenders, stratified by age group was selected. This group consisted of 166 cases.

Information sources

For each boy a file was available containing all reports from the probation or children's department, medical reports, reports from the remand home psychologist and the remand home psychiatric social worker who sees one or other of the parents in the majority of cases where a boy is remanded for psychiatric reports. Psychiatric reports to the Court were available for 65 of the Education Act cases and 151 of the property offenders.

Assessment of emotional state, and in particular quantification of emotional state is difficult. The term emotional maladjustment, though commonly used, is difficult to define, as many different factors both psychological and social were taken into account in deciding whether or not to deem a child maladjusted. Two methods were used in this study for the assessment of emotional state.

Method 1

The psychiatric reports to the Court were mixed together in a random order and each report was assessed using the following categories.

(1) No evidence of psychiatric disorder.

(2) Psychiatric disorder of mild or moderate degree.

(3) Severe psychiatric disorder.

No attempt was made to define severity in terms of symptoms. If the psychiatrist reporting on the boy had deemed him maladjusted or recommended referral for psychiatric treatment then the boy was considered as suffering from severe psychiatric disorder. A boy who showed some evidence of psychiatric disturbance but not of such a degree as to be thought in need of further treatment was allocated to the mild or moderate category.

A somewhat similar method to this was used in another study using two independent raters who achieved 95 per cent agreement on ratings. (Gath and Tennent, 1969).

Method 2

Profile of adjustment

In contrast with Method 1, which was based on the psychiatrist's global clinical impression, Method 2 was based on six separate 'Area' scores compiled for each boy so as to yield an individual profile of adjustment. These 'Area' scores were in turn made up of six items extracted from probation officers' and social workers' reports and recorded as present or absent. The areas used were (1) family relationships (2) peer relationships (3) school adjustment (4) sexual adjustment (5) use of alcohol/drugs (6) conduct disorder. Sufficient information to do this was available for 65 of the Education Act cases and 122 of the property offenders.

Results

It was found, in a previous study (Tennent 1969), that one third of the Education Act cases appearing before the London juvenile Courts are remanded in custody. The exact figures for property offenders similarly remanded are not available.

Table I shows the age distribution of the two groups.

The mean age and the modal age for the two groups are the same. There are relatively fewer Education Act subjects in the youngest and oldest age groups, but this difference is not significant.

Some of the environmental factors on which the two groups were compared are shown in Table II.

For most of the variables there are no significant intergroup differences. In both groups there are more families from social classes IV and V than in the general population. One in five of the families is permanently without a father, one in ten without a mother. Large families with a high degree of delinquency among siblings is common to both groups. However, there is a significant difference ($p < \cdot 001$) in the position that the remanded child occupies within the family. The Education Act subjects were more commonly the youngest members of their families, the property offenders were more commonly the oldest. (Families

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TABLE I

	E.A. remands (n = 68)		Property offenders (n = 166)	
12	6	9%	22	13%
13	20	29%	41	24%
14	25	37%	53	32%
15	17	25%	50	31%
Mean age	13·77 yrs. S.D. 0·92		13·78 yrs. S.D. 1·01	

TABLE II

	E.A. remands (n = 68)		Property offenders (n = 166)	
A Class				
II	4	6%	7	4%
III	18	26%	41	25%
IV	23	34%	59	35%
V	21	31%	51	30%
Unclassifiable	2	3%	8	5%
B Complete separation from parents				
Parent lost				
Father ..	13	19%	34	22%
Mother ..	5	7%	16	10%
Both ..	1	1·5%	6	4%
	FAMILY SIZE			
C Mean number of siblings	4·26	S.D. 2·4	4·6	S.D. 2·7
D Ordinal position				
Oldest ..	10	15%	88	53%
Other ..	36	54%	36	37%
Youngest ..	21	31%	16	10%
		$p < \cdot 001$		
E Criminality in siblings				
One or more criminal siblings	n = 156			
	25	37%	53	35%

where there were no siblings were excluded—one Education Act subject and six of the property offenders.)

There was no difference in the teacher's rating of the two groups of boys either in their relationship with other boys or in their general attitude to school. Over a half of each group were felt to be doing well at school, and it was only the minority who constituted a real problem.

On tests of intelligence both groups scored lower than the overall mean for the remand home (all ages groups), but the difference was not significant. The mean IQ for the Education Acts subjects is lower than that for the property offenders, but not significantly so. The only tests of educational attainment available was the boys' reading age. On this test the Education Act subjects did less well than the property offenders, but overall this difference is not significant at the 5 per cent level.

The previous Court experiences of the two groups are shown in Table IV.

The fact that significantly more of the Education Act cases have had previous court appearances under the Education Act and the property

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TABLE III

	E.A. remands (n = 68)	Property offenders (n = 120)
Teachers' reports		
(a) Solitary boys	30	54
(b) Attitude to school		
Satisfactory	43	70
Poor	16	32
Very poor	9	18
Intelligence	(n = 65)	(n = 135)
120+	2	3
110–119	9	15
100–109	16	27
90–99	13	35
80–89	20	33
70–79	1	16
60–69	4	6
Mean IQ	89·84 S.D. 13·1	93·61 S.D. 13·7
Reading age	(n = 65)	(n = 132)
Chronological age and above	13	43
1–4 years retarded	28	49
More than 4 years retarded	24	40

TABLE IV

Court records

	E.A. subjects (n = 68)	Property offenders (n = 166)	
Mean age at first court appearance	12·7 S.D. 1·67	12·26 S.D. 1·76	
Number with previous criminal records	24	149	$p<.01$
Mean number of previous convictions	0·5 S.D. 0·83	2·1 S.D. 1·1	$p<.05$
Number with previous E.A. prosecutions	29	15	$p<.01$
Remanded at first prosecution	25	17	$p<.01$

offenders under criminal proceedings is not surprising. A high percentage, 38 per cent of the E.A. subjects and 12 per cent of the property offenders were remanded on the occasion of their first prosecution. The difference between the two groups is significant at the 1 per cent level.

As shown in Table V there was evidence of psychiatric disorder (as assessed by Method 1) in 38 of the Education Act cases and 61 of the property offenders. The severity of psychiatric disorder was greater among the Education Act subjects.

Method 2 failed to reveal any significant differences between the two groups except in respect of general conduct. Even when all six area scores were combined together there was no significant difference between the two groups.

Neurotic traits (enuresis, encopresis, temper trantrums, sleep disturbance) were recorded as still present in significantly more of the Education Act subjects than in the property offenders.

The results of Court proceedings following remand are shown in Table VI. There are more methods of disposal open to the Court in the case of the property offenders. It will, however, be apparent that in terms of supervisory orders and removal from home the two groups are dealt with in a similar fashion.

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TABLE V

Emotional adjustment

	E.A. subjects (n = 68)	Property offenders (n = 166)
Psychiatric status (method I)		
No abnormality	27	90
Mild/moderate	23	36
Severe psychiatric disorder	15	25 $p<\cdot01$
No reports	3	15
Neurotic traits still present	27	31 $p<\cdot01$

TABLE VI

Court action

	E.A. subjects (n = 68)		Property offenders (n = 166)	
No order (absolute or conditional discharge)	14	21%	13	8%
Supervision order (Probation order) ..	37	54%	86	54%
Fit person order (Detention centre. Approved school)	17	25%	35	21%
Approved school order (Detention centre. Approved school)				
Fines			12	7%
Attendance centre			20	12%

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the findings of previous studies that truants and delinquents share similar family and environmental backgrounds. They also seem to be perceived similarly by their teachers, are of the same intelligence level, and show similar levels of educational attainment. There is considerable overlap between the two groups in terms of Court appearances under both Education Act proceedings and criminal proceedings, although the Education Act cases tend to be remanded in custody at an earlier stage.

The Education Act cases in this study were significantly more often found to be the youngest members of their families, the delinquents the oldest. Miller, reviewing the literature on the relationship between ordinal position and delinquency, concluded that the findings were vague and uncertain. Subsequent studies (Lees and Newson, 1954) have suggested that delinquents most often occupy the middle position in birth order. Fernando, in his small study, found that truants were more often the youngest member of the family, and this study confirms his finding. A possible explanation of this would be that mothers tend to hang on to the youngest child, while the eldest, with less control and more freedom of expression, commits criminal offences.

The overall incidence of emotional disorder is high in both groups. Previous studies of remand home and Approved School population (Cowie *et al.*, 1968; Gath and Tennent, 1970) have shown similar levels. The Education Act cases, however, showed a higher incidence of disorder, as assessed by Method 1, than the property offenders, but not when assessed by Method 2. (In a previous study (Gath and Tennent, 1970) a high correlation between Methods 1 and 2 was obtained.) The latter method attempts a more objective view of the factors often taken into account in forming a psychiatric opinion. The only objective factor recorded in the notes significantly more frequently in the Education Act group was the

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persistence of neurotic traits. Method 1 is based on the psychiatric reports, and it may be that at interview the truant group show more evidence of psychiatric disorder. However, an alternative explanation is that the psychiatrist has a different image for the truant and the delinquent, and that he is more likely to see the truant as someone psychiatrically disturbed and, perhaps more importantly, more amenable to treatment than the delinquent. This image of the truant as a more disturbed individual could also be invoked to explain the tendency of the Court to remand for a psychiatric report at an earlier stage.

Summary

All Education Act cases remanded in custody during the course of the school year 1966–67 were compared with a stratified random sample of property offenders admitted in the previous year to the same remand home.

There were no significant differences between the two groups in any of the background factors studied, except that the Education Act cases were significantly more often the youngest members of their family.

There was significantly more emotional disturbance in the Education Act group when using one method of assessment but not when using another. The significance of this is discussed.

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