

Factors Associated With School Dropouts and Juvenile Delinquency Among Lower-Class Children

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IT IS WELL KNOWN that the lower socio-economic classes have markedly higher rates of school dropouts and juvenile delinquency than do those in the upper levels of income and affluence.¹ Less understood are the factors associated with dropouts and delinquency within these lower classes. Despite the higher rates, a majority of these youths do not leave school or become delinquent. By itself, being poor is not enough to explain the occurrence of dropping out and delinquency; other influences are involved. What factors can explain why some of these youths leave school early but most do not; why some of them are picked up by the police and juvenile courts but most are not?

To explore these questions it was decided to do a retrospective cohort study of a known group of lower-class juveniles. The study was designed to explore the characteristics and records of a sample of lower-class children who were reaching school age in 1950 and who would have passed their juvenile years by the time of the study in 1962. We were fortunate at Yale University in having access to the results of the 1950 New Haven Five Percent Sample. This was a survey of 5 percent of the total New Haven population in 1950, conducted by Yale University to establish a baseline for extensive studies of social class and mental

illness.² From this survey it was possible to draw the names, addresses, and social characteristics of all the children born in 1942-44 who were rated as belonging to "class V" families. Class V in the survey is the lowest socio-economic class as measured by occupation, education, and income. All the adults in class V were unskilled or semiskilled and had an average of only 7 years of school; the families supported by a male head had a median income of \$2,700 a year.

Only 56 children in this age and class group were found, however, in the New Haven Five Percent Sample. Since this was a relatively small number for the purposes of the study, it was decided to add to it a larger number of children from another known lower-class group for whom records were available—children receiving assistance under the program of aid to families with dependent children. In 1950 in the New Haven area there were 362 children who had been born in 1942-44 and who were receiving aid to families with dependent children. Thirty-four had moved from the area or had died before 1955. The remaining 328 children, when added to the 56 class V children, gave a total of 384—a number considered sufficiently large for the purpose.

Use of the assistance cases had several advantages. The complete welfare case records were made available by the New Haven Agency administering aid to families with dependent children. The assistance cases were relatively homogeneous, moreover, in terms of both socio-economic class and broken homes. By definition they were part of a deprived social stratum since neither the parents nor other relatives could support the children. Furthermore, inspection of their records showed that not only were they economically deprived in 1950 but that in nearly all cases the families came from lower socio-economic backgrounds in terms of occupation, neighborhood,

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¹ See, for example, L. M. Miller, "The Dropout," *School Life*, May 1963, pages 6-7. For a bibliography of material on dropouts and class, see Bettina Weary, *School Dropout*, U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1962. For data on the association of delinquency with lower-class families see any standard text on delinquency—for example, H. M. Shulman, *Juvenile Delinquency* (John Wiley, 1958), pages 174-193. The subject of this article is official juvenile delinquency—that is, delinquency that has been officially recorded by the police, courts, or correctional institutions.

² A. B. Hollingshead and F. C. Redlich, *Social Class and Mental Illness* (John Wiley, 1958), and J. K. Myers and B. H. Roberts, *Family and Class Dynamics in Mental Illness* (John Wiley, 1959).

and lack of property. With respect to family disorganization, it was found that all but one of these families were broken at some time during the 11-year period by the death of a parent; by divorce, separation, or desertion; or by the chronic absence of one or both parents.

Thus, at the outset, there were at least some controls in this sample for socio-economic class and broken homes. Since youths from the lower class and broken homes have higher dropout and delinquency rates, it was anticipated that the sample would have relatively high rates. These higher rates yield various statistical advantages. Finally, the children in the assistance families could be compared with other lower-class children to see what significant differences appear.

Data were obtained from the welfare office records for the assistance cases, from the 1950 survey cards for the other cases, and from school and police records in all cases. Socio-economic characteristics of the neighborhoods were derived from the 1950 study, and neighborhood delinquency rates were calculated from recent statistics of the New Haven Police Youth Bureau. Each child's records were followed through his eighteenth year, so that the data on each child are comparable despite the 3-year range in ages.

SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Table 1 shows the four factors significantly related to school dropouts in this study. The first factor shows that the socio-economic class of the neighborhood is strongly associated with school dropouts. Each block in New Haven had been given a socio-economic class score by the 1950 study based on type of housing, percentages of buildings that were dilapidated, crowding, education and income of the residents, etc. This score ranged from six for the lowest-class neighborhood to one for the highest-class neighborhood. The scores for each address at which the child had lived were used in calculating the average-class neighborhood for each child. Those living in the lower-class neighborhoods (scores of 5 and 6) had more than twice the dropout rate of those living in the upper-class neighborhoods (scores of 1-3).

This finding can be interpreted in two ways: living in a better neighborhood reduces the dropout rate, and those who have the necessary moti-

TABLE 1.—Factors associated with school dropouts

Characteristic	Number ¹	Percent dropping out ²
Neighborhood class:		
1-3 (upper).....	23	22
4.....	35	37
5-6 (lower).....	292	³ 48
Number of moves since 1950:		
0.....	146	38
1-3.....	178	48
4 or more.....	31	³ 65
Sex:		
Female.....	191	39
Male.....	164	⁴ 54
Intelligence:		
Above-average.....	42	9
Average.....	129	37
Below-average.....	154	⁴ 54

¹ Assistance group and nonassistance group combined. Excludes those whose characteristics were unknown.

² Percent who have dropped out of school or whose records indicate they will not graduate.

³ The probability that this observed difference could occur by chance is less than 5 in 100.

⁴ The probability that this observed difference could occur by chance is less than 1 in 100.

vation, intelligence, etc., to graduate from school tend to move to better neighborhoods. Lower intelligence is associated with living in lower-class neighborhoods. It is also probable that schools were less adequate in the lower-class neighborhoods than in others. Presumably, this situation would increase both the dropout rate and the proportion with lower intelligence in these neighborhoods.

Second, frequent moves are associated with a high dropout rate: two-thirds of those who moved four or more times since 1950 dropped out of school. Grades and department scores were also lower for the more mobile, although mobility is not significantly associated with intelligence. Apparently, frequent moves interfere with adequate school work.

Third, there were 15 percent more dropouts among boys than among girls. The Census also found a much higher rate of dropouts among boys.³ It seems that in the lower-class groups being studied, as in the Nation, the temptation to drop out of high school is greater for boys than for girls.⁴

Fourth, intelligence is most strongly related to the dropout rate. More than half the youngsters with below-average intelligence leave school, com-

³ Of all seniors in October 1959, 8.8 percent of the girls and 15.8 percent of the boys did not graduate (Bureau of the Census, Series Census ERS, P-27, No. 32).

⁴ Solomon Lichter and others, *The Drop-Outs* (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), page 61. The authors say that the reason more boys drop out is "that for boys school provides a special culturally determined focus for rebellion and conflict formation."

pared with 9 percent of those with above-average intelligence. This finding, of course, is not surprising.⁵ Most unfortunate is the fact that about a third of those with average or above-average intelligence nevertheless drop out. Thus, despite their native ability, many of these lower-class children and children of assistance families fail to graduate. A separate analysis of those children with average or above-average intelligence showed that the three factors of neighborhood class, mobility, and sex remained strongly related to the dropout rate.

AFDC and School Dropouts

The data show that the children in families receiving aid to families with dependent children had a somewhat higher dropout rate than the other children. Forty-seven percent did not graduate from high school, compared with 38 percent for those not receiving aid.⁶ This difference is not large enough, however, to be statistically significant.⁷

Furthermore, a look at their performance while still in school shows that the children in assistance families were found to be doing as well as or better than the others. Both groups had the same proportion (52 percent) getting average or above-average ratings in deportment, and a slightly higher proportion of the children on the assistance rolls (58 percent) than of the others (56 percent) were making average or better-than-average grades. Since the assistance group contains more children with lower intelligence, more from broken homes, and more with frequent moves, it is surprising to find that they performed in school as well as the other children.

It is also surprising to find that dropping out of school was not significantly related to several fac-

⁵ Part of this association probably results from the fact that where cultural and educational opportunities are fewer both higher dropout rates and lower intelligence can result.

⁶ M. Elaine Burgess and Daniel O. Price, *An American Dependency Challenge* (American Public Welfare Association, 1963), pages 114-118. This study found that almost 70 percent of its national sample of children receiving aid to families with dependent children did not graduate from high school. It is presumed that the lower dropout rate in the New Haven study results from its location—a Northern urban area that has lower dropout rates in general than the Nation as a whole.

⁷ Chi-square is only 1.44 with a probability of .23.

TABLE 2.—Factors associated with delinquency

Characteristic	Number ¹	Percent delinquent ²
Race:		
White.....	267	27
Nonwhite.....	108	³ 45
Sex:		
Female.....	208	13
Male.....	176	³ 54
Intelligence:		
Above-average.....	45	11
Average.....	136	24
Below-average.....	165	³ 36
School status:		
High school graduate.....	193	18
Nongraduate.....	162	³ 48
Birth status:		
Legitimate.....	189	39
Illegitimate.....	44	⁴ 52
Parents' absence: ⁵		
Both present.....	62	24
One or both absent.....	211	⁶ 38
Number of delinquent siblings:		
0.....	183	25
1.....	101	34
2 or more.....	52	³ 62
Number of moves since 1950:		
0.....	152	27
1-4.....	205	31
5 or more.....	27	³ 59
Years in public housing:		
0.....	254	28
1 or more.....	130	⁶ 38
Neighborhood delinquency:		
Low.....	169	28
High.....	151	⁶ 39

¹ Assistance group and nonassistance group combined. Excludes those whose characteristics were unknown.

² With one or more arrest or juvenile court referral, excluding traffic offenses.

³ The probability that this observed difference could occur by chance is less than 1 in 100.

⁴ Probability of occurring by chance is .13. Since this approaches significant levels it is included.

⁵ Absence or presence in the home in 1950.

⁶ The probability that this observed difference could occur by chance is less than 5 in 100.

tors that have been presumed to be related. The 1960 Census shows that one of the strongest factors influencing dropouts is race.⁸ But in the New Haven sample the nonwhites dropped out no more than the whites (41 percent)! How can this difference between the national data and the data in the present study be explained? The fact that nonwhites have a higher dropout rate on the national level may result from their being concentrated in the lower class and in the South. Since in the sample study there are controls for class and region, this difference in dropout rates disappears.

Other characteristics, sometimes associated with school dropouts but showing no significant association in the 1962 study, are religion, size of family, birth order, broken homes, illegitimacy, and public housing. It is true that there were slightly higher dropout rates among Protestants, larger

⁸ Of all high school seniors in October 1959, 20 percent of the nonwhite youngsters did not graduate, compared with 12 percent of the whites (Bureau of the Census, Series Census ERS, P-27, No. 32).

families, the later-born children in a family, broken homes, illegitimate children, and families in public housing, but the relationships are not strong enough to approach statistical significance. It may be that these relationships are weak because the samples have been controlled for class.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Delinquency showed a relationship to more factors on which data were available than did dropping out of school. Table 2 shows these relationships with 10 of the strongest factors. The 10 factors are grouped into those referring to the individual, those referring to his family, and those referring to his neighborhood.

The first four factors—race, sex, intelligence, and school status—are primarily individual characteristics and are most strongly related to delinquency. Being nonwhite almost doubles the probability of delinquency, and being male quadruples the probability. The probability of delinquency for those with below-average intelligence is triple that for those with above-average intelligence, and dropping out of school more than doubles the probability of delinquency. The causal direction seems clear for the first three factors, but part of the association between school status and delinquency probably runs in the opposite direction—that is, becoming delinquent probably increases the likelihood of dropping out and vice versa.

For the purposes of the study, these individual characteristics were considered to be indicators of *legitimate* opportunity.⁹ In our society, being nonwhite limits an individual's access to the legitimate opportunity structures in employment, housing, etc. Similarly, having below-average intelligence or dropping out of school will limit an individual's opportunities in the legitimate or noncriminal world. It can be argued that, among these lower-class youth, being male also limits an individual's opportunity in the sense that "success" is more difficult to achieve for boys than for girls. Girls can typically look forward to achieving some minimum degree of success in marriage and

motherhood. Boys, on the other hand, will be less satisfied with achieving only marriage and fatherhood. In the eyes of society, they must also achieve success in the occupational world. Stated in terms of sociological theory, being nonwhite, male, less intelligent, or a school dropout restricts legitimate avenues to legitimate goals among lower-class youth and thus tends to produce frustration, alienation, and anomie. These feelings, in turn, tend to produce delinquent behavior and explain the marked differences observed in the respective delinquency rates for these groups.

The next four factors in table 2—birth status, parents' absence, number of delinquent siblings, and number of moves since 1950—are characteristics of the individual's family. Illegitimate birth and the absence of one or both parents indicate a broken or deviant family. Either characteristic, according to the study, increases the probability of delinquency by about 14 percent. Having delinquent siblings clearly indicates a deviant family in the sense that it contains persons who have violated the law. If the family contains two or more such persons, the study indicated that the probabilities are almost 2 out of 3 that the child will become delinquent. Frequent moves may indicate a deviant family in the sense that they tend to reduce the family's integration into the neighborhood, its "sense of belonging," its susceptibility to neighborhood controls, etc. The families that moved five or more times in the period studied had almost as high a delinquency rate as those with two or more delinquent siblings.

The last two factors, public housing and neighborhood delinquency, are characteristics of the child's neighborhood. The study showed that either living in public housing or living in a high delinquency neighborhood increases the probability of a youngster's becoming delinquent by about 10 percent.

In this study, these family and neighborhood characteristics were considered as being indicators of access to *illegitimate* opportunities. The child in the deviant family or neighborhood has more models from which to learn both deviant goals and illegitimate means to achieve his goals. Furthermore, he has easier access to illegitimate or criminal structures, such as delinquent gangs and gambling or dope "syndicates," and thus his chances of "success" in these illegitimate areas are increased. These characteristics complement the

⁹ The theory of legitimate opportunities, illegitimate opportunities, and delinquency presented here is derived from R. A. Cloward and L. E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity* (The Free Press, 1960). This study in turn was derived from work by R. K. Merton, A. K. Cohen, E. H. Sutherland, and others.

individual characteristics that block access to legitimate structures since they open up avenues to illegitimate structures and therefore increase the delinquency rates.

AFDC and Delinquency

The assistance group had almost twice the proportion of youngsters who had been arrested or referred to court as the other group (34 percent and 18 percent). Although this is a statistically significant association, the author felt that it was a spurious one, resulting from other factors, shown in table 3, which are related both to receipt of assistance and to delinquency.

Although the differences between the assistance families and those not receiving assistance are not statistically significant for the first three characteristics, the fact that the assistance group had more boys, more families living in the lowest-class neighborhoods, and more children with below-average intelligence, tends to increase their delinquency rates. All the other factors show significant and large differences between the two groups that would be expected to increase the delinquency rates of children on the assistance rolls. In comparison with those not receiving assistance, the assistance group had 11 percent more with below-average intelligence; twice as high a proportion who moved three or more times since 1950; twice as high a proportion living in public housing; three times the proportion nonwhite; and more than 10 times the proportion with one or both parents absent in 1950.

In order to adequately test the hypothesis that

TABLE 3.—Percent of children receiving AFDC and of children not receiving AFDC with specified characteristics

Characteristic	Percent	
	Children receiving AFDC	Children not receiving AFDC
Male.....	45	43
Living in lowest-class neighborhoods.....	61	57
With below-average intelligence ¹	49	38
Moved 3 or more times.....	18	² 7
Living in public housing.....	37	³ 15
Nonwhite ⁴	32	³ 11
With one or both parents absent in 1950.....	94	³ 8

¹ Defined as having an I.Q. of less than 90.

² The probability that this difference could occur by chance is less than 5 in 100.

³ The probability that this difference could occur by chance is less than 1 in 100.

⁴ Most of the nonwhite persons are Negro.

the higher delinquency rate for the children receiving assistance resulted from the factors shown in table 3 rather than the receipt of assistance itself, there should be a control for all seven of these other factors to determine if the association of assistance and delinquency remains. This control is obviously not possible with the limited numbers in the sample.

Control was possible for two of the most important factors—race and sex. The samples were divided into four subgroups: nonwhite males, white males, nonwhite females, and white females. Within these four subgroups, the correlation was computed for the number of years the child was on the assistance rolls and the number of delinquent acts for which he was arrested or referred to court.¹⁰ If receipt of assistance increases delinquency, this correlation should have been a strong positive one—that is, the more years the child received assistance, the larger the number of delinquency acts. Actually, in all four subgroups the correlations were found to be weak and insignificant.

Thus, with class, age, race, and sex controlled, there is little or no association left between aid to families with dependent children and delinquency. This finding supports the hypothesis that receipt of assistance does not increase delinquency and that the observed gross association between aid to families with dependent children and delinquency is a spurious one because they both result from a complex of other factors.¹¹

Furthermore, the factors shown above to be related to delinquency for the total sample are also related in similar ways when the children receiving assistance and those not receiving assistance are analyzed separately.

How Representative Are the Samples?

Before attempting to generalize for the Nation as a whole on the basis of the samples used in the

¹⁰ A valid and accurate measure of the seriousness of a delinquent act would have permitted a comparison of this factor with the number of years on the assistance rolls. Because there is little agreement on which delinquent act is more serious than another, it was impossible to develop such a measure.

¹¹ M. Elaine Burgess and Daniel O. Price (*op. cit.*, page 124) come to a similar conclusion.

study, one should bear in mind certain differences that may limit the applicability of the findings. First, the samples are entirely urban, but more than a fourth of all cases receiving aid to families with dependent children are rural.¹² This is an important difference, because urban juvenile delinquency rates tend to be about three times as high as rural rates.¹³ The delinquency rates for the New Haven Sample are therefore probably higher than would be found in a national sample. On the other hand, the dropout rates for this sample are lower than those shown in the American Public Welfare Association study.¹⁴ Second, New Haven is a New England city. Samples from other regions would obviously show systematic differences such as educational levels and the percentages that were nonwhite.

In terms of sex ratio, however, this sample of assistance recipients is similar to the national samples,¹⁵ with boys making up 48 percent of the national sample and 45 percent in New Haven. The average number of children in the family was roughly the same (a median of three), and the proportions were about the same with respect to race composition (with 2 out of 3 white) and the occupation of the parent (with more than 90 percent blue-collar workers). Illegitimacy rates (about 20 percent) and rates of physical or mental impairment (about 15 percent) also showed little difference. The New Haven children not receiving aid to families with dependent children are probably representative of lower-class New Haven children, but there is no way of knowing how representative they are of lower-class children in the rest of the Nation.

¹² Robert H. Mugge, "Aid to Families With Dependent Children: Initial Findings of the 1961 Report on the Characteristics of Recipients," *Social Security Bulletin*, March 1963, pages 3-15.

¹³ *Juvenile Court Statistics, 1961* (Children's Bureau Statistical Series No. 69), 1962, page 2.

¹⁴ M. Elaine Burgess and Daniel O. Price, *op cit.*

¹⁵ Robert Mugge, *op. cit.*, and M. Elaine Burgess and Daniel O. Price, *op. cit.*

SUMMARY

In the analysis of 384 lower-class children born in 1942-44, dropout rates were found to be significantly higher among those from the lower-class neighborhoods, those moving frequently, the males, and those with below-average intelligence. Dropout rates were not found to be significantly related to receipt of assistance. In fact, the students receiving assistance did as well as or better in terms of school deportment and grades.

Delinquency was found to be significantly associated with several individual characteristics (nonwhite, male, low intelligence, and leaving school) that were considered as indicators of barriers to legitimate opportunity that produce anomie and delinquency. Delinquency was also significantly related to characteristics of deviant families (illegitimacy, absent parents, and delinquent siblings) and to characteristics of deviant neighborhoods (public housing and high neighborhood delinquency rates). These characteristics were considered to be indicators of access to illegitimate opportunities that increases delinquency rates.

Although the children receiving aid to families with dependent children had twice the rate of delinquency for those not receiving aid, the evidence indicates that this is a spurious association resulting from other factors. The background characteristics of the assistance recipients are those that tend to produce higher delinquency rates, and when some of these characteristics (class, age, race, and sex) were controlled there was little or no association left between receipt of assistance and delinquency.

Since this sample was limited to 384 lower-class children in one metropolitan area, most of whom were recipients of aid to families with dependent children, generalizations should be made with caution. The study indicates, however, that dropouts and delinquency found among the lower-class children result from a complex of factors that fit into recent theory on legitimate opportunity, illegitimate opportunity, and deviance.