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## Some Relationships of Parental Characteristics to the Behavior of Their Sons: A Two Generation Study of Juvenile Delinquency and Anti-Social Behavior

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**SOCIOLOGY**

Some Relationships of Parental Characteristics  
to the Behavior of Their Sons:  
A Two Generation Study of Juvenile Delinquency  
and Anti-Social Behavior

In October 1956, the author was hired as an interviewer for a research project conducted by Washington University School of Medicine. This research project is a follow-up study of 525 white persons seen as children in St. Louis Municipal Psychiatric Clinic during the years 1924-1929, designated as experimental cases, and 100 persons randomly selected from the St. Louis public school records approximately matched for sex, race, year of birth, and neighborhood, designated as control cases.<sup>1</sup>

Since each interviewer was encouraged to do independent side researches, the author decided to make a two generation study. By March 1, 1957, approximately 150 experimental and control cases had been located and interviewed. It was thought that of 150 persons, a sizeable number would be married and have sons over age 12. The author was given access to all the material gathered by the School of Medicine. With its aid, he was also given access to the Police, Court, and School records in the city and county of St. Louis, Missouri.

It was surprising to find that many of the persons seen as children in the St. Louis Municipal Psychiatric Clinic about thirty years ago had never married, had no children if married, had only girls, had sons under age 12, did not know where their children lived, or lived outside of the metropolitan St. Louis area. As a result the two generation

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<sup>1</sup>For a report on the Washington University School of Medicine Research see Lee Robins and Patricia O'Neal. 1958. Mortality, mobility and crime: problem children thirty years later. *American Sociological Review*. 23: 162-171.

sample contained only nine control parents with ten boys over age 12, and twelve experimental parents with thirteen boys over age 12. With a sample this size, mothers and fathers have not been differentiated even though it is known that the mother and father do not have the same impact on the behavior of their sons.

The first hypothesis of this side research is that problem behavior sons will be found more often among the experimental parents than among the control parents. The second hypothesis is that the characteristics of the parents of the problem sons will more frequently be characteristics associated with parents of juvenile delinquents than characteristics associated with parents of non-delinquents.<sup>2</sup> Problem behavior was operationally defined as (a) a Juvenile Court record, (b) average conduct grades in school of C- or lower, and (c) any special notations by teachers or principals designating the child as a problem in school. The absence of these three is called non-problem behavior.

TABLE 1—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Type of Parent*

Behavior of boys	PARENTS		
	Experimental	Control	All boys
Problem .....	10	1	11
Non-problem .....	3	9	12
All boys .....	13	10	23

The first hypothesis is born out quite strikingly in Table 1. Of the twelve experimental parents, nine have ten problem sons, whereas only one control parent has a problem son. On the other hand, eight control parents have nine non-problem sons, whereas only three experimental parents have three non-problem sons. Only one parent in each family was interviewed since only one parent was an experimental or control case. Therefore, for each son, the data are for only one parent.

A closer study of the first generation shows that the one control parent with a problem son had a characteristic found in all the

<sup>2</sup>The characteristics studied in this research are derived from the research of Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck. 1950. *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*. New York, Commonwealth Fund, and from the research of T. Earl Sullenger. 1936. *Social Determinants of Juvenile Delinquency*. John Wiley and Sons, New York.

experimental parents; namely, asocial or anti-social behavior as an adolescent. This one control parent had a Juvenile Court record. No evidence was found in Juvenile Court records, school records, police records, or interviews, that any of the other control parents had asocial or anti-social behavior as adolescents.

**RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY**

Both the Glueck and Sullenger researches found that a frequent change of address was associated with a higher incidence of juvenile delinquency. The question of past addresses was asked of each parent on the interview. As a check, the city and county directories were carefully studied and all addresses listed for the past ten years for each parent. Address changes of less than six blocks were eliminated on the assumption that they would not imply a significant change in neighborhood associations such as peer group, school, and church.

TABLE 2—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Residential Mobility of Parents, 1947-1956*

Behavior of boys	NUMBER OF MOVES OF PARENTS		
	0-1	2 or more	All boys
Problem .....	4	7	11
Non-problem .....	8	4	12
All boys .....	12	11	23

Table 2 shows that seven of the problem sons have changed residence two or more times in the past ten years, whereas only four of the non-problem sons have changed residence this often. The experimental parents moved more often and therefore a three-way association exists: experimental parents, residential mobility, and problem sons. An opposite three-way association also exists: control parents, residential stability, and non-problem sons. Of interest is the fact that the three experimental parents with non-problem sons had a much greater residential stability than most of the other experimental parents and some of the control parents. Since a number of moves might have been concentrated in one or two years, a careful check was made for the largest number of years a son had ever lived at any one address since birth. Since city and county directories before 1940 did not give sufficient data, this information is not available for three sons for the period prior to 1940.

TABLE 3—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Longest Period Parents Resided at Any One Address Since Birth of Sons*

Behavior of boys	LONGEST PERIOD AT ONE ADDRESS		All boys
	5 years or less	Over 5 years	
Problem .....	9	2	11
Non-problem .....	3	9	12
All boys .....	12	11	23

Most of the problem sons never had any real opportunity to develop "roots" in any neighborhood since their parents never remained in one place for long. While Table 3 shows those who remained five or less years at any one address, many remained only four or three years at any one address. The inability to settle down in one place for any long period of time is associated with experimental parents and problem sons. A factor which would have an effect on settling down would be ownership of the home. This question was asked on the interview and in most cases is also given in the city and county directories. Table 4 is based on these sources of information.

TABLE 4—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Home Tenure of Parents Since Birth of Sons*

Behavior of boys	HOME TENURE			All boys
	Renter	Renter, then owner	Owner	
Problem .....	6	5	0	11
Non-problem .....	2	5	5	12
All boys .....	8	10	5	23

Five of the experimental parents have never owned their home. These five experimental parents have six sons, five juvenile delinquents and one a school problem. This seems to indicate that a continual renting is associated with greater residential mobility, more serious problem behavior, and experimental parents. The sons of the experimental parents and one control parent who rented for a time but became home owners are only school problems. Two cases among the parents with non-problem sons have also been continual renters. A closer study shows that one rents from the husband's father and has done so for over 7 years, and the other has rented from the same landlord and lived at the same address for 12 years. In other words,

the renting in these two cases is not associated with residential mobility.

**OCCUPATION AND INCOME:**

The research conducted by the Gluecks and by Sullenger showed that those parents lower on the occupational hierarchy tend more often to have children who are juvenile delinquents. On the basis of directories, interviews, and school records, the experimental and control parents were divided into a four-fold classification of occupation. In none of the families do both parents work. In two experimental cases where the father is not present the mothers work.

TABLE 5—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and the Present Occupation of Employed Parent\**

Behavior of boys	OCCUPATION OF PARENTS				All boys
	Common laborer	Skilled laborer	Clerk, salesman	Small business owner	
Problem .....	6	1	3	1	11
Non-problem .....	0	4	5	3	12
All boys .....	6	5	8	4	23

\*The employed parent is not always the experimental or control parent.

Five of the parents with six problem sons have an occupation classified as common laborers, whereas none of the parents with non-problem sons fit this classification. The results shown in Table 5 agree with the findings of the Gluecks and Sullenger. The experimental parents with problem sons tend to be lower on the occupational hierarchy, and the control parents with non-problem sons tend to be higher. Yet the experimental and control parents were matched for sex, race, year of birth, and neighborhood as children. Perhaps this points to a greater striving on the part of control parents. Perhaps it reflects a difference in attitude toward work, or toward society itself.

TABLE 6—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Present Weekly Family Income*

Behavior of boys	WEEKLY FAMILY INCOME				All boys
	under \$60	\$61-\$80	\$81-\$100	over \$100	
Problem .....	3	3	1	4	11
Non-problem .....	0	2	1	9	12
All boys .....	3	5	2	13	23

Occupation and family income are closely correlated. However, family income can be boosted by having members of the family working. The income available to the family affects their standard of living, their ability to enjoy luxuries, et cetera. Family income was gathered in the interviews with the parents. Table 6, based on this source of information, indicates that parents with problem sons tend to have somewhat lower family incomes. A thorough study also shows that the lower the income, the more serious the behavior of the problem sons tends to be. Noteworthy is that nine of the non-problem sons live in families with a weekly income over \$100.

**SCHOOLING OF PARENTS**

The research of the Gluecks found that parents with delinquent boys had slightly less formal schooling than parents of non-delinquent boys.

TABLE 7—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Formal Schooling of Parents*

Behavior of boys	GRADES COMPLETED BY PARENTS				All boys
	8	9	10	12	
Problem .....	2	6	3	0	11
Non-problem .....	5	2	0	5	12
All boys .....	7	8	3	5	23

In this study the average number of years in school for parents with problem sons is 9.0, and the average for parents with non-problem sons is 9.7. These findings are similar to those obtained by the Gluecks. None of the parents with problem sons graduated from high school, although eight began high school. On the other hand, five of the parents with non-problem sons stopped at the end of the eighth grade. The public school system during the years the parents attended was divided into an 8 year elementary and a 4 year high school. This made the 8th grade and 12th grade terminal points of a unit of education. Viewed from this perspective, starting high school and quitting before graduation is associated with experimental parents and problem sons, whereas stopping formal school at graduation, elementary or high school, is associated with control parents and non-problem sons.

Table 8 shows that the parents with non-problem sons have a somewhat better grade average than parents with problem sons. It was not possible to compare the intelligence of the two categories of

TABLE 8—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Grade Average of Parents*

Behavior of boys	GRADE AVERAGE OF PARENTS				All boys
	D	C	B	A	
Problem .....	1	8	2	0	11
Non-problem .....	0	6	5	1	12
All boys .....	1	14	7	1	23

parents. The lower grades may be a consequence of negative attitudes toward school work and school personnel on the part of parents with problem sons rather than a consequence of lower intelligence.

**CHURCH AND ORGANIZATION ATTENDANCE:**

The research of the Gluecks found that non-delinquent boys attended church and other organizations more often than delinquent boys. In general, the churches of America teach and disseminate the middle-class norms. If problem behavior is a manifestation of non-conformity to these norms, then parents with problem sons and parents with non-problem sons might be expected to show differences in church attendance.

TABLE 9—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Church Attendance of Parents*

Behavior of boys	PARENT'S CHURCH ATTENDANCE			All boys
	None	Occasional	Regular	
Problem* .....	1	5	4	10
Non-problem .....	2	5	8	12
All boys .....	3	7	12	22

\*No data for one boy's parent.

Experimental parents with the more serious problem sons are not regular in church attendance with one exception. Parents with less serious problem sons are regular in church attendance. Inspection of Table 9 shows that regular church attendance is associated with control parents and non-problem sons.

America has been called a nation of joiners. Most, if not all, of the patriotic, religious, fraternal, and other organizations reflect and disseminate the middle-class norms. One might, therefore, expect that regular attendance at one or more such organizations might reflect both the attitude toward, and acceptance of the middle-class norms.



TABLE 10—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Attendance at Association Meetings by Parents*

Behavior of boys	PARENT'S ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS			All boys
	None	Occasional	Regular	
Problem*	4	0	6	10
Non-problem	2	1	9	12
All boys	6	1	15	22

\*No data for one boy's parent.

There is no great difference between parents with problem sons and parents with non-problem sons, in so far as attendance at organizations is concerned. However, a closer study revealed that the parents with problem sons who attend regularly, usually belong to only one organization, and this is more apt to be one which holds monthly meetings, whereas the parents with non-problem sons tend to belong to either two or more organizations, or an organization with weekly or bi-weekly meetings. When the data in Table 10 are interpreted with this knowledge, there appears to be an association of organization attendance with parents of non-problem sons.

**AREA OF RESIDENCE:**

The research conducted by the Gluecks and Sullenger showed that delinquent boys tend to live in poorer neighborhoods than do non-delinquent boys. The city of St. Louis with over 800,000 people is different politically and socially from the smaller suburbs, most of which are socially and politically separate municipalities and communities. In general, the schools in the suburbs tend to be newer, the houses tend to be farther apart, separate school districts have more of a local "atmosphere", accounting for many differences between the main city of St. Louis and the outlying suburbs.

TABLE 11—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Present Area of Residence of Parents*

Behavior of boys	AREA OF RESIDENCE		All boys
	City	County	
Problem	7	4	11
Non-problem	5	7	12
All boys	12	11	23

Table 11 shows that six of the ten parents with problem sons have lived in the city of St. Louis all or most of their life, whereas six of

the parents with non-problem sons have lived in the county (i. e. suburbs) most of their lives. The parents with non-problem sons living in the main city tend to live in the areas of one family dwellings or duplexes, whereas the parents with problem sons living in the city of St. Louis tend to live in the older run-down neighborhoods or in the areas with multiple family dwellings.

**JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL COURT RECORD OF PARENTS**

As an interviewer for the Washington University School of Medicine Research Project, the author had access to police and court records. The names of each parent and son were checked through the records. The criminal record of each parent was then divided into criminal behavior before the son's birth and criminal behavior after the son's birth. Only those traffic offenses resulting in court action are included.

TABLE 12—*Distribution of Boys by Behavior and Criminal Record of Parents Before Birth of Son*

Behavior of boys	COURT RECORD			All boys
	None	Juvenile	Other	
Problem .....	5	3	3	11
Non-problem .....	8	2	2	12
All boys .....	13	5	5	23

TABLE 13—*Distribution of Boys Behavior and Criminal Record of Parents After Birth of Son*

Behavior of boys	COURT RECORD		All boys
	None	Criminal	
Problem .....	8	3	11
Non-problem .....	12	0	12
All boys .....	20	3	23

Table 12 indicates that a criminal record on the part of the parent before the son's birth is slightly indicative of his having a problem son later in life. Table 13 shows that this is more indicative if the criminal behavior continues after the birth of the son.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The sample turned out to be much smaller than was anticipated. The size and nature of the sample precluded any amount of statistical analysis and tests of probability. On such a small sample, inspection

of the raw data seemed to be a sufficiently precise method of making generalizations.

Inspection indicates relationships of a sufficient size and direction that one may conclude that the hypotheses have been verified. The author believes that additional research of this type should be conducted. Many more experimental and control cases of the Washington University School of Medicine Research Project have been interviewed since this study was made. A much larger sample is now available for a replicative research.