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Disturbed Youth and the Agencies

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I speak of "disturbed youth" because, though inadequately descriptive, it is the expression most commonly applied. It is meant to include not only young persons who get into trouble with the law but others who are sufficiently difficult or refractory for the school or the family or the church or the neighbors to report them as needing special attention or discipline or other treatment or therapy. The agencies referred to are primarily the range of official organizations that are concerned with the control or prevention of delinquency but may include also the voluntary welfare agencies that participate in the same task.

The reflections that follow were prompted by my experience as director of the City of New York's Juvenile Delinquency Evaluation Project, and to provide background for my remarks. I shall briefly describe the commission we undertook. We were appointed by Mayor Wagner to investigate, report on, and evaluate the whole range of City agencies engaged in the task of delinquency prevention and control, including ancillary youth services. It is the first time that any great city has undertaken so inclusive an evaluative survey over this field. We were given a free hand to obtain all relevant data and to present our conclusions. I had, at the maximum, a staff of eight research associates and an assistant director, with a small budget to call in expert consultants for part-time aid. The investigation lasted five and a half years, ending August 31st of this year. During this period we issued sixteen interim reports, each on some particular agency or program, and three final reports covering broader aspects of the total agency picture.

Our mission was fact-finding as a basis for evaluating a series of social-action programs. It is a form of research that has peculiar problems. Our chief problem was to ascertain the facts relevant to evaluation, not to evaluate the facts we found. We had in the first place to be doubly sure that any conditions we claimed to have found were

established beyond a question, for a single error could be used by critical authorities as a ground for condemning our whole investigation. Naturally, if one is attempting to evaluate, everything one reports is jealously examined by interested parties, since the evaluation is by no means always welcomed by those whose work is subject to evaluation. We did, let me add, in two or three instances, have the happiness of meeting the head of an organization who begged us to find out all the deficiencies of his service and offered to help in the process. Obviously, this attitude was not, to put it mildly, universal.

The major issue in an evaluative study may be broadly stated as this: how effectively, within practical limits, does the program achieve or advance its objective? This question is by no means so clear or so simple as it may perhaps sound, but, aside from that, there is the difficulty that the final test of achievement is frequently barred, and it was so for the evaluation we were undertaking. For our evaluation the definitive answer would have been the proportion of cases under organizational care or treatment who were actually rehabilitated, in other words, reformed from the delinquent tendencies they had previously shown, with sufficient control situations for comparison so as to justify the conclusion that the difference was due to such care or treatment. Such evidence was not available. Only in rare instances did we have any statistics purporting to represent the proportion of successes and failures. Statistics that nearly always were incomplete or inadequately certified or covering too short a period. To take one example, we obtained figures showing that of institutionalized adolescents, youths from 16 to 20, who had while on parole been under the care of a particular agency, over fifty per cent went straight or at least did not again get into trouble with the law during the observation period. But, to leave out other questions, what percentage of those would not have got into trouble had there not been the effort of the agency to help them? We had no means of answering. I am not at all denying that the work of the agency was effective—cases could be cited showing that it had found employment for them and in other ways made their path easier. It is simply that we had no basis of assessment. We found in no instance adequate research to prove, by the final test, the merits of treatment.

If this is the situation we face in studying rehabilitative programs, it is obviously even more so when we attempt to assess preventive programs.

The lack of definite tests is, however, no ground for the assumption that over the large area of organized action deficient in this respect we cannot undertake reasonably effective evaluative studies. In every area of scientific research we have often to depend on degrees of probability, on approximations, on indirect approaches, and such procedures can yield results of considerable importance. There are

many ranges between certitude and ignorance, and nearly all we know about human beings and human activities lie within these ranges.

In our evaluative procedures we had to fall back on the broad question: How well is this program geared to the task it is called on to accomplish? Most of the programs we studied, whether in the special schools for refractory youngsters or in residential institutions or under a system of probation or in one or another kind of reformatory for adolescents or in services designed to influence the behavior of gangs or in the case-work or group-work activities of welfare agencies, were guidance or training programs, attempting the social readjustment of young persons who had manifested some kind of behavior disorder—in other words, they were educational programs. And, after all educating the young is one of the most ancient of human enterprises, and perhaps the most studied. Even if some of the studying has not been particularly effective, we do know something about the problem and the approaches to it, and we do have a considerable body of research devoted to it. With this as background, we investigated numerous agencies and their programs.

Our bases of evaluation were sufficiently obvious. For example, to guide disturbed or rebellious youth the workers should themselves have certain qualifications, including the ability to establish relations with them. We found that in some guidance functions the standards were too low and the salary rates were insufficient to attract the appropriate personnel, and sometimes the case-loads were made too high. These deficiencies were not infrequently found to apply to probation officers, cottage parents, guidance counsellors, intake officials, custodians. It is curious that while we are very conscious of the need to have expert mechanics to tend our complicated machines we so often seem willing to put the peculiarly sensitive and vastly more complex mentality of the young in charge of poorly paid and poorly qualified officials.

Another pretty obvious proposition is that where your concern is troublesome misbehaving youth, the earlier in the process of deviation from decent behavior you attempt to readjust or rehabilitate them the better are the chances of success. It would seem clear enough, and it is supported by the consensus of experience, that for behavior ailments, as for bodily ones, treatment should be undertaken before the trouble becomes deep-seated. And yet we found there was very little skilled service and very few resources devoted to programs for the early direction and special care of vulnerable youth. Only a mite compared with the service and funds provided for the rehabilitation of more confirmed delinquents.

It is easy to understand why official agencies have concentrated their efforts in the latter direction. It is the serious offenses that call for arrest and courts adjudication. It is the habitual offender who is

committed to an institution. It is the more flagrant cases that the referral agencies succeed in placing. It is the headline cases, stabbings and shootings and vandalisms, that attract public attention and evoke demands for drastic action. Certainly such cases must be brought to book, and law and order safeguarded. But there is little concern for the conditions that breed delinquency or for the early developments that ripen into crime. This situation, as well as many others, indicates the need for a highly qualified supervising and planning board, beyond the multiplicity of operating departments, a subject to which I shall later return.

A further proposition will be readily accepted by all who have any practical experience in the field. It is that delinquency has many forms of expression, many differences of character, and develops in response to diverse situations. Probably everyone has been guilty of delinquent acts, which cover a pretty wide range. The formation of delinquent habits is associated with particular situations, with family friction or failure, with parental overstrictness or overindulgence, with neglect or discrimination, with frustrations of various kinds, with bad associations, with lack of opportunities or incentives in deteriorated neighborhoods, and so forth. And back of the conditions there are the varieties of disposition and the grades and qualities of intelligence among the youth subjected to them. Sometimes delinquency begins to develop at very tender years, sometimes around puberty. The differences of type are numerous and of course there are many children who even under the worst conditions surmount the danger of a delinquent career.

Several conclusions applicable to practice follows. In the first place guidance and treatment procedures should be differentiated and adapted to the behavior symptoms and mental characteristics of the delinquent. There is obviously no one prescription that applies to all cases, any more than to all kinds of disease. We too frequently found the tendency to lump all delinquents together, as merely exhibiting milder or more severe cases of the same trouble. For the light cases a warning sufficed, addressed to the children and to their parents. Somewhat more serious cases were put on probation. Quite serious offenders were committed to institutions, sometimes including youths with mental or physical deficiencies that called for specialized therapy.

We have, it is true, no accepted classification of types of delinquents. In regular usage there are a few loose terms of distinction, such as "acting-out" or "withdrawn" (or introvert). In the characterization of cases by agencies the most common term appears to be "disturbed," usually with some qualification such as "seriously," "severely," "emotionally," or "mentally." There are certainly cases to which the term "disturbed" seems hardly applicable. Delinquency

may indeed be itself a form of adjustment to adverse or unhappy experience, and sometimes it may be conformity to a mode of behavior which the parents themselves exhibit.

In view of all this variety of delinquent attitudes and manifestations certain corollaries can obviously be drawn. In the first place guidance and treatment procedures should be differentiated according to the behavior symptoms and the mental characteristics of the subject. Careful diagnosis and screening are requisite prior to disposition, especially for all relatively serious cases. This prescription applies to every kind of intake service, for clinics, for courts, for admission to special schools for difficult children, for State training institutions, residential service institutions, custodial institutions. Again, the Youth Division of the Police Department should be qualified to make primary distinctions, so that its members can wisely use their discretion whether to arrest a youth for court appearance, to bring him to the attention of an appropriate welfare agency, or merely to advise or warn him and communicate with his parents or guardians. Furthermore, diagnosis and screening are of high importance for the proper disposition of cases in the juvenile court, since the decision may well be crucial for the future of the youth who come before it. The court should therefore have available a broad-based diagnostic service to which the judge could refer for recommendation the more complex cases.

There is another form of screening and diagnosis that is of the first importance. I have already pointed out the relative neglect of preventive measures for vulnerable and near-delinquent youngsters. Obviously, such youngsters need to be discovered, and this procedure belongs mainly to other agencies than those just mentioned. We concluded that there are two primary resources for this service. One of these is the school. The school is much the best of all observation posts for the recognition of the behavior problems of the young, from their earliest years. The child is before the eyes of reasonably impartial and relatively well-trained people. His attitudes and his responses are subject to observation day after day, year after year. Any decently good teacher should be able to recognize, without resort to any fancy tests, those who need special guidance or some form of therapy or additional protection and care. The school should not be expected to take on the functions of a clinic or of a welfare agency, but it cannot efficiently educate socially maladjusted or grossly recalcitrant children without resort to guidance counsellors or without the service of psychologists and social workers to refer cases for further treatment.

We cannot, however, depend on the school alone. Certainly in the congested high-delinquency areas of the City the overworked school cannot cope with the problem. Here we have to turn to a second resource, the neighborhood itself. Only in the neighborhood and with the aid of neighborhood agencies and the enlisting in the

quest of neighborhood volunteers, can the necessary scouting be accomplished. In those neighborhoods families do not know how or where to appeal for aid, and many young persons are neglected or led astray for lack of it. A small professional unit set up within the neighborhood is necessary to organize services, provide guidance and aid, and act as a clearing house for referrals. Our own Project was enabled through a City subvention to organize a program along these lines in a high-delinquency area in the South Bronx, and the results to date are highly encouraging.

I have been mentioning some general and scarcely disputable propositions that were in effect major premises of our evaluative study. Our particular task was simply to relate such propositions to the actual operations of a group of official agencies. I shall mention two more propositions that are perhaps not so obvious but that were sufficiently established for us by the evidences of our investigation. They are both applicable to the institutional treatment of delinquents.

First, on-the-spot- or localized training or treatment for delinquents is preferable to institutional treatment, wherever the former can be applied without serious peril either to the community or to the youth himself. Obviously enough, youngsters guilty of stabbing or shooting or violent personal assaults or arson or non-statutory rape may need to be committed to some kind of custodial institution, but for most other offenses, even if the offender has been repeatedly in trouble, institutional treatment constitutes a hazard to be avoided wherever there is a practicable alternative. There is a considerable likelihood that the uncongenial environment of the institution, where resentful youngsters are penned together and almost inevitably create an underworld of their own, will confirm their hatred of authority, so that they will leave more hardened to delinquency than when they entered. We are referring here only to the non-specialized large-scale institutions, not to small selective institutions where adequate professional service is provided and somewhat more freedom is possible, nor to short-term shelters or half-way houses, nor to camps that provide for screened youngsters a real occupational training, in a less restrictive environment.

It is an unhappy unbalance that while such large sums are expended on these large institutions, the main treatment alternative available to the courts, probation, is so undeveloped and mostly so perfunctory, especially in view of the disparity of cost.

The last general proposition I shall offer applies to juveniles who have been discharged from institutions of any type or have been under treatment in clinics, and to adolescents who have been in a reformatory and are let out often without even the supervision of parole, and not least to narcotic addicts who have gone through a process of detoxication in an institution. The proposition is that institutional

returnees are in a peculiarly insecure and vulnerable position on discharge, that they are then in need of special assistance, and that if the institution has had any salutary effect at all it is likely to be dissipated unless there is adequate after-care. It is easy to understand that returnees are in a very difficult position, that it is particularly hard for them to get a job, that even returning to school, if they are young enough, is a problem for them, that they are without any resources and may not even have a home ready to receive them. These conditions are an ideal preparation for recidivism. Actually we found that only in a small minority of cases were any effective steps taken to avert this danger.

In conclusion, I should like to pass some remarks on the scholar's role in evaluative research. It is an area in which I have been engaged over the past ten years. There is a very considerable demand, as well as need, for evaluative studies of organizational structures and organizational operations. One may distinguish two main types of such research. One type is directed toward finding a solution for some special problem arising within an organization or between organizations. The other type, the type of which I have been speaking, has the broader function of evaluating the efficiency of the operations of an organization or of a system of organizations. Professional scholars generally play too minor a part in this large and growing area. Some have a tendency to shy away from it, on the doctrinaire assumption that it involves 'value judgments,' and value judgments are taboo in scientific work. In this paper I hope to have shown how much of a misapprehension may be involved in this sweeping conclusion. The propositions I have cited as the basis of our evaluative procedures are wholly uncontroversial, merely stating certain rational considerations concerning the conditions of effective action in the area under investigation.

I regard the activities of the SPSSI as a signal assertion of the scholar's role in this type of investigation over the whole area of the social sciences, just as I regard social psychology as the basic subject underlying all investigation in this area.

Our own investigation of the relation of a group of official agencies to the youth under their charge showed clearly the need for a considerable increase in the role of scholarship within the system. It is fine that professional scholars, psychologists and child welfare experts are called in to render some specific services, especially by the schools, the court clinics, and the residential institutions. Some large agencies have also research members working for them. But for the most part, these members are engaged in secondary activities. They seldom initiate programs or lay out broad plans; their particular tasks are usually assigned by administrators. Professional scholars should have the direction of training programs at all levels, and these scholars

should by no means be drawn solely from graduates of schools of social work. On our own project I found the services of political scientists and social psychologists invaluable. Again, diagnostic and screening services, so essential in this area, should be mainly in the charge of professional scholars, including, of course, psychiatrists. Moreover, the operations of agencies not infrequently tend to become routinized, and from time to time require the fresh impetus of a broad-based and relatively autonomous research body, which can review their system as a whole.

Most important of all, the over-all planning of a great city's complex structure of services for youth calls for the professional skill and experience of a permanent research unit of high caliber, free to study the whole network of relationships between the agencies as well as the respective operations of each, to propose revisions and developments of existing programs, qualified also to negotiate its proposals for inter-agency cooperation, and to review independently the adequacy of the whole structure to grapple with the problems of the young. Such a service is essential because otherwise there will be no over-all planning. Every department has its own functions and its own established interests which define and limit its viewpoint and are likely to cause duplication of effort and inadequate teamwork with other agencies.

The problem of delinquent youth is not solved by any simple expedients, by resort alone to more services or more controls. It is many-sided, and if it is to be tackled with the seriousness it deserves we must as far as possible get down to the conditions that breed it. Some of these are obvious, other are obscurely rooted in the mentality of youth, as it responds to the entanglements of circumstances. To deal with what we know is a big enough task. We know with certainty that the in-migrant groups in our great cities have generally been thrust into squalid deteriorating environments made worse by the congestion of their presence, and we know that they have accordingly swelled the delinquency statistics out of proportion to their numbers. We know that certain family situations also contribute disproportionately to delinquency. We know that discrimination, the false brand of inferiority attached to a group, because of color or ethnic origin, is a factor. We know enough to make a major attack on the problem. We know that it requires not only the preventive and remedial services we have referred to, but also the removal of the conditions that breed delinquency, the thorough renovation of the slum areas that deny to the young the decencies, the opportunities, the outlets they need. The kind of planning unit I have in mind would stimulate this over-all effort, would constantly make suggestions for the advancement of services, and would propose experiments in line with the development of research over the whole field. It

should be placed directly in the Mayor's executive office. Thus at length scholarship would make its full and essential contribution to a problem that in spite of all the services and funds devoted to it seems further from solution than before.