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Society and the Juvenile Offender

This article discusses the results of a major Swedish study concerning juvenile crime and the effects of society's reaction. The authors stress interagency cooperation and give examples of successful cooperation.

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Introduction

Society and the Juvenile Offender was a project begun in 1975 as a followup study to a 1956 research project. The central issue was the nature of society's reaction to juvenile crime and the effect of this reaction on juvenile crime. Research methods included literature reviews, two studies of one Stockholm suburb's experience with juvenile crime and that suburb's reaction system, and observations of numerous experimental projects in juvenile delinquency prevention. In addition, juvenile justice systems in the Soviet Union, Poland, the United States, and Denmark were examined through site visits.

A Study of Juvenile Offenders From Community S

The Stockholm suburb studied, here referred to as Community S, had about 40,000 inhabitants in 1975, 4,000 of whom were between the ages of 13 and 19. The community's crime rate was one of the 40 highest of the 118 police districts in Sweden. Police records of Community S and of neighboring communities showed that 93 youths from the community had police contacts in 1975; 76 had been arrested.

Larceny and burglary were favorite crimes of these youth, followed by driving without a license and stealing. Most of the offenders were male and between the ages of 15 and 17. Foreign citizens far outweighed their representation in the population. The juveniles tended to commit crimes on weekends and holidays anytime during the year, were usually arrested within 24 hours of the crime, but usually waited up to 156 days from the time of the crime to the day of final judgment. A significant

number of the children had had previous records or contacts with police, but 90 percent of the younger children and 49 percent of the 15- to 17-year olds had made their criminal debut in 1975.

The central social welfare committee's reaction was usually practical, representative of time and resource restraints. The most common reaction was to write or call the children's parents or the children themselves (if older than 15 years) and arrange a meeting. Final decisions on the cases varied with the circumstances of the crime and the juvenile's background. Many juveniles were let go with a warning, others were placed under supervision or on probation, and still others were recommended for trial.

Overall, the statistics pointed to an unreasonably long delay between the time of crime and time of final decision. This situation must render the final judgment either totally meaningless or vengeful in the juvenile's eyes.

How Does the System Work With Problem Youth in Community S?

To answer this question, a second study included a survey of various agency personnel who come into contact with delinquent youth. Interviewed were 11 social workers and a total of 41 persons from a variety of organizations: the police, the recreation department, the schools, the municipal agency for mental health care of children and of juveniles (PBU), and the libraries.

Respondents answered questions covering such issues as the nature of their first contact with problem juveniles, their method of dealing with the youth, their perceived effectiveness in preventing further crime, perception of their role in helping juveniles, perceptions of the roles of the other surveyed agencies, and areas of agency cooperation.

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The First Contact

Type of first contact varies with type of occupation. For instance, teachers, librarians, school authorities, and recreation activity leaders are much more likely to be aware of problems long before police are. Police arrest the child, contact his parents, investigate the crime, and then refer the case to the social welfare administration.

The social welfare administration, or "social-förvaltning," receives reports of all children arrested by the police. It also receives referrals from schools, the general public, and other agencies. If the referred child is under 15 years, the administration contacts the child's parents to set up an appointment. Children over age 15 are contacted personally. The caseworkers will normally set up an interview with the child and his parents or the child alone, try to probe underlying problems causing deviant behavior, explain the law as it applies to juveniles, and offer possible remedial strategies.

PBU does not seek youth contacts, nor does it receive referrals. The family and the child must initiate the contact. At the first meeting with its voluntary clients, which includes the child, the parents, and possibly the siblings, PBU appoints caseworkers (usually two) to the family and places the clients on a waiting list. PBU's working methods entail solely conversation therapy; the staff members remain passive during the first session while the family outlines its problems, often using dramatization.

School administrators and teachers discover delinquency in children during normal daily contact, although school administrators are likely to find out about problems second-hand through teachers. Responses usually include talking to the child and his other teachers, referring the child to the school administrator, and contacting the child's parents.

Likewise, recreation activity leaders and librarians encounter delinquency and problem behavior in their daily contacts with juveniles. Again, their response is to talk to the juvenile (usually a group of juveniles in the case of the activity leader) and attempt to secure a promise of behavioral change. Seldom do these two kinds of workers get in touch with the child's parents or with the other surveyed agencies.

Can Talking With Juveniles Have a Preventive Effect?

Since the main reaction of these agencies to juveniles' delinquent acts appeared to be talking to the youth or the youth and his parents, the next issue was to determine the effectiveness of these conversations in modifying the child's behavior.

Overall, respondents were uncertain or negative in their assessments of the long-range effects of these talks. Police, for one, thought that the effects of talking with children depended greatly on the attitudes and the kind of environment provided by the parents. A number of social workers replied that they "would like to think" that their work had positive effects (one answered

a firm "no"); recreation workers felt that their strictness might have a temporary effect; and librarians saw little impact of their communications with problem children that could be considered anything but momentary.

Roles and Interagency Cooperation

A juvenile who has problems or who has committed a crime is likely to come into contact with a number of the agencies surveyed. To help this juvenile effectively, these agencies should have a clear understanding of role delineations and each other's work, and an awareness of whether one such agency oversees the juvenile's progress from agency to agency. Respondents revealed that role delineations were confused and that no structured interaction was taking place among the agencies. More important, many respondents were critical of the work of the other agencies or were ignorant of the exact work the other agencies performed.

For police, the confusion of role was partly due to their repressive image and the repressive nature of their work. They felt, and other respondents agreed, that police work should have a clearer social-work aspect. However, respondents conceded that the police function of law enforcement is necessary to society.

PBU repeated its policy of working only with clients who ask for help. Other agencies were unclear as to what kind of work PBU did do or should do, and many agencies had negative attitudes toward PBU mainly because of its aloofness.

Social workers faulted themselves, and were faulted by other agencies, on not spending more time in the field. Respondents felt that social workers get a skewed idea of the juvenile's total life situation when the juvenile must meet the caseworker on the caseworker's ground.

School administrators' and teachers' roles in working with problem children are complicated by the fact that they work toward two goals: education of children and socialization of children. Teachers were criticized for not giving more individualized attention to students, but teachers felt that they did not have sufficient time and resources to do so.

Recreation and library personnel have a more specific and limited view of their role with children, which revolves around their function. Respondents felt that these two types of personnel could extend their roles, function as adult models for children, and work more closely with social-work agencies.

One Family's Experience With Authorities

Families with juvenile delinquents are often troubled with multiple problems. Many have had contact with a number of social service agencies. To determine the extent of contacts an average troubled family might have and the effect of multiple contacts, we examined one family's case history.

The family had seven members. These included a father who was an alcoholic, worked only sporadically, had abused his wife on occasion, and lived at home periodically; a mother with many physical and emotional problems; an unemployed teenage daughter who had dropped out of school and was pregnant; a teenage son who had had a first contact with police; and three young children, all of whom had been placed with foster parents at some point in their lives.

As a whole, the family has had contact with as many as 24 different institutions or social service agencies, ranging from the school doctors and school remedial program personnel, to police, to social welfare services. No one agency has taken the main responsibility for their case or has followed up on the other contacts.

Some Examples From Foreign Countries

The previous discussion has focused on Swedish society's reaction to juvenile deviancy. The following will cover reaction systems of several other lands.

Soviet Union. A basic difference between Swedish and Russian attitudes toward juvenile delinquency, on the part of individual citizens and the country's institutions, is that Russian society reacts from a clear and official definition of how people ought to behave, think, and function, while Swedish society has no such framework. Moreover, police in the Soviet Union are supported heavily by citizens performing mandatory and voluntary social control duties. Every Moscow police district has a support center manned by volunteers and a paid director. Apartment complexes have management committees who are responsible both for maintaining and running the complex and for monitoring the behavior of the people who live within it. In addition, every police department has a commission, made up of teachers, lawyers, doctors, and volunteers from business and industry, that deals with juveniles suspected of crimes. The commission examines cases and sends recommendations to the court concerning resolutions and penalties. The commission, the police inspector, the support center staff, and the apartment management committees all have a close working relationship and also work together with schools. A child who deviates is not considered psychologically ill, but rather a stray who must be further socialized.

Poland. In Poland, 13 is the age of criminal responsibility. Children from 13 to 18 who commit crimes can be adjudicated and handed rehabilitative or educational remedies. Parents can also be warned to tighten controls on their children. Supervision, a term in a special school, or sentencing to either a rehabilitative or, less grave, a reform institution, are possible consequences of conviction.

We visited three Polish juvenile institutions as part of the study, one for girls and two for boys. Results were mixed. While the institution for girls and one experimental institution for boys (using a token economy system of control) appeared to be relatively open with beneficial educational and vocational programs, one institution for boys was outdated and clearly punitive rather than rehabilitative.

Denmark. Denmark's department for juvenile delinquency prevention in Copenhagen's police department is an interesting example of a prevention strategy. The department has delegates from each police district in the city and functions to monitor the registration of young offenders and to act as a liaison between police and the social welfare authorities. Debate does not arise on the ethics of collecting information on children who have not been formally convicted of a crime; rather, the information is considered a tool for providing prevention.

Swedish Cooperative Projects

Since an overriding finding of the study so far is the pervading lack of cooperation among agencies that work with juveniles and problem families, we ferreted out a few projects that show promise in this area.

One was the Linkoping project (1973 to 1976), which worked on a model of primary and secondary groups responsible for an individual juvenile's case. Group members included a doctor and social worker (primary), and client coworkers, a psychiatrist, and other social agency representatives (secondary). The primary group developed and monitored the main case strategy, while the two groups convened occasionally to discuss the case and develop further ideas. The project eventually failed due to inadequate cooperation stemming from the disproportionate interest members had in the case and the chaotic structure of the organization.

Another project, here called the Uppsala model, is representative of many found in Swedish cities. A shelter takes in any youth wishing temporary residence and offers care and counseling. A working committee composed of representatives of various occupations attempts to locate jobs for unemployed and hard-to-employ youths at the shelter. However, youths are encouraged to finish school in preference to beginning a job at a young age. Children who begin a job are assigned a "father." The father is responsible for orienting the child to the working environment, helping him with problems on the job, and even giving the child support outside of the workplace.

Discussion

As a final segment of the study, we interviewed innumerable personnel from social service agencies, schools, police departments, research bureaus, and other organizations, and we reviewed the current literature to further complete the picture of society's reaction to juvenile crime and the offender.

Main issues that emerged included the delayed and illogical (at least from the juvenile's viewpoint) reaction to juvenile crime. As reported earlier, the average time from offense to final resolution was 156 days. To a juvenile, whose life is moving very fast and who has a tendency to be impatient for unpleasant things to come to an end, this time lag must seem unreasonable. Furthermore, final judgments seem inconsistent to the juveniles. Two boys involved in similar crimes could receive very different decisions depending on their circumstances. Although the distinction may be clear to

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adults, it may not be to juveniles who already are having a difficult time adjusting to life's changes. Furthermore, children associate wrongdoing with unfavorable consequences. If the judgment does not fulfill their expectations, a preventative effect could be lost.

Additional issues remain. Currently, the labeling theory predominates Swedish criminal policy, making authorities sensitive to the long-term effects of their reactions to juvenile deviancy. The general attitude toward juvenile crime and toward upbringing of children has liberalized greatly since World War II. The current style of "democratic upbringing" can slip into a relaxed style in which children are given a responsibility for themselves that outweighs their intellectual age.

Another problem is registration of youth for crimes committed. Authorities are hesitant to arrest and then hesitant to give a delinquent child a record, fearing unnecessary injury to his future. Yet expungement of juvenile records can reduce the effectiveness of preventive strategies and greatly interfere with research on the phenomenon of juvenile crime.

Also preventing effective intervention are the low detection and clearance rates for crimes committed by juveniles. Juveniles can be greatly embroiled in criminal life before being reported to police. Police who are reluctant to arrest the juvenile can further postpone intervention, which is more effective if begun early in the criminal career.

Petty larceny is a favorite crime of youth and has increased in proportion to society's greater emphasis on consumption. Shoplifting is easy to perpetrate, and the risk of being detected is small; of being formally adjudicated, even smaller. Most stores will send a report on the juvenile shoplifter to their security division, which, in turn, contacts the child's parents. Records of the incident are retained for future reference. Police are called in only when expensive items are involved. This situation suggests that, even if registration of youths were abolished, other organizations, such as department stores, would implement their own system of registration. The implications are even greater. If the government does not provide an effective crime prevention system, private interests will create their own systems of self-protection.

Centralizing Resources

Centralizing resources directed toward juvenile delinquency prevention is called for regardless of whether the resources are funded at the national, county, or municipal level. Furthermore, juveniles should be assigned only one contact person to give them support and direct their progress from agency to agency. The contact person's responsibility should not reside with a single agency but should be systemwide, so that, for example, a youth who has good rapport with a recreation activity leader may be assigned that adult as a contact person. Treatment plans devised for the juvenile should be comprehensive and touch all areas of the juvenile's life. This arrangement avoids the present tendency toward fragmented planning with discipline experts (e.g., doctors, social workers) dealing only with that segment of the client's needs that pertains to their area of expertise. To implement this model, social welfare district responsibilities and resources will have to be more equally apportioned.

Obviously, such a radical change in society's reaction system will be expensive and will take time and careful planning. Who will be responsible for initiating a child's introduction into this helping system and what guidelines will the initiator use to determine the severity of risk that the child faces? This question is particularly relevant in face of research indicating that early intervention is most effective and can save time and money. But what prediction instruments can be used to identify at-risk children, and how can one be sure that identification of a child as being at risk will not be more harmful than helpful? Research has not sufficiently answered questions on factors of juvenile delinquency and effects of intervention as opposed to non-intervention. Confidentiality and juveniles' right to privacy is another area of concern. Finally, how should salaries be computed for contact persons? Should a recreation activity leader acting as a contact make the same salary for this additional workload as a doctor with PBU who has a greater education and a larger base salary?

There are numerous problems that are not covered here, but, in the end, a centralized and comprehensive reaction toward juvenile crime appears to have more advantages than disadvantages.