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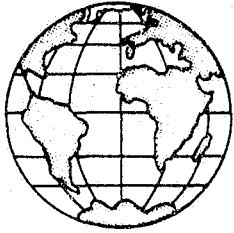
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# International Summaries

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## ACQUISITIONS

### Education and Delinquency: The Relationship Between Performance at School and Delinquency

*A questionnaire survey of Dutch students reveals the serious effects of negative labeling.*

By J. A. Nijboer and F.P.H. Dijksterhuis

#### Introduction

Background studies of convicted offenders have shown that these offenders are more likely than the general population to have performed poorly in school. For example, many have had conflicts with teachers, have repeated grades, or have dropped out of school at an early age. Traditionally, family background or natural tendencies (dissatisfaction, aggression) are cited as the reason for this poor performance. Recently, however, researchers have begun exploring the role played by the school in the evolution of delinquent behavior among juveniles. Much of this research has been done in countries other than The Netherlands, particularly in the United States.

This study looks at the Dutch educational system and its relationship with juvenile delinquency. Its methodology includes both a review of the literature and a nationwide survey of school students ages 12 to 16 years to gather data on a number of variables: students' attitudes toward school, motivation and its encouragement, the extent of student deviance in the classroom, their use of drugs and alcohol, and their participation in criminal acts.

All children are required by Dutch law to attend school until they reach a certain age. As a result, the educational system represents a very significant source of influence on their lives. In The Netherlands, juve-

nile delinquency rates have increased simultaneously with changes in the school system, especially the lengthening of the period of required attendance. This could be suggestive of a negative or criminalizing effect of the educational system, and the study explores this possibility. It also asks if these effects, if they do exist, can be prevented or modified. Theoretical research on the relationship between school systems and juvenile delinquency has been examined to determine whether insights arising from various sociological trends can be integrated into a single model describing students' experiences within the educational system and their reactions to these experiences.

#### The theoretical framework: four sociological approaches

The structural-functionalist approach holds that the school as an institution of socialization contributes to the preservation of the society in which it is located by fulfilling the external function of allocation; that is, seeing that the right individuals are matched to the right jobs. Its internal function is to promote the full development of the capabilities of each individual and to safeguard the jobs of those who work in society. The potential inconsistency of the two functions is readily apparent.

The systems-theory approach teaches that the educational institution as a system is constructed of subsystems and can itself be viewed as part of a larger system. This approach points up the importance of environmental factors for each system or subsystem. Hence, systems must process information obtained from their environments. They also must deal effectively with internal in-

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formation provided by truant or delinquent students within the school system, for example.

The symbolic-interaction approach stresses the importance of interaction between individuals and of formation of a self-image in a social context. The process of ascribing meaning within interactions is critical. Originally, this approach assumed a certain degree of consensus among the interacting partners. However, recent research indicates that disparities in power related to social position play a crucial role in the process of assigning meanings, resulting in negative stereotypes and negative labeling of certain subgroups.

The conflict approach alleges that consensus and conflict can be used to supplement one another. This concept is found in other approaches as well. There are sufficient indications that integration of insights distilled from these sociological approaches is feasible and even desirable at the middle level.

## Methodology of the present study

In view of the possibilities suggested by analysis of these sociological theories, a questionnaire study of the relationship between secondary school performance and delinquency in Holland was conducted. The survey population ranged in age from 12 to 16 years. Their schools were mainly in large communities and included institutions providing advanced education. The initial sample consisted of 1,405 students; 164 were dropped from the study for various reasons. Thirty-nine students were absent when completed questionnaires were collected, leaving a final study population of 1,202 students (85.5 percent).

A structured questionnaire was administered to students to gather empirical data. The questions encompassed the following subject areas: the way the student functions within the school setting; his attitude toward school; student motivation and its encouragement in the school setting; student deviance and its correction within the classroom; expectations of student behavior in the future; family background and demographic information; and use of and addiction to hazardous substances (tobacco, alcohol, and drugs). The questionnaire sought to investigate unreported crimes by presenting the study population with a list of crimes and asking them whether and how often they have committed the crimes, whether they committed them alone or with others, and whether they were caught and sentenced. This methodology allows researchers access to information not captured by official statistics; however, being reported by the subjects themselves, the information may not be entirely reliable.

The list of crimes used in the questionnaire was not all-encompassing. A complete list of potential delinquent acts would have been unmanageable; moreover, it was rationalized that juveniles usually engage only in a limited number of illicit activities. The focus was on crimes against property and crimes of violence. Questions on traffic violations were included, since such violations are common among the older students. Sex-related crimes and narcotics violations also were surveyed.

The students completed the questionnaires themselves, with anonymity guaranteed. The advance promise of confidentiality of student-provided information precluded verification of response accuracy, but it increased the chances that the respondents would answer truthfully and completely. In general, this method seemed to work quite well.

## Study findings

The findings demonstrate considerable use of alcohol by students and document its deleterious effect on school performance. Approximately 30 percent of the students used alcohol, with 7 percent drinking more than an average of 10 glasses of an alcoholic beverage per week. Alcohol use was found to increase with age; 14-year-old boys were the first age group to experiment with alcohol. Alcohol users functioned much less successfully in school than did abstainers. There were virtually no drug users in the sample.

Truancy and criminal activity were substantial. Twenty-two percent of the students played truant, 3 percent of them very frequently. The overwhelming majority of the frequently truant students attended schools providing low-level technical education. One-third of the students polled admitted to having committed crimes against property, and half of these offenders had committed such crimes more than three times. Almost half of the students in the sample admitted to having committed at least one crime of violence, and one-fifth of the sample acknowledged committing four or more such crimes. Eighteen percent said that they had committed traffic violations.

Although the crimes involved were usually petty, the possibility that they might be linked with certain principles of the educational system in The Netherlands warranted further investigation.

Correlations between these combined crime variables and student functioning at school were examined within the framework of three theoretical approaches: the labeling perspective, the anomie approach, and the conflict approach.

The clearest picture of the nature of the relationship between juvenile delinquency and school performance can be obtained by relating factor-analyzed data to delinquency. All of the dependent variables that technically can be considered applicable were included in this factor analysis.

Crimes of property were shown to be correlated with conflict with school, appreciation of school/motivation, age, achievements, and social class, in descending order of importance. Violent crimes were correlated primarily with conflict with school, appreciation of school/motivation, age, social class, achievements, and gender. Age, conflict with school, social class, appreciation of school/motivation, religion, leisure time, and achievements correlated with traffic violations. Twenty-five percent of the variance was explained for crimes against property, 20 percent for crimes of violence, and 27 percent for traffic violations.

These findings indicate that a relationship probably exists between educational performance and delinquency. More specifically, the functioning of students at school exerts a definite influence on the production and development of delinquent behavior.

Other correlations that were found with juvenile delinquency involved age and sex. Age was shown to be related to delinquency in general, and especially to traffic violations. This correlation has been shown in numerous other studies. Sex also was related to delinquency, with boys committing delinquent acts more often than girls did. Based on the survey method employed, however, it was not possible to determine whether the school played a role in these differences.

A negative correlation was found between juvenile delinquency and the importance that students attach to contact with their schoolmates. It is difficult to interpret this finding, but it appears that delinquency is more common among those who are isolated from their fellow students. This finding may indicate that the extent of integration at school is a factor that is related to juvenile delinquency; i.e. less integrated students are more delinquent than integrated students. Similarly, students who were well motivated, who considered school a fun experience, and who appreciated the importance of school in their lives were less delinquent than their less motivated peers.

Pressure exerted by teachers and parents was positively correlated with delinquency. Stronger adult pressure seemed to produce more delinquency, but parental help with students' homework seemed to decrease the extent and frequency of delinquent behavior.

Unexpectedly, the most affluent students also were found to be the most delinquent. The significance of this finding is not entirely clear. It is possible that the high delinquency level is related to the pursuit of such expensive pastimes as smoking and drinking. Richer students may have more money, but they also need more as a result of the expensive activities in which they engage.

Changing schools during the secondary school years also seemed to promote delinquency. This finding shall be subjected to further research, however, before it is interpreted as reliable.

#### Interpretation of results and development of a theoretical model

Interpreting the meaning of the different variables employed in the study is a difficult task. The variable most correlated with delinquency, alcohol use, may be an outgrowth of the same processes as those that cause delinquency. On the other hand, it is also possible that alcohol use is a factor that promotes juvenile delinquency. In fact, the obtained evidence seems to indicate that these two interpretations are equally valid. Several interpretations also are possible with truancy, the variable that occupies second place in this study (and that occupies a similar position in studies of this type in the literature). Truancy may be the result of other

problems, such as a bad school experience, drinking, drug abuse, etc. On the other hand, chronic truancy affords students more opportunities to commit crimes than are available to their schoolmates who remain in class. Thus, chronic truancy tends to cause the student to be labeled by his environment, leading to expectations that he will commit crimes. In effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy is created. The evidence points to truancy's leading to delinquency, with a large number of potential intermediate steps involved.

Based on the factor-analyzed results, and subject to the tenets of the theoretical literature, an explanatory model for the occurrence of juvenile delinquent behavior was developed. This model describes the experiences that students have had within the educational system, the way in which they have dealt with their experiences, and the peer, teacher, and parental reactions that their behavior has elicited. The configuration of the model is borrowed from systems theory: the student is seen as an information-processing system that maintains relationships with various other systems; such as the class, teachers, and parents. The content of the model is drawn from both symbolic interactionism (labeling theory in particular) and conflict sociology (reactions of resistance on the part of students). The structural conditions framing the model serve to guide, make possible, or make probable the course of the process of development of delinquent behavior.

In general, the preliminary theoretical model devised to explain the occurrence of delinquent behavior among youth demonstrates a spiraling and fairly predictable process beginning with poor school achievements and ending with self-fulfillment of negative labels. Poor achievers often are considered failures, a view that can result in a student's negative attitude toward school, loss of motivation, and mental stress. As a consequence of this cognitive assimilation of failure, some students resort to rebellion against the school, a rebellion that is expressed initially as unruly behavior and truancy. The environment, in turn, reacts to this student rebellion or resistance; often the reaction can take the form of negative labeling. Negative labeling, in turn, negatively influences the self-images of the rebelling students. It can also lead to their isolation from traditional or conventional groups and to their own conscious or unconscious rejection of traditional or conventional roles and role models. Negative labeling increases the likelihood that the rebelling students will seek to ally themselves with deviant subcultures that provide deviant or even delinquent models. The availability of these models and the readiness of rebelling students to view favorably and follow these models ultimately result in their own delinquent behavior.

The preliminary theoretical model was compared to the results obtained from other investigations of this type that have been reported in the educational literature. While the model has promise, it must be refined further in investigations that examine the sequence in which the various delinquency-related factors come into play and the manner in which the factors coalesce to create causality. It appears that the educational process does have an effect on the development of juvenile

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delinquency, but it is still unclear how this process evolves. According to the theoretical approach that has been applied in this study, symbolic interactionism plays a significant role, and this finding makes at least qualitative supplementary measurements necessary.

## Conclusions

One of the most striking findings of this survey is the devastating effect of negative labeling on the juvenile psyche. Applied seemingly innocently to a poor academic achiever, a negative label can destroy motivation and lead to a student's bewilderment about where he belongs. Personal values become distorted, hopes are crushed, and (partially) self-imposed alienation from the mainstream ensues. Affiliation with similarly segregated individ-

uals (or groups) follows, and the seeds of predelinquent behavior are sown.

Reaction against negative labeling and its consequences has led some researchers to claim that it may be the school systems themselves that foster crime and criminal development. In fact, negative labeling as a socio-psychological and crime-producing factor needs to be investigated much further before any such claims can be made with any degree of certainty. In particular, the conditions under which negative labeling takes place have yet to be determined. Because of the processual nature of the development of delinquency and the need to take this characteristic into account, it is impossible to base such investigations on point measurements alone. Rather, a prospective, longitudinal investigation is needed.