

BARNETT HOUSE PAPERS. No. 1

THE PROBLEM OF
JUVENILE CRIME

BY

CHARLES E. B. RUSSELL

H.M. CHIEF INSPECTOR OF REFORMATORY AND INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS

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JUVENILE CRIME—ITS CAUSES AND ITS REMEDIES

It would be difficult, I think, to fix upon a more suitable place in which to discuss the problem of juvenile crime, its causes, and its remedies, than is the building in which we find ourselves this evening—a building dedicated as a memorial of one who for so many years was so deeply interested in all such questions. It is therefore with especial pleasure that I am able to respond to your invitation to address you here.

No heading of newspaper paragraphs is more familiar now than that of 'Increase in Juvenile Crime'. It is one of the few subjects, apart from the War itself, forced most prominently upon the attention of the public, and interest in it has probably never been more widespread.

Not a few people appear to think that the decrease in adult crime as a result of the War is due to some mysterious psychological process. There is nothing mysterious about it. What has really happened is that very large numbers of potential criminals, and of those whose irregular ways of living had from time to time brought them within prison walls, have found in naval or military service a healthy outlet for energies frequently misdirected before the War. The much-advertised 'increase in juvenile crime' is equally free from mystery, though it requires far more explanation.

But at the outset, let me urge that the word 'crime' is an altogether incorrect description of the majority of the acts which are bringing young persons and children to the notice of the police and before the

courts. There is really no indication that the boyhood of the nation is forming definitely anti-social and criminal habits. But the truth is that for many reasons opportunities for misapplied energy on the part of young people are much greater than before the War. There is more energy also to respond to the opportunities, for boys living in the crowded districts are in general, owing to the immensely increased wages of their parents, better fed, better clad, and consequently healthier and more physically vigorous than they were. At the same time many of the ordinary restraining influences upon irregular displays of physical vigour have for the time vanished. Owing to the use of very many public elementary schools by the military authorities—a most deplorable circumstance—large numbers of children are only in school for half the day, and in towns and cities it is often difficult for the parents to fill up the boys' vacant hours with any satisfactory occupation. Many of the most virile and influential elementary school teachers have joined the Army, as have the great majority of the most energetic workers connected with all kinds of organizations for boys such as clubs and brigades. There is unrest more or less marked in every home, whilst the pictures in the halfpenny illustrated papers—practically the only newspapers these boys see—tell of excitement and sensational adventure. Small depredations of all kinds may be committed in the darkened streets with extraordinary impunity, and often are committed by high-spirited children as much for the fun of the thing as from covetousness. To me it is not at all surprising if, as a well-laden green-grocer's cart, e.g., slowly progresses down a back street, some small boy says to his chums, 'Let's pretend it's a German convoy, and raid it!' The suggestion is acted upon with zest, but there follows

next morning a miserable appearance in the local police-court, and thereupon as 'young criminals charged with theft' the small adventurers are glibly adopted by the headline-loving representatives of the press as illustrations of the great increase in juvenile *crime* prevalent in the country.

For myself, and I claim to speak with no little experience, not of an official kind, I believe the boy who is criminal at heart to be altogether a rarity. Just as no one would allege that there is any indication of an increase in crime among the boys of what are absurdly known as the 'better' classes, so there could be no question of any increase of crime among poorer boys were they only provided with the facilities for healthy physical exercises and indoor games that the sons of the more wealthy sections of the community enjoy. The 'crimes' of the less fortunate, I must repeat, are in the main expressions of animal vigour, of exuberance of spirits, of energy misapplied for want of legitimate outlet. At the back of all the trouble lies the national disgrace of the slum with its overcrowding and all the concomitant conditions we have allowed to exist like a cancer at the heart of the community. In proof of this, there are very few cases of youthful delinquency in the suburbs of our cities—almost all occur in the very crowded areas.

One important phase of the question, doubtless uppermost in the minds of many in this room, I do not propose to discuss at any length, namely, the influence of the cinema. But I would say at once that I believe nothing could be more fatal to any hopes of finding a right solution of the problem we are considering than to use the expression 'the influence of the cinema' as a kind of red herring dragged across the path to divert attention from any of the other factors which go to account for youthful transgressions. The

harm done is indisputable, just as is the fact that the picture-theatre has so irresistible an attraction for children that some of them will go the length of stealing money to provide the price of admission. The evil effect of the films is largely due to the fact that they supply the last impressions the children carry with them to bed. Eye-strain and undue excitement affect their health, and whilst, I believe, there is little that is actually immoral in most of the pictures seen, their vulgarity and silliness, and the distorted, unreal, Americanized (in the worst sense) view of life presented must have a deteriorating effect, and lead, at the best, to the formation of false ideals. Thoughts of burglary are, without doubt, put into boys' minds, and in some places gangs of juvenile thieves try to emulate the exploits of their cinema heroes. In Manchester, e. g., a gang of six boys stole sweets, cigarettes, and the like, and divided the booty at the house of one whose father was in the Army and mother out at work. The most successful thief of the week had his buttonhole decorated with a coloured ribbon. Mr. Spurley Hey, Director of Education, Manchester, wisely points out in his excellent contribution to the subject¹ that the boys who become leaders in such enterprises are of super-normal rather than of sub-normal intelligence, i. e. they are capable of becoming remarkably valuable citizens. The problem of the cinema has already been with us for some years, and as an adverse influence on the character of our children is quite independent of the War. The remedy undoubtedly lies in the substitution of good films for bad, and as material for good ones I would suggest, among others, natural-history subjects and healthy tales of adventure. The present film stories

¹ Conference on Special Schools Work, Manchester, October 1916. 'Juvenile Crime', by Spurley Hey, Esq., B.A.

are penny-dreadfuls in action. What our children need are pictured tales of the type of the best boys' books—the books of Henty, Brereton, Collingwood, and the rest. Properly controlled, the picture-theatre might become a centre of the best educative influence.

But there is no occasion to labour these points: they are admitted by all. What is not recognized is that the attraction, often a legitimate attraction, of the cinema frequently draws not so much the children but the mother from the home to the theatre, a withdrawal which, to all who know their back streets, means that young people, left to their own devices in the evening, experience a most detrimental lack of control. I know of one mother who for the last few years has made a regular practice of attending a cinema-theatre or music-hall five evenings a week. And she is not the only one.

Many people are under the impression that the young delinquents of the present time are practically all the children of men who have left their homes for service with the Colours. I am inclined to think rather that, in place of that being the *determining* factor, they come from homes where both parents, whether at home or not, are weak, irresponsible, slack, idle, and unsteady, teaching their offspring no moral standard, and possibly paying occasional visits to prison. In a vague way they wish their children to do right, but, too inefficient to make any effort themselves, depend on the various societies to undertake their responsibilities and exert the influence which should be theirs. Before the War such parents did little to control their children: now, with increased wages and young sons able to earn large sums for themselves, they do even less. For the children of bad parents the increase of money spells not greater comfort and a higher standard of living, but too often disaster.

Mr. G. A. Aitken, Head of the Children Department of the Home Office, read a valuable paper at a meeting of the Congregational Union at Birmingham last month, in which he drew attention to the power given to magistrates by Section 99 of the Children Act, which makes parents liable to be fined for the transgressions of their children. 'In many places', Mr. Aitken said, 'little or no use is made of these provisions. If they were more freely used, they would tend to secure greater care on the part of the parent, and would often prevent any further offence by the child. Obviously this remedy cannot be used when the father is absent on public work, and the mother is unable, owing to her employment, to exercise sufficient control over her children.' This system awards punishment where punishment is really due, and better than any other makes a slum-dweller realize his or her responsibilities, whilst it need not be feared that the delinquent child himself will go scot-free. It would be well, I think, if it could be brought afresh to the notice of the magistrates that they have this power of punishing the parent.

Two cities have a good record in the matter of juvenile crime: Leicester, where there has been no increase during the War, and Bradford, where there has actually been a decrease. Both places are noted for their intensity of voluntary effort in social work, whilst Leicester has the reputation of being better administered than any city except Birmingham, and the municipal authorities of Bradford are particularly sensible of the value of child life.

Mr. Spurley Hey's inquiry, to which I have just referred, into the records of the Manchester Juvenile Court, makes extraordinarily interesting reading. It appears that in that city—and I believe the same applies to the country in general—boys alone are

responsible for the increased number of offences, the number of offences by girls having actually decreased. In fact, the problem of juvenile crime among girls is not at present an acute one, though for the period of the War, and for some time after, girls will need watching with greater care than ever, lest moral offences occur. Except in Begging, which has decreased by 34 per cent., there has been a marked increase in every class of offence by boys. But serious as has been this increase during the past year, I am strongly inclined to think that the fact of an increase in such offences would have forced itself upon the attention of the public even had the War not occurred. Mr. Spurley Hey shows that in 1912 in Manchester there were 505 cases, an increase of 86 upon the previous year, while in 1913 there were no fewer than 555, though in 1914, which included five months of war, the numbers fell to 481. It is true that in 1915 the numbers rose enormously, i. e. to 781, an increase of 62 per cent., but it is clear that there was a progressive increase taking place before the War broke out at all. I think the decrease in 1914 may probably be explained by the fact that the outbreak of hostilities caused a shock to all sections of the population.

It appears, and this is of great psychological interest, that the age at which children, irrespective of sex, show the greatest tendency to commit offences is 12, that the year of the greatest increase in offences is from 11 to 12, and that after 12 there is a decline in the number of offences by boys. It is quite possible that the fact that in Manchester in particular very large numbers of boys become members of clubs at the age of 12 has much to do with this decline. Clearly a greatly extended system of junior clubs or play-centres is an experiment much to be desired.

With regard to boys over 14, though the increase of

delinquency has been nothing like so great as between the ages of 11 and 12, there has been a steady growth in the number of convictions since the War began. The statistics for Manchester are :

1911	.	.	.	178	convictions
1912	.	.	.	234	„
1913	.	.	.	147	„
1914	.	.	.	154	„
1915	.	.	.	209	„

It is, however, noteworthy that even the figures for 1915 do not equal those of 1912, while in 1914 the number of offenders between these ages was lower than in any previous recorded year except 1913. The fact that in 1912 the number of cases showed an increase of 31 per cent. upon the figures for the preceding year suggests that in the years before the War the whole matter deserved as much attention as it is now tardily receiving. Unfortunately I have not available the statistics for the whole country, but I am inclined to think that the general conclusions that may be drawn from those of Manchester are equally applicable elsewhere.

That so many boys take to evil courses after leaving the elementary schools is really no matter for surprise. School forms a local social centre, a place with order, strict discipline, constant occupation, organized games, and a certain amount of *esprit de corps*. When the boy leaves, all this suddenly collapses, and he finds himself a unit in a vast system in which he has to find his place. The schoolmaster, whose care was for what he could put in to the boy, is replaced by the employer, who, it is to be feared, frequently cares only for what he can get out of him. The fact that he is a wage-earner gives him a different position in the home, and, if he choose, he becomes more or less independent of

parental control and is free to spend his evenings as he thinks fit. So long as he pays his mother a fixed sum weekly he may regard his home as a sort of mere hotel, simply a convenient place for sleep and meals. At the same time as he left the elementary school he probably abandoned the Sunday school also, as a place 'only fit for kids', and no other religious influences have taken its place in his life. The slum boy of wild, headstrong nature or evil inclinations has therefore nothing to restrain him unless he voluntarily joins some organization such as the Boys' Brigade, the Church Lads' Brigade, a Scout patrol, a boys' club, or the like, and the weak point of nearly all these organizations is that they necessarily tend to become too respectable to attract or hold large numbers of the roughest type of boy, who really needs some compulsory form of discipline to take the place of the discipline of the school. 'Crime' is in many cases the inevitable result of taking charge of a boy up to the age of 13 or 14 and then suddenly abandoning him. The unskilled employment and the 'speeding-up' system prevalent in modern industry have an equally bad effect on the boy of unstable character. His brain is idle all day, and when evening comes employment of a rational kind is essential if he is to be kept steady. The evening school of the present in no way meets the case, for the kind of boy who finds his way to the courts practically never goes near an evening school. The education statistics for 1915 show a lamentable state of affairs, i.e. 5,636,000 children attending elementary schools, 203,000 attending secondary schools, 726,000 attending evening schools.¹

If boyish delinquency is to be checked, it must be

¹ See *The Juvenile Adult Problem*, by Frederic G. D'Aeth. (Oxford University Press. 4d.)

recognized by all concerned that for our adolescent population healthy physical exercise and games, both in and out of doors, are not a luxury, but an absolute necessity. For boys must have excitement, and if they cannot get it in legitimate ways, they will seek it in mischief and in vice. As the late Lord Alverstone once said in an admirable speech at my own lads' club in Manchester, 'Second to drink, and second only to drink, the real cause of crime (i. e. crime in general, not only juvenile crime) is the difficulty of finding healthy recreation and innocent amusement for the young among the working classes.' A few years ago, when seeking information for a book I was writing on 'Working Lads' Clubs', I wrote to a large number of Chief Constables in order to learn their opinion as to the influence of clubs on juvenile crime. Among the answers I received are the following :

'I have consulted with my Divisional Officers, and I find that it is their unanimous opinion that the existence of these clubs has a marked effect on the good order of the city, with a corresponding decrease of juvenile criminality.

'The amusements provided for the members tend to keep them off the streets in the evenings, and it naturally follows that the influences thus brought to bear on the lads encourage them to seek after wholesome occupation and healthy pleasures.' (Edinburgh.)

'I certainly am strongly in favour of such clubs : they are healthful, instructive, and have a strong tendency to induce lads to try to appear smart, which is an incentive to sobriety. It is a rare occurrence to find a lad in the hands of the police who has been a member of the club mentioned ; in fact, I cannot remember a single instance.' (Stockport.)

'I consider this club is a great boon to lads in this borough, and contributes very largely to the better conduct of youth in the town.' (Burnley—answered by a Chief Inspector.)

'The club contributes considerably to the good order of the district in which it is situated, and takes a large number of lads away from the street-corners who might otherwise be led into a career of crime.' (Salford—answered by a Sergeant.)

'The Corporation have provided a number of parks, recreation grounds, and open moorlands, which the lads of Luton take full advantage of in playing cricket, football, and other outdoor games, and I am pleased to say the youngsters here give the police very little trouble.' (Luton.)

I believe, therefore, that I have the police altogether with me in my contention that our boys must be provided with an outlet for the legitimate expression of their energy.

In many districts the existing organizations for boys are altogether inadequate to the task of providing for the whole juvenile population, whilst in others, where Clubs, Scout-troops, Brigade-companies, Sunday-schools and the like abound, a large number of boys fail to become members, or join but for a very short time. What is needed is a close co-operation between the workers in all these various bodies, which shall make it impossible for the boy who has lapsed from membership of any one of them to be completely lost sight of. Because a boy does not fit into a certain society, it does not follow that he is necessarily bad. Whether he leave it voluntarily because its conditions fail to please him, or whether he be turned out as an intolerable nuisance, that is the time to watch him, to recommend him to some other type of organization, to do everything possible to prevent him from becoming an outcast and joining in his lot with others who have become reckless and predatory because no one takes a strong interest in them. The boy who does not get on in a club may make an excellent Scout, while he who cannot tolerate the drill and precision of some Brigade-company may be quite at home in a club in which he can, say, learn to box. By some means or other, from his twelfth or thirteenth year onwards, *every* boy should be made a member of some organization which will provide for him healthy exercise, harm-

less amusement, fresh interest, discipline, and, most important of all, a religious motive. The mere provision of open spaces and facilities for games is not enough, for it is a radical mistake to believe that the English boy is always a sportsman. He is not; he must be *taught* to play fair. I am glad to be able to tell you that as a result of the recent conference at the Home Office a committee may be set up, the joint efforts of the members of which should result in much being done in the direction of strengthening and co-ordinating the existing organizations for boys with a view to their mutual co-operation.

I have been speaking chiefly of methods of preventing juvenile offences. But what, I shall be asked, are we to do meanwhile with the offender? The more frequent use of the power of fining the parents I have already advocated, and just as this method of correction has been neglected, so equally is it a matter for surprise that after all that has been written and said respecting the value of the probation system, even now, comparatively speaking, so very little use is made of it as a means for dealing satisfactorily with the juvenile offender. Of course it is true that a system which depends almost entirely for its success upon the judgement and abilities of the probation-officer and the interest taken by him in his work is rendered more difficult at the moment owing to the absence of many of the most virile of the probation-officers with the Forces. But there can be no doubt that this is work in connexion with which experienced women and men over military age might properly be used much oftener than at present. If such people, who, it goes without saying, must be persons of sympathy and understanding, above all, persons with a strong sense of humour, were asked by the magistrates to assist in this work, they would gladly do so voluntarily. Time does not

remain to me to-night to discuss this subject at length, but I have no hesitation in saying that, used far more widely than it is to-day, and with the personnel of the probation-officer staff recruited from those who are concerned mainly with juveniles, and not, as in general are police-court missionaries, with adults, the system should do much to reduce the present sum of juvenile offences. It is, however, usually unwise to place a boy on probation more than once, and really foolish, as it is generally utterly useless, to make the experiment a third or fourth time.

As the law stands at present, a delinquent child under 14 may have his parents fined, may be placed on probation, may be sent to a Reformatory or Industrial School, or may be birched. If he be over 14, the alternative of corporal punishment is eliminated, for he cannot suffer it except for a few offences in special circumstances, if convicted on indictment and under 16 years of age. For a serious or repeated offence, therefore, the only course open to a magistrate is to send him to a Reformatory.

Now it seems to me (this is purely a personal, not an official, opinion) altogether wrong that a high-spirited boy of any age who gets into serious mischief should in *every* case be 'put away' for three or four years in an institution. What he needs is to be pulled up by a short, sharp punishment, and, failing any other means of applying this, I am of opinion that a flogging would, in certain cases, e.g. putting obstructions on a railway-line, or gross cruelty to animals, be a much kinder and more effectual corrective than the long detention in a school—during which, as a matter of fact, he will not unlikely be caned or birched more than once. But such a flogging, which should be administered at the court either by the parent or by a police official in presence of the parent,

should not be recorded as a conviction, nor regarded as an eternal disgrace. The authorization of the infliction of corporal punishment up to 16 years of age is desired by many magistrates, and, properly safeguarded, would, I must believe, prove a useful measure. But I would on no account advocate the substitution of this punishment for committal to a Reformatory in cases where the home is thoroughly bad and the whole environment vicious. Each individual case must be carefully considered on its merits, always remembering that the home, if it be a good home, or even only a fair home, is a better place for most children than the best of residential institutions. Do not think I regard caning or birching as the ideal punishment for any child. I suggest it as a *practical* alternative to the, in certain cases, still less desirable prolonged internment of the wrong-doer; but realizing as I do that physical force only becomes necessary where the force of moral suasion is lacking, I would far rather see some other method of speedy but effective punishment devised. When our civilization has reached a point at which every boy of the working classes enjoys the rights which should be his—among others the right to decent sleeping accommodation, sufficient food, pure air, clean surroundings for body and mind, healthy games and sports in the open air by day or in comfortable halls and rooms in the evening—then the temporary withdrawal of certain privileges will no doubt be sufficient punishment for any offence he is likely to commit. Ultimately the responsibility for all crime lies with the inequality and injustice of our social system, but until these evils themselves are removed or greatly reduced, i.e. until our country is a Christian country, Society, such as it is, must both protect itself and reform the offender as best it can.

CHARLES E. B. RUSSELL.

BARNETT HOUSE OXFORD

BARNETT HOUSE, established in Oxford as a memorial to the late Canon Barnett and incorporated as an Association on March 17, 1916, has three main objects in view.

1. To advance the systematic study of social and economic questions. A reference library of modern social and economic literature is being collected at Barnett House, a course of social training is provided, public conferences and lectures are arranged in connexion with the House, and reports and papers will be issued from time to time on subjects of social inquiry.

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