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Augusta F. Bronner

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A RESEARCH ON THE PROPORTION OF MENTAL
DEFECTIVES AMONG DELINQUENTS.

AUGUSTA F. BRONNER.¹

A careful study of the proportion of mental defectives among delinquents is extremely timely. There exists a great discrepancy between the general opinion of thoughtful and experienced observers, such as judges, probation officers and teachers, on the one hand, and statements made by some experimental workers on the other. The percentage of feeble-minded among offenders, according to these statements, has ranged even as high as 89 per cent. Teachers who know the large number of delinquents who can do, and have done in their class rooms, 7th and 8th grade, and even high school work, express themselves as greatly surprised at these extraordinary figures.

Now, in all studies of offenders, we must recognize at once the fact that we are dealing with a selected group. For, of course, such investigations can take into account only the *caught* offender. Those who, because of unusual cleverness or because of fortunate circumstances escape detection and arrest, may be equally or more culpable than those apprehended. Though intelligence is not the only factor responsible for the lack of detection and arrest, yet it is undoubtedly a large one. This means that in all studies of offenders, there is a selective force operating which tends to eliminate the brightest and most capable.

Nor is this all; for the majority of such data as have appeared have been based upon the study of those in institutions—in reformatories and state industrial schools. When this is true we have not merely a selected group, but rather a selected portion of an already selected group. For now-a-days there is a tendency to commit to institutions only the most incorrigible or the least hopeful offenders. With our present system, all those believed capable of reformation under probation are given this opportunity. In consequence we should expect to find a larger percentage of the dull and incapable among those sent to reform and state schools than among those released on parole.

These facts necessarily influence in a large measure the results of investigations and give a picture that is distorted if applied generally. The results should be interpreted as showing conditions that exist among the group investigated only. Unfortunately, only too often the data are quoted as if representative of offenders in general. If 25 per cent of the inmates of reformatory institutions are found to be mentally defective,

¹Assistant Director Psychopathic Institute, Juvenile Court, Chicago.

that does not mean that 25 per cent of all offenders are mentally defective, nor that one-fourth of all crimes committed are to be explained on the basis of mental incapacity.

Another criticism of these same studies must be made. In a recent address before the American Prison Association, Kuhlmann, one of the psychologists most experienced in the study of the feeble-minded, pointed out very clearly and convincingly that errors in procedure employed in obtaining, as well as in evaluating, results have led to untenable conclusions. He cites the fact that typical reformatory cases, averaging from fifteen to twenty years of age, can only be inadequately studied by the Binet-Simon tests. These are unsatisfactory for measuring the grade of intelligence of those with a mental age above ten years, because the scale has no tests for 11, 13, and 14 years, and therefore must be unfair to those who might do well on such age tests were they available. The fact that there are but five tests, those for 12 years, even in the least accredited for the ages above 10 years, makes the determination of the mental status of older individuals by this system alone a farce. Kuhlmann shows that serious mistakes have also been made in the case of many offenders by using as the definite criterion of defectiveness the mental age obtained by the use of the scale; or by stating the difference between actual age and mental age. Further discussion of these points would carry us too far afield, since they belong to a detailed critique of the Binet tests and their application. Suffice it to say that most of the studies that have appeared can hardly be accepted as giving accurate or reliable information. Indeed, most of the discussion one hears so commonly now-a-days about the "mental age" of adolescent and adult offenders is veritable nonsense.

Again all mental studies present certain other grave difficulties. There is always to be considered the attitude of the person studied, as well as that of the experimenter. The mental examinations made in courts just prior to trials are much affected by the emotional condition of the examinee. This question of attitude is very important. The experimenter himself is often much hurried, the examination has to be made at once, he has no opportunity of winning the confidence of the subject, who, therefore, does not always co-operate fully and thus fails to do himself justice. On the other hand, the subject's reactions may be greatly influenced by the emotional stress under which he is laboring. We have had conclusive evidence of the excessive inhibitions due to fear or excitement. We have found cases where the boy or girl, tested first under these unfavorable conditions, has been unable to cope with a situation which under normal conditions occasions him no difficulty at all. Knowledge that one is to appear shortly before the judge, creates such a

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state of mind as to vitiate all results. This is true whether it results in inhibitions that lead to real, though temporary, inability or whether, because of personal motive, the inability is feigned.

It is not easy, at best, to present the Binet tests in a natural manner, especially to older persons. They are somewhat artificial, one following the other without any apparent connection. We find that for older subjects they are often a bore and in their eyes not infrequently an insult. If their purpose is really understood many subjects plainly show that they resent the implication and will make no effort to succeed.

In order to make such examinations with the minimum amount of unfairness, they should be conducted in a quiet place with no one present but the experimenter and the subject. We know from accounts given us that witnesses present tend to cause embarrassment and the proper spirit of friendliness and freedom cannot be established. The tests should not be plunged into at once. Some approach that arouses interest and co-operation and puts the examinee at ease is necessary.

At best there are certain practical difficulties in court work; certain external factors, often most important, enter into the problem when only brief examinations are made. The handicaps due to defective vision and defective hearing are often not appreciated. Mental dullness may be caused, in part at least, by physical ill health and the pernicious effects of bad habits. Again, in practical experience, we find the language factor a weighty one. Not only are there often those who are foreign born and who have acquired the new language but imperfectly, but equally as often there are those native born who still have had but little opportunity of mastering the language. To these some of the tests are quite incomprehensible. All these points must be kept in mind if one would gather and interpret statistics fairly.

In the hope of making a study which for the statement of proportionate statistics would be as fair as possible, a research was undertaken by the Psychopathic Institute of the Juvenile Court of Cook County. While it is true that here, too, we are dealing with a selected group to the extent that it represents those brought to the Detention Home, yet it is much less selected than any other. It represents first offenders as well as recidivists, and those brought on complaint of parents as well as those caught in wrong-doing. It is an entirely different group from those who are studied very thoroughly by Dr. Healy. Previous statistics regarding cases examined by Dr. Healy are based on his study of 1,000 repeated offenders, but these were highly selected cases, since all were not only repeaters, but most of them were very troublesome and difficult cases as well. The fact that they represented the very stupid, the very incorrigible, the extreme delinquent, was the reason that they required unusual and de-

tailed study. But even among these the proportion of mental defectives was not nearly as high as given in other assertions of some investigators.

The present investigation was made of 505 cases of delinquent boys and girls in the Detention Home taken consecutively in groups as follows: On successive weeks during the months of April, May, June and September a cross section study of all delinquents in the Home was made. These children were not appearing in court on the day of examination, nor did they know that the examination had any reference to their trials. All tests were made individually by the same experimenter; in every case sufficient time was allowed to establish a feeling of friendliness before beginning the tests.

It is obvious that it was not necessary to give the Binet tests to all members of this group, for it cannot be questioned that those pupils who are able to maintain their standing in the upper grammar grades or in high school are certainly not feeble-minded. In consequence the following plan was used: Each Wednesday there was given a school test consisting of writing from dictation and of solving a problem of long division in which the divisor was a three place number and the solution required handling a zero. On the paper each boy or girl recorded his or her age, the school attended and the highest grade reached. These facts were corroborated by the Home record.

Where no school retardation was found and where the 6th, 7th, 8th or higher grade had been completed and evidence of having profited by educational opportunities to the extent at least of the above school work was given, nothing further was done and the subject was considered normal in ability. However, in cases where retardation was found, though the work was done correctly, or where the school work was not done correctly in spite of a high grade having been reached, the boys and girls were taken singly and examined by using the Binet tests. In addition to this all cases which the house physician felt to be subnormal or feeble-minded, and those whom the probation officers and school teachers brought to our attention, were examined also. Thus to be classed as normal the boy or girl would be so considered by physician, probation officer, and teacher; at least 6th grade must have been reached; there must be no retardation; and the individual must be able to do fairly advanced school work. This would undoubtedly preclude most, if not all chances of error.

In doubtful cases the Binet tests were used because they are in general use and are now so generally known and talked about. Many of the cases were studied in much greater detail; where language seemed a large factor other tests not involving language were used as supplementary.

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The cases obviously quite unnecessary to study by tests for feeble-mindedness number 270—194 boys, 76 girls. Of the 235 remaining, 112 were studied by both the Binet tests and many other tests as well for the various recommendations which the Psychopathic Institute is called upon to give. Another 112 passed normal by the Binet test for their chronological age, or did correctly the 12-year group of tests; while the remaining 11 cases, where this is not true, are those later classified as doubtful.

Though we have long felt—and indeed Dr. Healy long ago said—that the Binet-Simon tests are reliable only through 10 years, yet in the present study the tests through 12 years were used in order to make the results as nearly comparable as possible with other studies of the problem. However, where subjects above 14 years of age succeeded in passing all the 10-year tests and some, but not all, of the 12-year tests, we cannot agree with those who would declare this as evidence of subnormality, much less of feeble-mindedness. These cases we may regard as doubtful and in need of further testing—almost all such were so studied—but we would not designate them as defective by Binet tests alone. In Table I given below we have tabulated in one series all cases found definitely and positively feeble-minded, and those found definitely and positively normal. In another series the figures represent those whom some would regard as possibly feeble-minded and those probably normal on the basis of the Binet-Simon tests alone.

TABLE I.

NUMBER OF CASES.			PERCENTS.				
B'ys.	G'ls.	T'tl.	Boys.	Girls.	Totals.		
Normal	337	116	453	Doubtful	2.4%	1.6%	2%
				doubtful)	9.4%	12.8%	11.1%
				Possibly (including			
				Probably	7%	11.2%	9.1%
Feeble-minded.	26	15	41	Feeble-minded:			
				doubtful)	93%	88.9%	90.9%
				Possibly (including			
				Without doubt . . .	90.6%	87.2%	88.9%
Doubtful	9	2	11	Normal:			
	372	133	505				

From the above figures we see at once that the percentage of our delinquents who are undoubtedly normal ranges about 90 per cent. The nine doubtful cases of boys and two of girls represent those who have passed the 10-year tests successfully, failed on some of the 12-year tests,

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and were not further studied by other tests. These cases we ourselves would not consider as being feeble-minded. The standard used, namely, having completed the upper grammar grades, and being able as well to perform the school test, gives us a double check at least on our group, and furthermore, inasmuch as these data have likewise been corroborated from other records, there can be practically no doubt that none of these subjects could be classed as feeble-minded. Including them, however, among the defective we find 90.6 per cent of the boys and 87.2 per cent of the girls normal in mental ability though it is much more likely that 93 per cent of the boys and 88.8 per cent of the girls belong in this class. However to satisfy all those who would disagree with this standard on Binet tests and who would insist that all 12-year tests must be passed as well we have found the percentage of defectives on this basis too. The present aim is not to determine what degree of ability they may have but merely to satisfy ourselves that they are normal at least.

Combining the boys and girls found in the Detention Home we find in our group of 505 that without doubt 88.9 per cent are normal in intelligence and that almost certainly the truer figure is represented by 90.9 per cent. The average age of the cases is 15.2 years. The girls are slightly older than the boys for the average in their case is 15.8 years as opposed to 14.5 years on the part of the boys. The entire age distribution is shown in Table II.

TABLE II.

Age—	Boys.	Girls.
7-6 to 8-6.....	1	...
8-6 to 9-6.....	4	...
9-6 to 10-6.....	9	...
10-6 to 11-6.....	18	1
11-6 to 12-6.....	16	6
12-6 to 13-6.....	40	10
13-6 to 14-6.....	55	5
14-6 to 15-6.....	86	23
15-6 to 16-6.....	89	35
16-6 to 17.....	28	...
16-6 to 17-6.....	..	36
17-6 to 18.....	..	17
	347	133

In order to determine the reliability of our figures and to show to what extent they are representative of conditions that might be found at any time other than the four months during which the investigation

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was carried on, the figures were computed for each of the months separately. If we find they do not vary much one month from the other, we may feel that the results are not matters of chance but typical and true for any period. Dividing our entire group into those studied during the months of April, May, June and September, we have the following tables:

TABLE III.

Girls—	April.	May.	June.	Sept.	Totals.
Normal	27	28	29	32	116
Feeble-minded	3	5	3	4	15
	10%	15%	9.1%	10.8%	11.2%
Doubtful	1	1	2
Totals	30	33	33	37	133

TABLE IV.

Boys—	April.	May.	June.	Sept.	Totals.
Normal	74	48	117	98	337
Feeble-minded	6	4	8	8	26
	7.3%	7.7%	6.2%	7.2%	7%
Doubtful	2	..	3	4	9
Totals	82	52	128	110	372

Thus we see that the percentage is fairly constant throughout the different periods and the figures cannot be subject to any great error.

These results are not contradictory to the common sense experience of judges and others who deal with delinquent adolescents. Those who are familiar with these problems know from their own experience the number of adolescent offenders who are extremely bright and whose delinquencies arise so very often from causes other than lack of mental ability. Even those experimental workers who have been interested in this question for a long time, but who are not seeking merely for startling figures, have become skeptical of conclusions that have been previously published and have in large measure modified their own opinions. On the basis of their larger experience they feel that these results are unwarranted and only possible on the basis of errors made in obtaining them. They, too, are inclined to believe, both from the evidence of statistical and experimental work, as well as from the opinions of those who have gathered first hand knowledge through working with delinquents, that the percentage of the feeble-minded is quite small as compared to those who cannot be so classed, but who nevertheless, because of many other factors involved in the problem, become delinquent.

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CONCLUSIONS.

(1) All studies of offenders are based necessarily on a selected group.

(2) Studies made in institutions deal with a highly selected group.

(3) All such studies are necessarily unfair representations of the whole body of offenders.

(4) Studies made in courts just prior to or immediately following trials are subject to grave errors, due to the attitude of the examiner, examinee, or both.

(5) External factors which act as handicaps to the examinee are sometimes involved.

(6) The use of inadequate tests and errors in procedure invalidate the results given in numerous studies previously published.

(7) On the basis of a study of more than 500 cases in a group as little selected as is possible to obtain, we find the percentage of feeble-minded to be less than 10 per cent, while the group of those normal in ability exceeds 90 per cent.