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# CRIME AND THE FAILURE OF INSTITUTIONS IN CHICAGO'S IMMIGRANT AREAS

JOHN LANDESCO<sup>1</sup>

The following study will appear as a chapter in a book to be entitled "The Neighborhood Criminal Gang," which has been written by Mr. John Landesco. The research necessary thereto performed by him. The work was undertaken under the direction of Professor E. W. Burgess of the University of Chicago and Judge Andrew A. Bruce of Northwestern University and under the auspices of the Social Science Research Committee of the University of Chicago and the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology and is shortly to be published in book form by the University of Chicago Press.

The new publication will contain the results of a continued study of the problem of Organized Crime in the City of Chicago which was begun by Mr. Landesco in 1925 and the first portion published in 1929 in the volume of the Illinois Crime Survey and as a contribution of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology and of the Social Science Research Committee of the University of Chicago to that great undertaking.

It is perhaps unnecessary to state that the survey and study then made did not end the menace of Organized Crime and of the underworld in the City of Chicago and that much which has been well worth chronicling has transpired since 1929. Hence the new study and the new book. The particular chapter or article which is now given to the public discloses a situation which is so fundamental and so necessary to be understood, if we are to obtain any intelligent estimate of the problem of gang control and prevention, that it has been thought wise that it should be published in advance of the completed volume.

E. W. BURGESS,  
ANDREW A. BRUCE,  
Directing and Supervising Committee.

## *Political Institutions*

Through the press the impression is gained that the only news

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from the area of the "42" gang is crime news. This is due to the fact that the only contact with the gang problem is police contact, the only treatment accorded this spreading gang problem in the area is arrest and punishment, which entail pursuit and flight, shootings, maimings, and killings. With the gang influence spread so widely and playing upon the child so early, the police have an overwhelmingly impossible job. This alone is enough to demoralize any corps. The venality of the police follows. Knowledge of this fact is basic to the point of view of the delinquent boy and of the criminal in the area that the police "only want money." The long criminal history of a young man in the twenties leads him to the conclusion in retrospect that "we work for the police and the lawyers and the fixers."

Aside from the police, the neighborhood politician, in or out of office, is the other direct contact of the immigrant with the state or government. The neighborhood politician and official are the state in reality to this neighborhood.

The political control of the west side "little Italy" was dominated by John Powers, for forty years alderman and political boss of the 19th ward in which these Italians first settled. He controlled their votes through jobs, favors, and courtesies. He controlled the legitimate "pick and shovel" jobs of the early settlers of 30 years ago and later. He made possible the first appointive jobs through politics for the first Americanized Italians with political ambitions. When arrested he furnished bonds and "fixed" cases not only in the immediate police district but anywhere in the city for anyone of the ward charged with any crime. They learned from him and his organization election methods, including slugging and vote frauds. When the Italians became a majority he selected for leadership in his organization such Italians as were adapted to such methods, and not the quiet house-holder nor the schooled immigrant who brought with him a tradition of decency.

When the Italian constituency increased to a majority in the ward he encouraged some of the leaders of his own making by pre-election promises of candidacy for elective jobs. Failing to keep these promises, war started between his henchmen and these ambitious, disappointed leaders—a war of violence, the slugging of the early period was later followed by bombings and killings.<sup>2</sup> When Powers' retirement was imminent the politicians planned to mutilate the Italian constituency, and the west side "little Italy," a single community, was

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<sup>2</sup>See John Landesco "Organized Crime in Chicago" in *Illinois Crime Survey*, pp. 948-53.

apportioned in 1921 to four separate wards, leaving the Italian factor or element only a few precincts in each ward. It reduced the possible following for the rising Italian politician only to precincts. It eliminated the better opportunities for the beginner in politics. The outlook was one of precinct politics and attracted such material, "peanut politicians."<sup>3</sup>

There was one element in the community whose power and influence was transferable from ward to ward. That was the gangster who would commit vote frauds, slugging, or murder. He became a power in politics and made politics his profession. For him the gangster element bestirs itself to enormous activity before and during elections. To him the elected politician is obligated. In this politician the honest policeman encounters the danger and obstacle of transfer or removal or obstruction of promotion. To him the police defers for practical reasons.

### *Educational Institutions*

But in any orderly community the first realization of the state which the child encounters is the school. We assume a school "system," meaning that the same opportunities are available to every child in every district in the city.

From experience this assumption is subject to great modification—first, because there are even under a school system vast differences in quality between individual schools; second, in these immigrant areas the problems and needs of the children are different from those in other areas. The school with its tradition is adapted to a set of conditions which presume an understanding of the work of the school by the parents and an appreciation and supervision by the family of the progress of the child in school. In an immigrant community of widespread illiteracy the parents are helpless in this co-operation. They make no effective intelligent demands or protests.

From this point of view an Italian parochial school, which at the same time had the parents in church using the same language and propagating the sacred traditions of the parents, could probably do better. In the cases of some of the families who have marched through the immigration period in wholesome unity, if not harmony, of parents and children, this factor plays an important part. This

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<sup>3</sup>In spite of this division of the Italians into minority groups in different wards, the twentieth ward has elected Italian Americans as aldermen, and Italian Americans have been elected to the state legislature and to the National Congress.

sympathy and communication between parent and teacher achieved the results for which the parent-teacher's association strives.

As parent-teacher associations do not succeed in this area, parents meet school authorities, truancy officers, principals, as enforcing officers instead of teachers as such when the child is delinquent and at no other time.

Further, the schools in this neighborhood are old, comparatively poorly equipped, and in general undesirable to the teacher who almost without exception comes from distant residential, English-speaking areas. Politics plays no small part in the career of the teacher and by and large the teacher tries to be transferred away from the schools in this district. Even the occasional teacher of wide sympathies who is fascinated by the specific problems of the schools in this area is eager to be placed closer home. The picture is, then, of an unwilling, discouraged teacher, not the best of the corps of the city, with an occasional exceptional teacher of broader education and point of view who finds an outlet for an exceptional originality in this district, whereas a district uniformly orderly and English-speaking allows little expression in the harness and leash of curriculum, text book, program and supervision. In this district, even though she works under all of these restraints, the peculiarities of the problem may permit more originality.

There are other discouraging aspects of school work in this district. In the upper grades in a district of enlightened Americanized parents the work of the pupil can be quickened or stimulated by the objectives of job training and high school. In this immigrant area the sincere school principal finds her last year's graduating class dirty and idle in the streets, shooting craps, or raising a raucous disturbance in the school yard. Her outstanding success is the small group of select children who have carried their school work to conclusion, who have not dropped by the wayside because of truancy or delinquency or commitments to institutions. But even these children have found no legitimate place in the industrial world, to which graduation introduces them. The employment placement of the grade school child of this neighborhood and the planning of his vocational career has been left to this helpless parent.

Even for the child of the English-speaking laborer, the careering through the blind alley jobs of juvenile employment results in chaos. In addition these children, and I am now speaking of the best of them who finish school, have other difficulties of their own to overcome, difficulties of dress and grooming, of speech and accent. The school

has oriented them toward white-collar jobs and the office to which they have applied for jobs has not accepted them because of these personal difficulties.

The children upon leaving public school are too young for apprenticeship in skilled trades; they have heard little and know less how to find their way through the maze of restrictions surrounding entrance into skilled trades imposed by unions and employers. Their elders brought no skill with them and only a few of them learned skilled trades here. Very few can direct their child into apprenticeship. In fact, this situation leaves this child only poorly paid jobs with no visible or tangible outlook. Frequently he gets a job in the machine shop as drill press hand after he is 16, or tool room boy, but there is no arrangement or program of progressive steps through a trade. He sees the young son of the skilled Scandinavian or German in apprenticeship while his own outlook is a blind alley.

Then there are technical high schools, for instance. These are filled to capacity with those elements of the school population whose fathers brought over with them skill and a tradition of apprenticeship and of planning the career of his child as a working man. One of the best known technical schools in America was situated almost within a stone's throw of one "little Italy," in this city, with hundreds, almost thousands, of Italian children in the nearby elementary schools. The Italian children of the neighborhood who attended this school were very few, not even a sprinkling; they could be counted on the fingers of two hands. For instance, one boy was the son of the president of the largest Italian organization, a very progressive man, but when he completed high school, he did not become a craftsman; inasmuch as his father had afforded a full time technical high school course, he could afford a college education. He is now attending a university.

So little did the immediate neighborhood contribute to the attendance in this technical school that it was moved miles north into the center of the groups described above who have a tradition of craftsmanship, whose children constitute, by and large, the attendance of this technical high school. Between the elementary academic schools of the Italian district and the technical high school there was no effective coordination.

The technical high school cannot supply the needs of children who cannot attend full time school for three or four years. Poverty and lack of an understanding of the opportunities for the child are, of course, basic. We assume then that these children go to work.

We have already indicated that they either do not go to work or find jobs which for them are blind alleys. Very likely then those who do work fall into the hopper of the continuation school.

Here again, the continuation school has not articulated with the specific needs of these children—first, because the continuation school in Chicago has been conceived in terms of a part-time extension of the work of the regular academic school. It has for its attendance those who have failed in the elementary schools through lack of interest, truancy or delinquency, and those who have not opportunity to go to high school or full-time technical school.

All these children need to be chaperoned and oriented through their initial years in industry. What has actually occurred is that the child who has run away from the regular grammar school gets more of it. The child who has finished the regular grammar school and needs to find his way through that maze of blind alley and opportunity which it encounters in its initial years in industry, gets no specific aid, training, or help from this type of continuation school.

Finally, a group of children living in a neighborhood where law in general is not effective, where daily he hears and witnesses avoidance and escape of legal enforcement, finds ways to escape the truancy officer. Child labor law or school attendance law is enforced no better than is any other law in this area. The continuation school attendance law is beset with so many loopholes, so many legal escapes, that only a small proportion of the total juvenile labor population attends. When we examine the delinquency areas for the effects of continuation school, they seem to be non-existent. It occurs, therefore, that in all of the documents gathered for this study there is not one mention of continuation school, though this institution has been in existence during the entire school age period of almost every subject in the delinquency-crime documents.

During the last three years, unemployment has been so widespread and so continuous for such fathers and young men as have always been employed that children assume that jobs are impossible to get. What is a periodic slump for those who have suffered unemployment before, is a futile world without a starting-place or a career or a place in life for a boy just coming up.

An immigrant area is a simple, convenient environment in which the new arrival can begin to make a home. Soon afterward when his family begins to arrive from Europe or the children born here begin to grow up, success is marked by moving away from the immigrant community. In the 30 years of the existence of the west

side "little Italy" there has been a continuous exodus of those whose adaptation to American life has brought them increased economic welfare. Looking around for models, mirrors, or examples of success to point out to the young, one only finds in the neighborhood the successful gangster and the politician with his flash and his pull and his automobiles. There are "big-shot" liquor bosses and beer bosses, some of them are at one and the same time politicians, and there are politicians who fix for the criminals and beer bosses. Together with their gangster followings they rule the civic life of the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

### *Religious Institutions*

The exodus of the legitimately successful residents has its effect upon all the institutions. In the immigrant areas churches and synagogues, parochial or denominational schools, have flourished in the past, have built large, expensive plants and buildings with an outlook to an increasing welfare of their members in the future. As the successful families are constantly drawn off to the other neighborhoods they are attracted by the institutions established in those neighborhoods. The Americanized children prefer the decorum of the churches in these new neighborhoods, prefer the public school or the private Catholic school where Americanized families send their children. This is as true in the Jewish area. In the Lawndale area there are massive synagogues, beautifully and expensively built as well as religious schools. The burden of expense looms heavier and larger upon the poorer residents who have remained in the neighborhood because the successful families have moved to new and distant neighborhoods where synagogues and schools, modified in form and more suitable to American life and more attractive to American youth are constantly being built.

In every old immigrant community or ghetto the communicants or members of these religious and cultural institutions complain that all they want is money, money, money! The fact is that the big givers upon whose support these projects were contemplated withdraw their support because they have either given up entirely their affiliation with institutions of this type or are supporting other more agreeable, more effective congregations or parishes. This complaint of the constant pressure for financial contributions is very general in the west side "little Italy" under the policy of the Catholic church that

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<sup>4</sup>For a fuller discussion of this point see Chapter 26 "The Gangster's Apologia Pro Sua Vita" in Part III "Organized Crime in Chicago" in Illinois Crime Survey.



every parish must support itself. Their feeling is intensified by the fact that the poor and not only the poor but the working class or peasant in general, in their original European communities almost regardless of nationality or religion, has not been trained to support churches. Religious institutions in Europe exist in general through the beneficence of the rich, bequests, and endowments and are often supported by the state. Not only do the poor carry very little of the burden but they come to the religious institutions when in need. The church gives; it does not take. The parishes in this immigrant community are under the burden of raising their entire budget from the immediate immigrant community. They must at the same time educate the communicants to support the church with money. This situation adds to the cynicism of young and old, "The priest only wants money, money, money!"

In the relation of the family and the church the parochial schools have greater difficulty in retaining the original harmony between church, school, and home than existed in the earlier days of the immigration. Americanization has meant also demoralization from the internal point of view. When the rites, customs, and observances of the home coincided with all the teachings of the church there was harmony, but when in the many homes of the many children in the school there is a great variety of patterns of observance, by act and omission, through the influences of the new culture upon the home, the harmony between church, school, and home is broken and this situation often even adds to the confusion of the child.

In the families which have emerged as wholesome from their immigration period and have succeeded in educating their children under American influences and institutions, there still exists a culture conflict between parent and child about church, beliefs, and church-going, even though the early harmony between church, school, and home served to conserve their childhood and to carry them through safely.

#### *Unemployment and Relief Agencies*

Unemployment of the father for a long period is not only demoralizing through poverty but in the patriarchal home it is even more demoralizing through the loss of dignity of the father. Joblessness is an indignity. Where children are being raised in a neighborhood in which the gang helps the boy to early economic independence and acculturates him with attitudes contrary or hostile to the father's tradition, unemployment brings the disrespect to open op-

position and humiliates the father, making him the more ineffective in his paternal control.

In order the better to trace the processes of demoralization in a gang area, we have chosen integral families whose sons have become gangsters. If these cannot withstand the onslaught of conflict with the gang's influences, what can the broken family do?

Either in the integral family or broken home with gangster children we fail to find the traces of adequate relief by the social agencies with a view to the pressing problems of the children. In fact, we have found integrated families with many growing children moving into the neighborhood where the children begin to become profitably delinquent. At first there is a strong opposition from the parents but with the inadequacy of the father's earning and the periodic unemployment and the drastic effort of the mother to save the wholeness of the family, compromise after compromise is made. When unemployment is lengthy we find that same family living upon the loot of all of its children, but retaining its wholeness.

In clearing the names of delinquent youth through the central record bureaus of social agencies, we find that the parents of these gangster children have never been aided. They have found their own solution. From the point of view of the best interests of the city and community it were best had these families been aided and aided adequately to a standard required by the raising and schooling and training for jobs of the children.

It is questionable whether through philanthropy whole communities can ever be brought up to such an adequate standard. It is certain that the methods of the case worker are such as to bias the aid in favor of families who are aggressive in their demands upon the case worker and who are willing to undergo the investigational and supervisory processes of the charity worker.

#### *Recreational and Character Forming Institutions*

In our contacts in the area of the "42" gang we constantly find the children aglow with the excitement, the exploits, the pleasures, and the adventures offered by the gang and afforded by the profits of delinquency. Boy Scouts, settlements, social centers are almost entirely absent as influences in the lives of these children. For the infants a good deal more is done, both by the Catholic social agencies and others. Campaigns for all of these recreational agencies constantly exploit the problem of delinquency in the raising of money,

but these agencies are not working either adequately or effectively in the shaping of the lives of our delinquents and criminals.

In orderly communities the institutions that make for order in the day by day life of growing children and of immigrant families are the family, the church, the school, vocational training and employment, recreational facilities including the library. If we assume that all of these institutions are working efficiently in these immigrant areas then we can immediately seek the causes of delinquency either in the organic make-up of the individual or in old world traits transplanted. These children have either inherited criminality in their physical constitutions or else are criminal because of the influence of their old world tradition.

Our study of individual cases, families, play groups, and the gang convinces us that the chief causes are not to be found in the physical and mental make-up or in the transplanted culture. Our working hypothesis is that the chief factors were in the situation in which neighborhoods of this type find themselves. This neighborhood is one of the old immigrant areas out of which the most adaptable families have been selected in the exodus, leaving behind a community composed of families whose burdens are too great for their own solution and beset with problems more devastating to the character, morality, citizenship, and economic efficiency than the problems at the doors of families in other more orderly neighborhoods. We must first look to the efficiency of these institutions which influence the day by day life of the families and of the children.

### *The Pull of the Gang*

In contrast to the inadequacy and the chaos of the agencies and organs of orderly legitimate life, the unattainableness of the means and the progress of a legitimate life plan, the gang is at the doorstep or at the corner. It furnishes the partners for truancy who lure the dissatisfied boy from school, it provides playtime friends who have at their fingers' ends the sources of spending money for pleasures to be achieved either within the neighborhood or in the wide metropolis. They can steal to spend, and spend for pleasure and adventure. Then the older gangster or hoodlum lures with promises of bigger money, protection, and manly vices. He flaunts before the eyes of the little boys the cars he has stolen, the clothing, the shows, the cabarets and the excitement.

Within gang life are the examples of manly courage and the dangers and battles and extreme loyalties of the gangster world.

Growing up within the gang the boy knows that his gang partners have suffered the beatings of the police, confinement and torture for him and he for them. He has been carried from under the fire of the enemy by his pals and he has rescued his friends in turn. He has received money from them when he was broke and ragged or in trouble at home or with the police, and has helped them in turn. In the early years when the rackets only brought in spending money, the police had little concern. When the rackets begin to pay the police becomes alert. Through a long period of encounters and fixings with the police, bearing the scars of battle and the bitter memories of punishment and confinement, the gangster surveys his own life and that of his pals in retrospect, he is the first to say that crime does not pay. There are the dead, the maimed, the imprisoned, and the casual poor hoodlum doing anything to make a dollar, available as the tool for anybody's crime—the victim of the police venality. This attitude emerges best when from the outside some person or group comes prepared to offer a way out, a contrasting career or way of life with an actual program and concrete opportunities.