


Spring 1941

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Recommended Citation

Kenneth I. Wollan, A New Treatment Program for Juvenile Delinquents, 31 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 712 (1940-1941)

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A NEW TREATMENT PROGRAM FOR JUVENILE DELINQUENTS¹

Kenneth I. Wollam²

Delinquency persists as one of our most disturbing social problems. In spite of the money and professional skill which have been applied to the matter we find ourselves today without any clear-cut prescription. We are not without light, however, for the research of the last forty years has left us with positive as well as negative findings and the next generation stands in a good position to capitalize on the efforts of pioneers in this field.

Any discussion of new methods of treating delinquents, therefore, must be pursued with modesty and with due consideration for the legacy of insight and fact which are the ground work for progress. The discussion of treatment methods used by the Citizenship Training Department of the Boston Juvenile Court is to be considered primarily an attempt to consolidate the findings of several generations of research with an effort to carry the problem over from a preoccupation with diagnosis to a more direct attack on supervision and treatment.

Problems and Limitations in a Treatment Program for Delinquents

The acknowledgment of barriers and limitations in the establishment of an ideal treatment program for delin-

quents seems to be the first step in an effective attack on the problem. These barriers confirm the fact that when we attempt to handle the delinquent we are faced with a far more difficult treatment routine than obtains in cases of simple medical conditions, or in cases of clearcut psychological problems.

I

Though the delinquent is glibly spoken of as a social type and we categorically attempt to study him, the fact is he does not represent a species or a pathological condition different from the main stream of youthful behavior. Even legally we have difficulty in defining delinquency. California and the District of Columbia do not attempt to define delinquency but realistically relate what other states consider delinquent behavior and then, in effect, say "that's what we mean." Medically, psychologically, or socially the delinquent as a class cannot be considered as an "abnormal." Most of us have been guilty of misconduct which under certain conditions would have drawn us into a juvenile court and classified us as delinquents. Dr. Ira Wile points out that "Delinquents may have finer and more agreeable personalities, and more

¹ Presented at the Western Massachusetts Conference on Mental Hygiene in Education and Social Work, Springfield, Mass., April 13, 1940.

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stable personality organization than many non-delinquent personalities."³ The fact that we are not dealing with a particular type of person, or a peculiar type of conduct delineates the complexity of the problem and even suggests that we are concerned with a manifestation of the behavior characteristics of the whole human race.

II

A second limitation to the establishment of effective handling of delinquents is this: we begin some type of treatment before we know what conditions need to be remedied. That this is an unorthodox, unscientific procedure is readily acknowledged, but in our present method of handling delinquents it is an inherent difficulty. Treatment of *a kind* begins the moment a summons is made out. The appearance of a policeman at the boy's door, the ride in a squad car, the preliminary questioning in the station house, the appearance before the probation officer, and before the Judge all contribute to the boy's total life experience and therefore constitute a *kind* of treatment. A lay-over in a detention home for study where the boy meets doctors, psychologists, social workers and where he lives with other boys who are in trouble also constitutes a kind of treatment which may have lifelong effects. This procedure of fact finding, therefore, itself becomes a hazardous kind of treatment which raises many problems for subsequent efforts.

Equally disconcerting is the fact that frequently it is impossible to get pertinent data which yield a comprehensive picture of the delinquent's personality and his behavior. It is also true that when all the facts are in, the interpretation often offers several plausible alternatives which provide divergent opinions on treatment. We must be extremely modest in our claims for understanding human behavior. As a psychiatrist recently said to us "We neither know in each instance why a person acts as he does, nor do we always know why we fail or succeed with him." Certainly those of us who work with delinquents know that the behavior of the offender is not easy to trace or interpret. We nevertheless are forced into the awkward position of establishing a treatment program of supervision and custody with a minimum of facts and no real assurance that pertinent material can eventually be secured.

III

Another limitation to an ideal treatment situation is that when we attempt the rehabilitation of delinquents we are working with individuals who have been deprived of their freedom by the law. The hazards and weaknesses of this condition are well known. The resistance, blocking, antagonism, and resentment usually shown make for many problems. We have found that even routine intelligence tests become invalid in many cases due to an unwillingness or an inability to cooperate. A strong working rapport which is the very foundation of any treatment situation is not always possible when per-

³ Wile, Ira S., *The Challenge of Adolescence*, p. 367.

sonal freedom is denied. Certainly information given under protest cannot be used to establish a personal working relationship.

During adolescence there is a strong urge to emancipate from parents, that is, to throw off the shackles of parental supervision and stand on one's own feet. This, indeed, may be one of the components of delinquent behavior. When a Court steps in to establish a kind of control which approximates, at least psychologically, the type of supervision from which the adolescent is attempting to free himself, a condition is set up which is the very antithesis of that which is needed, thus providing a permanent hazard to all treatment efforts.

IV

Judge John F. Perkins of our Boston Juvenile Court has frequently mentioned a factor which is overlooked in many treatment programs. The important step in any rehabilitation effort is to get the delinquent to accept the carefully planned treatment, for the boy himself has the *final* decision on matters of conduct and future action. It is the delinquent's attitude, his acceptance or rejection of ideas and plans which determines the ultimate success of treatment. We may decide upon a treatment program which in common experience looks ideal and yet if the boy will not accept it we are doomed to failure. We may have methods for drawing the boy in line with our plans but this is merely a recognition of the truth that the boy or girl has the final veto. The burden of our problem,

therefore, is not merely to establish facts and arrive at conclusions, but to do this in a way which is acceptable and understandable to the individual who is himself the final court of appeal.

Treatment Methods Used in the Citizenship Training Group

A clear, precise account of the methods used in any treatment program is difficult to give because so much depends upon the skill and intuition of the person handling the case who may not always be able to articulate the methods employed. Even though a person may have an academic understanding of the techniques at his command, he may find that by training or disposition he is limited to a certain approach. Recognizing that the capacities, preferences, and intuition of the therapist are among the most variable factors with which we deal, we must nevertheless specify as clearly as we can the techniques and methods of treatment which have a fair chance of success with delinquent children. We shall review particularly those specific principles of method which have been applied to our Citizenship Training work in the Boston Juvenile Court.

By way of orientation it should be mentioned that this Citizenship Training Department was established as a service for the Probation Officer. All boys between ages of 12-17 going on probation in the Boston Juvenile Court are routinely sent to us for study and treatment. The boys attend eight weeks, five days a week, in the afternoon after school between the hours of 3:30 and 6 o'clock. We at-

tempt rehabilitation with the boy without disturbing the normal routine of his life by removal from home or school. We work with the boys in groups and individually. The staff consists of a director, a specially trained boys worker, an educational advisor, a psychologist, and a part-time psychiatrist.⁴ The project is housed in a recreational center located about a mile from the court.

I

We attempt to gain a comprehensive picture of the personality and experience of each delinquent.

We acknowledged earlier that it is not always possible to establish a clear-cut case of cause and effect in the study of human behavior. We either simply cannot get the information or when we do get it the interpretation is open to debate. We must, however, get all the data that are relevant to the case and any failure to do this makes the real outcome doubtful. There are medical factors, eye and ear defects, school disabilities, dullness of intellect, malnutrition, conflict at home, etc., all of which may fit together to give *clues* to the possible solution.

In our Citizenship Training Department we have insisted upon submitting a boy to a large number of social group situations in addition to the routine medical and psychological examinations which standard procedure demands. This activity-interview method of

studying the delinquent has been described elsewhere⁵ but it can be briefly stated as a procedure which demands a wide variation of expression on the part of a boy in play groups, discussion, craft classes, and gymnasium. This has given us an opportunity to appraise with first hand observations the aggression, maturity, sociality, and standards of a boy—factors of particular importance in delinquents. We feel that objective data on the social behavior of the individual as it expresses itself in these groups are essential in judging what treatment steps are really necessary.

II

We attempt to give equal emphasis to insights from various scientific fields.

A review of the literature of the last two generations reveals the emergence of many definite points of view in the social sciences. Many treatment plans have emphasized a single approach to the complete exclusion of others from allied fields. This was unfortunate but perhaps inevitable in the early days of this type of research. We believe that the independent points of view must now be drawn together both academically and functionally. At our staff conferences we have the services of a psychologist, a recreation leader, an educator, a psychiatrist, a penologist, and the probation officer who is the family case worker. The combined opinion of this group makes possible

⁴ Wollan, Kenneth I., Gardner, George E., "A Group-Clinic Approach to Delinquency," *Mental Hygiene*, April, 1938; and Wollan, Kenneth I., "The Use of Group Activity in Probation Work," 1938, *Yearbook, National Probation Association*.

⁵ Gardner, George E., Wollan, Kenneth I., "The Activity-Interview Method in the Study of Delinquency." In print: *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*.

an all-around attack which avoids the hazard of overspecialization. Each point of view is subject to debate and each field is tested by the broader experience of the group.

III

We attempt to build strong personal relationships between ourselves and the boys.

The antagonism and resentment which characterize most of the boys when they come to us convinced us very early in our work that because we functioned as an agent of the court, the traditional interview method of gaining rapport was not sufficient. We found it necessary to establish informal groups with specific play and work opportunities for the boys to acquaint themselves with the leaders who were expected to be their friends and counselors. These boys demanded evidence that we could be trusted, that we possessed qualities of fair play. It has been our experience that personal relationships profound enough to motivate broad personality changes are developed best by sharing such mutual experiences as are possible in games, athletics, discussion, and creative craft work. The Citizenship Training Department, by its group activity, in which the leader becomes a participant, attempts to give the delinquent boy a chance to *study and test the leader*. Rapport established in this manner seems to be developed naturally and avoids the artificial procedure of drawing the boy into conversation before he has had a fair chance to appraise and judge the leader.

IV

Treatment should be immediate.

Any system which permits a long delay between the commission of a delinquent act and the initiation of treatment gives the delinquent a false impression of the relationship between his act and its consequences, that is, the whole event is permitted to grow cold before anything is done about it. In certain cases the delay and the corresponding suspense may impose an exaggerated sense of guilt on the individual and may magnify the incident entirely out of proportion to its real significance.

In our Citizenship Training Department we start a boy out the day he is placed on probation. The disposition itself in the Juvenile Court takes but a day or two at the most, and he usually comes to us about an hour after probation has been imposed. He is not started out on a vigorous program, but he does start in immediately to carry out a plan of training while the memory of the incident is still fresh. We feel that the immediacy and decisiveness of this procedure is of extreme importance. The question may be raised, how can any treatment begin without an initial period of observation? Our answer is simply this: We start a boy out on a general program of activity and improvement immediately and watch his habits of behavior to determine what precise steps in treatment are necessary. There are well tested athletic and play activities which have a certain uniformly good effect whatever the real cause of delinquency may be, and we begin by

initiating the boy into our program gently via these activities. Of course, in cases of marked shyness or medical problems the routine has to be varied.

V

The approach is direct.

We have found that the one thing an adolescent boy demands is that we do business with him *directly*. He doesn't want the hearsay of his teacher, or club leader, or parents used as the basis of private discussion. By giving the boy a chance to act in a variety of social situations, some of which demand strain, we have been able to develop *fresh, original* material which we use directly with the boy. It has been our experience that a boy is willing to discuss a fight he has had in our locker room but resents discussing a fight he has had on the playground if the details of the fight have been communicated to us by the school teacher.

The treatment advantage of this can be seen nearly every day in our set-up. If a boy blows up in checker games, or makes a nuisance of himself in discussion, he can be taken aside *immediately* and the whole matter discussed with him *directly*. Such incidents, even though they may be violations of rules which involve discipline, become mutual experiences which the boys are ready to discuss.

One boy referred to us for larceny was known to have a pugnacious manner which had previously put him into the court for assault and battery. His disposition to fight and quarrel eventually became evident in competitive games. After several altercations with

boys in the gymnasium, the matter was taken up directly with the boy on the basis of the incidents seen in our own presence. We did not have to refer back to an event drawn to our attention by the court record or by the probation officer. We had original, fresh, mutual incidents which served as the basis for attacking the problem.

VI

Treatment is designed to impress the boy that his court appearance has not made a different type or species out of him.

We know that many boys believe that their delinquency has somehow segregated them from the common run of human beings and stigmatized them permanently. One of our main treatment tasks is, therefore, to make the boy certain that he is still a member of society who will be restored to good standing upon the successful completion of his period of probation.

Our Citizenship Training Department headquarters are in the Boston Y. M. C. U. which is an old, well established agency known for its athletic training and camp work. The boys come to this building, experience no segregation, in fact, are made to feel that they are a part of a recognized man's agency. At the same time a boy is urged to attend his local club. Every effort is made to draw him into the main stream of normal life activity and to restore him to good standing in his community with a sense of achievement rather than a sense of guilt.

VII

We attempt to place the burden of action and decision upon the delinquent.

Earlier we discussed the psychological fact that our plans for a boy are always subject to his veto. It is he who must decide what future course of action is to be taken. We can decide probation or commitment for him but we cannot decide that he is to stay out of future trouble. Our real problem, then, is to develop an independent, responsible citizen who will decide for himself on a course of socially acceptable behavior and carry it out with some degree of decisiveness. We cannot operate on him, or give him a patent potion which will accomplish this. We are faced here with the task of self-development and self direction.

We believe that this ability to decide and act in a socially successful manner is best achieved by putting the boy on his own as soon as possible, by giving him approval when he has shown good judgment. We have therefore built our whole program around an effort to get each boy acting and deciding for himself, even to the point where he gives us his carefully conceived recommendations for future treatment efforts. We have found it extremely reassuring to a boy to consult him about his own future and to let him know that things are not being done to him, but rather that he is a free agent deciding his own course of events. It seems certain that any plan which takes the initiative away from the person being treated tends to cripple him and establish permanent need for props and crutches.

VIII

Treatment is looked upon as "development."

The *training* or development aspect has featured our point of view from the very first. We have found a gymnasium of indispensable service in giving a certain atmosphere to our procedure. A boy may not understand personality growth but he does understand physical development. He usually wants to be strong, to develop muscle, to grow, to be healthy. These are tangible factors, the motivations for which are already established. This is therefore the place to begin and we have found it acceptable to even the dull and resistive.

From the tangible physical development side, we have found it possible to carry over the motivation to more radical changes in personality which may be looked upon and accepted, by the boy, as a phase of development not totally unlike that seen in his own muscular growth.

We believe this "development atmosphere" which we attempt to cultivate as a working philosophy justifies itself particularly with adolescent boys who fundamentally seem to center much effort and attention on the improvement of their own physiques. This atmosphere is also a favorable one in which to consider delinquency specifically, for frequently a boy will eventually say, regarding his offense, "Aw, that was kid stuff." We have found that if a boy will look upon delinquency as a manifestation of a childish lack of control, he is usually in a fair position to accept the incident with profit and

to go on to develop a more responsible adult type of behavior.

IX

We attempt to establish a balance between firmness and friendliness.

One of our earliest discoveries was that a boy did not want anything to do with us if we did not show a reasonable firmness and consistency. On the other hand he demanded a genuine friendliness from us before any kind of rapport was possible. It became necessary therefore, to assume two roles which, at face value, seem to be antithetical in nature but which are functional demands on a leader of delinquent boys.

The child who has been raised in an environment where discipline has been determined by the caprice of the moment, finds security in a situation where he knows what consequences result from his behavior even though they be unpleasant in nature. It is also true that a boy experiences security in being associated with a personal friend who is stronger in will and determination than he.

Conclusion

We have outlined here the difficulties encountered in a program of treatment for delinquents and indicated the manner in which the Citizenship Training Department of the Boston Juvenile Court has attempted to meet these problems. The care and handling of the problem child still remains an art depending upon the skill of some gifted person, but nevertheless, it is necessary to formulate our experiences and communicate them in the same way as the wise teacher coaches a promising student. Furthermore, in any delinquency treatment program we must understand the *whole problem* sufficiently to avoid the hazard of using methods which defeat the very purposes for which the program was designed. We are all looking for light. It seems reasonable to believe that under the penetrating attack of the research of *all* the Social Sciences working cooperatively we may achieve results which at present seem impossible.

CURRENT NOTE

Inter-American Bar Association — The First Conference of the Inter-American Bar Association was announced for March 24-28, 1941, at the Hotel Nacional, Havana, Cuba. The President of the Association is Dr. Manuel Fernandez Supervielle of Havana and the Executive Secretary is Lawrence D. Egbert of Washington, D. C. Round Tables were planned upon 5 crime topics: (a) Crime prevention: Medical, educational, juvenile court and juvenile institution aspects. (b) Uniform and re-

ciprocal laws: Extradition, defense, criminal regulation of traffic and transportation. (c) Criminal procedure: Pre-trial, trial, post-trial. (d) Penal treatment: Quarantine; classification based upon medical and other data, on conference and diagnosis; treatment process by experts, housing, work, etc. (e) Administration, including personnel: police, investigatory, judicial, prosecutory, probation and parole, penal institutions.