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# Origins of Crime: A New Evaluation of the Cambridge Somerville Youth Study, by William McCord, Joan McCord, and Irving Kenneth Zola

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# BOOK REVIEWS

ORIGINS OF CRIME: A NEW EVALUATION OF THE CAMBRIDGE-SOMERVILLE YOUTH STUDY. By William McCord and Joan McCord with Irving Kenneth Zola. New York: Columbia University Press. 1959. Pp. xvi, 219. \$6.00.

The original Cambridge-Somerville study was made between 1937 and 1945 and was designed to assess the effects of treatment upon a group of 325 boys between the ages of five and thirteen at the beginning of the study who were compared with a carefully matched group of another 325 boys of similar age and background who received no treatment. The results of this study were mainly negative, *i.e.*, approximately forty percent of both groups acquired official records as delinquents or criminals and the treatment appeared to have had a negligible effect. The present study, begun in 1955, was first planned as a recheck of the effectiveness of treatment, but later became, as the title indicates, a study of the causes of crime.

In an early chapter the authors in the main reaffirm the original negative conclusions indicated in the above paragraph. They did find some evidence, however, that intensive therapy produced positive effects in a few of the cases.

The main focus of the McCord study is upon data concerning 253 of the original group of 325 boys who received treatment. The entire 325 were not included because some of them had been under treatment for too brief a period and a few had died. Extensive information and voluminous case records were available to the authors concerning these 253 boys because they had been under observation and guidance for from two to eight years in connection with the treatment program. This material was evaluated by panels of judges who rated the home environment, the personalities of the parents, the nature of the discipline in the family, the quality of the neighborhood, the boy's role in the family and other similar matters. These factors were then correlated with the criminality of the son, the type of crime committed, reformation, age at first and last conviction, and so on.

The official court record of a conviction for a violation of the criminal law is the only measure of criminality utilized in this study and criminality is taken to include traffic violations and convictions for drunkenness. The authors admit that the acceptance of court records as

a measure of criminality is a deficiency of the study but its importance is minimized by the arguments that there is probably little undetected crime and that "it is doubtful that a confirmed criminal can pass through the first thirty years of his life without being apprehended at least once." (p. 10) Persons who are familiar with police practices and crime statistics are likely to feel that the McCords are unduly optimistic in these assumptions. The pertinence of the quoted remark concerning "confirmed criminals" seems doubtful since we are not told what that expression means nor is there any indication how many of the boys turned into "confirmed criminals." It is interesting to ask how many convictions are required and for what offenses to justify the use of this term? It will be noted that from the authors' logic and definitions "reformation" means only the absence of an official record of a conviction!

On the basis of literally hundreds of correlations and combinations of variables the authors conclude that criminals are characterized by "a basic deficiency in conscience, a failure to internalize elementary inhibitions" (p. 196), and that this defective conscience originates in early pathological influences within the home consisting primarily of lack of affection and inconsistency. The mode of affectional relationships between the son and the parents, and especially the mother, is regarded by the authors as the basic determinant of conscience. The content of conscience is determined, they say, by the parental model and by the consistency with which a social value is presented to the child (pp. 198-99).

While this theory is presented as a conclusion it is probably substantially what the authors believed before they undertook this investigation. The data presented do not compel one to accept this theory that conscience is formed in early childhood exclusively within the home, and by implication, that it is not appreciably influenced by later adult experiences. Indeed, the authors themselves confess that, as regards reformation, adult experiences have to be taken into consideration (p. 192).

In general, the authors' theory is a mildly Freudian one in the sense that it seeks the roots of adult behavior in childhood experiences within the family. This bias is made evident at many points, as for example, when it is pointed out that forty-five percent of the boys who had cruel mothers became criminals and the authors add the following unsupported assertion: "The fact that this percentage was not higher indicates that despite physical abuse and overt rejection, this cruel attention instilled at least a fear of retaliation by the law." (p. 100) Another example is the suggestion (p. 152) that the traffic criminal is seeking an escape from an overprotective mother or compensation for a passive mother, and that he obtains a sense of self-importance and mastery by violating traffic

regulations which he cannot get in his home. If one turns to table 71 (p. 147), on which this conclusion is based, it is noteworthy that the sons of normal loving mothers seem to violate traffic laws about as much as those of the overprotective and passive ones—a point not commented upon.

It is impossible in the short space of a review to do justice to the many specific findings and hypotheses advanced by the authors. As a single example of their method and their data one table will be summarized. This table (p. 108) relates parental affection to the later criminality of the son and has a bearing on the relative importance of the respective parent's influence. The results were:

loving mother & loving father—32% of sons convicted of crime  
loving mother & rejecting father—36% of sons convicted  
rejecting mother and loving father—46% of sons convicted  
rejecting mother & rejecting father—70% of sons convicted.

It should be noted that, while a significant statistical relationship is indicated by these results, there were also many exceptions, for under the most favorable circumstances one of about every three boys nevertheless became criminal while under the most unfavorable circumstances about one in three still refrained from criminality. These results are typical examples of the numerical data on which the conclusions of this study rest.

The problem created by this sort of data is well brought out by the authors themselves when they criticize the sociological approach. It cannot explain, they complain, why some boys even in the most delinquent, gang-infested areas do not join the gang and do not become delinquent or criminal. By the same token the McCords' own theories must be rejected, for in all instances where the number of cases was substantial there were substantial numbers of boys who appeared as exceptions, *i.e.*, who became criminal despite cohesive homes, consistent discipline, loving parents, relatively good neighborhood, and so on. Conversely, there were also always some who did not become criminal when the opposite or unfavorable conditions prevailed. Under these circumstances it is hard to see why the McCords view their theory as superior to any other.

The McCords happen to have had at hand an abundance of data concerning the home backgrounds of their cases. Concerning other aspects of the boy's early life there was apparently very little information. For example, detailed information concerning the boy's associations with persons outside the home and of his contacts with the police, courts, social agencies, and so on was either not available or was not used. After the boy left the project there was apparently next to no real information

about him except as provided by court criminal records. Had all relevant information on all these matters been available for each boy for the entire time period from the boy's first contact with the project until 1955, a great mass of additional, inconclusive correlations could have been presented to confuse the issue further.

It is axiomatic among statisticians that statistical correlations, regardless of their number or ingenuity, do not justify causal conclusions. There is no limit in principle to the number of items with which a given form of behavior may be correlated. Criminality has been correlated with hundreds. The fact that a given item is statistically associated with criminality does not prevent it from also being associated significantly with many other forms of behavior. It is this lack of specificity of a statistical relationship which is one of the important differences between this sort of a relationship and a causal one.

As another reason for rejecting the sociological theory of crime causation the authors argue that the family influence is more basic than that of the gang (for example) because it is an earlier one. This preference for remote causes as opposed to immediate ones is not in harmony with the usual scientific concept of cause which emphasizes immediate causation, requiring that there be close juxtaposition of cause and effect and denying action at a distance. The McCord conception is historical rather than scientific. It obscures an important sociological assumption which the McCords make, namely, that the existence of a criminal subculture and gangs may be taken for granted within the environment. This assumption happens to be true of this sample drawn as it was from the lowest social classes within the environs of a large city, but it might not be true in rural areas or in the upper classes.

The authors' acceptance of court records of convictions as the measure of criminality creates an artificial gap between cause and effect, between home environment and later criminality. This separation enables the authors to contend that their evaluations of the homes and parental personalities could not possibly have been influenced by the criminality. It also suggests that the criminality could not possibly have been a contributory cause of home environment or parental attitude. It should be noted that many of the boys were originally referred to the project by social agencies or the police because they were thought to be maladjusted. This suggests very strongly that some were delinquent when first contacted. Formal conviction for crime usually follows after a preliminary period of some duration characterized by association with delinquents and repeated encounters with authorities, who are notoriously reluctant to charge immature boys with crime. Not only is it possible, therefore, that

the delinquency of the boy may have been known from the beginning, but it is also possible that the boy's delinquency sometimes helped to produce the home situation. It is not illogical to suppose, for example, that a mother might sometimes reject her son because he was delinquent—indeed, it is more logical to assume this than to assume that boys always become delinquent because of prior rejection by the mother.

Most students of human behavior are probably inclined to accept the idea that early training and experiences within the family are of critical importance in shaping the later development of the child. Most readers of this book are also likely to agree that it is an impressive and competent piece of work and one that will certainly receive a great deal of careful attention in future investigations. Its main weakness seems to the reviewer to be that the causal theories expounded therein are not too closely connected with the statistical correlations presented, and that the study as a whole does not stem from direct contact of the authors with the subject matter. Discoveries in the field of science generally arise from prolonged intimate contact with raw data. It is well to remember that in the study of crime the primary data being investigated consists, not of numbers, official records or statistical correlations, but of human conduct.

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RACE RELATIONS AND AMERICAN LAW. By Jack Greenberg. New York: Columbia University Press. 1959. Pp. viii, 481. \$10.00.

When the exigencies of American politics forced the negro to fight his battles in the judicial chamber rather than the legislative hall, an unlooked for by-product was the production of a fascinating case study of law in action. In a situation without parallel in our constitutional history, the Supreme Court has undertaken a re-examination and redirection of the position of the ten percent of the population whose lot it is to be colored in a nation which gives its greatest rewards to those with an absence of pigmentation. While the roots of this development can be traced at least as far back as 1938, and probably even farther, the major impact has of course come since the fateful Monday in mid-May 1954, when the Court announced its decision in the *Segregation Cases*. These half-dozen years mark one of the classic legal struggles which have erupted from time to time in the United States, struggles of a political and social nature,

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