

# Curbing Juvenile Delinquency

by BERTRAM M. BECK\*

*Juvenile delinquency is widely recognized as one of the most serious problems facing the Nation today. A conference on the subject, called by the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, was held in Washington during June. Efforts to determine just how grave the problem is and what can be done to solve it are being made by the Senate Committee on the Judiciary through a subcommittee set up for the purpose, by private organizations, and by Government agencies, including the Children's Bureau, which has sponsored an experimental pilot project financed by private funds. The nature of the problem of juvenile delinquency and a program to help solve it are outlined in the following pages by the Director of the Special Juvenile Delinquency Project.*

JUVENILE delinquency is a problem that, in the past 5 years, has received wide recognition. The number of boys and girls brought to the attention of the juvenile courts or the police because of delinquent behavior has mounted sharply, and their offenses are often of a serious nature.

## *Nature of the Problem*

Juvenile delinquency may be defined as violation of the law by persons of juvenile court age or conduct so seriously antisocial that it interferes with the rights of others or menaces the welfare of the delinquent himself or of the community. Precise definitions are contained in the juvenile court statutes of the States and, of course, vary from State to State. A broad definition may include conduct other than violation of laws; whether a child comes to the attention of the court is determined to a large extent by parental or community attitudes towards a child's behavior, and consequently the acts that bring a child before the court may be either trivial or serious misbehavior.

Preliminary figures gathered by the Children's Bureau from juvenile courts show that in 1953 an estimated 435,000 boys and girls were referred to these courts because of delinquent behavior. Final data may

show an increase from the 1948 total that is somewhere between 45 percent and 50 percent.

Juvenile delinquency is a national problem, not restricted to the large cities. For the less densely populated areas of the country the increase in the juvenile delinquency rates is even sharper than the national averages. The size of the problem is greater than the figures indicate, since they represent only the boys and girls who are referred to juvenile courts. Each year more than a million young offenders are brought to the attention of the police; about 3 out of every 4 of these boys and girls are not referred to the courts.

In addition, many delinquent children undoubtedly escape the attention of the law. The number is not known, but a survey made in a large Eastern city indicated that, of the youngsters coming to social work agencies for help who told of serious acts of delinquency, almost a third were unknown to the police. The number of delinquent children who are unknown to any community agency—police or social work—cannot be estimated.

Questions are still raised, however, on the nature of the problem. Is the problem real? That is, have juvenile delinquency rates gone up only because more children are referred to the juvenile courts rather than because of an actual increase in delinquency? Is the increase the result of the rise in the total child population?

Have standards of child behavior changed, and are children reaching the juvenile court today for reasons that would not have been considered serious a few years ago?

First of all, juvenile police services and other facilities have expanded considerably in the past 5 years, though not to the extent needed. As a result of even this limited expansion, greater efforts are being made to keep all but the most serious offenders out of the juvenile court. Thus the increase in juvenile delinquency rates cannot be interpreted as manifesting merely an increase in the attention given delinquent acts. This type of increase would show up more in police statistics and less in juvenile court figures. Actually, the juvenile court statistics may underestimate rather than overestimate the problem.

Second, the increase in delinquency does not reflect only the increase in the Nation's child population. Early data on the number of children who came before juvenile courts in 1953 indicate that final reports may show an increase over the total in 1948 of as much as 50 percent; during the same period there was a rise of only 7 percent in the child population aged 10-17 (the ages at which most juvenile offenders appear before the courts). In other words, the percentage increase in the number of delinquency cases was about seven times the percentage increase in the child population aged 10-17.

Third, it cannot be assumed that standards of child behavior have changed so much that we are now using the courts to deal with children for acts that would have been overlooked in earlier years. There is strong evidence that the youngsters coming before the juvenile courts today are committing crimes of a really serious nature. The *Uniform Crime Reports* of the Federal Bureau of Investigation show that, in 1953, children under age 18 committed 54 percent of all auto thefts and 49 percent of all burglaries.

\* Director, Special Juvenile Delinquency Project sponsored by the Children's Bureau.

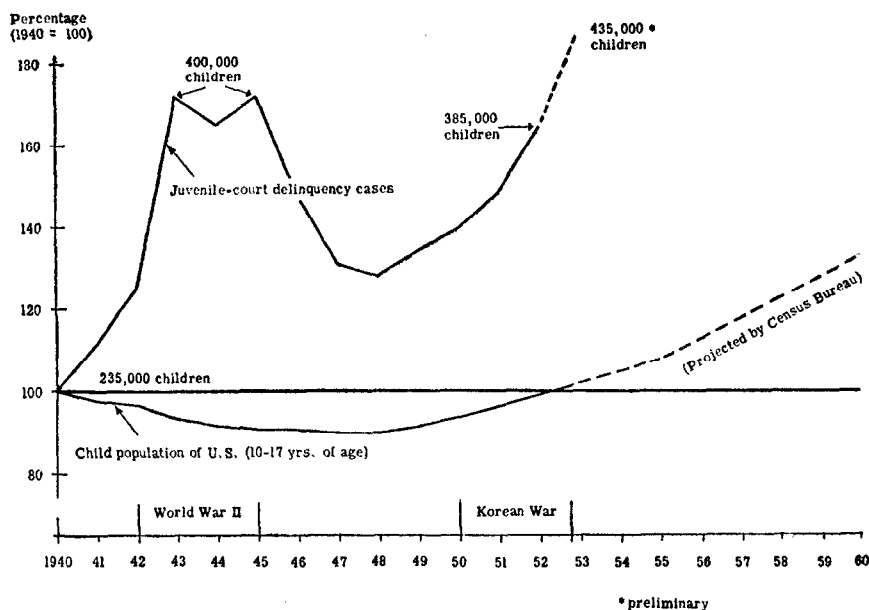
The services, facilities, and programs that have been provided for children in this country have not, obviously, been sufficient to hold back the rising tide of delinquency. Studies have been made to ascertain the effectiveness of certain services—child guidance clinics, recreational and friendly counseling services, and housing projects—to prevent delinquency. These studies seem to indicate that no single effort, in and of itself, can be taken as an effective preventive device. Even in communities that have an abundance of services, such services may not be organized in the manner most likely to produce results.

If the provisions for preventing delinquency can be termed inadequate, then what of the provisions for treating the delinquent child? Agencies for helping these children are too few, and most of them do not offer the right kind or enough of the right kind of services. Many communities maintain agencies that do no more than lock up the youngsters who are in trouble. These agencies make no attempt to find out the cause of the child's misbehavior and help him correct it, yet in that attempt lies the only hope of preventing the child from going on to become the criminal of tomorrow. Studies have shown that many of the boys and girls who today appear before our juvenile courts go on, as adults, to commit at least one serious crime for which they will be convicted.

### Understanding the Problem

Any national attempt to cope with juvenile delinquency must be based on knowledge now available as to the causes of the problem. Much research in this field is directed at an examination of the traits of the delinquent child rather than at the cause of delinquency. As a result, the traits found to be common among groups of delinquent children are often considered the causes of their delinquency, in spite of the fact that research workers have dispelled the notion that delinquency is caused by any one factor such as poverty, broken homes, membership in a minority group, or gang membership. Any one of these factors may, of course, be a contributing or precipitating factor in the

*Trends in the number of juvenile court delinquency cases, 1940-53, and in child population aged 10-17*



delinquency of particular groups of children.

While knowledge of the reasons for juvenile delinquency is certainly not precise, there is sufficient knowledge to give sound direction to preventive and treatment efforts. Early in the century came the first of a series of studies showing the association between delinquent behavior and underprivileged neighborhoods. Deeper significance has been given to this discovery by more recent research that shows that the standards, ideals, goals, and ways of behavior differ significantly between people who live on the right side of the tracks and those who live on the wrong side. It has been found that youngsters who live in slum neighborhoods do not receive from their parents and from the cultural milieu in which they live the encouragement to repress hostility that children receive in neighborhoods that are economically and socially favored. Behavior that might well be considered delinquent in favored communities is considered normal in certain underprivileged areas.

Little light has been shed, however, on the question of why a particular child living in an underprivileged area expresses his aggressive urges to a point beyond that accepted in

the large community around him, while the neighbor's child does not. The answer, according to current studies, is in the home. Delinquent children in slum neighborhoods, to a far greater extent than nondelinquent children in the same neighborhoods, are brought up by parents who, because of their own limitations, cannot lay the foundations for a consistent, well-balanced, and socially normal personality during the early stages of the child's character development. If the child lives in a more favored community, where church, school, and home work together in repressing open display of hostile behavior, the child may never become a delinquent but may develop a neurosis characterized by inner turmoil; in other words, he will take it out on himself rather than on the world.

In recent years the problem of juvenile delinquency has assumed a new dimension not yet adequately explored by social science research. Persons all over the country who are working in positions in which they can observe the conduct of young boys and girls report a wave of delinquency, often manifested in excessive vandalism, which cuts across class and caste and seems to have little reference to the individual background of the child. The ex-

istence of such a new dimension is substantiated by reports of referrals to juvenile courts, which show the sharp rise of delinquency in the less densely populated areas where delinquency had not been a major problem earlier.

### **Components of a Successful Program**

To succeed in curbing delinquency, a program must rest on a sound base and also be marked by **broadness of vision and social inspiration. It must** have within it the seeds of a social crusade that will change for those involved their attitudes about themselves, their neighbors, and their communities and so change the face of the community in which they live. Within this broad framework, certain specific objectives must be achieved. Such objectives need a tripartite program—prevention, early appraisal, and constructive treatment.

**Basic prevention.**—The first concern is to develop healthy personalities in children, and for this purpose a preventive program is essential. It has been demonstrated that loving maternal care in the child's own family home during his earliest years is the foundation for healthy development in adult life. Consequently, efforts toward basic prevention must be concerned with those social programs designed to bolster family living. Among them are programs advancing economic well-being—the social security programs—and programs to provide decent housing. Measures designed to cope with the problem of chronic illness and physical disability as well as those aimed in a more positive sense at maintaining health are particularly important, since they help keep families together. Individualized social and psychological services for families should be strengthened. Discussion groups, with trained leaders, for expectant parents in which mutual problems may be explored and the body of knowledge about child development may be drawn upon are of vital importance.

As the child grows, his needs change, and provisions to meet those changing needs must be available. Here the bolstering of family life and the encouragement of family ac-

tivities are essential. The role of religion in transmitting social and moral values is crucial. Recreational services should be strengthened to provide opportunities for healthy play. Youth organizations devoted to character building have a valuable contribution to make. The all-around betterment of the public school system is, of course, essential.

**Early remedial work.**—Despite all that may be done to prevent delinquency, there will be children who develop problems. The second part of the community program therefore concerns locating, at the earliest possible time, children with problems, finding the resources to help them, and developing such resources where they are needed. As part of the program for remedial action, recreation workers, parents, teachers, and others must be taught how to find, at an early stage, children with problems. Locating these children is useless, however, unless there are resources to aid them and their families, and the program must therefore be concerned with providing adequate mental health services, group work services, and casework services to help those whose needs warrant attention. There should also be an appraisal service operating throughout the State. Some States have developed this service for rural areas by means of a traveling mental hygiene clinic. Many resources have been misused because of inappropriate referrals. Delinquency cannot properly be compared with a disease like diphtheria, in which once the symptoms are manifest the precise treatment is known. It can better be compared with a symptom that can mean the presence of any one of several diseases—major or minor. Only the professionally trained person can properly discern the difference and, having made the diagnosis, use the proper resources.

Some delinquent children are neurotic, with delinquency the result of deep, compelling needs within them. When they say, "I don't know why I did it," they really don't know; they are not consciously aware of the reason. They will not be deterred by punishment or affected by conventional treatment. They need long-time, individual psychotherapy.

Many delinquents are social delinquents; their problems primarily result from the kind of neighborhood in which they are reared. Often their behavior is "normal" within their environment, although it deviates from the expectations of society as a whole. These children may benefit from a relationship with the right kind of adult person—not necessarily a trained professional person.

Other delinquents—usually those who have suffered an emotional shock in their early childhood—are asocial. Often they have been deprived of a mother's care during infancy. They may have to be referred by the courts to agencies authorized to exercise the degree of control needed for their treatment.

Still other delinquents may be accidental delinquents, whose brush with the law has little or no significance, except that they were caught doing something many youngsters do as a part of the normal process of growing up.

A few children may have as the base of their delinquency some clearly defined organic trouble that will yield to medical treatment.

An appalling waste occurs in this second phase of delinquency control if all these children receive the same kind of treatment simply because there isn't that initial investment in appraisal that will help sort one type of delinquent from another.

Early remedial work is also important for children who are not delinquent. Since it is not easy to know which children showing early signs of maladjustment will become delinquent and which will develop some other symptom of deviation, the second part of the program will, like the first, benefit all children although instituted to curtail delinquency.

**Treatment.**—The third phase of the delinquency control program is concerned with the child after he has officially become delinquent. Since the cases of most of these children are handled by police officers, without reference to any other agency, special attention must be given to the development of training programs for such officers. Unfortunately, nearly half our communities of 20,000 or

more population have no police officer with special responsibility for work with juveniles. The establishment of juvenile bureaus in police departments serving the more densely populated areas must be encouraged. The aim should be to promote constructive treatment of the youthful delinquent by the police officer so that the child will not have ingrained feelings of hostility against those in authority.

The use of county jails and local lockups to hold children awaiting official action by the juvenile court must be replaced with facilities so staffed and organized that detention in secure custody becomes the first step in treatment and in the acceptance of legitimate authority rather than the first step on the road to criminality.

One solution would be a regional detention system. Under it a child who has to be detained in secure custody can be held in a special institution, so designed that more can be learned about the child and better information made available to the judge. There are only about 200 detention homes in the Nation, although 2,500 courts have juvenile jurisdiction.

Concern for the delinquent means also that attention must be given to the juvenile courts. The judges must be men and women with sympathy for children, knowledge of human behavior, and ability to use the knowledge in determining what type of treatment is in the child's interest. These courts require a staff of trained probation officers.

Institutions for delinquent children are all too often merely dumping grounds for children nobody wants and for whom no provision has been made. If these institutions are to do their job, they must have programs geared to the needs of children, and they must receive only those children who can benefit from their programs.

## Coordination

The three parts of the program obviously must be interrelated; otherwise, there is a great waste of service, and the effectiveness of the program is seriously hampered. A recent study in a metropolitan area providing a wide variety of health and welfare services revealed that 40 percent of those services were concerned with only 6 percent of the families living in the area. This study, as well as earlier surveys, showed that the problem of delinquency usually does not exist alone but is one of a number of maladjustments in a family. Although families with maladjustments may receive the lion's share of total service time available, they often do not receive substantial help. The variety and severity of their problems sometimes result in their being shifted from agency to agency. In addition, without proper coordination the needs of certain families may be overlooked. Services are often spread too thin, or gaps exist between the types of services provided by agencies. Sometimes there are weaknesses at an early stage of service that increase the burden at a later stage.

Providing effective and economical services and facilities requires some device for coordination, planning, and social action. Such a device may be found in the type of coordinating body that brings together the technicians and the men and women of a community who must support the services. Without this kind of teamwork the public support necessary to advance the interests of children is impossible. With it, however, the programs can be improved and the greatest possible number of persons in a community can work together toward mutual goals.

During the past 2 years the Children's Bureau, with the help of the Special Juvenile Delinquency Project, has been bringing together and publishing the facts about juvenile de-

linquency and stressing the need for community action through the kind of three-part program described. The project was sponsored by the Children's Bureau and is supported by a number of individuals and foundations.

As a first step in this work, national voluntary and public organizations with a particular interest in the problem were called together. Such organizations as the National Probation and Parole Association, the National Council of Juvenile Court Judges, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Association of Training Schools and Juvenile Agencies, and the Child Welfare League of America advised on the projected program. The organizations have continued to give full cooperation and have been working partners on aspects of the program particularly close to their areas of interest.

## Conference

Progress in the fight to curb juvenile delinquency was reviewed in the conference on "Moving Ahead to Curb Juvenile Delinquency," held in Washington June 28, 29, and 30. Leaders in the field were invited by Oveta Culp Hobby, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, to attend the conference.

Preparatory work for the conference had been done by the Children's Bureau and the Special Juvenile Delinquency Project, and persons associated with this phase of the work were asked to participate. They included public officials; leaders in education, health, social work, and other professions; and representatives of civic, religious, and other groups.

The conference had a threefold purpose—to review accomplishments to date, to define and discuss the most urgent needs at this time, and to formulate the next steps in a continuing program designed to meet those needs.