

Scared crooked: Does punishment promote juvenile delinquency?

Early identification and punishment of juvenile delinquents does nothing to deter young people from criminal careers and, in fact, leads to an immediate increase in the frequency and seriousness of misbehavior, according to a study released last week by the Department of Justice. The study of over 6,000 adults also revealed that almost all the males and most of the females broke some law before turning 18. But because most teenagers outgrow delinquent behavior as a normal part of maturation, the study concludes, juvenile delinquency is a very poor predictor of adult crime.

According to Lyle W. Shannon, director of the Iowa Urban Community Research Center at the University of Iowa, an analysis of 32 years of public records from Racine, Wis., shows that juvenile delinquency is quite normal, but most adolescents decrease — and then discontinue — their illegal behavior. A small “hard core” group of delinquents who do continue on into adult crime, however, have created the false impression that early misbehavior is somehow linked to careers in serious crime.

Furthermore, Shannon reports — based on interviews with the subjects — that most teenagers abandon criminal behavior as a result of reappraising their lives; fewer than 8 percent reported going straight because they were afraid of getting caught. This is in keeping with another of Shannon's findings — that offi-

cial intervention and sanctioning of misbehavior is not followed by a decline in the frequency or seriousness of delinquent behavior. Indeed, such intervention appears to lead, at least temporarily, to an increase in illegal behavior, Shannon says. This finding flies in the face of common wisdom, Shannon concedes; children who get away with crimes are not inspired to continue in crime, he told SCIENCE NEWS.

Although the data may violate common sense, they are not startling to others doing research on juvenile crime and punishment. According to Ira Schwartz of the University of Minnesota, director of the federal Office of Juvenile Justice under the Carter administration, Shannon's results are consistent with those of other researchers, including his own. Schwartz has just completed a study of admissions to detention centers and training schools in every state, and he found that the vast majority of teenagers in the juvenile justice system are either behavioral problems or petty offenders. “We're over-intervening,” he says. “We're institutionalizing lightweights and increasing the likelihood of their returning to crime.”

Shannon's research did reveal a small group of subjects — less than 12 percent of the sample — whose continuous delinquency did appear to lead them into serious adult crime. But while half of these subjects from the inner city of Racine later became felons, they accounted for only 25 percent of the felons in the community;

the others came from various parts of the city and had varied juvenile records. Some of the most serious adult criminals had no police record before the age of 18, Shannon notes. Any attempt to predict adult criminality (and to intervene) based on juvenile records would erroneously include some and exclude others, he says.

It is very difficult to devise effective punishment for juvenile misbehavior, Shannon says. The implication of this finding, he adds, is that juvenile delinquents should be kept out of the juvenile court system whenever possible; instead, more cases should be disposed of by policemen on the street. “While those who are involved in the expenditure of vast sums of money for intervention find this difficult to accept,” Shannon concludes, “it is unrealistic to posit juvenile delinquency as the precursor to adult crime and continue to intervene as though the facts were different from what they are.”

Shannon's research also damages some other myths about juvenile delinquency. Contradicting the idea that children from broken homes are more likely to get into trouble, Shannon found that family structure had little relationship to teenagers' illegal behavior. He also found that after-school and summer jobs do not keep adolescents out of mischief; the opposite seems to be true, Shannon notes, perhaps because workers have the cash needed to cruise Racine as troublemakers.

— *W. Herbert*

Letters

The quotable Pope

I strongly object to portions of Dietrick Thomsen's commentary “The Quotable Pope at CERN” (SN: 8/14/82, p. 109).

His statement that those who claim that the material universe is a closed system are making an unprovable statement about the source of truth is a philosophical claim, baldly asserted, unsupported. Such claims are inappropriate in a publication which purports to champion understanding of science.

Also, while it is possible that some secular humanists maintain an “absolutist view of science,” I for one am a rational humanist who maintains a transactionalist view of science, as well as other forms of knowledge. To be philosophically astute in questioning claims to certain knowledge is not, automatically, to be arrogant, old-fashioned, reactionary or against increases in human freedom or an extension of the possibilities and perspectives of living. In short, Dr. Thomsen is using a straw man argument to back up his personal evaluations. It is his opinion, apparently, that *all* arguments against a rapprochement between the scientific community and the Catholic church are against human freedom, etc. Such unsubstantiated personal evaluations are, in my opinion, out of place in a magazine of your caliber. If such issues are to be debated, do it right. Make a well-thought-out argument, marshal evidence, refute objections.

*Ruth Anthony-Gardner
Philadelphia, Pa.*

Exposure to inordinate amounts of silliness in the press, everyday, has certainly lowered our outrage threshold, but I feel it a duty, nevertheless, to register my protest at the “Commentary” by D.E. Thomsen. The personal philosophical preferences of Mr. Thomsen are of no interest, I am sure, to most readers of SCIENCE NEWS. His heralding of the beginning of an intellectual adventure bringing together religion and science will seem ludicrous to many of them — particularly to those like me who have heard such announcements for as long as they can remember, and never noticed anything that justified them — neither then nor after.

It is little to ask that SCIENCE NEWS stick to its proclaimed function, that of providing us with reliable reports on recent scientific advances, and try to keep thought pollution out of its pages — even of its “Commentary” pages.

*Francois Treves
New Brunswick, N.J.*

Should the pages of SCIENCE NEWS be turned over for extended exercises in religious apologetics?

That would seem to be your new policy, judging from Dietrick Thomsen's Commentary. But whether Mr. Thomsen's unquestioned abilities in explaining complex matters of physics and other sciences qualify him as an expert in metaphysical speculations is open to debate.

In seeking to take up the Pope's call for a dialogue on “a sense of the orders of knowledge and different approaches to truth,” Mr. Thom-

sen goes out of his way to defame those of us who feel that one order of reality is quite enough. He lumps secular humanism with some most unlikely company; first, with “Marxist materialism,” because both “are based on an absolutist view of science that has not been tenable for the last 60 years”; and then with “a frozen Scholasticism and an obscurantist and ignorant biblicism,” because all are supposedly “powerful reactionary forces . . . moving to prevent the future from happening if they can.”

To link secular humanism with Marxism is a classic cheap shot. Humanists reject Marxism just as we reject any ideology, theistic or nontheistic, that claims to know absolute truth and is willing to employ terrorism and totalitarianism to impose that truth on nonbelievers. Smearing humanism by association with Marxism because both are nontheistic is like trying to discredit the Pope by linking him with the Ayatollah Khomeini because both are theistic.

Let me remind Mr. Thomsen that secular humanists have no history to live down of suppressing science for ulterior ideological purposes — which is more than the Pope, many other traditional theists and Marxists can say.

In the interests of equal time, perhaps your next Commentary should be written by a nontheistic expert on biology who could solemnly announce to your readers that no one in the last 100 years could accept the Adam and Eve story because it conflicts with what we know about the evolution of humanity.

*Craig Howell
Washington, D.C.*