

Skid Row Child Bypassed

Hard-core poverty can be eliminated only if poverty workers reach deprived children earlier and are willing to work with them longer.

► THE BUMS, psychopaths and alcoholics of tomorrow are at age three largely beyond the reach of any poverty program in existence.

At tender preschool ages, children from skid row already display abnormal personalities and an inability to form healthy ties with adults or each other.

These observations were made by Dr. Charles A. Malone, associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, Philadelphia. Dr. Malone recently completed three years of intensive therapeutic research on 21 children in south Boston.

His staff included two teachers, two social workers, a nurse, an analyst and a psychologist working under the sponsorship of the Boston University Medical School. Their effort, supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, was designed to discover how much children from "disorganized families" could be helped.

Little Judgment Used

These families, comprising roughly 15% to 20% of the slums, recognize little difference between day and night. Meals can be anytime. Members of the family communicate by yelling. Punishments are confused and meted out with little sense of judgment. For example, if one child accidentally knocks over his sister's food, the sister gets a whack.

Dr. Malone said the Government's Head Start program for preschool children would not normally reach these youngsters because it relies on the parents' initiative to learn about the classes and then to get their children to them. Such awareness and positive action do not exist in disorganized families.

If by chance a child from this background does get into a Head Start class, he can be spotted immediately, said Dr. Malone.

He is the inattentive child who is aimlessly fingering toys. He is the one who is obviously "not with it."

The Boston team combined a special nursery program with service to the children's families. A team member might help the mother take care of her house, or teach her how to cook or simply talk to her. The children were always picked up for school and sometimes were fed and dressed by the Boston researchers.

These offspring of skid row had a number of personality characteristics peculiar to their background, said Dr. Malone.

In one sense they were absolutely

unlike children. They seemed never to have any fun; they did not play with toys and had little curiosity.

They rarely fought each other, and expressed their aggression mainly through impulsive grabbing. On the whole, the children were overly passive.

In contrast to this, the youngsters had a special attribute born from the very real dangers in which they lived—hyperactive senses. They were constantly on the lookout, keeping track of the teacher as though by using their eyes and ears they could forestall trouble.

"Expectation of calamity and guarded fearfulness permeated their daily nursery school lives," Dr. Malone wrote in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, January 1966.

To gain a measure of protection the children did not form close, warm relationships with other people. Though they could and did put on a show of friendliness toward adults, it was shallow and designed for winning attention.

Indeed, the children were quite skilled at manipulating adults for attention. Once, by acting helpless, they managed to get answers to test questions from the team psychologist who was unaware at the time of what they were doing.

Intellectually the children had average mentalities, a few were even superior. But their thinking processes had

become rigid, narrow and unusually literal. They had little capacity for abstract thinking or working out problems.

The one thing Dr. Malone and his co-workers expected their charges would know was the grocery store, since by the time they were three, they had already learned how to go shopping, feed a baby and do a number of other jobs.

But when the teacher took the children to the store, she found that they apparently did not know their way around, nor could they remember the names of common items.

Such a paradox is probably a natural product of excessively literal thinking, said Dr. Malone. The youngsters could rattle off a grocery list, exchange money, cross dangerous intersections, but all this had no meaning apart from the job itself. Learning had not been translated into general knowledge.

Something can be done for such children, Dr. Malone believes, but how much is not yet clear.

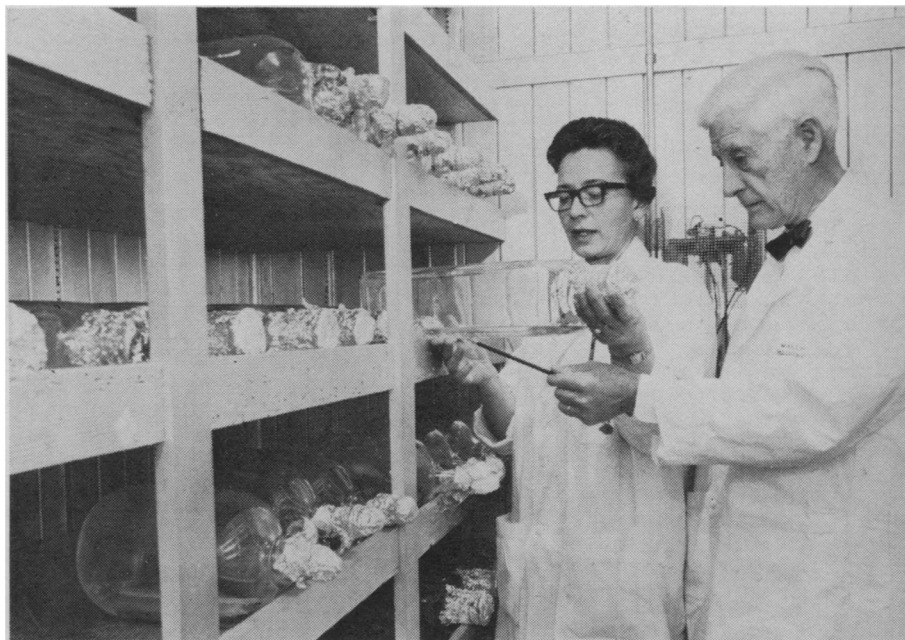
During three years, the Boston team did bring about emotional changes. "We began to see the children come alive and have fun," said the psychiatrist. Greetings had more vitality, feelings toward the teacher were deeper.

However, now that the nursery program is disbanded, there is a risk the children may regress when they enter first grade in public schools.

If the Government wants to do something about hard-core poverty, it should be willing to invest 10 years in a child instead of two, suggested Dr. Malone. Also it needs the facilities to contact "hard-to-reach" families.

Without intervention, children from this background will simply repeat the pattern of their parents—marital discord, promiscuity, alcoholism and sometimes serious psychopathy.

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Michigan State University

TEST FOR TUBERCULOSIS—A jar in which tuberculosis bacteria are being grown as the first step in the production of tuberculin, widely used in skin tests for tuberculosis detection, is being examined by Drs. Walter and Virginia Mallman of Michigan State University who, with their colleagues, hope to develop a tuberculin that will make skin tests more reliable.