

## ENGLISH STUDIES IN CRIMINAL SCIENCE

### THE SOCIAL PROBLEM GROUP

#### EDITORIAL NOTE

"The Social Problem Group" is the name given to a sociological phenomenon whose existence has been brought to light in modern times. Beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century investigations into the cause of crime, mainly through the compilation of criminal statistics, made evident the fact that the coefficient of criminality was not constant throughout the whole country. It was found to vary from region to region, and again from town to town. It was further established that even within each such unit the intensity of crime could vary greatly, so that while criminal activity might be rampant in one district of a town it might be almost non-existent in another. Three other closely allied enquiries were also being prosecuted, one of which aimed at ascertaining the extent to which variations in the volume of crime were connected with the character of the professions or occupations carried on by the population. Some results of this enquiry indicated that in many instances when two strata of the population within one limited area were compared a greater difference of criminality was discovered than could be found when two larger areas, say county with county, were compared. Another investigation showed that variations of criminality, both as to its kinds and as to its incidence, corresponded with variations in economic conditions such as instability of employment and poverty. Furthermore, an intensive study of the personality of delinquents established that a great proportion of them were physically and mentally inferior.

Combining the results of these six lines of enquiry, criminologists were led to the view that there can be identified an element of the population, unevenly distributed throughout the whole country, which may be regarded as a hotbed of criminality. It is to this element that the name "Social Problem Group" has been given.

It is plain that criminological deductions can, by themselves, do no more than point to the general indications evinced by this phenomenon. Its scientific analysis requires the accumulation and classification of a great mass of factual material relating not only to the economic conditions and social environment of various sections of the population, but also to their biological history and their mental characteristics. For the collection of such material, and still more for its proper selection and classifica-

tion there is needed the close association of skilled workers in the social and medical sciences.

The first authoritative account of the Social Problem Group was given in 1929 by the Mental Deficiency Committee.<sup>1</sup> This committee carried out a most extensive and careful enquiry into the incidence of mental deficiency in England, and on the basis of the material so collected framed the following description of the Social Problem Group:—

Mental Defectives are of course found in all races and in all classes of society, among the wealthy as well as among the poor, but in any community a large number of them will be found in a restricted number of families. Let us assume that we could segregate as a separate community all the families in this country containing mental defectives of the primary amentia type. We should find that we had collected among them a most interesting social group. It would include, as everyone who has extensive practical experience of social service would readily admit, a much larger proportion of insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates, and other social inefficients, than would a group of families not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community which we propose to term the "social problem" or "subnormal" group. This group comprises approximately the lowest 10 per cent. in the social scale of most communities. Though the large majority of its members are not so low-grade that they can be actually certified as mentally defective, it is possible that a not inconsiderable number of them might prove, if examined by expert and experienced medical practitioners, to be certifiable and subject to be placed under care and control.

Five years later the Departmental Committee on Sterilization<sup>2</sup> endorsed these views as to the Social Problem Group, and recognised the possibility of a concentration in the lowest social stratum of the physically and mentally defective, the chronic unemployables, the habitual recipients of public relief, and a delinquent element of a mentally subnormal type. It also drew attention to the close interdependence between poverty and low mentality, stressing however the lack of definite information as to the size of this social stratum and pointing to the urgent need for further research in this field.

It seems to us that in reviewing the whole position in this matter the following conclusions may be reached:—

- (a) As the result mainly of the work initiated by Booth, Rowntree, and Bowley together with the information contained in the impressive series of social regional surveys

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<sup>1</sup> *Report*, Part III. s. 91.

<sup>2</sup> 1934, Cmd. 4485 s. 102.

- which have been carried out, we know a considerable amount about the economic and social facts of the Social Problem Group. We know very much less, however, of its physical and mental peculiarities.
- (b) Our knowledge of the nature of the causal relationship between poverty and mental weakness (the outstanding characteristic of the Social Problem Group) is still very imperfect.
  - (c) It has not yet been scientifically established that the Social Problem Group is in fact a specific source of criminality. Only when and if this question has been answered in the affirmative will it be possible to attempt to assess the volume of crime which it produces. It is plain that it can only be answered when further researches have been carried out into the social and biological aspects of the problem.

A thorough understanding of the Social Problem Group and of its consequences will be of exceptional importance to those interested in criminal science and to those concerned with public administration.

In the first half of the nineteenth century criminologists and students of social science were struck by the extensive and persistent criminology of certain social strata. They initiated some local investigations and came to the conclusion that there existed a pernicious element in the population which they termed "Classes Dangéreuses" or "Classes Criminelles." Of the part played by environment, heredity, and disease both physical and mental, they had little, if any, appreciation. Almost inevitably therefore they confined themselves, apart from some sporadic measures of philanthropy, to the promotion of administrative machinery of a punitive and repressive character aimed at the maintenance of public stability against the attacks of this internal enemy.

Nowadays our knowledge of the social forces and of the structure of human nature is more thorough, and there is a tendency to connect criminality with the Social Problem Group. The modern attitude favours a constructive social policy having as one of its main objects the prevention of crime.

The concept of the "Classes Dangéreuses" belonged to the period dominated by the general outlook and social effects of the Industrial Revolution; the concept of the Social Problem Group is linked with a realization of the need for the establishment of a system of social security for all.

Convinced of the need for more information about the Social Problem Group especially in its economic and mental aspects we invited Mr. Caradog Jones, until recently Reader in Social Statistics in the University of Liverpool, to provide our Department with a study on the subject. Mr. Caradog Jones took a prominent part in the construction of a most important social survey of Merseyside and he brings to bear on our present subject a wide experience of the investigation of social problems in addition to his eminent knowledge of statistics. On behalf of our Department we take this opportunity of thanking Mr. Caradog Jones for his most valuable collaboration.

It is also a source of great satisfaction to us that notwithstanding the heavy public duties which rest upon him, Lord Horder has made it possible to precede this study by a stimulating prefatory note. Some of Lord Horder's critical remarks well illustrate the fact that the whole question is still in its formative stage, and that much more research will have to be carried out before agreement can be reached on many essential points.

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