SUBNORMALITY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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I shall not attempt to go into details on a topic so wide and varied in phases, but limit myself to a few remarks on the outstanding social problems related to subnormality that seem to me most pertinent in the interests of social workers. Before discussing any of these problems in particular, a few words on the causes that lead to social problems in the subnormal will be in place.

A. Causes of Social Problems in Subnormals. We are so accustomed to find the subnormal delinquent in one way or another that the force of the repeated association has at times led to a tacit assumption that all subnormals are delinquent, or certain of becoming so in time. Such an attitude is not justified either by extended observations on numerous individual cases, or by our general knowledge of the traits of subnormals that might lead to delinquency. It will be helpful to view this relationship as due to three factors. These are the mental traits of the subnormal, his training, and his environment. In the discussion of these three causes we are dealing with an old question. We are familiar with the old school that attempted to explain criminal tendencies by heredity, and claimed even to have found certain physical stigmata or symptoms by which such tendencies could be detected. Few nowadays are followers of that school. We have lived through the natural reaction also that usually follows extreme views. Today we have some new light on the ancient question of the relationship of heredity and environment as causes of social inadequacies in the individual; a light that reveals the presence of both factors, but in forms that had before been unrecognized. The mental traits of the subnormal do not in themselves necessarily lead to social problems, except in the case of the lower grades, where intelligence is so lacking as to make the case necessarily dependent. The subnormal is not by nature bad, vicious or anti-social in any way. But their mental traits—lack of judgment, foresight, or control, combined with more or less normal desires and impulses—are peculiarly favorable to delinquent and anti-social behavior when co-existent with unfavorable training and environment. We thus have a hereditary basis in delinquency in the mental traits of the subnormal, for subnormality is usually hereditary. But that delinquency is only potential, and requires the training and environmental factors to make it actual. To be sure, in the case of the subnormal, it requires but a very minor influence from the latter to bring this about.

Indirectly, heredity affects the training with which we are here chiefly concerned. This is the training that the home supplies, or fails to supply. In the majority of instances the subnormal child has subnormal parents. It is unusual to find very large differences in the general intelligence of two parents. In our classification one may be placed more or less frequently below the dividing line and the other above, but in such instances neither is likely to be far removed from the borderline. This means that the subnormal child grows up in a home entirely unfit for the moral guidance of the children. Few rules of right and wrong are inculcated. There is little or no positive moral training. The moral habits with which the normal home equips the normal child and that guide him safely through adult life are for the most part lacking. Not infrequently the home is

itself actually immoral. There is then no possibility of the subnormal child escaping delinquency.

Recent observations have added two things to our understanding of the relationships between environment, delinquency and subnormality. The first of these is that the environment has various degrees of complexity, to which the subnormal may fail to adapt himself, and that it is rapidly becoming more complex. Some dozen years ago Binet startled his colleagues for a moment with the statement that an individual might be normal in one environment and feeble-minded if he moved to another, as from the rural to the urban. Yet the truth of this utterance is readily comprehended once our attention is called to it. It is a significant truth for social workers, for we have been making rapid strides in the urbanization of a larger and larger portion of our total population. As our cities become more numerous and larger a higher and higher percentage of our subnormals must "fall by the wayside."

Again, the subnormals in a large measure create their own environment that in turn reacts on them unfavorably as regards delinquency and thus sets up a vicious circle. We have ourselves found in making mental surveys of the total school population in different towns that the average intelligence varied greatly in different sections of a town, at times as much as two years in general mental development. The less intelligent children are found in the less desirable sections, where real estate is cheap, and rents are low. On the whole, parents that lack ability and earning capacities, coupled perhaps with lack of ambition and failure to appreciate higher standards of living, gravitate toward such sections, and their lack of intelligence is reflected in the lack of intelligence of their children.

B. Relationship of Subnormality to Delinquency in General. We do not know what proportion of our total number of subnormals become delinquent. We have knowledge of a relatively very small part of the number that we know by reliable estimates exist. To get an exact statistical statement of this relationship we must know either this proportion, or the proportion of all delinquents that are subnormal. The relationship of delinquent tendencies to the degree of subnormality is also somewhat in dispute. Most authorities have been accustomed to hold that the higher grade defectives are the more dangerous to society. The lower grades are readily recognized as defective and thereby are both protected and guarded against. And more important than this, they are never engaged in the tasks of the everyday life of normals that would give them occasion to become delinquent. This view, I believe, represents the facts in the main. But, if it is accepted, we must note that there must be a turning point somewhere as we go up in the grade of intelligence, otherwise the entirely normal in intelligence would be more delinquent than the subnormal. In opposition to this view, it is held by a few that our observations have been misinterpreted. It is known that there are many more high grade subnormals than there are low grade. It follows, therefore, that we are likely to find more high grade delinquents than low grade delinquents, but this does not necessarily mean that a larger proportion of the existing high grade subnormals become delinquent.

We have some approach to a knowledge of the proportion of delinquents that are subnormal. A number of studies of groups of delinquents where all have been mentally examined furnish reliable data. Before the days of mental tests it

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was rather an extreme estimate to place the percentage of reformatory inmates that are feeble-minded as high as ten per cent. Here, as elsewhere, this objective and many times more accurate method of determining grades of intelligence has revealed a situation that requires a complete readjustment of our mode of thinking and methods of dealing with the delinquent group as a whole. It will require repeated demonstrations of what, as shown by mental test examinations, the facts really are before a conservative public will really be ready to accept them. In this connection it is unfortunate that the first few limited studies that were made in which a number of reformatory cases were mentally tested were misinterpreted, and a much too large percentage of delinquents reported as feeble-minded. These earlier studies were made with the original Binet-Simon scale of tests, which was not sufficiently extended at the upper end to give correct results for cases whose intelligence bordered on that of feeble-mindedness but were not quite low enough to be so classed. The original tests, though quite reliable for determining lower levels of intelligence, made the majority of these borderline cases appear as definitely feeble-minded. Consequently, we got reports that fifty to seventy-five, and even higher percentages of representative groups of delinquents had been found to be feeble-minded. I shall not detain you with the presentation of these earlier results.

It will be sufficient to call your attention to two studies against which no serious criticism can be made as regards the accuracy and reliability of the findings. One of these involves the careful individual mental examination of all the inmates of the California reformatory for boys at Whittier. The other is a like study for the reformatory for boys at Red Wing, Minnesota. In both cases, the tests used remedied the defects of the original Binet-Simon scale, and were adequate for the task set. The findings are summarized in the following table.

	Feeble-Minded	Borderline	Dull Normal	Average	Superior
450 Delinquents, California---	30	27.2	20.6	19.2	3
905 Normals, Terman -------	2	8	10	60	20
600 Delinquents, Minnesota---	27.5	24	24.5	23	1

The middle line of figures gives the distribution of the percentages of school children that belong to the several grades of intelligence indicated. These were 905 unselected children from the schools of California and a few neighboring states. You will notice that two percent of them were found feeble-minded, a figure practically identical with the one we have found as the general average of several towns in which we have examined all the school children. Compare this with the figures in the first and third lines. In the first line are given the results of the examinations at the California reformatory. In the third are given those for the Red Wing reformatory. You will notice how very closely the figures for the California and Minnesota reformatories agree. I believe they can be taken as entirely representative of the average reformatory for boys. If so, every social worker would do well to keep before her a mental picture of this really astounding table. It means that nearly a third of the reformatory delinquents are definitely feeble-minded, and that a smaller portion of them have an average normal intelligence or better. It means that lack of intelligence is the basic fact about delinquency.

It would be very valuable to know further whether the nature of the delinquent acts is in any way characteristic of the grade of intelligence; also in what respect, if in any, the delinquencies of subnormal girls differed from those of subnormal boys. These matters cannot be answered as yet in a trustworthy manner from statistics. We would expect some differences. Undoubtedly, sex immorality with subnormal girls, for example, is an unusually frequent form of delinquency.

C. Relation of Subnormality to Economic Inefficiency and Dependency. There is much that we should like to know about the economic status of the subnormal at large and of whom we have no record. Lower grade cases are necessarily all dependent, but this cannot be said of the moron. We believe that there are few if any exceptions to the moron sooner or later becoming dependent or delinquent in one way or another if left entirely without guardianship, but this gives us little clue to his economic status in general. It should be safe to assume, from the standpoint of the state, that the moron group, as a group, is a distinct liability to the state, and not an asset. The state would be wealthier had the moron never existed. Granting this to be true, we may make an instructive comparison with a condition that could surely be realized should the public demand it. That condition is proper training and guardianship for every existing moron in the state. It is a familiar observation that the moron has sufficient intelligence to perform satisfactorily most of the ordinary unskilled labor tasks. With adequate training from childhood up and employment under proper guardianship he could easily be made as efficient as the average normal unskilled laborer in many more tasks than necessary to supply all the morons in the state with jobs. He is capable, for example, of entirely satisfactory janitor service. This simple task alone would supply every male moron in the state with a permanent job. We would need to search no further for tasks to fit his abilities and in which he could earn normal wages. In like manner, the moron girl is entirely capable of satisfactorily performing ordinary general house work. Should we train them all for this task and employ them as housemaids we would have met only a small fraction of the demand for this service. There is really no need of arguing the question whether morons have sufficient intelligence to make a living.

Now let us do some figuring to see what the labor of the morons might be worth to the state if they were thus trained and employed. It is now certain that not less than two percent of Minnesota's population has a moron grade of intelligence or less. This means, roughly, 60,000 subnormals in the state. We also know that at least three-fourths of these are of the moron grade, giving 45,000 morons in the state. Let us attribute the modest earning capacity to each, when trained and under guardianship, of seventy-five dollars per month. Few janitors nowadays earn less. This yields a total of $40,500,000 per year as the earning capacity of our morons. This would be no small asset, in place of the undoubted liability they now represent. But perhaps you will answer at once that these wages would or should go to the moron individuals, while the state as such had expended millions possibly in giving this training and in maintaining this guardianship, and gets no direct return. This might be true, but the return, even in dollars and cents, is nevertheless there. For the state by really supplying this guardianship would thereby solve all or nearly all the problems associated with subnormality. It would eliminate practically all delinquencies of subnormals, and the expense of these to the state at present probably covers most of what it would cost to supply the training and guardianship here in question. It would

relieve many a home from burdens, leave parents happier, economically more efficient, and in general better citizens. It would prevent marriage and reproduction by the subnormals, or at least reduce it to a minimum and thereby eliminate not less than three-fourths of subnormality in a single generation.

D. Relation of Illegitimacy and Problems of the Unmarried Mother to Subnormality. We know nothing in a statistical way about the frequency with which subnormal girls give birth to illegitimate children. Probably the majority of such cases are never reported, thus leaving no existing record behind. The problem, again, has been approached from the standpoint of the mentality of the unmarried mother instead of from the standpoint of the frequency of illegitimacy with the subnormal girl. Such few observations as we have on this question indicate that the majority, at least, of unmarried mothers are definitely feeble-minded. Thus, the Social Service Department of a Cincinnati hospital, is giving a thorough mental examination to each case in an unselected group of unmarried mothers, found sixty-two per cent of them feeble-minded, ten per cent being of imbecile grade. The mentality of cases coming into court is but rarely determined, but there is every reason for believing that the frequency of subnormality among these is quite as high. Illegitimacy is primarily a matter of lack of intelligence.

E. Relation of Prostitution to Subnormality. Were we to believe opinion more or less frequently expressed on the extent of sex immorality we would be forced to conclude that its relationship to subnormality could at the most be but slight. But such opinion is never based on reliable observation, and is more an indication of careless thinking than an expression of observed facts. The situation is, of course, also quite different with the habitual offender, and the professional prostitute. Unselected groups of prostitutes have been given mental examinations in a number of instances. A Massachusetts commission examined 300 cases, finding fifty-one per cent feeble-minded. One hundred and twenty-seven cases arrested near an army camp during the recent war included seventy per cent feeble-minded, and all but eight per cent had an intelligence of less than eighty per cent of average normal, that is, all but eight per cent were feeble-minded or borderline cases. Of one hundred and twenty-six cases observed by the Probation Officer of Cook County, Illinois, eighty-five per cent are reported as feeble-minded. Other instances give similiar figures. We may safely conclude that prostitution is essentially a matter of subnormality. Eliminate or control the latter, and most of the existing prostitution is eliminated at the same time.

F. Relation of Venereal Disease to Subnormality. It is reported that practically all prostitutes are diseased, and if the great majority of them are also subnormal we have this important indirect relationship. The prostitute is unquestionably the chief source in the disemmination of venereal disease. The diseased subnormal is also very much less likely to seek medical treatment than is the more intelligent person. Probably but few subnormal syphilitic prostitutes receive medical treatment, except in the instance of licensed prostitutes under medical supervision. The methods so far employed in combatting venereal disease as a social menace have therefore overlooked one of the most important factors in the situation. Control the subnormal and you eliminate venereal disease.

G. The Solution of Social Problems. I have enumerated only a few of the social problems that we have known or suspected for some time of having some

relation to subnormality. Our objective mental test method of determining intelligence, and the popularization of this method during the past ten years, has not only firmly established this connection, but has shown it to be many times closer than we supposed. Much is yet to be learned along this line. We are only at the threshold of a new line of investigation, and a new line of attack of many old problems. When more evidence is in we may find that subnormality is partly responsible for many more of the social evils than we are even now suspecting. In a number of instances it is evident that we have in the past been overlooking the chief factor. These findings should be the basis for a readjustment in our methods of solving social problems, which will thereby become very largely the methods of care and control of our subnormals. The discussion of these methods I have reserved for my talk this evening, but I may here call your attention to a few broad principles. There are two methods of attack. The one aims to elminate or reduce subnormality by preventing their reproduction. We have as yet made little or no progress towards this end. We have attempted to do so through commitment to the state institution, by the anti-marriage laws, and recently by extra-institutional guardianship. To this a sterilization law might have been added. Of these the anti-marriage law has probably never been applied directly in a single instance in the state. All methods together are today not affecting five per cent of the grade of subnormals that reproduces, the morons and a few of the higher grade imbeciles.

I have noted at the outset that the subnormal is not by nature vicious or bad. He becomes so by external influences, home training in the broad sense, and environment. This gives the possibility of preventing social problems through the control of these factors. This method becomes very complicated through the number of things required to make it effective, but on the whole is the more practical. It is through this failure to provide the necessary means of enforcement that all our efforts in the past have come to naught. The laws in question do not work automatically, nor do various provisions made apply themselves automatically. It should be obvious, for example, that we need to know who the subnormals in the state are before any law passed or provision made for them can be made effective. Yet we have not this information, and have made no effort to secure it.

Question: What per cent of children in Minnesota are feeble-minded?

Dr. Fred Kuhlmann: You may feel that when I say that two per cent of the school children in a given community and two per cent of the citizens of Minnesota are feeble-minded, that I have made an exaggerated statement. We through our investigations have found this true for Red Wing and Austin. In Northfield over two per cent are feeble-minded. Also in Morristown. In Faribault our survey shows that four per cent are feeble-minded. When I say that two per cent of the general school population is feeble-minded I believe that I have made a correct statement. I believe that the primary cause of delinquency is not the training in the home, nor the environment, but that the mental condition is the primary cause.