

Some Family Characteristics of Irish Juvenile Offenders

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Abstract: Two matched groups are compared, 100 industrial trainees and 870 juvenile offenders, who comprised the total population of Ireland's one Juvenile Open Centre during a 4-year period. Variables examined include family size, birth order and whether the family was broken by death, divorce, separation or desertion. The family size of the offenders was almost twice the national average and significantly greater than that of the comparison group. Among the offenders there was a considerable under-representation of last-borns, and first-borns from larger families. However, the over-representation of middle-borns was slight. There were no birth order effects for the trainees. No difference was found between the 2 groups with respect to loss of either parent through death. However, the offenders were 5 times more likely to come from a home broken by divorce, separation or desertion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The family background of juvenile offenders has long been an important topic in criminological research. There has been a particular focus on the broken home and its possible aetiological significance for delinquency, but considerable attention has also been paid to the effects of family size and birth order. There has been little previous research in this area in Ireland despite the fact that the Irish situation is unusual because of a relatively high fertility rate and because divorce and remarriage are not legally permitted. The present investigation presents baseline data on the birth order, family size and marital status of the parents of a group of 870 juvenile offenders, who served sentences at Shanganagh Castle Open Centre between January 1979 and September 1983. All the offenders had been convicted in court and in the first instance sentenced

*The authors are grateful for the assistance of the management, staff and trainees of the Dublin, Jervis Street and Waterford City AnCO Training Centres.

to a closed detention centre. The offenders are compared with a group of 100 vocational trainees, matched for age, and of similar socio-economic status. Data are also presented on some socio-economic characteristics of the families.

Family size, birth order and whether a home is broken by death, divorce, separation or desertion are variables which have attracted a great deal of attention, in part because they appear clearcut and objective and are amenable to quantitative analysis. None the less, unequivocal findings are rare in this area and controversy still surrounds the question of the association of delinquency with these variables. The chief problem is that family background variables are only crude indicators of the putative social, psychological and economic processes which are considered likely to have a direct causal influence on the promotion of delinquency. For example, despite the often replicated finding that the incidence of broken homes is greater among delinquents than among controls (e.g., Burt, 1925, Glueck and Glueck, 1950, and Offord, 1982) the existence of any direct causal link between broken homes and delinquency is still seriously questioned. McCord (1982) has provided evidence which suggests that the statistical association between delinquency and broken homes may, to a large extent, be accounted for by the fact that probable direct causes of delinquency such as parental conflict, paternal deviance and maternal rejection are also strongly conducive to marriage breakdown. Also, Nye (1958) and Wadsworth (1979) have demonstrated that for a similar crime the child of a broken home is more likely to receive a custodial sentence, so that the statistical association may possibly be explained in terms of bias within criminal justice systems. Such findings are strong enough to caution against any facile assumption that the statistical relationship between broken homes and delinquency justifies the view that a broken home as such is a primary cause of delinquency.

Ernst and Angst (1983), in their comprehensive review of the literature on birth order and family size, state that it is a well-established fact that delinquents have a larger mean sibship size than comparable controls. For example, Ferguson (1952), in a study involving 1,349 boys in Glasgow, found that the delinquency rate for boys from a family of more than 4 children was twice as large as that for those from a family of 4 or less. Trenaman's (1952) study of 700 young delinquent soldiers found that the delinquent soldiers came from families with an average size of 6.3, compared with an average size of 3.6 for the control group of non-delinquent soldiers. However, although the statistical link between large family size and delinquency is well-established, the underlying causal relationships are not yet fully delineated. Rahav (1980) argues for what he calls a pseudo-economic explanation, believing that the spreading thin of inadequate family resources, both human and material, is the major causative factor. However, an alternative theory is offered by Robins *et al* (1975), who believe that the underlying process is one of contagion of anti-social behaviour from one sibling to another, with contagion more probable the larger the family size. A third

view, that the relationship is a statistical artefact resulting from a strong correlation of family size with other more relevant variables, cannot be ruled out. For example, both Ferguson (1952) and West and Farrington (1973) have found that, although over-crowding is associated with high rates of delinquency, in homes which are not over-crowded there is no link between large family size and delinquency.

Early studies of birth order and delinquency seemed to indicate an over-representation of first-born children among delinquents (e.g., Goring, 1913 and Wile and Noetzel, 1931). However, more recent research has found that first-born children do better than others (Herrell 1970, Mullin 1973) and that it is middle-born children who are over-represented amongst delinquents (Biles, 1971 and West and Farrington, 1973). An important study by Rahav (1980) examined the relationship between delinquency and birth order and family size taken together. Looking at the total population of officially notified Israeli delinquents over a 3-year period, he found that middle-born children were more likely to become delinquent than either first- or last-born and that this effect became more pronounced as family size increased. The combined influence of family size and birth order was far from negligible, with delinquency rates varying from .6 per 1,000 for only children to 20 per 1,000 for children in the ninth birth order position.

Rahav concluded that the higher delinquency rates for middle-borns supports his pseudo-economic explanation, since a family's resources are likely to be most stretched in the period when middle-born children are at home. Other explanations, focusing on the role of differential socialisation for children in different birth order positions, have been suggested but have received little empirical confirmation (Ernst and Angst 1983).

Subjects

The experimental group of 870 subjects was the total population of male juvenile offenders who arrived at the Open Centre between January 1st, 1979 and September 30th, 1983.

Forty-eight point five per cent of the total group were from the Greater Dublin Area while the remaining 51.5 per cent were from the rest of the country. The population of Greater Dublin is approximately 1 million people while that of the rest of the country is approximately 2.5 million. Because of the influence of selection for the Open Centre, this group cannot be considered representative of the entire population of detained male juvenile offenders. For example, the experimental group has relatively more first-time offenders, a large majority of whom were convicted of various types of larceny, and relatively fewer offenders serving long sentences for crimes involving violence. However, a small proportion of the experimental group was convicted on serious charges, and was serving the last few months of a long sentence at the Open Centre.

The range of sentence length was from 1 month to 4 years and the average was 7.14 months. A large majority, 65.7 per cent, were serving sentences of 6 months or less, 32.7 per cent were serving sentences longer than six months but not longer than 1 year, while only 1.6 per cent were serving sentences longer than 1 year. The age range of the offenders was from 16 years to 20 years, with an average age of 17 years 7 months.

Data on the occupation of the offender's father were not available in many cases but a review of the first 100 cases for which they were available provides an approximate analysis of the social class background of the whole group. In this subgroup 43 per cent of the fathers were or had been unskilled manual workers, 29 per cent semi-skilled manual workers, 13 per cent skilled manual workers, 9 per cent managerial, clerical or lower professional workers and 6 per cent self-employed proprietors, including farmers. It is evident that the offenders were largely from a working-class background and, indeed, over 40 per cent of the fathers were in the lowest socio-economic category, unskilled manual workers.

The comparison group comprised 100 young men following courses with AnCO, the National Training Organisation. They were either undergoing apprenticeships in a skilled trade such as plumbing, or were following a more general work preparation course intended to prepare trainees for factory employment. Fifty of the subjects were from an AnCO Training Centre in Dublin City and 50 from a Centre in a town 105 miles from Dublin. All 100 subjects were within the same age range (16-20) as the experimental group and their average age was 18 years 3 months.

With respect to father's occupation, the background of the comparison group was found to be similar to that of the offender's. Thirty-six per cent of the comparison group fathers were unskilled manual workers, 24 per cent were semi-skilled manual workers, 24 per cent were skilled manual workers, 11 per cent were managerial, clerical or lower professional workers, and 5 per cent were self-employed proprietors, including farmers. The proportions of manual workers in the two groups, i.e., 84 per cent and 85 per cent are almost identical, although relatively more fathers of trainees than of offenders were skilled manual workers. Trainees who had been in prison, detention centre or on probation were excluded from the comparison group.

II. RESULTS

Family Size

The average family size of the experimental group was 7.6 children (Standard Deviation = 3.9). That for the comparison group was 4.9 (S.D. = 2.04). The difference between the two groups was highly statistically significant, $z = 110.7$, $p < .0001$. Both figures can be compared with a national average family size of 3.45 (1977, Census of Population) or approximately 4 for completed families.

Only 4.1 per cent of the experimental group came from families of 1 or 2 children, 29.7 per cent from families of 5 or less children, while 48.2 per cent came from families of 8 or more children. The comparable figures for the comparison group were 10 per cent, 69 per cent and 12 per cent.

Birth Order

Data on birth order were available for 715 of the offender group. Fifteen point nine per cent of the offenders were first-born, 72.6 per cent middle children and 11.5 per cent last-born, and the equivalent figures for the comparison group were 25 per cent, 50 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively. However, these substantial differences reflect the large difference in family size between the two groups, and a more useful analysis is provided by comparing the observed values with the expected values for the various birth order positions. The expected value for any birth position was calculated as the number of cases in that particular family size divided by the number of birth positions in such a family. A ratio (observed over expected) greater than 1 indicates an over-representation at a given position.

When this procedure was undertaken for the offender group, for all family sizes between 2 and 10 combined, the ratios of observed to expected values were as follows; for first-born 1.04, for all middle positions 1.08, and for last-born 0.68. In other words, in the offender group, both first-born and middle children were slightly over-represented while last-born were substantially under-represented by approximately one-third of their expected number. A similar analysis of the comparison group lends considerable weight to this finding since in that case the ratios for observed to expected values, over the family sizes 2 to 10 combined, were 1.02 for first born, 0.98 for middle children and 1.02 for last born. These results indicate that membership of the comparison group, unlike the offender group, is largely independent of birth order.

Table 1 presents the birth order ratios for each position in the family sizes 2 to 10 for the offender group. Rahav (1980) reports that in his sample of Israeli juvenile delinquents the middle-born are consistently over-represented and that this over-representation increased as a function of increasing family size. Although analysis of the present sample indicates that middle children as a group are over-represented (by 8 per cent), the more detailed analysis of results presented in Table 1 shows that this is not an entirely consistent and clearcut finding. Almost half of the middle positions are under-represented in this sample and in 2 family sizes the most under-represented position is a middle position. There is also no clearcut tendency for the over-representation of middle children to become stronger and more consistent as family size increases. On the other hand, it can be seen from Table 1 that the under-representation of last born is relatively consistent and especially marked over family sizes 3 to 6. There is also a considerable and consistent under-representation of first born in the larger family sizes.

Table 1: *Birth order ratios: observed divided by expected birth order position*

<i>Family size</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
2	.72	1.27								
3	1.57	1.00	0.43							
4	1.18	1.33	0.94	0.55						
5	1.36	1.47	1.09	0.65	0.43					
6	0.92	1.46	1.92	0.85	0.38	0.46				
7	0.69	0.78	1.12	1.21	1.04	1.04	1.12			
8	0.68	1.07	0.98	1.17	0.78	0.98	1.37	0.98		
9	0.26	0.52	1.54	1.03	2.18	1.03	0.90	0.90	0.64	
10	0.32	0.63	0.32	1.90	1.43	0.48	0.63	1.59	2.06	0.63

Family and Personal Characteristics

Data on the status of the family of origin are presented in Table 2. The percentage of the offenders and trainees falling into each category is provided along with the chi-squared values, based on raw scores, which compare the 2 groups. Although the percentage of offenders who were brought up outside the family of origin, whose father was dead and whose mother was dead, was in each case higher than the equivalent percentage for the comparison group, these differences were not statistically significant. However, a significantly larger percentage of offenders than trainees came from homes that had suffered a divorce, separation or desertion. There was also a strong statistically significant difference between the 2 groups with respect to the employment rate of fathers within intact families. Fathers of offenders were more than 3 times as likely to be unemployed as fathers of trainees, who suffered an unemployment rate close to the current national unemployment rate of approximately 15 per cent. Only 39 per cent of the offenders came from homes where the father and mother were still alive, living together, and where the father was in employment. The equivalent percentage for the comparison group was 74 per cent.

Table 2: *Family characteristics*

	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Trainees</i>	<i>Chi-squared</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
Not brought up in Family of Origin	1.7%	0.0%	1.7	N.S.
Father Dead	11.3%	9.0%	0.5	N.S.
Mother Dead	6.5%	2.0%	3.3	N.S.
Parent Divorced, Separated or Deserted	10.1%	2.0%	7.0	.01
Father unemployed in intact family	42.5%	14.3%	24.5	.001

III. DISCUSSION

The results provide clearcut evidence of economic disadvantage in the family background of the offenders. Eighty-five per cent of the offenders come from homes where the father was, or had been, a manual worker. According to national census returns (1983, Census of Population of Ireland) this finding is comparable with a figure of approximately 30 per cent manual workers in the total Irish labour force, or 41 per cent if one includes the category "other non-manual" which covers occupations such as bus driver, chef and caretaker. The contrast is even more marked when one focuses on the proportion of unskilled, and presumably less well-paid, manual workers. Forty-three per cent of the offenders' fathers were in this category, compared with a national figure of 7.4 per cent. This profile of economic disadvantage is further underlined by the very high unemployment rate for the offenders' fathers, which stands at almost 3 times the national unemployment rate and 3 times the rate of the trainees' fathers, who were also predominantly manual workers. Given these figures and the considerable proportion of fathers absent from home, it is reasonable to assume that a majority of the offenders' families relied for their income largely on social welfare payments.

While the economic resources of the offenders' families are seen to be limited relative to both the general population and the trainees' families, it is evident that their financial situation is further weakened by the far larger family size, over which their restricted resources have to be spread. The offenders' families contained almost two times as many children as the national average family. Since the offenders' families contained an average 2.7 more children than the families of trainees, who were by and large from a similar socio-economic background, the very high offender family size is not explainable on the grounds of a higher fertility rate amongst the manual working-class.

While the statistical association between large family size and delinquency is strongly confirmed in an Irish context by the present results, the findings on the effects of birth order are not as clearcut. Rahav (1980) found in his Israeli study that the probability of delinquency increased with both family size and a middle-position birth order. Both relationships, he contended, reflect the spreading thin of family resources; emotional, behavioural and economic. The economic disadvantage of the present experimental group has been clearly established and it also appears inevitable that many of these offenders will have been relatively neglected in terms of parental attention. This is probable since 70 per cent of the offenders were from families with 6 or more children and more than a quarter were from homes with an absent parent. However, the present results do not confirm Rahav's finding with respect to middle-born children. While overall, being middle-born did slightly increase the probability of being delinquent, this was not consistent over all middle-born positions and did not be-

come a more powerful effect with increasing family size. On the other hand considerable under-representation of last-borns and of first-borns in large families was found. These results lend some weight to the view that internal family dynamics might contribute to the prevention or promotion of delinquency in certain birth order positions.

The proportion of offenders coming from broken homes of all kinds was 28.5 per cent. This figure is comparatively low since Burt (1925) in Britain and Glueck and Glueck (1950) in the USA report that around 60 per cent of their delinquent groups were from broken homes. The contrast is greater still when the focus is on homes broken by divorce, separation and desertion. In the Irish group, 10.1 per cent of offenders had experienced parental divorce, separation or desertion, which is less than one-quarter of the equivalent rate in the British and American studies. This result clearly reflects cultural differences, particularly the much greater prevalence amongst the general population in the USA and Britain of homes broken by divorce. Despite this relatively low rate of divorce, separation and desertion of 10.1 per cent, the contrast between the Irish offenders and controls was highly significant, with offenders suffering a home broken in this way five times more frequently than the trainees. This result is in accord with many studies from other countries which have found the incidence of parental divorce, separation and desertion to be considerably elevated amongst delinquents when compared with controls or national norms. On the other hand, no significant difference was found between the offenders and the trainees with regard to the rate of homes broken by the death of either the mother or the father. While both Burt and the Gluecks report a higher incidence in their delinquent groups of homes broken due to death, several more recent studies have, like the present investigation, found no significant difference between the levels of bereavement experienced by delinquents and controls, even when the incidence of divorce, separation and desertion is much higher amongst the delinquent group (Gibbens 1963, Gibson 1969 and West and Farrington 1973). Although it should be borne in mind that these global figures do not take account of possibly crucial factors such as the age at which a loss was experienced or whether the lost parent was substituted for through marriage or cohabitation, there is, in the failure to find a link between delinquency and loss due to death, *prima facie* evidence that it is not the absence of a parent in itself which is associated with the promotion of delinquency. As McCord (1982) argues, it is more likely that the explanation lies in terms of factors such as marital discord and neglectful attitudes which are often, though not necessarily, associated with divorce, separation and desertion but which can certainly be found in intact marriages. Nye (1958), for example, has produced evidence that delinquency rates are higher in unhappy but unbroken homes than in homes that have been broken in a relatively harmonious manner. Although the present results suggest that divorce, separation and desertion have an important contributory role in

some cases of serious delinquency in Ireland, it remains a distinct possibility that the behavioural and attitudinal factors which mediate this effect may also be found in the background of many of the delinquents from intact families.

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