

## *Absenteeism at National School—Educational, Medical and Social Aspects*

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*Abstract:* This study of a small sample of national school absentees suggests that such absentees are characterised by high levels of economic and emotional insecurity, and by educational retardation. It thus supports the control theory of deviance in so far as this holds that deviance results from the lack of a stake in society. Of the different sets of factors involved, educational, medical and social, social factors are shown to be of the greatest significance. In a more precise sense, control theory is not, however, confirmed. Evidence from this study suggests the existence of a group of over-conforming children, who by definition are those that would be most rewarded by society, and therefore attached to its norms, who are liable to be extreme non-attenders. The suggestion is therefore put forward that control theory, in so far as it reduces to a conditioning or learning paradigm of behaviour, is inadequate.

MANY studies have established links between socio-economic or ability factors and achievement at school. Recent studies of this kind have been that of Wedge and Prosser (1973) of the National Children's Bureau which showed that poor children tend to do poorly at school, Rudd's study (1972) showing a link between poverty and early school leaving, and Cullen's study (1969) showing a link between poverty and educational retardation. The aims of the present study are to test the theory that absenteeism from school reflects a pattern of multi-dimensional deprivation, economic, intellectual and emotional, and to assess which kind of factor has primacy of influence in the development of such absenteeism. We predict that the group of absentees under review will be characterised by high incidences of poverty, family inadequacy, intellectual

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retardation and personal maladjustment. Furthermore, we predict that a subgroup of chronic absentees will be even more strongly characterised by such adversities.

Students of criminology will observe that what is being tested is the "control" theory of social deviance, that is, the idea that people become deviant through want of a stake in the community which serves to bind them to the community's norms. From this perspective, people who are handicapped in terms of society's economic, educational and personal criteria are at risk of becoming delinquent since they have nothing to lose by so doing. Control theory would seem to imply that we form our self-image largely on the basis of others' opinion of us. If others seem to value us (because of our wealth, intelligence or amiability), we come to value ourselves (although logically we should value what society seems to value in us, our wealth, etc., rather than what we are in ourselves) and this feeling of self-acceptance is so potent that we avoid any deviant acts which forfeit for us society's approval. Control theory boils down to the problem of how to make people sensitive to the rewards and punishments of society. It seems a fair assumption that people will not seek to conform unless they have already tasted some of the fruits of conformity. If, as we predict, our group of absentees are poor, come from inadequate homes and lack a feeling of social approval, their absenteeism is all the more understandable. In the absence of super-ego controls the id tends to take over, or so control theory would have us believe.

Tables 1, 2, 4 and 8 present results testing control theory in so far as they analyse the degree of absenteeism in terms of educational or intellectual prowess, economic security, adequacy of familial socialisation structure, and degree of acceptance of oneself by others. Table 3 which relates absenteeism to maternal employment may also be said to test control theory in so far as a child with a working mother may be said to have less incentive to follow society's rules. Some, of course, may disagree with this view. Depending on one's view, Table 3 does not confirm or say anything about control theory.

Control theory would seem to suggest that more aggressive children need a stronger attachment to society if they are to remain non-delinquent. Eysenck's hypothesis of delinquents being naturally extraverted and impulsive and thus harder to condition, is a very similar theory. Tables 5, 6 and 7 show how the absentees responded to imaginary frustration and analyses the degree of aggressive response according to degree of absenteeism. If control theory holds true, we should find that absentees in general are more aggressive than other schoolchildren and that chronic absentees are even more aggressive.

Finally Table 9 compares the influence of different variables on chronic absenteeism and represents an overall comment on control theory.

### *Methodology*

In late 1969 the author with the co-operation of Dublin School Attendance Officers selected what was felt to be a representative group of school non-attenders. Three national schools were selected, two near the city centre and one in the suburbs. These were felt to be fairly typical lay Dublin national schools. The

procedure for selecting non-attenders was as follows. Every month the principal of each national school sends to an attendance committee a list of pupils who have missed at least three days in the preceding month. The sample was selected by taking every second name from the lists for the three schools in November, 1969. As in the case of a survey of probationers carried out by the author about the same time (Hart, 1974) this study is confined to boys.

Of the 57 subjects, one was aged 8, five aged 9, four aged 10, four aged 11, fifteen aged 12 and twenty-eight aged 13. Data were collected through unstructured, focused interviewing and psychological testing of the boy, through interviews with mothers, and through the use of a questionnaire with teachers and School Attendance Officers. The interviewers, both psychologists,\* sought to assess the boy's attitude to his school, teachers, family and peers, and the use he made of his leisure. Note was taken of nervous symptoms, whether the boy was right- or left-handed, the state of his clothes and any indications of disposition and intelligence. Inquiry was made as to the existence of visual or aural defects.

The tests employed were much the same as with the probationers. Tests in common were the Delinquency Association Scale (Hart, 1970<sup>a</sup>), the Columbia Mental Maturity Scale intelligence test (Burgemeister, Blum and Lorge, 1959), the Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Study (Rosenzweig, 1948), the Objective Thematic Apperception Test (Conger and Miller, 1966) and the New Junior Maudsley Inventory (Furieux and Gibson, 1966). Attainment tests for non-attenders were the Marino Word Reading Test (O'Sullivan, 1970), the Schonell Test of Reading Ability (F. J. and F. E. Schonell, 1950) and the Schonell Essential Mechanical Arithmetic Test.† As a check on the level of intelligence, Raven's Progressive Matrices test was administered on a group basis to 45 boys, the remainder not being available on the subsequent occasion of testing.

The interview with the mother was similar to that with the probationer's mother. Its purpose was to assess the family in terms of the updated version (Craig and Glick, 1966) of the Glueck Social Background Factors—maternal discipline, maternal supervision and cohesiveness of family. It will be recalled that the Gluecks in their American studies, in particular that described in "Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency" (1950), found that delinquents could be differentiated from matched non-delinquents by the existence in their backgrounds of such adversities as inadequate parental supervision, faulty parental discipline (erratic, overstrict or lax) and the absence of family cohesiveness. Craig and Glick's version of their rating scale focuses on maternal rather than paternal adequacy not because of any judgement as to the relative importance of mothers in the aetiology of deviance but because of the belief that mothers are more accessible and co-operative than fathers. In addition to rating mothers on the Glueck scale, the interviewer also

\*Thirty-four boys were interviewed by Bernadette O'Sullivan, at that time a psychologist with The Economic and Social Research Institute, and twenty-three were interviewed by the author.

†The following abbreviations are used in this study: Delinquency Association Scale—DAS; Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Study—RPFS; New Junior Maudsley Inventory—NJMI; Objective Thematic Apperception Test—OTAT.

administered the California Psychological Inventory (Responsibility and Socialisation scales) to them (Gough, 1964). The interviewer administered the California Test of Personality (CTP) to the boy wherever possible (Thorpe, Clark and Tiegs, 1953). These interviews and tests were carried out over a two-month period in spring 1972, or about two years after the initial testing of the boy. Through the co-operation of mothers it was possible to assess some 50 families on the Glueck scales.

A short questionnaire was distributed to the boys' teachers (numbering 16) covering such topics as the teacher's assessment of the boy's ability and work effort, the boy's reasons for missing school, the teacher's opinion on whether he truanted, reasons for truanting and teacher's idea of the best way of improving the boy's attendance. School Attendance Officers (numbering 4) were asked to fill out questionnaires on the degree of non-attendance (for instance, whether they saw it as "occasional", "frequent"—noted for non-attendance for at least three different months, or "chronic", more often absent than present), family background and the nature of any action they had taken to improve matters. By comparing their account of the family with that of the boy and his mother, the author was able to build up in some cases what he felt to be an in-depth picture of a family.

Initial testing was carried out in the first five months of 1970. In September 1974 the Criminal Record Office was sent the 57 names and addresses and asked for details of any criminal offences.

One-tailed chi-squared tests are used to assess the statistical significance of deviations from the hypothesis of no difference in the expected direction between population distributions. Fisher's Exact Probability Test is used with small numbers. The .05 probability level is taken as the criterion of statistical significance. It will be noted that rows and columns have in most cases been summated. The main criteria for summation are (1), the desirability of splitting score distributions near the median and (2), the wish to differentiate chronic non-attenders who presumably contain a large number of future social problems from the remainder. In Table 3, where an Exact Probability Test has to be used, categories of part-time-and-full time employment are combined. In Table 7 an additional test is made to show a link between very high scores and chronic absenteeism. "Not applicable" categories have been excluded from tests.

## RESULTS

### *Educational Factors*

In general scores on ability and attainment measures were very low. Mean IQ on the Columbia was 68.6 points while that on Raven's test was very nearly 72 points (computing scores in terms of mental age by reference to Table 4 of the Manual) (Raven, 1960). The mean reading age on the Marino was only 8 years 10 months, which was also the mean arithmetic age on the Schonell test.

Of the cognitive measures, Schonell Arithmetic score was significantly linked with degree of non-attendance as rated by a School Attendance Officer in

terms of "occasional", "frequent" or "chronic". Progressive Matrices had also a bearing on non-attendance and when it was held constant arithmetic score lost its significant effect. Table I shows the degree of association for the two variables.

TABLE I: *Progressive matrices and Schonell arithmetic scores by non-attendance*

(a) <i>Progressive matrices score</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
10-19	22	7	6	9
20-29	11	7	3	1
30-39	8	4	2	2
40-49	4	3	0	1
Not given	12	1	7	4
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Excluding "not given", combining all scores over 19, and occasional with frequent non-attenders,  $X^2=2.71$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p < .05$ .

(b) <i>Schonell arithmetic score</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
1-12	26	8	7	11
13-24	23	9	11	3
25-36	7	5	0	2
Not given	1	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Excluding "not given", combining all scores over 12, and occasional with frequent categories,  $X^2=4.33$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p < .05$ .

It will be shown through factor analysis that social rather than educational variables were influential in determining non-attendance. It should be noted, however, that Progressive Matrices did show a significant effect among those with high Glueck scores, that is, among those from relatively inadequate homes. Further evidence appeared which indicated that educational factors had some significance. In the case of 16 boys the reason for non-attendance was reckoned by psychologist or teacher to be linked with dislike for the school, teachers or lessons. These boys were significantly more likely to be frequent non-attenders.

It was difficult to assess attitudes on such sensitive topics as teachers and lessons, and where a rating was made (in 26 cases about teachers, 22 cases about lessons) no link was shown between attitude and degree of non-attendance. Most who

spoke about their teachers spoke well of them, suggesting a policy of prudence rather than a reliable account. However, only five of those who expressed an opinion about their lessons liked doing them, no less than ten expressing a dislike of Irish.

### *Medical Factors*

Eleven, or 19 per cent, asserted a teacher had slapped too much, the same proportion as in the study of probationers. Although there was a high incidence of visual or auditory defect, 26 per cent, there was no link between this and severity of non-attendance. In some cases of physical defect, parents seemed quite careless. "Peter", for instance, said he found it hard to hear with his right ear and that it pained him at night. He said his mother had got ointment for it but had never brought him to the doctor. "Patrick" had had trouble with flat feet and was supposed to get something done about them, having been examined by the school doctor a year ago. He had given his mother the doctor's letter but she had done nothing about his feet. In some cases it was clear that the mother had little time for the child because of the many pressures on her. "Conor", who was one of 12 children, was supposed to attend a children's hospital because of trouble with his eyes and ears. He told the interviewer he thought he was going deaf in one ear. The day he was supposed to attend hospital, about a year ago, his mother was herself in hospital and his father was too busy with the other children. "Conor" had not mentioned the subject to them since. He seemed depressed by their lack of interest and although he admitted he was worried by the thought of going deaf or blind, did not indicate he was going to raise the matter with his parents. "Cormac" had defective vision and should have been wearing glasses. He said his mother intended to get the glasses repaired on the following Monday when she was off work.

Five boys were in classes for the retarded and 12 had difficulty in reading. Such difficulty was not related to non-attendance. Two suffered from asthma or migraine and six were left-handed. In five cases there was incoherent speech and in two cases difficulty with writing. In only four cases was there an indication of school phobia in the sense of the boy being so worried about the continued presence of a parent in the home as to be reluctant to leave home for school. In seven cases the physical health of a parent was chronically poor and this may well have led to pressure on some to stay at home in order to help.

### *Social Factors*

In 23 cases the most frequent reason given by a boy for his non-attendance was that he had to help at home. Such boys tended to a significant degree to come from large families. In 24 cases the teacher felt there was little or no parental interest in the boy's education and in 13 of these cases he felt the boy was sometimes kept at home in order to help. There was thus impressionistic evidence of the impact of home conditions on the boy's schooling.

There was also statistical evidence of the effect of home conditions. Poverty\* characterised almost two-thirds of the group, a higher proportion than among the probationers. As Table 2 (a) shows, there was a significant link between membership of a poor family and being a "chronic".

TABLE 2: *Poverty and Glueck score by non-attendance*

(a) <i>Poverty</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
Present	33	8	11	14
Absent	24	14	7	3
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Combining occasional and frequent categories,  $X^2=4.23$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p < .05$ .

(b) <i>Glueck score†</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
37-114	8	5	3	0
115-192	15	10	4	1
193 and over	27	2	9	16
Not available	7	5	2	0
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Excluding "not available", combining occasional and frequent categories and all scores under 193,  $X^2=15.14$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p < .001$ .

†High score indicating family inadequacy.

Average number of children per family was 6.8 and this variable was very strongly linked with degree of non-attendance, the strength of the association exceeding that for nine other social and personality variables, as is shown in the Appendix. The families of "chronics" averaged 8.9 children whereas frequent non-attenders had an average of 6.6 children and "occasionals" an average of 5.4 children. These averages represent very large families for the social groups concerned (84 per cent were from manual working groups, 51 per cent being from the routine manual group). They recall the averages cited by Rudd in her study of national school terminal leavers (Rudd, 1972). The average number of children in the families of

\*A family was considered poor if characterised by any of the four following circumstances: more than 5 children under 14 unless father was of at least skilled manual status; two-thirds of total at home unemployed, including father unemployed; more than two-thirds of total at home unemployed except where father was at least of skilled manual status; father figure deserted family or boy reared in institution.

her terminal leavers was 7.2. Fr Ryan noted an average of 7.6 children per family in his sample of early school leavers (Ryan, 1967).

Another factor making for poverty in our group was the high paternal unemployment rate. This ran at 32 per cent, a very high incidence for the manual groups concerned. The variable was not, however, related to severity of non-attendance.

Such aspects of family culture as those indicated by Glueck score and the existence of an alcoholic problem in a parent were closely linked with non-attendance. Table 2 (b) shows the association for Glueck score. Boys with high Glueck scores, that is, those whose maternal discipline and supervision were inadequate and whose families lacked cohesiveness were very likely to be chronic, or at best, frequent non-attenders. Glueck score was more significant than poverty as a determinant of non-attendance. There were significant effects for Glueck score in both the poor and the not so poor groups. When Glueck score was held constant, no significant effect appeared for poverty. There was a very high incidence of parents, usually fathers, with alcoholic problems—49 per cent. This adversity was present to a significantly greater extent than among probationers and was significantly associated with the degree of non-attendance. The proportion living in overcrowded dwellings\* was also extremely high, being 49 per cent. The high incidence of overcrowding may be attributed to the fact that four-fifths of the sample lived in corporation flats which were far too small for their large families. Boys in overcrowded dwellings were significantly likely to be "chronics". Eight boys were poorly dressed at interview and seven of these were frequent or chronic non-attenders. That non-attendance tended to run in families was clear from the fact that "chronics" were significantly more likely to have siblings in trouble for non-attendance.

The interviewer of the mother sought details on her employment status. Some seven mothers indicated they had a full-time or part-time job. A number of mothers did not reveal their working status presumably because they feared this might be reported to income tax officials. One such mother was reported as working by a teacher and another by a School Attendance Officer. One of the psychologists, who interviewed 23 boys, included in the interview a question about whether the mother worked. Answers revealed another four working mothers. The total of 13 working mothers (23 per cent) is an underestimate because the other psychologist did not question her boys about their mothers' working status. The proportion is high when it is considered that an incidence of 14 per cent was found among Dublin married mothers in the manual workers' group (Walsh, 1973, p. 43). The theory that maternal employment causes deviance among children was, however, strongly questioned by a significant association between being a "chronic" and *not* having a working mother. A further test of

\*Overcrowding was considered present where more than two children slept in a bedroom, or a kitchen or sitting room was used as a bedroom or where the adults shared their bedroom with a child other than a baby.



the theory was made by focusing on the 23 boys in whose cases adequate information on maternal working status was available. Table 3 indicates a significant association between *not* having a working mother and being a chronic non-attender. A higher proportion of working than of non-working mothers provided suitable supervision for their boy, 54 per cent compared with 36 per cent, so it

TABLE 3: *Maternal employment by non-attendance (23 cases only)*

<i>Maternal employment status</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
Not employed	14	1	6	7
Employed part time	3	1	1	1
Employed full time	6	3	3	0
<i>Total</i>	23	5	10	8

Combining part time and full time employment, and combining occasional and frequent categories,  $p < .01$ , Fisher's Exact Probability Test.

would seem that where a mother was determined to provide supervision, she would provide it whether working or not. There was no link between maternal working status and Glueck score, number of children, paternal unemployment or low score on the Responsibility scale of the California Psychological Inventory which was administered to the mother during her interview. (Gough, 1964). There was a slight tendency ( $p < .10$ ) for the working mothers to have chronically ill husbands and, as might be expected, a significantly small proportion of their families were poor.

Three further signs of family inadequacy were noticeably common although none was strongly linked with the non-attendance problem. In 53 per cent of cases parents had disagreed over discipline, in 19 per cent the mother's interviewer thought that the dwelling was dirty or neglected, and in about half the cases communication between father and mother (assessing this on the basis of the mother's interview) seemed poor.

## PERSONALITY FACTORS

### *New Junior Maudsley Inventory*

On this self-report inventory of behaviour mean score on extraversion was 13.18, on neuroticism 9.51 and on the lie scale 9.56. The first two means significantly exceed those for the English normative sample. No link with degree of non-attendance was apparent for any NJMI measure. Thus, Eysenck's view that deviants are characterised by extraversion and instability was not confirmed by looking at the degree of absenteeism.

*California Test of Personality*

The Elementary Form of this self-report on feelings and behaviour was completed by 42 boys aged under 15 years. Mean score for the 42 on overall personal adjustment was exceeded by 60 per cent of the American normative sample while that for social adjustment was even lower, being exceeded by 70 per cent of the American sample. One of the 12 scales produced a significant difference between occasional non-attenders and others. This was Sense of Personal Worth. There was, however, no significant distinction between chronics and the remainder, as is evident in Table 4.

TABLE 4: *CTP sense of personal worth\* by non-attendance*

CTP personal worth score	Non-attendance			
	Total	Occasional	Frequent	Chronic
0-2.9	0	0	0	0
3-5.9	4	2	1	1
6-8.9	23	5	9	9
9-12	15	10	2	3
Total	42	17	12	13

Combining frequent and occasional categories and all scores under 9,  $X^2=1.08$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p$  about .15.

\*Elementary form.

Note: CTP sense of personal worth seeks to assess how well regarded by others a person feels.

*Objective Thematic Apperception Test*

On this test (which requires subjects to select one interpretation of a picture from a number presented to him), chronic non-attenders were significantly less likely to choose responses suggesting their parents encouraged them towards goals of intrinsic value in themselves.

*Rosenzweig Picture—Frustration Study†*

Table 5 shows that the group as a whole projected a significantly large number of aggressive or extrapunitive responses to situations of imagined frustration. Since

†This test consists of 24 cartoons each of which shows a child in a frustrating situation. The subject has to say what the child would say. Responses are classified according to direction of aggression, extrapunitive or blaming the other for the frustration, intropunitive or blaming the self, or impunitive—avoiding expression of feeling. They may also be classified according to response type—obstacle dominance, where the presence of the frustrating obstacle is insistently pointed out, ego defence, where the effort is made to preserve self esteem, and need persistence where stress is laid on solving the problem.

social class data on the American normative group of 77 twelve and thirteen year old children is not presented in the test manual, it is possible that the extrapunitive of the non-attenders reflects their social background rather than any personality deviation as such. The high level of extrapunitive and low levels of intropunitive (self-blaming tendencies) and impunitive (denial of any feelings) resembles the picture of probationers suggested by Table 18 of that study and the probationers too were predominantly from manual working groups.

TABLE 5: *Non-attenders and normative sample by response on Rosenzweig picture-frustration study (children's form)*

Response	Non-attenders		Normative sample	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Extrapunitive obstacle dominance	1.60*	1.02	1.20	1.12
Extrapunitive ego defence	8.65*	3.07	5.50	2.45
Extrapunitive need persistence	3.54*	1.78	2.90	1.64
Intropunitive obstacle dominance and intropunitive ego defence	4.00	1.73	5.70	
Intropunitive need persistence	0.60*	1.08	1.40	1.17
Impunitive obstacle dominance, ego defence and need persistence	5.38	2.87	7.20	
Group conformity rating	59.0%*	9.7%	63.8%	9.3%

\*Difference between means is significant at the .05 level.

Note: The obstacle dominance and ego defence categories of the intropunitive score are combined because of the rarity of intropunitive obstacle dominance responses. All impunitive categories are combined because of the difficulty of differentiating the categories of impunitive response from one another.

Types of non-attenders were differentiated by RPFS measures which discriminated in a similar manner among probationers. Like probationers who relapsed into crime, chronic non-attenders gained low extrapunitive need persistence, or constructive aggression, scores as Table 6 shows. Frequent non-attenders were particularly high on this scale, exceeding "occasionals" who, in turn exceed "chronics". The association between chronicity and low scores is not expected so a two-tailed test is used.

The curvilinear association resembles that among probationers and suggests that a high level of extrapunitive need persistence creates some, although not extreme, problems of adjustment. The overall chi-square for Table 6 is significant although the curvilinear relationship destroys the significance of the difference between chronics and others. Since the sample was generally high on extrapunitive, occasional and frequent non-attenders were extremely high on this measure. This finding about the "chronics" recalls Rudd's comments (1972, p. 31) on personality

TABLE 6: *Extrapunitive need persistence (RPFS) by non-attendance*

<i>Extrapunitive need persistence</i>	<i>Non-attendance</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
0-3.5	32	14	5	13
4-7.5	22	8	10	4
Over 7.5	3	0	3	0
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Combining occasional and frequent categories and all scores over 3.5,  $X^2=2.15$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p$  about .15 (two-tailed test).

differences between children who left school at 14 and those who stayed on for post-primary education: "It might be expected that Terminal Leavers would be more undisciplined and difficult to deal with than others at their school, but this does not appear to have been so. Nearly twice as high a proportion of post-primary leavers as of Terminal Leavers were said to cause classroom disturbances and a higher proportion of them defied school authorities in some way or were cheeky or insubordinate. The behaviour which Terminal Leavers were more likely than post-primary leavers to exhibit was bad attendance/unpunctuality/mitching and, in the case of girls, homework not done/inadequately done and boys bullying/fighting". Rudd's evidence is that children who leave school early express their aggression to authority figures indirectly through absenteeism, unpunctuality and failure to do homework. There was some indication from their high incidence of bullying and fighting that they displaced aggression for teachers onto peers. RPFS results with chronic non-attenders and relapsing probationers show a similar pattern of repressed aggression. The result creates difficulty for control theory and a need for such argument as that society does not reward conformity beyond a certain point. This is a drastic modification of control theory, however, because the rationale of the theory is that society rewards conformity and makes it worthwhile.

Some might say that the "chronics" were maladjusted in personality but their apathy may be quite normal when the effect of social deprivation on the unconscious is taken into account. A definition of masochism by Gordon Fletcher, a Dublin psychoanalyst, is relevant here. He defines it as a mental law of gravity which draws the mind back to fixating and unhappy experiences. Another comment from Rudd is also relevant. She goes on to say "One of the questions asked the parents being interviewed was 'what type of child do you think did best at—school'? One mother replied, 'Rough kind, one that answers back'. The evidence that children who go to post-primary schools are more talkative, sociable and cheeky than those who do not, appears to support her." For all the

canting disapproval of aggression in our society, people are aware of its constructive aspects.

One other score of the RPFS showed an interesting difference between chronics and others. Table 7 shows the link between high intropunitive score on those items of the RPFS where the subject has to answer for someone who is being rebuked for an alleged failing and chronicity of non-attendance. Although only four boys scored over 4 points on this measure, the fact they were all chronic non-attenders is of considerable interest. The intropunitive response on an incriminating item of the RPFS means that the subject projects a self-blaming response onto someone being reproached. "Occasionals" showed a significantly high level of aggressive response on the incriminating items.

TABLE 7: *Intropunitive score\* on incriminating items (RPFS) by non-attendance*

Intropunitive score	Non-attendance			
	Total	Occasional	Frequent	Chronic
0-1	7	3	2	2
1.5-2.5	14	6	5	3
3-4	32	13	11	8
4.5-5.5	4	0	0	4
Total	57	22	18	17

Combining occasional and frequent categories and all scores of 3 or over,  $X^2 = .09$ .  $DF = 1$   $p$  about .37.

Combining all scores under 4.5, and occasional and frequent categories,  $p < .01$ . (Fisher's Exact Probability Test).

\*Made up of intropunitive obstacle dominance and intropunitive ego defence.

As with probationers, subjects' scores on the lie scale of the NJMI did not appear to account for the link between low extrapunitive need persistence and extreme deviance.

Examination of the association between extrapunitive need persistence and non-attendance when variables like poverty, Glueck score, arithmetic and Progressive Matrices were held constant, suggested that the association represented an underlying link between social deprivation and non-attendance. Extrapunitive need persistence lost its significant effect when each of the four variables above was in turn held constant. Children of very poor and inadequate families seem liable to become apathetic in personality and chronic in their school non-attendance. It seems that although extrapunitiveness may be a "working-class" way of dealing with frustration, as Miller suggests (Miller, 1958), the intropunitive or impunitive response characterises the most deprived subgroup within the "working-class". Such fatalistic and "couldn't care less" attitudes have probably defeated many a

project to improve the lot of the deprived. The "chronics" at an early age display the "soiled" sense of identity which some theorists believe is characteristic of older delinquents as a result of society's stigmatisation.

#### *Delinquency Association Scale*

On this 14 item questionnaire about home and school some 35 boys (61 per cent) admitted that they had mitched from school more than once. Predictably, these were significantly more likely to be "chronics". The great majority said they usually mitched with others. According to the teachers, all the boys save one mitched or had mitched. The true proportion mitching probably lies somewhere between the proportion who confided in the psychologist about their mitching and the proportion suspected by teachers.

In relation to the third question of the DAS, that about customary type of punishment, about two-thirds of the sample said that corporal punishment was their customary punishment at home. This proportion is very similar to that among probationers. The variable was not linked with degree of non-attendance. "Chronics" showed a significant tendency ( $p < .05$ ) to score at 360 or over on DAS total (Table 8). This confirms the picture suggested by their Glueck ratings.

TABLE 8: Total DAS score by non-attendance

DAS	Non-attendance			
	Total	Occasional	Frequent	Chronic
0-179	9	5	3	1
180-359	34	14	12	8
360 and over	13	3	3	7
Not applicable	1	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	57	22	18	17

Excluding "not applicable", combining all scores under 360, and occasional and frequent categories,  $X^2=2.98$ .  $DF=1$ .  $p < .05$ .

#### *Factor Analysis*

Eighteen variables were factor analysed by the method of principal components with varimax rotation to throw light on the fundamental roots of non-attendance. Table 9 shows loadings of these variables, which include the variable of non-attendance, on the first seven principal components extracted from the correlation matrix. These components account for 67.3 per cent of the matrix variance and all have eigen-values exceeding unity.

We see from this Table that school attendance is primarily a social problem. The only factor linked to a substantial extent with chronic non-attendance is Factor 1,

TABLE 9: Factor loadings of eighteen variables related to non-attendance

Variable	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Chronic non-attendance	<u>-.58</u>	-.29	.16	.15	-.16	<u>.36</u>	-.20
No alcoholic problem at home	<u>.39</u>	.05	.01	-.13	.10	-.06	.08
Glueck score	<u>-.51</u>	.04	<u>.35</u>	-.07	-.09	.19	-.03
Total children in family	<u>-.85</u>	.09	-.02	.11	.08	.01	.04
Absence of poverty	<u>.58</u>	-.13	.06	.07	.11	-.03	.07
Corporation flat	<u>-.31</u>	.09	<u>-.31</u>	.02	.10	<u>.57</u>	.02
Household clean	.12	-.06	<u>-.35</u>	<u>-.38</u>	.01	.12	.13
Absence of overcrowding	<u>.85</u>	.08	.19	.16	-.25	-.13	.05
Sullen at interview	-.22	.02	.02	.00	-.10	<u>.43</u>	.11
Parent interested in boy's attendance (teacher)	<u>.57</u>	.13	.29	-.10	.03	-.09	-.09
Boy dislikes school (teacher)	.09	-.06	-.02	-.02	<u>.74</u>	.07	-.09
Boy dislikes school (psychologist)	-.04	-.03	.18	-.10	<u>.39</u>	-.05	<u>.35</u>
Boy not kept at home (teacher)	<u>.36</u>	-.05	<u>.61</u>	-.11	.11	.01	.09
NJMI Neuroticism	.00	-.05	-.19	<u>.74</u>	-.03	-.08	.01
Schonell arithmetic	.02	.03	-.11	-.29	.12	-.26	-.04
Intropunitive score (super-ego)	.05	-.13	.02	-.11	.06	<u>.44</u>	-.12
Extrapunitive need persistence score	.13	.03	-.04	-.05	-.06	.01	<u>.80</u>
OTAT—other-intrinsic score	.01	<u>.99</u>	.01	-.03	.10	.09	.02

Note (1) Loadings exceeding an absolute value of .30 underlined.

(2) Five variables were scored in 3 categories, all others were dichotomies. The five variables were: Glueck score (unknown counted as high score), total children in family, Schonell arithmetic score, parental interest in boy's attendance and NJMI neuroticism.

which, with its high loadings of "number of children" and "overcrowding", very obviously represents social influences. The only other factor linked to any noteworthy degree with non-attendance is Factor 6, which represents an amalgam of social and personality factors. Control theory is supported by the importance of the factor of social deprivation but is questioned by the link between intropunitive score on the incriminating items of the RPFs and chronic non-attendance.

*Follow-up*

As noted, a check was made with the Criminal Record Office in September 1974 to see how many had been convicted of offences other than non-attendance. Some ten boys were recorded as having been convicted. Since one of these was merely convicted of loitering, only nine (or 16 per cent) appeared to have been

unequivocally delinquent. Nineteen variables were examined for their correlation with delinquency but only two, alcoholic parent and Glueck score, were significantly linked with it. There was a slight tendency ( $p$  about 0.06) for delinquents to gain low extrapunitive need persistence scores on incriminating items of the RPPS.

### *Teacher's Perceptions*

Those teachers who felt that anything could be done to improve the boys' attendance were inclined to think that the best way would be by improving the families' attitudes to education or the home conditions. In answer to a question on this topic there were 15 references to the importance of increasing parental interest and three references to the importance of improving the family's conditions of life. There were only four suggestions that court action might be useful and this possibility was suggested because of what was hoped would be its good effect on a parent.

Teachers had less faith in the value of educational improvements, obviously believing, as the factor analytic results show, that non-attendance is primarily a social problem. There were only three suggestions that it would help to get the boy more interested, two references to the value of remedial teaching and one suggestion that counselling might help. There were two references to the boy's state of health and one suggestion that the boy be kept away from other truants.

In some cases teachers seemed in a state of despair. In three cases they said nothing could be done. In eight cases of frequent and three of chronic non-attendance they made no suggestion as to how the situation might be improved.

Home factors were considered by the teachers to be of less importance in truancy. When asked for reasons for truancy, there were 13 references to the influence of bad companions and 11 references to a boy's dislike of school. Truanting, as such, was seen as only one cause of non-attendance.

One teacher clearly enjoyed the challenge of dealing with a boy who was frequently absent. In answer to the question about how attendance could be improved, he replied, "John' has improved a great deal—absence of correction seems to make him enjoy school better" and, under "Any other comments", he wrote, "When first I had John' I treated him like an ordinary child and this had disastrous results. I saw he had a total revulsion towards the Irish language. The more I tried to overcome his hatred for it, the further back from me he withdrew. He mitched and was generally unruly. I no longer expect him to answer questions in Irish with the same degree of accuracy I expect from the others and with the 'pressure' off he is very happy and rarely misses school. He is very weak at Irish as a result". Another teacher was far less creative. In answer to a question about the reasons for a boy's non-attendance he said "One mitching bout was spent helping a man who keeps pigs. The pigs evidently have more interest for him than have I!"

Although one of the schools was extremely dilapidated, none of the teachers criticised the school building. Their difficult working conditions reminded the



writer of a story he heard from Senator Brosnahan of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation about a national teacher who committed suicide after years of frustrating work in a very poor area. Thankfully, the school in question has now been completely rebuilt.

One item of the teachers' questionnaire concerned the subject most preferred by a boy and in which he showed most ability. One-third of the sample were said to have no interest in any subject and not to be good at any. This group contained a significantly large proportion of frequent non-attenders but no more "chronics" than might have been expected. The most disliked subject, according to teachers, was Irish. This result recalls Rudd's discovery that almost half her sample of national school terminal leavers disliked Irish or tried to avoid it (p. 80), Roseingrave's finding that 57 per cent of a sample of early school leavers disliked Irish more than any other subject (Roseingrave, 1971, p. 128) and an hitherto unpublished finding of the author that over half of a sample of Dublin voters thought Irish should receive less emphasis at national or primary level.\*

#### *Society's Response*

According to themselves School Attendance Officers were reluctant to bring children to court and even more reluctant to have them committed to institutions. The evidence tends to bear this out. Although there were 35 frequent and chronic non-attenders, only 13 parents had been fined for their boy's non-attendance and only three boys committed.† The three boys sent to institutions were all chronic non-attenders and from very inadequate homes. "Peter's" background is typical. He was aged eight years eight months at time of interview and was committed to Salthill residential school with his brother 18 months afterwards. The family was poor and there were eight children. The boy had asthma and had seen fierce rows between his parents. By the time of interview they seemed no longer to have such rows but hardly spoke to one another any more. The mother did all the disciplining because the father was inclined to be too hard on the children. According to her, "Peter" clung too much to her and he was easily led. She said he had been brought mitching by his elder brother. According to the Attendance Officer, she worked at night in a restaurant and was so disinterested in the boy's schooling that he would often be in bed at 11 o'clock in the morning. In her interview with the Officer she pretended her husband had left home, presumably because she was ashamed of him. The Officer thought the boy did not stand a chance from the word "go" and pointed out that the mother openly admitted she spoiled all her children. At the time of follow-up "Peter" was attending school again and according to the Attendance Officer had shown a remarkable improvement in attendance. Apparently the mother had appealed successfully

\*The results on the Dublin voters that relate to opinion on civil servants and the role of the individual in the local community have been published in "Public opinion on civil servants and the role and power of the individual in the local community" (Hart, 1970b).

†In the 1973 Report of the School Attendance Department it is shown on page 25 that only about 6 per cent of children in trouble for non-attendance were sent to special schools.

against the committal. Since the appeal had been made and he had returned home, his attendance improved. The family tensions may well continue to disturb him, however, in the absence of effective casework.

Attendance Officers, like teachers, were well aware of the social aspects of the non-attendance problem. The Senior Attendance Officer states in the 1973 Annual Report of the School Attendance Service (p. 1)—“Irregular school attendance in itself is not a tremendous social problem, but, unfortunately for a number of Dublin children, non-attendance at school is a mere symptom of a greater malaise. Investigation by School Attendance Officers uncovers problems of such magnitude that the mild misdemeanour of irregular attendance pales into insignificance”. In many cases of social deprivation the Attendance Officer seems to be the first to become aware, at an official level, of a family’s inadequacy. Yet there was frequent\* contact between Officer and boy in only five cases. This must be seen in the context of the Officers’ lack of training in casework but it should also be noted that no Officer mentioned referring a boy to a social worker. This is probably because there were no social workers available from the Health Board at the time.

### *Conclusions*

Eaton and Houghton (1975) have shown that persistent absenteeism among teenagers is linked with dissatisfaction with secondary school but among our national schoolboys social factors seem paramount in the matter of non-attendance. Moreover, it was not merely that the parents lacked interest in the boy’s schooling but were otherwise providing their son with a stable environment. Where the parents took little interest, there was also evidence that the family environment was generally inadequate, as indicated by high Glueck scores. Where there was evidence of a boy being kept at home to help, family size was greater than for the remainder of the group. Improving attendance would seem in many cases to involve working with the family, either by giving advice or counsel, or assistance in terms of medical, financial or domestic help.

Although a school may be the first official agency to become aware of a child’s inadequate family environment, it is certainly not up to the school to remedy that inadequacy. There should be an adequate supply of Health Board caseworkers coupled with a flexible system of home help, crèches and playgroups. Advice on family planning would also seem badly needed. The total number of children in a family remained closely linked with degree of non-attendance ( $p < 0.01$ ) even when such variables as Glueck score, corporation flat and parental alcoholism were held constant. Its significant effect remained ( $p < 0.02$ ) even when parental interest was held constant.

Although social factors seem primary influences, it would be unwise to discount completely the influence of the school itself. There was evidence in this study that boys who disliked school or who seemed to teachers to have no interest or ability

\*More than five meetings.

were frequent non-attenders. Improving the national school curriculum to cater more for individual and local interests would probably result in improving attendance for a certain group who are not too beset by domestic difficulties. Teachers in deprived areas should have the best of school equipment and audio-visual aids, and the years they spend teaching in a deprived area should be taken into account if they move to another school and apply for the post of principal there. Although it is outside our scope to argue the pros and cons of educational priority areas, it should at least be noted that the establishment of such areas would foster an inflow of human and material resources into deprived areas. There is a strong case to be made for teachers in deprived areas gaining a higher salary than those in other areas.

Apart from improvements of curriculum, the school would also be more effective with non-attenders if it worked more with parents. As in the Rutland Street Project, an attempt should be made to secure maximum parental participation in the school. Some teachers complained that the parents of slow students were precisely those who failed to attend parent-teacher meetings. Such parents apparently took little interest in their boy's education until the time came for him to leave or until he began to fall back noticeably. Some of them would then begin to blame the teachers. Dealing with parents and learning to involve them in the educational effort should receive due recognition in teacher training programmes. This is particularly important in Dublin as Kelly (1970) found that teachers there had little contact with parents (p. 114)—“When contact did exist it was informal, in that parents called to the school to meet the teacher. Very few parent-teacher associations existed, nor were they the form of parent-teacher relations favoured by teachers for the future”. He notes that this aloofness from parents may arise from the teacher's tendency to define his role exclusively in terms of his pupils and his wish to maintain the independence of that relationship. This bias should be corrected in future teacher training programmes.

Another way in which schools could take on a more social rôle would be the development of social education programmes for national school children in their fifteenth year. These could be developed for all children and variants could be adapted to the needs of deprived groups such as chronic non-attenders at an earlier age. The kind of day centre suggested by Mr Bruton in a statement on non-attendance issued by the Government Information Bureau on April 1st 1974 might well employ such programmes, using such techniques as discussion groups, counselling and vocational guidance.

The kind of counselling needed by non-attenders might well bear some relation to that reported on in “Educational Research” (15, 1) by Lawrence. In his experiment in England, three approaches were taken to the problem of reading retardation, remedial reading with a special teacher, remedial reading plus counselling, and thirdly, counselling alone. Of the three approaches, counselling on its own had by far the best effect. The other approaches were less effective apparently because they focused on the child's area of weakness, his reading. Counselling was carried out by teachers with a minimum of psychological training and

involved one weekly individual session of 20 minutes. The method involved establishing an uncritical friendly atmosphere in which the counsellor provided a "sounding board" for the child's feelings. The child drew pictures and talked with the counsellor, who encouraged him to discuss his fears, worries, attitudes to school and himself, and his personal relationships.

Since so many of their serious cases involved social deprivation, Attendance Officers should have their own facilities for child and home assessment. They should thus have their own child psychiatrist, psychologist and social worker who, working as a team, could furnish speedy reports on the more serious cases. Thus the present delay in getting children assessed at guidance clinics would be avoided. Attendance Officers would benefit from some preliminary training in family casework, particularly in the rapid identification of family problems and weaknesses. There should also be an ongoing system of meetings between the officers and other concerned groups such as Gardaí, public health nurses and social workers of the Health Board. A specific group of social workers employed by the Health Board should carry out family casework where intensive therapy with the families of non-attenders is deemed necessary. They should have requisite training and be remunerated in accordance with the difficulty and importance of the work. If society decides to deal with its problem cases outside institutions, then it should be prepared to provide the personnel required.

Attendance Officers in Dublin must cope with the problems of a fragmented administrative area. It seems sensible that the Service should have a central, unified headquarters organisation, as suggested in the 1971 Annual Report. Such a service could well extend into areas like Tallaght, Clondalkin and Ballymun, areas at present outside its ambit.

Apart from an assessment team of its own and support from Health Board caseworkers, the Attendance Service should be able to use hostels for those non-attenders who would benefit from a short break from home. There should also be adequate provision for slow learners or children with a specific learning difficulty. A senior Attendance Officer thought the performance of special schools for retarded children left much to be desired. In the Annual Report of the Attendance Department for 1971 we read (p. 36): "Of the 15 children assessed at Child Guidance Clinics and as a result admitted to a Special School, seven were 'off rolls' during the year of admission. One boy attended for one day; two for one month and the others for slightly longer periods. The School Attendance Officers were left with no option but to have the children re-admitted to the national schools they attended at the time of assessment or to some other national school".

At a theoretical level, the control theory of deviance has not received unambiguous support. There was some indication that over-conformers were more liable to be "chronics". It seems to the writer that a better model for understanding deviance among such groups as over-conformers (also evident among the probationers) is that which holds that deviance results when a child is not accepted for what he is in himself. Control over very intropunitive children is lacking because

they have received only a conditional acceptance. Their self-punishing tendencies may often be an ironic commentary on the inadequacy of the approach which values a person's qualities rather than the person. They seem to be saying, albeit unconsciously, "Look I am conforming in every way you wish but I am still deviant".

It is inaccurate, as a Minister recently stated, to say that only 5 per cent of non-attenders have serious social problems. About 30 per cent of the present sample were chronic non-attenders, about half had parents with an alcoholic problem and 16 per cent got into trouble with the law for matters other than non-attendance. The average attendance rate for boys is 91 per cent (School Attendance Annual Report, 1973, p. 25), and if we assume that serious social problems characterise a minimum of one-fifth of the 9 per cent not attending, there are 900 socially deprived boys in Dublin alone. If we assume a similar proportion with problems among the girls, we get a total of almost 2,000 deprived youngsters. Ignoring the problem will not cause it to disappear.

#### *Appendix*

The ten variables of the 18 factors analysed which were most closely linked with chronic attendance are listed below.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Correlation with chronic non-attendance (2 point scale)</i>
Total children in family	.44
Glueck score	.43
Overcrowding	.43
Parental interest in boy's schooling	-.36
Boy sullen at interview	.34
OTAT—other intrinsic score	-.33
Poverty	.32
Corporation flat	.32
Alcoholism of parent	.28
Extrapunitive need persistence (RPFS)	-.27

All variables are significantly linked with chronic non-attendance, the first four at the .01 level of statistical significance.

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