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WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT JUVENILE DELINQUENCY ?

New Global Study, prepared by UN for Geneva Congress, reviews expert findings and suggestions

Who is a juvenile delinquent? How serious is the delinquency problem and what can be done to combat it? What are the most effective agencies for preventing children from becoming delinquent? These are a few of the timely questions discussed in a new United Nations study entitled "The prevention of juvenile delinquency".

This 84-page report, which surveys the problem on a global basis, will be considered by the First United Nations Congress on the prevention of crime and treatment of offenders, which opened in Geneva yesterday. Juvenile delinquency is one of five major topics to be examined at the Congress. The others are minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners; the selection and training of correctional personnel; and the questions of prison labor and of open institutions.

Juvenile delinquency is a problem to a greater or lesser degree in almost every country, the Study reports. In some of the industrialized countries, despite the emphasis on prevention, delinquency seems to be increasing. In other countries, although the problem is still great, there is evidence of a decline.

So far, the exact cause of delinquency has not been defined, the report points out. Moreover, while there has been much talk of prevention, existing programs to prevent delinquency are all experimental. No known program has yet been proved to be completely effective.

The purpose of the U.N. Study is to review recent thinking on juvenile delinquency in various parts of the world and to summarize the main issues as a basis for discussion at the Congress. The Study was based on reports of U.N. regional conferences; on publications of the U.N. and specialized agencies; and on reports of non-governmental organizations and other experts.

Strengthening family life

Among the expert findings and suggestions examined in the Study are the following :

- Juvenile delinquency is very slight, or does not exist at all, in areas where the family is still the center of community life. Delinquency is prevalent, however, where the traditional way of life has, to a large extent, disintegrated and where there has been a simultaneous growth of towns and industries.

- Family life should therefore be strengthened in regions where it is weak,

and should be protected where it is still strong. It is agreed, however, that to tell a family what it should or should not do is often a difficult and delicate task. The aim should be to make the family environment best suited for the child's development, and to this end, there should be the greatest possible co-operation between the school and the family.

- Measures to strengthen the family may differ from country to country, according to national needs, interests and traditions. Nevertheless, every country can take steps to combat delinquency. An anti-delinquency program should aim at helping the child to adjust to the society in which he lives. Although the raising of living standards indirectly helps to prevent delinquency, the experts regard the process of child adjustment as more important.

- Putting the blame on parents will not by itself solve the problem. The stresses of rapid social change affect adults as well as juveniles. The parents themselves may need help before they can be expected to help their children who may have developed delinquent tendencies. Ways and means must be found to educate parents to enable them adequately to fulfil their responsibilities as parents.

- Broken homes, incompetent parents, mothers at work, and the shift of population to cities are not the only factors which weaken the family. Other factors include "the general tolerant attitude" towards certain business practices and social relations, and a lack of respect for the law. In a society where economic success and competition are major social goals, measures to strengthen the family should be moral rather than economic.

- The prohibition of comics, although often recommended, will not alone prevent delinquency. Any solution should take into account the conditions of life which produce comics and make them possible.

The role of the School

= The school is in a unique position to prevent delinquency since it is one of the best places to detect delinquent tendencies. The school should therefore play a bigger part in the child's development by assuming new social function.

- Schools should provide social and psychological services to help detect and treat children with behaviour problems. For this purpose, the co-operation of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and counsellors should be enlisted.

- If the school program is to succeed, teachers should be carefully selected, specially trained and properly paid. Educational courses should be brought more in line with the new social role assigned to schools, and the architecture of school buildings should be improved.

- The term "juvenile delinquent" should refer only to juveniles who have committed a criminal offense. Those who present behaviour problems or who are neglected, dependent or orphaned should not be included in this definition.

- There is an urgent need for more research and data on juvenile delinquency.

Second Study prepared

Besides discussing the role of the school and the family, the UN Study deals with the scope and meaning of prevention, the role of the State, the community, the police and the social services, as well as the role of Courts and treatment measures.

Another study on juvenile delinquency has also been prepared for the current Congress by the London Institute for the study and treatment of delinquency. This report, entitled "The prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in selected European countries", describes the laws relating to pre-delinquency as well as medical, psychological, educational and social measures in use at the present time.

The problem of juvenile delinquency has always been given priority in the work program of the United Nations Social Commission. Numerous studies have been made and regional meetings organized at the Commission's request and experts on juvenile delinquency matters have been provided by the United Nations for several countries.

The emphasis at the current Congress will be on the prevention, rather than on the treatment of delinquents - to nip delinquency in the bud before it may ruin a youth's life. This is in accordance with a recommendation made in 1953 by a special UN Advisory Committee of experts on the prevention of crime and treatment of offenders.

Police Assistance

The latest UN Study also examines the important role which should be played by the State, the community, the police and the social services in preventing delinquency. With reference to the police, the Study describes the special police units for juveniles, which have been introduced in many countries. It also cites the work of juvenile recreation programs and youth clubs organized by the police.

Other measures mentioned include those relating to the profitable use of leisure by juveniles (clubs, organized recreation, scouting, etc.); the control of mass media of communication (radio, cinema, television, comic books, etc.); and religion.

Discussing measures for punishing the juvenile, the UN points out that many experts believe that punishment should not be applied for its own sake, but as a means of rehabilitating the offender; and that an offender should be sent to an institution only as a last resort.

The Study reports that in the Middle East, Asia and the Far-East - where the whipping of juvenile offenders is still permitted in certain countries - the trend now is away from the principles of punishment and retribution. Practically every government is now contemplating or introducing reforms modelled on new practices and modern ideas.

On the other hand, there is a trend in other countries towards a more severe policy in dealing with juveniles. In this connection, recent legislation in the United Kingdom, India and Germany is cited. In India, for instance, the Madras Children Bill of 1950 does not provide for corporal punishment, but it does empower the Court to inflict "any punishment which is permissible for a parent to inflict."

Defining a "Juvenile Delinquent"

The experts recommend restricting the use of the term "juvenile delinquent" because they believe that once a youth is labelled a delinquent his chances of rehabilitation are reduced. Therefore, they consider that juvenile delinquency should refer only to the juvenile who has actually committed a criminal offence. They further believe that the term "pre-delinquent" should not cover every kind of behaviour problem, but only those which are serious enough to lead the juvenile to commit an offence.

In conclusion, the Report cites the need for a special authority in each country to coordinate policies and programs for the prevention of juvenile delinquency. Statistics on juvenile delinquency should also be collected and organized as accurately as possible, it adds.

"In certain countries, the problem of juvenile delinquency as a social problem has come to be recognized only recently..." the Study points out. "The importance of prevention.... is obvious. By instituting preventive programs at this juncture, it is reasonable to expect that the tide will be stemmed before it could assume undesirable proportions."

This archiving project is a collaborative effort between United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and American Society of Criminology, Division of International Criminology. Any comments or questions should be directed to Cindy J. Smith at CJSmithphd@comcast.net or Emil Wandzilak at emil.wandzilak@unodc.org.