Juvenile Courts and Truancy

There are two principal ways in which children who fail to attend school satisfactorily get taken to juvenile court. The first is on account of associated juvenile delinquency, that is, as a result of offenses they have committed. The second is because of the school attendance problem, when education authorities take this course of action. Two investigations carried out in Leeds were concerned with these respective means whereby truants get to court. They are outlined in this chapter.

Delinquency and Truancy (Berg, Goodwin et al., 1985)

A consecutive series of children prosecuted for criminal offenses and dealt with by the Leeds City Juvenile Court were investigated from the point of view of associated truancy. Five hundred children were included in the study, 435 of them were boys. A form was completed by teachers at their schools that contained questions about attendance over a period of 10 weeks, health, behavior, educational ability, home circumstances, and any justification for absence from school.

Controls

Three control groups were used to compare school attendance. One sample of children had been employed as controls in another study (Berg et al., 1983a). They were children next on the school register to truants taken to court for poor attendance. The second control group was the entire normal school population of Leeds over 10 years of age whose attendance over one term had been estimated a year or so previously. The third sample of children used as controls was the population of 10 secondary schools, two from each of five areas of the city. This group of children is described more fully in the second part of this chapter.
Comparisons

It was found that the average school attendance of the juvenile delinquents was 77% (median 82%). Corresponding figures from the first control group of 168 children were 87% (median 94%). The difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$) without any difference between boys and girls. Twelve percent of the delinquents were off school more than half of their possible attendances compared to only 1% of the controls.

Considering the second control group, the mean percentage attendance of 66 middle schools, taking children aged 10 to 13, was 92 (SE=2) and of 49 secondary schools, taking 13- to 16-year-olds, was 91 (SE=4). The average attendance of the delinquents was 15% below that of the controls, numbering about 370,000 children. Taking the standard errors into account, this was statistically different to a considerable degree.

Turning to the third control group, 68 of the delinquents were on the registers of the 10 schools that formed the controls. Two cohorts of children had been followed up in these schools. One consisted of 1,600 children studied over 3 years from age 13, and the other comprised 1,800 studied over 2 years from the same age. Twenty-nine of the delinquents were at least 15 years old, so they were compared with the first cohort. Currently they were attending school 79% of the time on average, which was significantly less than the remainder of the children in the same age group who attended 85% on average ($p < .05$). Comparing the attendance levels in the 2 previous years showed no significant differences between the delinquents and other children. The 39 delinquents who were age 14 were compared with the remaining children in the second cohort and showed similar significantly poorer attendance. Looking at the previous year in their case also indicated significantly worse average attendance among the delinquents in the previous year when they were 13 ($p < .01$).

Features of School Attendance

The delinquent children came from nearly 100 different schools and only about half of them were considered truants by their teachers. Those who were ($n=230$) had an average attendance at school of 67%, which was significantly less than the remainder, who had a mean attendance of 88% ($p < .001$). Approximately half of those whom the teachers thought were truants had an attendance of less than 70%, compared to only about a tenth of the rest. Average school attendance of the juvenile delinquents over about 10 weeks was 77% ($SD = 21$). There was no significant difference between boys and girls, but there was a significant negative correlation with age of $-.3$.

Action by the Education Authorities

Ten percent of the delinquents had appeared before the school attendance subcommittee and a similar proportion had been taken to juvenile court for failure