Enuresis, Fire Setting, and Animal Cruelty: A Useful Danger Signal in Predicting Vulnerability of Adolescent Males to Assaultive Behavior

Douglas E. Wax, Ph.D.*
University of Michigan Medical School

Victor G. Haddox, M.D.
University of Southern California Medical School

ABSTRACT: Current shifts in corrective and rehabilitation planning result in an emphasis upon primary prevention efforts involving early identification and intervention with vulnerable children who run high risk of serious adolescent and adult delinquency. A variety of observers have argued that the presence of a combination of observable problem behaviors documented in childhood is related to ego weakness and may have value as a predictor of explosive acting out in later life. The present study examines a number of institutionalized adolescent male delinquents whose recent history contains reference to a triad of behaviors (persistent enuresis, fire setting, and animal cruelty). Not only does the predictive validity of the triad appear to be supported, but the cases cited rank highest among overtly dangerous assaultive youth seen in the Southern California Youth Authority during the 12-month observation period. Presented is a summary of case history data supporting the hypothesis that the triad is a useful clinical tool in the prediction of violent behavior.

Various social sciences have long struggled with issues concerning behavioral prediction. The applied behavioral sciences, particularly in the areas of correction and allied rehabilitation, have often seized upon concepts such as the psychological test profile, body type

*Dr. Wax is Instructor of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, and Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan. Dr. Haddox is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of Southern California Medical School, Institute of Psychiatry, Law, and Behavioral Sciences, and Associate Professor of Criminology, California State University.
correlates, and even genetic variance such as the XYY phenomenon in the hope that such notions might be of use in predicting potentially dangerous individuals. The fate of each such attempt at prediction should be kept in mind by anyone describing further such instruments. Hence, we offer the following discussion in full awareness of such limitations, including "predictor vulnerability" and potential misapplication. Indeed, we do not argue that the configuration we shall discuss should be accepted as a "fail-safe" technique. Rather, we intend its careful use as one possible element in an "early warning system" which we feel is much needed by clinicians and allied personnel who are consulted in the screening and treatment planning for the young offender.

A surprising number of observers have noted clinically a triad of behaviors usually described in case histories of violent adults. The triad includes persistent enuresis, repeated fire setting, and extreme animal cruelty. In the most thorough recent review on this phenomenon, Hellman and Blackman [1] established with their data that a significant relationship exists between this triad of symptoms in childhood and violent aggressive behavior in adulthood. Our present exploration of this phenomenon has involved a detailed study of adolescent males evidencing this triad [2,3]. Our findings are consistent with previous studies of adults and the detailed descriptions of children demonstrating this triad. We shall describe our research method and summarize our findings briefly before discussing the clinical application of the triad.

Methodology

The subjects under study were seen by us in our service as clinical consultants to the California Youth Authority. Although psychiatric referrals are preselected to a significant degree [e.g., declared delinquent under California Welfare and Institutions Code 602; demonstrate significant psychological symptoms so as to merit psychiatric evaluation], there was no further selection of cases for this study by the authors. A total of 46 cases were referred and seen during the 12-month period. Of these, six adolescents demonstrated the triad of persistent enuresis, repeated fire setting, and excessive animal cruelty. Four additional cases were considered to possess the triad, but complete documentation of one or more of the components was not possible; thus they were not included in this study. Although we believe that many Youth Authority subjects possessed the triad under consideration, denial of one or more of