



Delinquency prevention for individual change: Richard Clarke Cabot and the making of the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study



Brandon C. Welsh^{a,b,*}, Steven N. Zane^a, Michael Rocque^c

^a Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

^b Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^c Bates College, Lewiston, ME, USA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Richard Clarke Cabot (1868–1939) designed and directed one of criminology's most well-known delinquency prevention programs and the field's first randomized controlled experiment: the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (CSYS). This paper aims to develop an historical understanding of the making of the CSYS through a focus on Cabot.

Methods: The present study is guided by the socio-historical approach and informed by past historical research in criminology. It draws upon a wide array of archival records and published works from the late 19th century to present day.

Results: The CSYS came to fruition through a culmination of personal, professional, and institutional influences on Cabot, including: his ideals and sense of pragmatism, refined by his transition from medicine to social ethics and social work; criminological luminaries in the 1920s and 1930s, who focused on the individual over the environment—most notably, William Healy and Augusta Bronner and Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck; and Cabot's concern with the failures of treatment of offenders.

Conclusions: The study's early history and its lineage to Joan McCord's research on the study allows us to discern some of its legacies for delinquency prevention today, including application of the experimental design and a holistic view of delinquency prevention. The CSYS continues to have an influence on criminological thinking and research.

1. Introduction

Begun in 1939, the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (CSYS) is a delinquency prevention experiment embedded in a prospective longitudinal survey of the development of offending. Six hundred fifty under-privileged boys (later reduced to 506), ages 5 to 13 years (median = 10.5), from Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts, were placed in matched pairs and one member of each pair was randomly assigned to the treatment group. Referred to as “directed friendship,” the preventive intervention involved individual counseling through a range of activities and home visits for a mean average of 5.5 years. The study has been the subject of three major follow-ups (in 1948, 1956, and 1975–79) to investigate program effects on offending and other outcomes and risk factors for offending over the life-course.

It is largely owing to the pioneering research of Joan McCord (1930–2004) that the CSYS has become so well known in the field of

criminology. This began with McCord's work on the 1956 follow-up when participants were in their mid-twenties (McCord & McCord, 1959a, b, 1960). Her 1978 article, which reported on findings of the next follow-up when participants were in their mid-forties (McCord, 1978), was especially influential, not to mention controversial.¹

Through McCord's writings, she unfailingly gave due attention to the founder and first director of the CSYS, Richard Clarke Cabot. On the one hand, she did this as a matter of fact, a way to capture the study's beginnings and historical context. On the other hand, she did this as a way to pay tribute to Cabot's deep commitment to science, his long-term vision for the study, and his fierce dedication to trying to improve the life chances of underprivileged boys. Here is McCord extolling Cabot's scientific acumen:

Not surprisingly, in turning to the problem of crime, Cabot insisted on using a scientific approach, one that aimed to alleviate the probable causes of crime but also one that would permit adequate

* Corresponding author at: School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Northeastern University, Churchill Hall, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA
E-mail address: b.welsh@northeastern.edu (B.C. Welsh).

¹ This follow-up, which eventually traced participants from 1975 to 1979, served as the basis of many other important works over the next 25 years (see McCord, 2002b; Sayre-McCord, 2007).

tests of the results of intervention. (McCord, 2003, p. 18)

As a professor of clinical medicine and social ethics at Harvard University, Cabot was by no means a trained criminologist. Indeed, other professions have rightly claimed him as one of their own. These include medicine, social ethics, and social work (see Evison, 1995; O'Brien, 1985). Yet, he played a rather notable role in the history of criminology. In the parlance of Rafter (2004, p. 735) and Sherman (2005, p. 119), Cabot may just be one of the many “half-forgotten and misunderstood” or completely “forgotten” figures that contributed to our field's early history.

Cabot's role in the history of criminology is directly linked to the development and implementation of the CSYS and its attendant methodological rigor. Indeed, much has been made of the study being the first randomized controlled experiment in criminology (Weisburd & Petrosino, 2004) and one of the earliest randomized experiments of a social program (Forsetlund, Chalmers, & Bjørndal, 2007). Also, as an experiment embedded in a prospective longitudinal survey of the development of offending, it has been noted that the CSYS is the first longitudinal-experimental study in criminology, and one of only a handful with long-term post-intervention follow-ups (Farrington, 2013).

Perhaps of even greater importance is the study's focus on the prevention of delinquency. For Cabot, this meant prevention in the first instance, prior to children coming in conflict with the law. He referred to his study's future participants as “predelinquents.” Cabot was also adamant that the intervention modalities of his study not be of a punitive or correctional reform nature.

In later years, these characteristics would come to form the basis of how some scholars and policymakers distinguish between delinquency prevention and control in the United States (Welsh & Pfeffer, 2013).² As noted by Lejins (1967, p. 2): “If societal action is motivated by an offense that has already taken place, we are dealing with control; if the offense is only anticipated, we are dealing with prevention.” What Lejins was after was the notion of a “pure” prevention, which was becoming confused with the use of the term “delinquency prevention” within the juvenile justice system. Weis and Hawkins (1981, p. 2) put it more bluntly: “Historically, what has been passed off as delinquency prevention within the juvenile justice system is basically delinquency ‘control,’ simply because it has been implemented after the illegal behavior and even after a juvenile justice system reaction has occurred.”

Cabot's motivation for this focus on prevention was twofold. First, he was appalled by the high rate of recidivism (80% after 5–15 years) documented in the Gluecks' study of male offenders in the Massachusetts Reformatory (Glueck & Glueck, 1930). He said as much in his foreword to the Gluecks' book: “This is a damning piece of evidence—not against that Reformatory in particular, which probably stands high among institutions of its kind, but against the reformatory system in general. Here it does not work. No one knows that it works any better elsewhere” (Cabot, 1930, p. vii). A year later, in his presidential address to the 58th annual meeting of the National Conference of Social Work, Cabot (1931, p. 440) was even more vocal in his displeasure with the current approach to addressing delinquency: “How splendidly ineffective are our foolish pea-shooters, our ‘reformatory’ attempts to change habits of delinquency!” He continued right up to the conclusion of his address: “I have an idea that the treatment of juvenile delinquency is now bad, wasteful, and ineffective. This idea comes mostly from the Gluecks' studies, published and not yet published” (p. 452).

Second, Cabot envisioned that prevention would play a role far beyond delinquent behavior. Prevention was about improving the life chances of the disadvantaged boys assigned to the treatment group. Edwin Powers, who later served as director of the CSYS from 1941 to

1951, and who planned and led the first evaluation of the study's effects on delinquency (Powers & Witmer, 1951), illustrated this position through the eyes of a fictitious study participant:

To see that Joe did *not* steal that bike was, of course, one of our aims, but we could not stop there for there very likely would be other bikes to be stolen. We realized early in the Study that fundamentally we were interested in Joe, as Joe. We wanted him to become a good citizen—not to be, in a negative sense, a mere ‘non-delinquent.’ We became interested in Joe's family, his friends, his success in meeting the daily problems of life. Our objectives, stated in terms of ‘delinquency prevention,’ were recast into the broader concepts of ‘character development,’ or building ‘constructive personalities.’ (Powers, 1950, p. 23, emphasis in original)

This developmental focus of prevention is just as important today, as captured by a broader group of delinquency prevention programs that take place in family, school, and community contexts (e.g., Catalano et al., 2012; Fagan, 2013; Fagan & Hawkins, 2013; Sullivan, 2013). Developmental prevention programs have as explicit aims the betterment of children's immediate learning, health, and social and emotional competencies, as well as the improvement of children's success over the life-course (Duncan & Magnuson, 2004; Tremblay, 2007).³

2. The current study

This paper aims to develop an historical understanding of the making of the CSYS through a focus on Richard Cabot. In doing so, it also considers Cabot's role in the history of criminology. Several key questions hold special interest to our research. What were the personal, professional, and institutional influences that inspired Cabot's vision for the CSYS? What was the motivation behind Cabot's underlying theory of change and why did he favor individual-level change and oppose “mass social reform”? Also, how was Cabot influenced by the state's approach to the treatment of juvenile offenders during this period of time?

As a backdrop to these questions are many fine points on the need for a deeper understanding of criminological history (see e.g., Laub, 2004, 2006; Rafter, 2004, 2010; Schlossman, 2012). One point made by Rafter (2007, p. 805) stands out: “To understand the origins, acceptance, and maintenance of criminological ideas, we need a historical perspective on figures of the past.” This is the central thrust of this paper.

The methodology for the present study is firmly anchored in the tradition of the social-historical approach as well as informed by past historical research in criminology. We draw upon a wide array of published and archival sources. This includes the papers of Richard Cabot, which are housed at the Harvard University Archives in Pusey Library. The collection consists of approximately 255 boxes of materials, covering his family and professional life, and spanning the years 1886 to 1974. Included in these materials is an unfinished biography of Cabot by Ada McCormick. Begun in earnest following the death of Cabot's wife, Ella Lyman Cabot (in 1934), and continuing well past Cabot's death, the biography proved especially helpful in adding context to the years leading up to the development of the CSYS. We also examined Cabot's published writings, paying particular attention to those on the topics of social ethics, social work, and crime, as well as other (mostly published) writings on Cabot. The latter includes numerous obituaries, several historical studies of Cabot, many accounts of the CSYS (by other directors of the study, Cabot's colleagues, and other academics), and a doctoral dissertation on Cabot's life and career (Evison, 1995). Finally, we also had access to the papers of Joan

² See Elliott and Fagan (2017) for an excellent history of crime prevention, which also covers crime control strategies.

³ It is noteworthy that developmental prevention programs today are receptive to community factors, something that was not part of Cabot's intervention philosophy.

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