

**WHAT AMERICAN TEENAGERS BELIEVE CONCERNING
THE CAUSES OF
JUVENILE DELINQUENCY**

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Final Report on Research in Delinquency Causation

Accomplished at

Southwest Texas State College

January, 1959 -- August, 1961

By

Arthur A. Grusendorf

Professor of Sociology

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PREFACE

The problem of juvenile delinquency has been studied by many investigators in a variety of ways. The key to the control of this problem, considered from the standpoints of the prevention of delinquency and the treatment--rehabilitation--of delinquents, is a clear understanding of the causal complex. Much research has been devoted to causation, but to date no study has been reported which undertook to discover what the teenagers themselves believe to be the major factors in delinquency causation. The verdict of America's youths concerning the causes of the difficulties with which they are confronted should be heard. The research reported herein was undertaken to ascertain that verdict.

This project was accomplished through the cooperation of many persons. President J. G. Flowers gave enthusiastic support to this undertaking, not only by encouraging the writer in making this effort, but also by securing a small grant to cover certain expenses. Dr. James Taylor, Head of the Division of Social Science, cooperated to the fullest extent toward making this study possible. Miss Jane Montgomery (B.S. '60) and Miss Mary Ruth Brigance (B.S. in Ed. '61) devoted hundreds of hours to the tedious task of reading and classifying responses to the questionnaire. Miss Mary Ann Polansky, Miss Peggy Cox, and Miss Madelyn Kosh served as typists. Mr. John Yarchuska of the Industrial Arts Department made the chart which appears on page 7. There are others at the Southwest Texas State College who, in various ways, encouraged us toward completing this project.

Special recognition is due the school administrators who cooperated to the extent of having one or more of their senior high schools participate in this research. Finally, our sincere thanks are due to the 46,487 girls and boys who responded to the questionnaire.

Arthur A. Grusendorf

Southwest Texas State College
San Marcos, Texas
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FINAL REPORT ON RESEARCH IN DELINQUENCY CAUSATION

I. Purpose

This research project was accomplished for the purpose of discovering what American teenagers believe to be the major causes of delinquency among boys and girls today.

II. Research Design

1. Preliminary Procedure

a. This project was planned, with the cooperation of the class in Juvenile Delinquency, during the Spring Semester, 1959. The survey on which this research was based was completed August 1, 1961. In the questionnaire¹, which was designed to elicit expressions of belief from senior high school students concerning the causes of delinquency, each participating student was asked to state the following:

- (1) his age, sex, and school classification.
- (2) his belief concerning the most important reason for or cause of delinquency among boys and girls today.

b. One hundred superintendents of schools of cities and towns in all parts of the United States were invited to participate to the extent of having one or more of their respective senior high schools included in this survey. 58 superintendents accepted the invitation. A total of 88 high schools² was included in this survey.

¹ See Appendix A.

² See Appendix B for list of names of cities and towns, the number of high schools, and the number of students included.

c. Instructions given for the administration of the questionnaire were as follows:

When the questionnaire sheets are distributed to the students, there should be no comment by anyone regarding the subject of juvenile delinquency. We request, therefore, that the person or persons who will administer the questionnaire simply read to the students the "Explanation of the Research Project" which appears at the top of the questionnaire. The students should then be asked to fill in the blanks after item 1 and then write their responses to item 2 of the questionnaire. Also, the students should be asked to limit their responses to what they believe to be the one major reason for or cause of delinquency.

d. The questionnaire was administered to 24,400 girls and 22,087 boys -- a total of 46,487 students, representing 88 senior high schools in 16 states.

e. The number of responses received from the various participating schools ranged from 30 to 2884.

f. For the purpose of comparing the responses from students representing the larger cities³ with those from the smaller cities and towns, the following division, based on the population of the communities, was made:

- (1) "Larger" cities -- populations of more than 50,000.
- (2) "Smaller" cities and towns -- populations of less than 50,000.

g. Representativeness of sampling is indicated by the fact that high schools from the various sections of the United States participated in the survey and that the types of responses received from one section did not vary significantly from those received from other sections. Moreover, the percentage distribution of the first 28,506 responses, received during 1959-60, did not vary significantly from that of the total number of 46,487 responses included in this survey.

³ See Appendix B.

h. Personnel used in reading and classifying the responses consisted of two senior college students⁴ who had completed courses in sociology, including the courses in criminology, juvenile delinquency, and social psychology. These students were carefully trained in reading and classifying the responses. The two students collaborated in the reading and classifying of the 28,506 responses received during the first year of the research project (1959-60). The responses received during 1960-61 were read and classified by only one of the students. The entire work of processing the responses was done under the close supervision of the writer. The criterion for classifying each response was the causative factor most clearly emphasized by the student making the response.

i. The first 10,000 responses that were received were read by me and the two student assistants for the purpose of establishing categories of responses on the basis of which all subsequent responses could be classified. This procedure was believed to have advantages over that of setting up a list of categories on the questionnaire itself and having the students check the one which, according to their judgment, represented the most important factor in the causation of delinquency. The procedure selected, it was thought, made it more likely that the responses given by the students would be more representative of the respondents' beliefs concerning delinquency causation.

j. The categories under which all of the responses could be classified are as follows:⁵

⁴ Miss Jane Montgomery (1959-60) and Miss Mary Ruth Brigrance (1959-61).

⁵ The numbering of categories followed here is identical with that shown in the tables and the chart presented in this report.

- (1) Factors relating to parents, family, and home
 - a. Lack of love, concern for, interest in and understanding of the child by parents.
 - b. Faulty discipline in the home -- parents too strict, too lax, too little parental guidance, instruction, and encouragement toward approved behavior.
 - c. Broken or disorganized home -- parents divorced, separated, or prevalence of severe intra-family conflicts.
- (2) Too much leisure, nothing to do after school hours, community lacks facilities for recreation and opportunities for part-time employment.
- (3) Peer influence -- group pressure, following the leader.
- (4) Specific cultural influences -- liquor easy to obtain, gambling places, narcotics, crime and suspense movies and TV shows, crime comics.
- (5) Miscellaneous responses -- unclassifiable, too vague, meaningless.
- (6) Compensatory behavior -- These responses do not indicate cause directly; they describe patterns of behavior via which the person apparently hopes to prove to himself and/or others that he is somebody.

2. Statistical Procedure

a. The responses from each of the participating high schools were carefully read and classified in accordance with the "categories." For each school the number of responses falling into each category was recorded on a form that was identical with that used for Table I (page 6). This procedure made it possible to see at a glance which categories received the greater number of the responses and also to compare the number and percentage of responses, under each category, made by girls with those made by boys. The number and percentages of the responses by categories, age groups, and sex were calculated and then recorded, in appropriate columns, on the tabulation sheet.

b. When the tabulations of responses from all of the schools were completed, the numerical data were consolidated on a separate tabulation sheet, and the percentages were then calculated and recorded as shown in Table I.

c. The next step was to represent in graphic form the data shown in Table I. The result is shown in Chart I (page 7). It is to be noted that the numerical and percentage distribution by age groups is not included in Chart I. It was decided to omit the data for age groups because (a) their inclusion would have further complicated the chart, and (b) the percentages for the different age groups are almost identical in each category. The differences of the percentages based on sex are seen to be quite significant, especially the percentages under categories 1a, 1b, and 2.

d. Since delinquency has usually been considered more of an urban rather than a rural problem, it was considered important to make a comparison of the distribution of the responses received from the "larger" cities with those received from the "smaller" cities and towns. Cities with populations of more than 50,000 were classed as "larger" cities. Table II (page 8) reflects the differences in the percentage distribution, by categories, based on the size of communities.

III. Interpretation of Data

1. The factor most frequently described as causal in present day delinquency is found in the atmosphere of the home. The girls thought of this factor more often than did the boys -- 33 per cent of the girls and 23 per cent of the boys believed it to be the most important cause of delinquency. In deploring what they believed to be a lack of love and concern for and understanding of children by parents, those girls

TABLE I

Numerical and Percentage Distribution, by Categories,* of Statements of Belief Concerning the Most Important Causes of Delinquency Received from 24,400 Girls and 22,087 Boys, Representing 88 Senior High Schools in 16 States Included in the Research in Delinquency Causation Conducted at Southwest Texas State College from 1959-1961.

Categories* of Responses	Girls				Boys				G. and B.			
	Under 16		16 and Over		Under 16		16 and Over		Totals			
	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.		
1a	3,639	33	4,439	33	8,078	33	2,620	21	4,910	23	12,988	28
1b	2,798	27	3,594	27	6,392	26	3,372	26	5,502	25	11,894	26
1c	1,002	9	345	10	2,347	10	882	9	2,002	9	4,349	9
2	1,039	10	1,512	11	2,551	10	1,186	13	2,290	17	3,476	13
3	413	4	466	3	879	4	407	5	670	5	1,077	5
4	197	2	289	2	486	2	197	3	412	3	664	3
5	1,247	11	1,357	10	2,604	11	1,285	14	1,766	13	3,051	13
6	513	5	550	4	1,063	4	566	6	839	6	1,405	6
Totals	10,848	100	13,552	100	24,400	100	8998	100	13,089	100	22,087	100

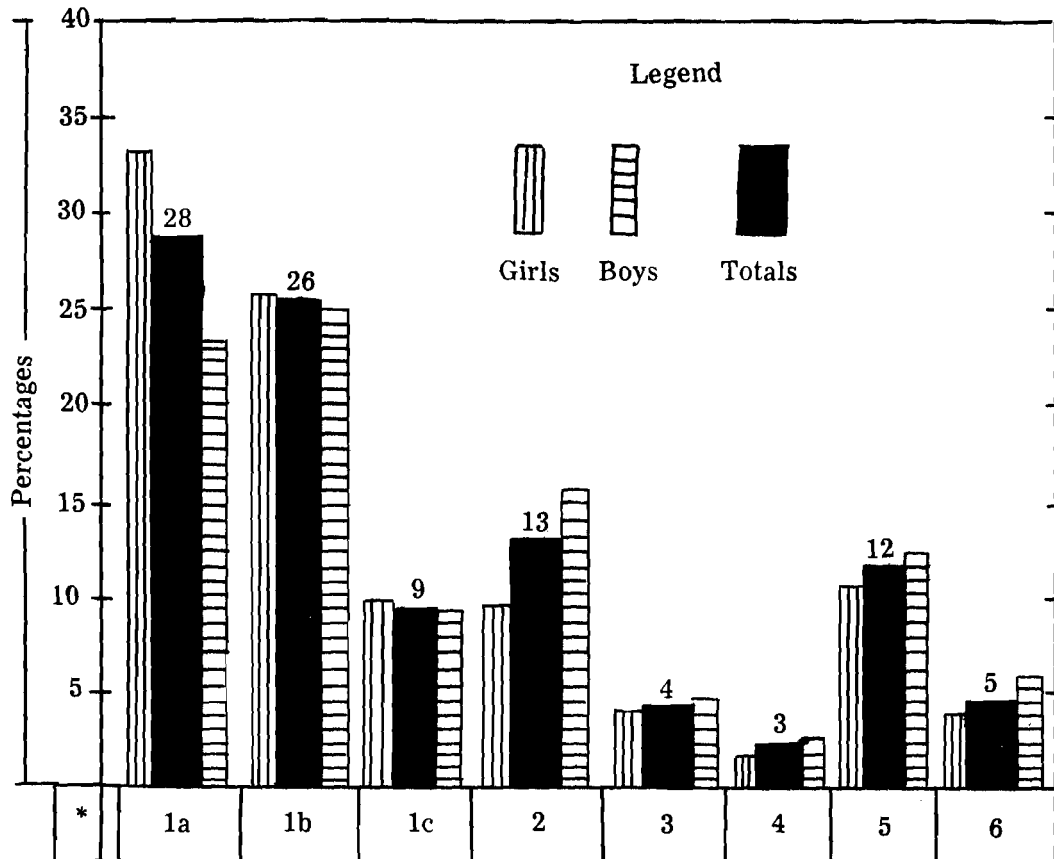
* Categories of Responses.

- 1a -- Lack of Love, Concern for Children by Parents
- 1b -- Faulty Discipline of Children in Home
- 1c -- Broken, Disorganized Homes
- 2 -- Too Much Leisure

- 3 -- Peer Influence, Gang Pressure
- 4 -- Specific Cultural Factors; TV, Comic, Movies, etc.
- 5 -- Miscellaneous, Unclassifiable Responses
- 6 -- Responses Describing Compensatory Behavior

CHART I

Percentage Distribution, by Categories,* of Statements of Belief Concerning the Most Important Causes of Delinquency Received from 24,400 Girls and 22,087 Boys, Representing 88 Senior High Schools in 16 States Included in the Research in Delinquency Causation Conducted at Southwest Texas State College from 1959-1961.



* Categories of Responses

- 1a — Lack of Love, Concern for Children by Parents
- 1b — Faulty Discipline of Children in Home
- 1c — Broken, Disorganized Homes
- 2 — Too Much Leisure
- 3 — Peer Influence, Gang Pressure
- 4 — Specific Cultural Factors; TV, Comic, Movies, etc.
- 5 — Miscellaneous, Unclassifiable Responses
- 6 — Responses Describing Compensatory Behavior

TABLE II

Numerical and Percentage Distribution, by Categories,* of Statements of Belief Concerning the Most Important Causes of Delinquency Received from 16,918 Girls and 15,162 Boys from the 16 Larger Cities** and 7,482 Girls and 6,925 Boys from the 44 Smaller Cities and Towns Included in the Research in Delinquency Conducted at Southwest Texas State College, 1959-1961.

Categories* of Responses	Larger Cities						Smaller Cities and Towns					
	Girls		Boys		Totals		Girls		Totals		Boys	
	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.
1a	5,516	: 33	5,475	: 23	8,991	: 28	34	: 2,562	28	: 3,997	21	: 1,435
1b	4,297	: 25	3,511	: 23	7,808	: 24	28	: 2,095	29	: 4,086	29	: 1,991
1c	1,663	: 10	1,479	: 10	3,142	: 10	9	: 684	9	: 1,207	8	: 523
2	1,673	: 10	2,243	: 15	3,916	: 12	12	: 878	15	: 2,111	18	: 1,233
3	643	: 4	796	: 5	1,439	: 5	3	: 236	3	: 517	4	: 281
4	349	: 2	454	: 3	803	: 3	2	: 137	2	: 347	3	: 210
5	2,034	: 12	2,256	: 15	4,290	: 13	8	: 570	9	: 1,365	11	: 795
6	743	: 4	948	: 6	1,691	: 5	4	: 320	5	: 777	6	: 457
Totals	16,918	: 100	15,162	: 100	32,080	: 100	100	: 7,482	100	: 14,407	100	: 6,925

* Categories of Responses

- 1a -- Lack of Love, Concern for Children by Parents 3 -- Peer Influence, Gang Pressure
- 1b -- Faulty Discipline of Children in Home 4 -- Specific Cultural Factors; TV, Comics, Movies, etc.
- 1c -- Broken, Disorganized Homes 5 -- Miscellaneous, Unclassifiable Responses
- 2 -- Too Much Leisure 6 -- Responses Describing Compensatory Behavior

**See APPENDIX B for lists of "Larger" Cities and "Smaller" Cities and Towns.

and boys seemed to feel that the emotional adjustment of the child is basic in his adjustment to the norms of the larger community.

2. According to 26 per cent of the girls and 25 per cent of the boys, parents are apparently not only to provide a home and family atmosphere that is conducive to emotional adjustment, but they are also expected to do something positive to contribute to the children's understanding of the values in terms of which social life in home and community is ordered. In short, these girls and boys -- 26 per cent of the total -- expressed the conviction that many present day parents are too busy, are not sufficiently interested, or do not know how to perform the functions of guidance and instruction in matters of conduct. Parents do not take the time or exercise the patience necessary to enforce any rules of conduct concerning which they may have instructed their children. According to many responses, girls and boys of today feel the need of conscientious and intelligent, constructive discipline as a basic requirement for acceptable adjustment of children to both home and community.

3. Many of the responses also included references to the damaging effect that deviant behavior on the part of many adults has upon children who are trying to grow up today. The flagrant deviations from the norms by adults, reported daily through the media of communication -- the newspaper, radio, and television -- seem to bewilder many youngsters. The discrepancy that appears to exist between what girls and boys are taught in many homes, in churches, and in schools as "expected" behavior and the behavior that is exhibited by so many adults is viewed as a serious handicap to growing up by today's teenagers. Many youngsters seem to believe that this discrepancy

diminishes the effectiveness of efforts by parents and others to train children toward self-discipline. "Why is conformity to the ideals of conduct so important for us youngsters when it is so extensively disregarded by the adult generation?" is a question that was raised by many of the high school students included in this survey.

4. The broken home has been blamed by many persons in this country for the rising delinquency rate. As the divorce rate climbs, so does the delinquency rate. The correlation between these two variables has meant, for such persons, also a cause-and-effect relationship in which the divorce of parents is the causative factor. In the present study it was discovered that only about 9 high school students out of each 100 who responded to the questionnaire specifically mentioned the broken home as the most important factor in delinquency causation. In a large number of instances the respondents mentioned "broken home, divorce, separation" in close relationship with "lack of love, interest in, concern for children" by parents. It appears that according to the beliefs of most of those who attributed delinquency to broken homes there was also the thought that divorce or separation of parents and delinquency among their children may stem from a common factor or complex of factors. This matter, however, should be further investigated.

5. In the light of the data shown in Table I and Chart I, it is abundantly clear that a substantial majority (63 per cent) of the total number of girls and boys who cooperated in this survey are convinced that the "home-parents-family" situation is the most important place to look for the factors which condition children for delinquency.

The second most frequently stated factor is "too much leisure." The boys included in this survey seemed to feel the problem of leisure more intensely than did the girls, as the percentage of the responses made by boys referring to this factor is over 50 per cent. higher than that made by girls. It is noted also that the percentage for boys over 16 years of age is significantly higher than that for boys under 16 years of age. A careful analysis of the responses by the older boys leaves little doubt that many such boys feel considerable frustration because they do not have the opportunity to begin to participate in more purposeful activities than mere recreation, amusement, or idleness. Many expressed the feeling that in the present day community there is really no place for them -- they are too old to fit into the child's world and too young and immature to be accepted as "junior partners" in the more purposeful activities of the adult world. Such young persons -- more boys than girls -- feel that the absence of constructive challenges in the community sets many teenagers adrift, presently without a real purpose in life. This purposelessness is the condition in which socially disapproved goals often challenge the ingenuity of youths so burdened. Resultant behavior, in many such instances, is engaged in for "kicks."

6. The remaining categories combined represent only 24 per cent of the total number of responses included in this study. Of these only 7 per cent refer to causative factors -- 4 per cent were classified under "peer group or gang pressure" and only 3 per cent referred to cultural factors, e.g., bad movies, comic books, radio and television. The remaining 17 per cent of the responses, representing categories 5 and 6,

were either unclassifiable because they were too vague or too poorly written to be intelligible (12 per cent), or referred to delinquent behavior patterns, almost entirely of a compensatory nature. It is noted that only 3 per cent of all responses included in this study suggested that such factors as bad movies, radio and television shows, and crime comics were primarily responsible for delinquency. Many responses, however, included references to such factors, but these were rated as subordinate to those included in categories 1a, 1b, and 2.

7. When comparison is made of the responses from schools in the larger cities with those received from schools in the smaller cities and towns, as shown in Table II, no impressive differences are found in the percentage distribution by categories. However, several minor differences should be pointed out, as follows:

a. The percentage for category 1a is 2 points lower for boys from the smaller cities and towns than it is for the boys from the larger cities, while the percentage for category 1b is 6 points higher for the boys from the smaller cities than it is for the boys from the larger cities.

b. The percentage under category 2 -- "too much leisure" -- is 3 points higher for the boys from the smaller cities than it is for the boys from the larger cities. Also, the percentage under category 2 is 2 points higher for the girls from the smaller cities than it is for the girls from the larger cities.

c. The total number of responses from the smaller cities and towns, representing 4 states, was 14,407, while the total number from the larger cities, representing 16 states, was 32,080.

IV. Evaluation

As this research project is concluded, the question arises as to the validity of its findings. In answer to that question the following statements seem to be justified:

1. Students of senior high schools were asked to state what they "believed to be the most important reason for or cause of delinquency among boys and girls today." The replies were anonymous. It was assumed that the students would express themselves more frankly if they were not asked to write their names on the questionnaire. It was further assumed that the great majority of those responding would be sincere in making their responses. However, it was also assumed, as it always must be in the case of opinion research, that a percentage of those stating beliefs or opinions do not state what they actually believe with reference to the issues or propositions in question.

2. The hypotheses underlying the justification for carrying out this project, which was aimed to discover what present day teenagers believed to be the most important causes of delinquency, are as follows:

a. Teenagers, representing the same generation from which today's delinquents come, understand to a greater extent than do adults, "what's going on" among the youngsters of today, and why.

b. Many boys and girls have observed how or why others of their own age groups have become delinquents.

c. The beliefs or feelings that a person has about a given situation largely determine his behavior with reference to it. Hence, it is assumed, many of those who expressed beliefs concerning factors that cause delinquency were saying, in effect, "If I were subjected to a given factor or condition rather than any other that I can think of, I would probably become a delinquent."

3. If the assumptions and hypotheses set forth in the preceding paragraphs are tenable, it may then be assumed that the findings from this study constitute a valuable addition to the growing body of knowledge concerning the problem of delinquency causation which has been derived through research.

V. Conclusion

1. This research did not isolate any factor that could be established as the major cause of delinquency.
2. Of the total complex of factors which operate in relation to the development of behavior, whether conforming or deviant, those which characterize the parent-child relationships are considered by far the most significant by teenagers themselves.
3. Beyond the complex of behavior-conditioning factors represented by parents, family, and home, the absence of opportunities for participating in constructive, worthwhile activities in the community is seen as a factor which contributes to delinquency in at least two types of cases:
 - a. There are many teenagers today who would prefer to do part-time work rather than to engage in either recreation or idleness. Many also need to earn their "spending money" or help in family support. The absence of work opportunities, coupled with other factors that press upon the young person, is often thought to be the condition against which many teenagers, especially boys, drift into unlawful activities.
 - b. Many of the respondents included in the present survey believe that the complex of community factors which creates the condition of "too much leisure" is also associated with delinquencies which are committed for "kicks."

4. Other factors, e.g., peer group pressure, "bad" movies, TV and radio programs and crime comics are believed to contribute to some delinquencies, but according to all but a small percentage of girls and boys who participated in this survey, such factors are secondary, or subordinate, to other factors, such as those that are inherent in parent-child relations and too much leisure.
5. The steady rise in delinquency is believed by many teenagers to be a concomitant of increasing lawlessness among the adult, or parent, generation. This perhaps suggests that society, in a real sense, will have the delinquency problem it creates.
6. In so far as the findings of this research are valid, they provide an indication of the approach that might be taken to the problem of reducing the incidence of juvenile delinquency in the United States.
7. Further research is suggested to determine what juvenile delinquents believe to be the principal cause(s) of delinquency. A comparison of the findings based on such research might then be made with those presented in this report.

A P P E N D I X A

Questionnaire

RESEARCH IN DELINQUENCY CAUSATION

Explanation of the Research Project

The department of sociology at the Southwest Texas State College is conducting a study of factors and conditions which contribute to delinquent behavior among boys and girls. One part of this research is to find out what boys and girls themselves believe to be the most important cause of delinquency among children and youths in the present generation. In order to get this information, the students of over fifty senior high schools in various parts of the United States are being invited to participate in this research. Each participating student is requested to give the following information:

1. Age_____; Sex_____; School classification (grade)_____
2. In a few sentences, please state specifically what you believe to be the most important reason for or cause of delinquency among boys and girls today:

A P P E N D I X B

List of the Cities and Towns, by States, the Number of Senior High Schools, and the Number of Students that Participated in the Research on Delinquency Causation Conducted at the Southwest Texas State College, 1959-1961.

Larger Cities¹

<u>States</u>	<u>Cities</u>	<u>Population</u> ²	<u>No. Schools</u>	<u>No. Students</u>
Alabama	Huntsville	72,365	1	1003
Arizona	Phoenix	429,170	2	1691
California	Oakland	367,548	1	2884
	San Bernardino	91,922	1	2173
Colorado	Denver	493,887	5	244
Connecticut	New Haven	150,047	1	1780
Georgia	Atlanta	487,455	1	1089
Indiana	Indianapolis	476,258	2	2071
Michigan	Detroit	1,670,144	2	4813
Missouri	St. Louis	750,206	2	1518
Nebraska	Lincoln	128,521	3	3049
New Mexico	Albuquerque	201,189	1	1947
New York	Niagara Falls	102,394	1	1205
North Carolina	Charlotte	201,564	1	1230
Texas	Fort Worth	365,268	2	971
	San Antonio	587,718	8	4412

¹ Cities with populations of over 50,000.

² Official U.S. Population Figures, 1960 Census, F.M. Compton & Company, 1961.

Smaller Cities and Towns³

<u>States</u>	<u>Cities</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>No. Schools</u>	<u>No. Students</u>
Connecticut	Danbury	22,928	1	1415
Florida	Daytona Beach	37,395	1	1550
New Jersey	Asbury Park	17,366	1	1705
Texas	Alvin	5,643	1	479
	Bastrop	3,001	1	127
	Bertram	806	1	73
	Blanco	789	1	89
	Bloomington	1,756	1	79
	Boerne	2,169	1	136
	Buda	451	1	78
	Burnet	2,214	1	166
	Columbus	3,656	1	214
	Cuero	7,338	2	312
	Dripping Springs	235	1	50
	Edna	5,038	1	275
	Flatonia	1,009	1	117
	Fredericksburg	4,629	2	551
	Gonzales	5,829	2	465
	Hallettsville	2,808	2	383
	Kerrville	8,901	1	270
	Kyle	1,023	1	45

³ Cities and towns with populations of 50,000 or less.

Smaller Cities and Towns continued

Texas	La Grange	3,623	1	296
	Leander ⁴	500	1	73
	Liberty Hill	600	1	45
	Llano	2,656	1	202
	Luling	4,412	2	256
	Marble Falls	2,161	1	107
	Mason	1,910	1	187
	Moulton	646	1	147
	New Braunfels	15,631	1	480
	Nordheim	407	1	30
	Port Lavaca	8,864	1	349
	San Marcos	12,713	1	547
	Schertz	2,281	1	63
	Cibolo ⁴	300	<u>a</u>	<u>a</u>
	Schulenburg	2,207	2	345
	Sheridan	150	1	70
	Rock Island	400	<u>b</u>	<u>b</u>
	Shiner	1,945	2	361
	Victoria	33,047	4	1485
	Waelder	1,270	1	72
	Weimar	2,006	1	126
	Yoakum	5,761	3	435
	Yorktown	2,527	1	152

⁴ Population figures as reported in Texas Almanac, 1961-1962.

^a Schertz and Cibolo are served by the same school.

^b Figures for Sheridan and Rock Island schools were combined in this study.

STATISTICAL SUMMARY

Number of states represented	16
Number of "larger" cities	16
Number of "smaller" cities and towns.....	44
Total number of cities and towns.....	60
Number of high schools.....	88
Number of questionnaire responses received	
Girls.....	24,400
Boys.....	<u>22,087</u>
Total responses included.....	46,487

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