

THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN

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ABSTRACT

Although juvenile suicides in the United States are negligible, the wish never to have been born occurred to about 30 per cent of a widely scattered sample of adolescent boys and girls. This wish occurred most frequently among children with high scores (poor adjustment) on a test of neurotic traits and also among those rated by their teachers as poorly adjusted socially, emotionally, and on conventional moral traits. It also occurred most frequently among children from homes which lacked harmony and intimacy between parents and children. Social contacts were less closely associated with the wish than were home conditions. The wish never to have been born, which may be considered as an evasive attempt at adjustment, indicates both a poorly adjusted personality in the child and lack of unity and harmony in the home.

JUVENILE SUICIDES

So few children in the United States commit suicide that juvenile suicides are not a problem. Thus in the year 1920 the rate of suicide per 100,000 children between the ages of ten and nineteen was 2.1. The rates for each succeeding ten-year age period were, respectively, 9.5, 13.7, 18.5, 22.6, 26.0, 27.0, 34.0, and 27.5.¹ In 1928 suicides of boys between the ages of ten and fourteen constituted but 0.19 per cent of the total number of male suicides, and the suicides of girls of the same ages constituted only 0.49 per cent of the total number of female suicides. In this year there were no suicides among children under ten years of age (see Table I).

RELATION OF DEATH WISHES TO SUICIDE

Wishes for death occur much more frequently among children than does suicide. This wish may take several forms. It may be the thought or statement "I wish I were dead." It may be the more passive wish never to have been born. Fantasies of death and of their own funerals come to some children. Other children threaten to kill themselves as a means of control over their elders.²

Two questions present themselves with reference to these wishes

¹ For recent discussions of suicides of children in the United States see Arthur L. Beeley, "Juvenile Suicide," *Social Service Review*, III (1919), 35-49; Ruth Shonle Cavan, *Suicide* (University of Chicago Press, 1918), pp. 313-17.

² Cavan, *op. cit.*, chap. x.

of children: Under what conditions do they appear? And do they tend to cause the person having such wishes to resort to suicide at a later age? Upon the second question the writer has no new data. Upon the first question a new body of data has been collected, in connection with a study of personality and family relationships made for the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection.³ The data for this study consisted of questionnaires filled out by some

TABLE I*

NUMBER OF JUVENILE SUICIDES IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1928 AND THE PERCENTAGE WHICH THEY CONSTITUTE OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SUICIDES

AGE IN YEARS	BOYS		GIRLS	
	Number	Percentage of Total Male Suicides	Number	Percentage of Total Female Suicides
10-14.....	23	0.19	17	0.49
15-19.....	238	2.00	207	5.94
20-24.....	550	4.62	380	10.91
25-29.....	884	7.42	371	10.64
30 and over.....	10,210	85.77	2,510	72.02
Total.....	11,905	100.00	3,485	100.00

* Based on *Mortality Statistics, 1928* (Government Printing Office, 1930), pp. 138-39.

nine thousand junior high school pupils widely scattered over the United States, and a rating scale filled out by the teacher for each pupil. Included in the questionnaire was a brief list of neurotic traits, based upon adaptations of the Woodworth neurotic scale for use with children. One question of this test of neurotic tendencies was: "Did you ever wish you had not been born?"

By comparing the children who stated they had wished they had not been born with those who said they had never so wished, family conditions and personality traits of the two groups of children become apparent as significant concomitant factors, for in some respects the two groups of children differ to a marked degree.

³ The study in question was on "The Function of Home Activities in the Education of the Child," by a subcommittee of Sec. IIIA. Professor E. W. Burgess, of the University of Chicago, was chairman of this subcommittee and the writer was research assistant. The material here reported was incidental to the study as a whole, which is to be published in full elsewhere.

From a fourth to a third of the public-school adolescents stated that they had wished they had not been born. The age range of these children was ten to seventeen years, with the median at fourteen years. Table II shows that the Mexican children had the highest percentage (35) who wished they had not been born; rural white children, with 34 per cent, came next. In both the Negro and the white groups a higher percentage of rural than of urban children had wished they had never been born. It will be recalled that suicide

TABLE II

THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL CHILDREN

Classification of Children	Percentage of Each Group Who Had Wished They Had Not Been Born	Percentage of Each Group Who Had Not So Wished	Total Number of Children
White urban children with American-born fathers*	26.6	73.4	1,969
White small-city children with American-born fathers†.....	29.5	70.5	1,200
White rural children, chiefly with American-born fathers†.....	34.1✓	65.9	771
Negro urban children*	25.9	74.1	1,224
Negro rural children from Alabama.....	29.7✓	70.3	239
Children with Russian-Jewish fathers, chiefly urban§.....	30.9✓	69.1	955
Children with Italian fathers, chiefly urban.....	29.8✓	70.2	795
Children with German fathers, chiefly urban.....	23.2	76.8	401
Mexican children, chiefly from one western city..	34.5✓	65.5	278

* "Urban" refers to cities of 75,000 and over in 1920. Seventeen such cities are represented.

† "Small city" refers to cities with 5,000-75,000 population. Twenty-two such cities are represented.

‡ "Rural" includes towns under 3,000 and open country.

§ I.e., the fathers were born in Russia.

rates in the United States are much higher in cities than in adjacent rural areas, both for Negroes and whites. Nor do the children who are foreign born or of foreign-born parents have an unduly high proportion who had wished they had not been born, although the suicide rate for foreign-born people in the United States is very high. Table III shows that among urban white children with native-born fathers a slightly higher percentage of girls than of boys had wished they had not been born, although the suicide rate for males is higher than for females.

It is not clear, then, that the wish never to have been born, considered as a wish for death, follows the same trend as the suicides

which occur among the adults in the same population groups. The hypothesis, therefore, is not justified that the wish not to have been born indicates a suicidal tendency in a given group. For the present it must be accepted at its face value, as a wish on the part of the child that he had not been called upon to accept the responsibilities of living.

Without an attempt to analyze in detail what the wish never to have been born means to the child, it has nevertheless been found that this wish is indicative of a definite home situation and personality type which tend to be characteristic of many of the children who

TABLE III
SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN

Classification of Children	Sex	Percentage Who Had Wished They Had Never Been Born	Percentage Who Had Not So Wished	Total Number of Children
Urban white children with American-born fathers....	{Male	22.8	77.2	949
	{Female	30.0	70.0	1,020

wish they had not been born. As already noted, the wish is not a universal childhood wish, but characterizes a minor though fairly numerous group. The discussion which follows points out some of the personality traits and home situations which are found associated with the wish never to have been born.

PERSONALITY RATINGS

A detailed analysis was made for one group—the urban white children with native-born fathers. With boys and girls grouped separately, the children who wished they had never been born were compared with those who had never so wished on many of the items in the child's questionnaire and the teacher's rating scale. Table IV compares the two groups on the score on neurotic traits and on the teachers' ratings.⁴

⁴ The scale for neurotic traits contained twenty-four questions, such as "Have you always gotten a square deal out of life?" "Do you like the nicknames you have been given?" "Can you easily imagine stories to yourself so strongly that you forget where you are?" The questions were ones which previous investigators had found distinguished delinquent from non-delinquent boys. With a sample group of 471 children, scores on paired halves of the test had a correlation ratio of 0.533 ± 0.024 , which became

Table IV-A indicates very clearly that the children who at some time have wished they had not been born are also the children who

TABLE IV
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND
CERTAIN PERSONALITY RATINGS

	DO YOU SOMETIMES WISH THAT YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN?					
	Percentage of Girls Replying		Total No. of Girls	Percentage of Boys Replying		Total No. of Boys
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
A. Score on neurotic traits:						
0-5 (good adjustment)	7.0	92.9	485	5.6	94.3	387
6-11 (fair adjustment)	43.4	56.5	419	28.6	71.3	405
12-24 (poor adjustment)	81.2	18.7	112	67.4	32.5	89
B. Teacher's rating on moral traits:						
Good*	27.3	72.6	505	22.5	77.4	310
Average	31.3	68.6	459	21.2	78.7	536
Poor	44.6	55.3	56	31.0	68.9	103
C. Teacher's rating on emotional stability:						
Stable	26.5	73.4	467	18.7	81.2	406
Average	32.0	67.9	509	25.4	74.6	500
Unstable	46.5	53.4	43	29.2	70.7	41
D. Teacher's rating on social aggressiveness:						
Compliant	27.7	72.3	419	23.1	76.8	273
Average	30.5	69.4	498	21.4	78.5	521
Disorderly	38.2	61.7	102	26.6	73.3	154
E. Teacher's rating on physical development;						
Good	27.8	72.2	356	20.3	79.6	256
Average	31.3	68.6	578	21.7	78.2	551
Poor	30.6	69.4	88	30.8	69.2	143

* The scores on the rating scale were divided into five equal intervals. The lowest two intervals constitute the group called "poor," the middle interval the "average" group, and the highest two intervals the "good" group. The same system of division was used in C, D, and E.

0.695 ± 0.017 when extended by the Spearman-Brown formula. The test also distinguished delinquent from non-delinquent adolescents in our study.

The teacher's rating scale was an adaptation of the *Haggerty-Olson-Wickman Behavior Rating Schedule*, published by the World Book Co. It yielded a score on each of five aspects, each score being the sum of the ratings on seven specific questions. The five aspects are physical development, social aggressiveness, emotional stability, conventional moral habits, and mental alertness.

have other undesirable attitudes, as judged by the list of twenty-four neurotic traits. They are, for instance, the children who feel lonely, unpopular, who do not get along well with other children or with their teachers, who have fears and suspicions. Of the girls who indicated five or less neurotic attitudes (the group which may be thought of as having good adjustment), only 7 per cent had wished they had not been born. Of the boys in this group, only 6 per cent had wished they had not been born. But among the girls who indicated twelve or more neurotic attitudes, 81 per cent had wished they had not been born, and 67 per cent of the boys in a similar group wished they had not been born.

The teacher's ratings indicate the impression which the child has made upon the teacher. They are limited to what the teacher can observe of the child in and around the school. Strictly speaking, they may not indicate what the child's traits are. They do indicate, however, the reputation which the child has with one of the major adult groups to which he must adjust, and hence they are important criteria of the child's social adjustment. Of the girls whom the teachers rated as having good moral traits, 27 per cent had wished they had not been born, as compared with 45 per cent of those rated with poor moral habits. For the boys the same trend appears, but in less well-marked degree. So, too, more of the emotionally unstable children had wished they had not been born than had the emotionally stable children. According to the teachers' ratings on social aggressiveness, the disorderly and very aggressive children were somewhat more inclined to wish they had not been born than the compliant children. Among the boys the group of "average" aggressiveness has the lowest percentage wishing they had not been born. This may indicate that, for the boys, both great compliance and great aggressiveness indicate maladjustment. There is also a tendency for fewer of the physically well-developed children than of the poorly developed children to wish they had not been born.

Thus, by all the tests used to group the children on the basis of well-developed and poorly developed personality, the children who were contented, who conformed to social standards, who were emotionally stable and physically well, showed much less tendency to wish they had not been born than did the children who were not so

well adjusted. The wish never to have been born may thus be regarded either as an integral factor of many types of maladjustment or as a resultant of such conditions. In either case it is symptomatic of some type of maladjustment which is reflected also in the personality and character of the child.

HOME AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

The complete report of the study, made to the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, indicates that neurotic traits, as measured by the test used, and adverse ratings by the teacher are found principally in children who come from certain undesirable family and social backgrounds. A similar relationship is found between the wish never to have been born and certain family and social factors as indicated by the children in the questionnaires which they filled out. Table V gives the most important set of related factors—those concerning the harmonious and intimate relationship of the child with his parents.

For both boys and girls the percentage who had wished they had never been born increases as intimacy with the parent decreases. Almost half of the girls had wished they had not been born in the groups which criticized both parents, regarded the mother as nervous most of the time, did not confide in father or mother, did not kiss the mother, and had been punished during the preceding week. Among the boys almost a third of the corresponding groups had wished they had not been born. Only a fifth to a fourth of the girls and less than a fifth of the boys in groups on harmonious terms with their parents had so wished. There is, then, a definite association between lack of intimacy between parents and children and the occurrence of the wish never to have been born in the children.

Likewise, the children from broken homes had wished they had not been born in somewhat higher proportion than had the children from unbroken homes. Table VI shows that whereas 38 per cent of the girls from broken homes had wished they had not been born, only 27 per cent of the girls from unbroken homes had so wished. Among the boys the difference between the two groups is negligible.

Low socio-economic status of the family and employment of the mother are associated with the wish never to have been born among

the girls but not among the boys, as is shown by Table VII. In fact, among the boys the sons of professional men tended to have

TABLE V
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND
PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

QUESTIONS ASKED CHILDREN*	DO YOU SOMETIMES WISH THAT YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN?					
	Percentage of Girls Replying		Total No. of Girls	Percentage of Boys Replying		Total No. of Boys.
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
A. What does your father (mother) do that you do not like?						
No criticism.	22.2	77.7	332	14.4	85.5	276
Criticized father.	36.8	63.1	141	28.9	71.0	138
Criticized mother.	35.2	64.7	51	26.6	73.3	45
Criticized both parents.	52.8	47.1	104	43.0	57.0	100
B. Is your mother nervous?						
Never.	22.4	77.5	214	17.2	82.7	238
Sometimes.	30.3	69.6	597	24.4	75.5	565
Most of the time.	45.4	54.5	110	33.8	66.1	71
C. Do you tell your mother your joys and troubles?						
Almost always.	22.7	77.2	603	19.2	80.7	368
Sometimes.	39.9	60.0	298	24.3	75.6	432
Almost never.	48.5	51.4	70	30.9	69.0	97
D. Do you tell your father your joys and troubles?						
Almost always.	13.4	86.5	208	19.9	80.0	231
Sometimes.	28.5	71.4	428	19.1	80.8	418
Almost never.	42.9	57.0	261	30.5	69.4	206
E. How often do you kiss your mother?						
Every day.	25.3	74.6	639	21.4	78.5	443
Occasionally.	37.4	62.5	259	21.0	78.9	337
Almost never.	42.6	57.3	68	33.3	66.6	114
F. Were you punished at home last week?						
No.	26.7	73.2	759	20.5	79.4	682
Yes.	43.2	56.7	118	30.8	69.1	217

* With the exception of A, the children were given the questions with the answers printed after them. They then checked the answer which was correct for them in each case. In A, they wrote down the thing which each parent did which they disliked.

this wish in slightly higher proportion than did the sons of men in other occupational classes.

Clinical and statistical studies have tended to show that only, oldest, and youngest children receive somewhat different treatment in the family than do middle children, and hence that they may develop different types of personality.⁵ Order of birth seems to make no difference in the appearance of the wish never to have been born, however. A range of only five years in the age of the children was covered by the data. No trend is discernible during this five-year

TABLE VI
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND BROKEN HOMES

HOME CONDITION	DO YOU SOMETIMES WISH THAT YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN?					
	Percentage of Girls Replying		Total No. of Girls	Percentage of Boys Replying		Total No. of Boys
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
A. Homes broken by death:						
Both parents alive.....	28.3	71.6	846	22.7	77.2	805
Father dead.....	41.8	58.1	98	20.0	80.0	80
Mother dead.....	37.2	62.7	59	25.5	74.4	47
Both parents dead.....	30.0	70.0	10	36.3	63.6	11
B. Homes broken by death or separation:						
Both parents home.....	26.9	73.0	753	22.4	77.5	716
One parent dead or parents separated.....	37.5	62.5	216	23.7	76.2	198

period from twelve through sixteen years in either decrease or increase in the wish never to have been born. As to religious affiliation, almost the same percentage of Protestant and of Catholic children had wished they had not been born.

Of the factors thus far considered, family relationships seem more closely associated with wishes not to have been born than do such factors as order of birth, age, or religious affiliation. Another group of factors remains—social contacts. Three indices of social contacts were used: number of close friends, number of organized clubs to which the child belonged, and number of visits per week with friends. As with the other data, this information came from the children's

⁵ See chap. xiv on "Order of Birth and Personality Development," in the report of the subcommittee, *op. cit.* (White House Conference on Child Health and Protection).

replies to the questionnaires which they filled out. Table VIII gives the results, which are somewhat difficult to interpret and which clearly do not show the consistent pattern shown by the family relationships.

TABLE VII
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND CERTAIN
INDICES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

INDICES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS	DO YOU SOMETIMES WISH THAT YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN?					
	Percentage of Girls Replying		Total No. of Girls	Percentage of Boys Replying		Total No. of Boys
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
A. Occupational class of father:*						
Professional.....	23.2	76.7	112	25.9	74.0	108
Commercial and managerial.	26.7	73.2	116	21.5	78.4	102
Skilled trades.....	27.3	72.6	300	20.7	79.2	303
Skilled labor.....	31.9	68.0	244	23.3	76.6	240
Unskilled labor.....	37.5	62.5	64	17.5	82.5	40
E. Employment of mother:						
Mother not employed.....	26.8	73.2	777	22.7	77.2	729
Mother employed.....	42.1	57.8	209	22.1	77.8	194
C. Socio-economic status by Sims scale:†						
Wealthy, scores 32.5-39.6..	30.2	69.7	86	26.5	73.4	83
Upper middle class, scores 21.7-32.4.....	25.4	74.5	365	22.3	77.6	304
Lower middle class, scores 10.9-21.6.....	32.0	68.0	400	21.5	78.4	403
Poor, scores 0-10.8.....	41.5	58.4	101	30.0	70.0	80

* The classification used was a "common-sense" one worked out by Counts and adopted by Sims for use in his scale of socio-economic status. For a copy see Vernon Sims, *The Measurement of Socio-economic Status* (Public School Publishing Co., Bloomington, Ill.).

† See *ibid.* A short form of the scale was used. Therefore the scores are not comparable to the scores obtained in other studies in which the Sims scale was used. The scale gives weighted values to education of the parents, number of books and magazines in the home, possession of a telephone, automobile, bathroom, occupation of the father, etc. The descriptive terms here used have been assigned arbitrarily by the author of this article.

Since the family relationships were more significant for the girls than for the boys, the girls were chosen for a study of the total home background in its association with the wish never to have been born. The percentage of girls in each category who had never wished they had not been born furnished a value for that category. Thus, on the matter of confiding in the mother (Table V-C), 77 became the value for almost always confiding, 60 the value for sometimes confiding,

and 51 the value for almost never confiding. In like manner, each of eight factors in the home received values for the categories under it. The eight factors chosen were employment of the mother, broken homes, criticism of parents, nervousness of the mother, confiding in the mother, confiding in the father, kissing the mother,

TABLE VIII
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND SOCIAL CONTACTS

	DO YOU SOMETIMES WISH THAT YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN?					
	Percentage of Girls Replying		Total No. of Girls	Percentage of Boys Replying		Total No. of Boys
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
A. Number of close friends:						
Four or more.....	26.4	73.5	480	20.4	79.5	513
Two or three.....	34.1	65.9	398	26.4	73.5	314
One.....	26.3	73.6	110	20.4	79.5	88
None.....	61.1	38.8	18	22.2	77.7	18
B. Number of clubs to which child belongs:*						
Three or more.....	26.0	74.0	73	23.7	76.2	80
Two.....	29.0	70.9	231	17.8	82.1	224
One.....	29.1	70.8	450	25.5	74.4	396
None.....	36.2	63.7	185	23.0	76.9	178
C. Number of visits with friends during preceding week:						
Six or more.....	30.3	69.6	528	24.3	75.6	468
Four or five.....	30.6	69.3	212	22.8	77.1	158
Two or three.....	29.4	70.5	173	18.9	81.0	153
None or one.....	28.5	71.4	91	22.7	77.2	141

* This section of the table is based upon replies to the following question: "Check all of the following clubs or organizations of which you are a member: Boy Scouts, Hi-Y, other Y.M.C.A. club, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Girl Reserves or other Y.W.C.A. club, 4-H Club, school club not already checked, church club not already checked, other club (what kind?)."

and punishment. By adding the eight values for a given girl a score was arrived at which indicated the presence or absence in her home of the desirable categories under these factors. The scores ranged from 470 to 614, the low scores indicating homes in which factors associated with wishes never to have been born were prevalent, the high scores indicating homes in which the conditions not associated with this wish were present. The percentage of girls at each score level who had, and who had not, wished they had not been born

was then computed in order to discover whether the homes with a greater number of undesirable features produced more girls who wished they had not been born than did desirable homes. The results are given in Table IX.⁶ A more detailed table, not published here, shows that the 10 girls with the lowest scores all had at some time wished they had not been born and that the 20 girls with the highest

TABLE IX
THE WISH NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BORN AND SCORES
ON TOTAL HOME BACKGROUND

SCORE ON HOME BACKGROUND BASED UPON EIGHT FACTORS*	PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS FROM EACH LEVEL OF HOME BACKGROUND WHO		TOTAL NUMBER OF GIRLS AT EACH LEVEL
	Wished They Had Not Been Born	Had Never So Wished	
470-74.....	(1 case)	1
475-84.....	(1 case)	1
485-94.....	91.7	8.3	12
495-504.....	81.0	19.0	21
505-514.....	69.6	30.4	23
515-524.....	82.8	17.2	29
525-534.....	68.3	31.8	63
535-544.....	62.7	37.3	67
545-554.....	52.8	47.2	72
555-564.....	44.1	55.9	93
565-574.....	43.6	56.4	55
575-584.....	42.6	57.4	61
585-594.....	23.3	76.7	60
595-604.....	24.2	75.8	33
605-614.....	100.0	20

* The eight factors used were employment of mother, broken home, criticism of parents, nervousness of mother, confiding in mother, confiding in father, kissing mother, punishment.

scores had never so wished. With only one marked deviation from an even trend, the percentage of girls who had wished they had not been born decreases as the scores on the home background increase. Clearly, homes may be classified as to the amount of tension and conflict which the child feels is present, and a prediction may be made of the probability of children from different types of homes developing a wish never to have been born.

Three related factors thus appear: conflict and lack of intimacy in the home, ratings indicating maladjustment on various tests of per-

⁶ All the girls who had wished they had not been born were used in this tabulation, and an equal number of girls was chosen at random from the entire number of girls who had never so wished.

sonality makeup, and the wish never to have been born. The data here presented show the relation between the wish never to have been born and each of the other two factors. The report made to the White House Conference shows the relationship between tension in the home and maladjusted personality. The wish never to have been born does not appear as an isolated wish. It is part of a rather general outlook on life which may be thought of as neurotic. Moreover it appears, as do the other neurotic attitudes covered by the test of neurotic traits, among children from homes in which the child feels out of harmony with his parents.

The statistical findings are supported by data from another section of the White House Conference Study—a series of descriptions of family life secured from 602 students in fifteen colleges. Among other questions the students were asked whether they had ever wished they had not been born or that they were dead. Of 112 women who replied to this question, 46 per cent had wished for death in some form, and of 107 men, 60 per cent had so wished. The most frequent situations calling forth this wish among the women were punishment or scolding (10 cases), denial of something by parents (12 cases), not understood by parents (4 cases), and when angry (4 cases). Among the men the most frequent situations were punishment or scolding (17 cases), denied something by parents (6 cases), and misunderstood by parents (3 cases). Only 3 girls and 1 man mentioned quarrels with friends as the occasion for a wish for death.

The wish for death or wish never to have been born when it appears in children may be taken as indicative of a more general neurotic outlook on life, which, in turn, is found in conjunction with a home situation in which the child feels out of sympathy with his parents and that he cannot confide in them. Thus, although a relationship between wishes for death among children and later suicidal tendencies cannot be established on the basis of these data, wishes for death appear as common to a minority of children who are characterized by other very definite personality trends and home conditions.