Why men leave home: a study of desertion by the male parent in thirty families who were referred to the family and child service agency by the municipal court in winston-salem, North Carolina for a social study and recommendation in non-support cases

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WHY MEN LEAVE HOME

A STUDY OF DESERTION BY THE MALE PARENT IN THIRTY FAMILIES WHO WERE
REFERRED TO THE FAMILY AND CHILD SERVICE AGENCY BY THE MUNICIPAL
COURT IN WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA FOR A SOCIAL STUDY AND
RECOMMENDATION IN NON-SUPPORT CASES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF SOCIAL
WORK IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY

REBECCA JUANITA ANTHONY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JUNE 1952
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is deeply indebted to Mrs. Lillian Gaskill, Executive Secretary of the Winston-Salem Family and Child Service Agency, for information and suggestions for the development of this study, and to Mrs. Viola B. Martin for her stimulation of reflective thinking on the subject. The cooperation of faculty members of the Winston-Salem Teacher's College in making available material not accessible through the libraries is sincerely appreciated.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

The broken home has been defined as a home wherein one or both parents are absent due to death, divorce or desertion. The effects upon the lives of its members have caused enough concern to warrant studies on the problem which have disclosed knowledge of the existence of definite effects on the lives of children who mature in these homes. These effects are oftentimes demonstrated as the child goes into adulthood and attempts to assume the responsibilities befitting a husband and father. Likewise, there are problems for the parents in these situations.

This study will be geared to desertion as a factor in the broken home. The term, as used in this study, is defined by Elliott and Merrill as the irresponsible departure from the home on the part of husband or wife, leaving the family to make its way as best it can. It is often referred to as "the poor man's divorce." This reference might imply a financial status which might be supported further by the number of applications which are made to social agencies for financial assistance by the deserted families. However, it is to be considered that social agencies represent the only source of statistical report on the subject, and that there are numerous deserted families who never come to the attention of agencies. The legal requirement for recording deaths and divorces makes

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1 Mabel A. Elliott and Frances E. Merrill, Social Disorganization (New York, 1936), p. 503.
available a statistical count of their occurrence, but there is no way of determining the actual number of desertions that occur. Nevertheless, from the sources reporting on the subject, the National Desertion Bureau and other social agencies, it can be said that the number is large enough to warrant attention.

In 1948, it was estimated that desertions had increased forty-two per cent in the past eight years. In 1928, social agencies in ninety-three cities estimated desertion rates at twenty-eight to two hundred and three per one hundred thousand population. The National Desertion Bureau predicts that 50,000 desertions will occur yearly with a greater number in prosperity than in years of depression. According to these and other estimates, the trend in desertion seems to be upward.

The Federal Security Administration figures show that $205,000 is received annually in State and Federal aid to deserted families, but no one has attempted to add the total cost in terms of malnutrition, mental degeneration and misery. In some cases when the wife realizes that her husband has "run out on her", the shock is so great that she is hospitalized in a state institution, thereby further depriving the children of

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1 Barbara Heggie, "Runaway Husbands", Good Housekeeping, CLXXXI (Dec., 1948), 58.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
responsible parents. Even though she remains in the home, she is frequently a woman with no special preparation for any phase of life, but is nevertheless compelled to be the main source of support for the family. Both health and disposition show the effects in failing strength and in a quick or sullen temper, and a habit of nagging or complaining.

Also, imagine the typical male deserter as described by Brandt:

... young, able bodied, more or less dissipated, capable of earning good wages, but rarely in the mood for making the exertion, and above all, lacking in the quality which makes an obligation to others outweigh consideration for personal comfort and preference. This combination makes him susceptible to attractions of all sorts and prevents him from dealing with the elements of discord which exist in every home.¹

It has been estimated that three-fourths of the children seen in the Juvenile Courts are from broken homes. They had reacted to the double burden of economic insecurity which caused them to grow up with basic personality maladjustments, unable to adhere to an adult relationship any better than their parents. They may enter marriage expecting it to mature them. They have difficulty facing crises and often run away when their wives become pregnant—just when they are needed most. Their lack of maturity to assume responsibility may be due to a subconscious wish to escape the financial responsibility of supporting a family. All of these add to the loss by the social group.

Social and legal agencies are improving their method of treatment for the deserter and the deserted family. One such agency is the National

¹ Lillian Brandt, Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families (New York, 1905), pp. 63-64.

² Barbara Heggie, op. cit., pp. 149-150.
Desertion Bureau, combining the services of a social agency with that of a legal aid society to help the deserted family and the deserter when possible.¹ In 1949 the Uniform Support of Dependents Law was adopted by eleven states and two territories. This law provides for the deserting husband to be brought into court in the state where he is residing.² This recourse, and even extradition, is sometimes followed by Domestic Courts and Departments of Public Welfare, but the emphasis seems to be more on money payment than understanding why the husband is living apart from his family. Even if he does pay, this is no substitute for his presence to the mother and the children.

The writer became interested in this subject during a period of employment between November, 1948 and September, 1950 with the Cook County Department of Public Welfare, Chicago, Illinois, which administers the categorical assistance to residents of Cook County, Illinois. The interest continued with the field work assignment to the Family and Child Service agency of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This agency provided case work services to the Municipal court for a five year period prior to the latter's attempt at establishing a Domestic Relations Court.

**Purpose of the Study**

It is the writer's belief that there are certain common factors influencing the destruction of our family units and causing some of them to

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¹ Merrill and Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 503.
² Barbara Haggie, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
end in desertion. For this reason, it is further believed that more consideration should be given to the deserting father and that more planning should be done with him. Previous studies have been made of, and numerous theories have been advanced as the reasons for desertion, but these were done at earlier dates. Because of the trends in social work, psychological and cultural, it was hoped to determine how the earlier findings relate to present day practices in desertion. The earlier studies served as a comparative basis for the present one, to determine if there are any new factors in desertion. The purpose of the study was fourfold: (1) to review previous studies of desertion for factors that have been proved to contribute to desertion, (2) to compare desertions of today with previous desertions in the light of psychological and cultural emphasis, (3) to look for any new factors contributing to desertion which were not listed in previous studies, and (4) to analyze and evaluate the kinds of help sought and received by the deserted families. From this it was hoped to determine if these families might benefit from family counseling before the family ties are completely destroyed.

Method of Procedure

Information for the study was obtained from the records of the Family and Child Service Agency in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and a selected bibliography. The bibliography included references which are related to personality formation, the importance of the family unit, the disorganization of the family unit, and previous studies of desertion. The cases were selected from those containing a record of desertion by the male parent which were referred to the agency by the Municipal court for social study and recommendation in non-support charges. Thirty of these
cases which were accepted by the agency between 1913 and 1915 were used. Particular attention was paid to the Social Service Exchange reports for subsequent contacts with this and other social agencies in the community.

Scope and Limitations

This study was limited to thirty families who were referred to the agency by the Municipal Court. Only those cases of desertion by the male parents were used. The material is from a secondary source, having come from the agency records. For this reason, the writer relied heavily on secondary data, both published and unpublished. Thus the study was more subject centered than agency centered. Due to the limited number of cases studied, the writer did not attempt to draw conclusions as to the problem, but instead, presented a summary of the findings and evaluation of previous writers together with findings of the present study.
CHAPTER II

FACTORS INFLUENCING DESERTION IN THE THIRTY FAMILIES STUDIED

In the thirty cases studied, the following causative factors were given: jealousy, drinking, extra-marital relationships, temperamental incompatibility, brutality on the part of the husband, interference by in-laws, illness (physical and mental), nagging, difference in social interest, insufficient support, irregular employment, immaturity, and rejection of children.

TABLE 1

PROBLEMS OF PARENTS IN THE THIRTY FAMILIES STUDIED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems Listed</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient support</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular employment</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-marital relationships**</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brutality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperamental incompatibility</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interference by in-laws</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbances</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagging</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaturity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal attachment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in social interest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical illness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Each family was tabulated for each problem presented.

**On the part of husband or wife.

The results from seven studies of desertion were reviewed for findings in regards to factors in desertion and how they compared with present day practices in desertion. The first of these studies was based on
material which was the result of group discussions garnered from a study of five women who had applied to one district of the United Charities of Chicago during the winter of 1938 and 1939 asking for relief because their husbands had left them. The second was Dorothy O'Rourke's study of fifty family deserters which was made in 1930. The material for this study was secured from fifty case records of deserter's families under the care of the Family Society of Philadelphia in 1928 and 1929. The cases were selected at random from the files of three different districts.

The third was that of E. Francis O'Neil and Ralph J. Glover's report on a study of one hundred cases of desertion. This report was compiled from questionnaires which were sent to the Diocesan Bureaus of five large cities. Included also was Joanna Colcord's study of broken homes. The basic facts for this study were taken from "Family Desertion" by Lillian Brandt made in 1905 and was supplemented by a few statistics from the Charity Organization Society of New York in 1910 through 1917. E. R. Mowrer's statistical study of desertion, the cases for which were taken from the 1921 records of the Chicago Court of Domestic Relations, was the fifth.

The sixth was that of Earle Eubank based on the statistical data concerning some of the characteristics of desertion tabulated for 327 selected cases from the Chicago Court of Domestic Relations. The concrete material for analysis, illustrative material, and classification of desertion types are the result of an intensive study of more than 600 families from the Stock Yard District of the United Charities of Chicago. The last of these studies was that of S. Howard Patterson of family desertion and non-support based on the cases brought into the Domestic
Relations Court of Philadelphia. The cases were those legally recorded as alleged desertions or non-support, and were confined largely to the five year period from 1916 to 1920.

Similarly to the seven studies, the material used by the writer employed case records. Opinions of sociologists and reports from the National Desertion Bureau were considered and used in analysis. In his analysis, Eubank classified five desertion types. The first of these he listed as the spurious deserter who plays the part in collusion with his wife to secure aid from a charitable organization. The second he described as the gradual deserter, or the accidental type who leaves his family to work in different places and never returns, or discontinues support.

... The third type is the intermittent deserter who leaves home somewhat at regular intervals, when domestic difficulties develop. An example of this is the man who deserts when his wife is pregnant. He returns when the scene is quieted, and waits until the next pregnancy. The fourth type is the one who enters into an ill advised or hasty marriage. The fifth is the last resort type, or one who makes a complete break with his wife and family after having made successive attempts at readjustment.1

In the families studied, the gradual, the intermittent, the hasty marriage and the last resort types were found. Dorothy O'Rourke listed thirteen factors in desertion:

Difference in nationality, religious differences, sex incompatibility, unemployment, illegal marriages, illegitimate children, drinking, gambling, physical defects, questionable mental condition, difference in social background, pregnancy of wife, and previous desertions.2

1 Earle Edward Eubank, A Study of Family Desertion (Chicago, 1916), pp. 24-48  
2 Dorothy O'Rourke, Fifty Family Deserters (Smith College Studies in Social Work, September, 1930–June, 1931) 1, 370.
Joanna Colcord divided her factors into two classifications: personal and community.

Among the personal factors, which were the contributing factors in the man and woman, were actual mental deficiency, faults in early training, difference in background, wrong basis for marriage, lack of education, occupational faults, wanderlust, money troubles, ill health, temperamental incompatibility, sex incompatibility, and vicious habits. The community factors were interference by relatives, racial attitude toward marriage, community standards, lack of proper recreation, influence of companions, and the expectation of charitable relief. 1

Rosenquist, a sociologist, listed factors which were almost identical to the personal factors listed by Colcord, but expressed in minor varying terms. 2 A report from the National Desertion Bureau listed factors contributing to desertion as those of economic, psychological, psychopathic, and hygienic factors. 3 All factors listed in desertion appeared to be reasons for marital discord and/or conflicts, and this relationship might well be seen.

For the most part, the factors given in all of the studies were similar, even though described differently. The factors given in the previous studies which reoccurred in the writer's study were mental deficiency, health, insufficient income, drinking, physical defects, interference by in-laws, and extra-marital relationships. There were also factors present which were listed in previous studies, but were not listed among the

3 S. Howard Patterson, "Family Desertion and Non-Support," Journal of Social Hygiene, VI (April, 1930), 20.
reasons given by the husband or wife for the desertion. Among these were
illegitimate pregnancies, previous marriages, and age differences. In
all of the studies there were more than one factor with the average being
two. In O'Rourke's study there were from one to nine, and in the present
study there were from none to five.

**TABLE 2**

THE NUMBER OF PROBLEMS IN EACH FAMILY STUDIED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Problems</th>
<th>Number of Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were several theories advanced as to the reasons for desertions.
One government official has blamed the plenitude of jobs throughout the
country. He pointed out that during the booming war years, only a fear
of local draft boards kept many men from making this axiom true. It
is also believed that dissatisfied husbands, hitherto lacking the courage
to make a break, got their first real taste of freedom. When peace was
declared, they simply remained where they were. Only in one instance of
the cases studied was the husband working in another city, and in one in-
stance was extradition proceedings effected. However, this might have

1 Barbara Heggie, *op. cit.*, p. 147
2 O'Rourke, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
been influenced by the fact that these cases were referred by the court when the husband was brought in to answer non-support charges.

O'Rourke's study showed unemployment as the next most frequent cause for desertion. She believed that some men find employment as an excuse for leaving home, and others who were forced to go away from home to secure work gradually became deserters. In the thirty cases studied, insufficient income and irregular employment appeared most frequently, and almost equally, as factors in desertion. This might be attributable to their interrelatedness.

There were several views advanced in regards to nativity and nationality as a factor in desertion, but the thirty families of this study were not studied with regards to this factor. It is doubtful that this had much value in this study since the families belonged to a rather homogeneous group of American Negro and white families. Colcord found that the racial factor is important in desertion; not only the individual's own background, but also the attitude of the people toward the sanctity of marriage, toward the position of women, and toward the importance of restraints in sexual relations, will have an effect upon the rate of desertion of a given group. On the other hand, Eubank and Patterson concluded that desertion is not a racial or national characteristic. Patterson, in comparing court cases with the adult population, found that the foreign born of Philadelphia have not furnished an undue proportion

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2 Joanna Colcord, *op. cit.*, p. 1414.
of desertion cases. Apparently, the cultural factor is not one of race, but that of the norm of behavior within the individual's culture group.

Some theories have been advanced in regards to religious differences, but in O'Rourke's study, "it was but an additional tension or the most obvious cause to give for the desertion." In many cases, it is probably an ever present fact which may cause additional tension in the household.

Sexual incompatibility appeared most frequently in O'Rourke's study as the factor which may have led to the desertion, being found in fifty per cent of the cases. Extra-marital relationships appeared secondly in the families of this study, and might have some bearing on the sex compatibility of the marriage partners.

The last and most common reason given for desertion is that of economy. So much weight has been attached to this that desertion is commonly referred to as the "poor man's divorce," but this epigram hardly stands the test of experience, since the only sources of statistical data on desertion are the social agencies and the domestic courts. Economic reasons, whether imaginary or real, probably brought the deserted families to these sources in many instances. The writer does not disregard economy as a factor in desertion, but does accept that it is frequently a contributing cause. On the other hand, it is true that many of the causes for domestic infelicity which led to divorces may bring about desertion among the less fortunate. Only, the deserting man does not consider his absence from the home as any thing so final as a divorce.

2 Dorothy O'Rourke, op. cit., p. 391.
Immaturity was listed in only one of the cases while it seems to have very much influence. This case portrayed immaturity quite vividly even though the partners attached more emphasis to the difference in social interest.

Case 1

Mr. and Mrs. N. had been married for only a short time prior to the desertion. This was the third marriage for Mr. N. at the age of 21. He was divorced from his first wife whom he claimed he married while he was intoxicated. He married a second girl while stationed with the Army in Texas before securing a divorce from the first wife. This marriage was annulled. He married the present Mrs. N. after a very short courtship. Mr. N. was described by the worker as an "apparently happy go lucky" sort. He accused Mrs. N. of being jealous of his social interest. His accusation was based on the fact that Mrs. N. resented his interest in social dancing while she had to be a "wall flower".

When seen from the point of view of the social worker, desertion is itself only a symptom of some more deeply seated trouble in the family structure. This immediately suggests that the personalities involved are in conflict with each other, and are hazardous to a comfortable marriage adjustment. In a subsequent chapter, it will be seen that a mature marriage adjustment requires that one must have freed himself of strong childish attachment; that his specific sexual drives be directed toward the opposite sex; and that he is able to perceive and care about the feelings of his partner.

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1 Joanna Colcord, _op. cit._, p. 23.
CHAPTER III
THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY FORMATION ON DESERTION

It is commonly believed among students of social behavior that the first five years are the formative years of life, and that what happens to the individual during these years determines how he reacts to life situations. These are referred to as determinants of the personality. It is rather difficult to draw the line of demarcation between any determinant of the personality development, but it has been proposed that "the personality is supposed to develop simultaneously with physical growth and is linked closely with the physiological processes."

All individuals pass through several stages of psycho-sexual development which are descriptively labeled as the oral, anal, phallic, latent, puberty and adolescent stages into adulthood. Each of these stages merges and is influenced by the preceding ones. That is to say, that an individual must complete one stage of development in order to move successfully to the next, and failure to do so is to become "fixated" at a particular level of the psycho-sexual growth.

This insight into the causes of arrested development is important to our understanding of maturity. In the first place, it focuses our attention upon the formative years of life and makes us notice the whole process of human growth from birth to death-through infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Survival


is a child's first need; a sense of his own significance is the second. The child, from birth, needs to feel secure; needs to be noticed; needs to be wanted. If these deep, inescapable needs are not satisfied, the child may be made to feel that he amounts to nothing, that he is a nuisance, a drag, a failure, an unwanted member of the family. Thus slapped down, he must find some way to win attention and significance. He will try to resolve his problem by means at his command. He may get what he wants by aggressiveness, retreat into phantasy, or become outwardly submissive. Gearing his life to such immature methods of problem solving, he unwittingly halts his own growth toward emotional and social maturity. At forty, he may be found getting his own way by having tantrums, browbeating his wife, terrifying his children, or bawling out his subordinates. Mental, emotional and social immaturity indicates that the adult is trying to work out by childish means the problem of his various relationships to life.1

Parental attitudes toward the child during the developmental stages are very important, and especially during the Oedipal period since "there is a tendency for some persons to remain in love with their parents indefinitely, and thus never quite free themselves to become interested in a person of the opposite sex, or get any idea of marriage and home formation of their own."2

Because of individual differences and total life experiences, what happens to persons in the developmental stages produces all sorts of personalities. One of the greatest dangers to maturity and assumption of the adult role is the development of a dependent attitude. Characteristically, excessively dependent people make poor marriage partners, and this is especially true when they are married to another person who also tends to be dependent. This is clearly illustrated by Florence Hollis in her casework study "Women in Marital Conflict." It is believed that:

these individuals have not outgrown the childish type of attachment to their parents, and for some reasons, are demanding that others be more affectionate, more patient and more protective than adults usually are. If he is not given this, he is inclined to become fearful, or hostile and depressed. He is usually too ready to believe that spouse or mate is interested in another person, oversensitive to slights, demanding of attention, nagging and critical, or even abusive.1

Evidence of this is seen in one of the thirty families studied.

Case 2

Mr. and Mrs. A. had been married for two years prior to the desertion. They were the parents of one child and Mrs. A. was expecting another baby. Mrs. A. was described as having an unusual attachment to her mother who was apparently dominating her daughter's married life. This daughter was an only child who had apparently never quite grown up. When conflicts arose between her and Mr. A. around their marital relationship, her parents encouraged her to return home. They separated over a violent quarrel about Mrs. A.'s frequent visits to her mother. When she returned from the visit, he had left home. Mrs. A. had accused Mr. A. of extra-marital relationship, and of being cruel to her. Mr. A. also seemed to be somewhat dependent in that he had never established a home for his family. They had lived their entire married life with the parents of Mr. A.

Dependency arises chiefly from two extreme forms of parental relationships, deprivation and overindulgence.2 Emotional deprivation contributes to feelings of insecurity and hinders the individual's development of enough love to move beyond childish dependency.3 Over-indulgence, which is manifested in the continuation of behavior toward the child by the mother in a protective way, reinforces closeness and infantilization with the added gesture of pulling the child back and preventing his


2 Ibid., p. 23.

3 Ibid., p. 25.
growth into more independent behavior. Over-indulgence can hinder the individual's preparation for adult life, and prevent him from learning to care for the well-being of others in an adult sense.\(^1\) It is highly likely that these individuals will find marriage very distasteful, and would seek escape from it.

One of the thirty cases studied illustrates quite adequately how dependency interfered with marriage and bound one to the parental home.

Case 3

Mr. and Mrs. L. were the parents of five children ranging in ages from two to eleven years. They had lived with Mr. L.'s family in a neighboring city, but this situation had apparently become unbearable for Mrs. L., and she had persuaded Mr. L. to move the family to Winston-Salem. However, he later deserted and returned to his parent's home. Mr. L. was an only child and was described by the worker as one who was apparently spoiled and accustomed to having his own way. Many subsequent contacts were made with this family at various times, but a reconciliation was never effected.

Even though we do not have access to knowledge of Mr. L.'s early childhood, we might surmise that he was likely over-indulged by his parents. How much the parental attitude was influenced by his being an only child is another point that might be considered.

The trend in thinking today seems to be that culture also plays a dominant part in the personality formation. According to Ralph Linton, the influences which culture exerts on the developing personality are of two sorts:

... those influences which derive from the culturally patterned behavior of others toward the child, and those influences which derive from the individual's observation of, and instruction in

the pattern of behavior characteristic of his society. Many of these patterns do not affect him directly, but they provide him with models for the development of his own habitual responses to various situations.  

Other institutions are accountable for much that is good and bad in the home. Economic forces that keep homes insecure and that may even destroy them, community forces that breed antagonism and group tension, schools of the type that perpetuate various ignorances, snobbishnesses, and emotional provincialism, churches of the type that generate intolerance, and political forces that breed corruption and war may be so powerful that individual fathers and mothers, however mature, may be helpless to counter them. Neither depression or war singles out for attack only those homes in which the parents are doing a poor job of bringing up their children. Therefore, we need to determine the extent to which the institutions of our society are responsible for our homes. 

The machine has deprived the family of many of the experiences that will encourage the continuance of psychological growth from infancy through adulthood. It has built the cited and reduced the living spaces for the family, it has made the home into a place surrounded by strangers, and it has taken the fathers far away.

However, the parents still have it within their power to be either growing or fixated, and the opportunity to provide a climate for the growth of young minds from ignorance toward knowledge. Since "children learn chiefly by contagion, the child can grow from irresponsibility to responsibility through the experiences of the adults in the home."

Another aspect of the cultural development of the personality is that of the economic influences on personality development. If the

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1 Ralph Linton, *The Cultural Background of Personality* (New York, 1945), pp. 139-140.

2 Overstreet, op. cit., p. 232.

3 Ibid., pp. 233-235.

4 Ibid., pp. 139-140.
individual is influenced by his observation of and instruction in the culturally patterned behavior characteristic of his society, then the male child who grows up in our sub-cultural environment where the father has been either unknown or of the irresponsible, deserting type may establish an imitative pattern. He may be unable to acquire from his developmental environment the concept of father responsibility so acceptable to our dominant culture. People are restricted to these areas because of their low income which characterize their overcrowded living conditions.

Frazier in his study of the Negro family applied Burgess' co-centric theory to the south side of Chicago, dividing the population by zones. He found that desertions were more prevalent near the loop of the city and lessened toward the periphery. All other economic factors being equal, the living standards of these people increased in much the same way. In the thirty families studied, many of the families were sharing overcrowded residences with other relatives, and the majority or nearly all of them were employed at laboring jobs with low salaries. A deserting spouse from the multiple dwelling might conceive of his departure in a different perspective since his family is left with relatives.

It appears then that any appraisal or understanding of behavior, including that of the deserter, would warrant an appraisal of his cultural environment. It is believed:

In societies where the cultural pattern prescribes absolute obedience from the child to the parents as a prerequisite for

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rewards of any sort, the normal adult will tend to be a submissive individual, dependent and lacking in initiative. Likely, his reaction to any new situation will be to look to someone in authority for support—another element of the dependent personality.¹

Another theory advanced is that of individuals who were reared in smaller families with numerous adults about, anyone of whom may reward or punish, the normal personality would tend in the opposite direction. In such societies, the average individual is incapable of strong or lasting attachments or hatred toward particular persons.²

It is inconceivable that such a society would embody within its culture such patterns as our concepts of romantic love, or the necessity of finding the one and only mate without whom life would be unbearable.

¹ Ralph Linton, op. cit., p. 141
² Ibid., p. 142
CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCIES IN THE PROBLEMS OF DESERTION

Frances Merrill described what she considered to be the typical deserted family.

This family consists of a wife and two small children. The wife is a woman with no special preparation for any phase of life, but as far as her knowledge and resources allow, she does her best toward making home what it should be. Frequently, she is compelled to be the main source of support for the family. By the time her husband deserts, five to six years after marriage, the discipline she has had from his irregularity in providing necessities, and from his drunkenness and other bad habits, has left its mark in failing strength and in a quick and sullen temper or habit of nagging and complaining.1

It is unlikely that all of these traits are characteristic of all deserted families, but a comparison of findings in previous studies as well as the present one revealed similarities as well as differences.

TABLE 3

THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN THE DESERTED FAMILIES STUDIED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Number of Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the families studied, there were four having no children, and the other had from one to five children, the average being two children per family. They were for the most part young, and ranged in ages from

1 Frances E. Merrill, op. cit., p. 504.
three months to twenty-one years. In one instance, the children were, for the most part, matured, one having been emancipated from the home and one of the remaining three employable. The findings with regards to the duration of marriage was shorter than the three to four years of Merrill. In the previous studies, 45 to 47 per cent of the marriages lasted only one year. In the present study, of the twenty-four cases containing this information, the marriages lasted from less than one year to an isolated instance of twenty-five years, with an average of two years duration.

### TABLE 4

**THE DURATION OF MARRIAGE IN THE THIRTY FAMILIES STUDIED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Marriage</th>
<th>Number of Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has been estimated that desertion reaches its highest peak among couples who have been married a year, when there is one child, and when family responsibility had become too much for the husband. The second peak comes at the period of twenty to twenty-five years of marriage. Many of the husbands who had grimly stuck it out until their children are grown finally leave.  

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However, her description of the deserted mother and her role seems much in accord with the findings in the studies of desertion. The wife and mother does find herself in a serious economic strain which probably contributed to our ability to learn about her through domestic courts and social agencies. In the cases studied, none of the women had any special training, and when she was working outside of the home, it was at domestic employment or in the tobacco industry which is the chief industry in Winston-Salem. Both of these jobs sometimes required long working hours.

In addition to the economic aspect, the deserted wife is faced with certain emotional problems. These women are faced with adjustments to make in many areas to the society in which they live, within themselves, and to learn to function in a new role to their children. There is some stigma attached to the fact that her husband has left her. Sympathy from neighbors, expressed or unexpressed, might be misinterpreted and produce self-pity and/or guilt. She might also fear guilt of being responsible even though she is not conscious of her role. She feels that her husband has rejected her by leaving, and when combined with earlier childhood patterns, might produce serious emotional disturbances.

In some instances, when a wife realizes that her husband has deserted, the shock is so great that she is institutionalized. Having been brutally wounded by one man, she remains cold and distant in her relationship to others.\(^1\) On the other hand, she might seek the companionship of another man in the absence of her husband, rather for economic gains,

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\(^1\) Barbara Heggie, *op. cit.*, p. 146
which sometimes results in illegitimate pregnancy. This was true in four of the families studied. Thus she has all of the problems of an unwanted child whom she may reject.

This emotional attitude of the mother, coupled with the economic necessity of long working hours while the children are improperly supervised, create an unhealthy environment in which these children must grow. Out of this develop truancy, delinquency and neglect. They get a distorted picture of family life. It has been pointed up in an earlier chapter how important the parental role and the parental attitude are toward the child during the developmental stages; thus it seems that a chain reaction is developing.

The mother of the son who resembles his father and constantly reminds her of him might transfer to that son her feelings of love and hate, rejection or even hostility which she felt for the father. The son who is denied the masculine figure in his life with whom he can identify may never develop the masculine traits. The daughter who does not have the father person may never resolve the Oedipus period. In one of the cases studied, the mother did not file non-support charges against the father until eleven years after the desertion. She had gone to the court at this time because their son had been involved in a great deal of difficulty and brought before the Juvenile Court many times. This child was two years old when his father deserted.

Even though, literally speaking, the husband is the one who creates this distasteful situation by leaving, he too is affected by it. Because he is not on the scene, he is often forgotten and many times ridiculed, despite his problems. The deserting father does not usually plan to desert, thus he does not, as a rule, have a destination. Because of the
established pattern of masculine independence, unlike the deserting mother, he may not turn to friends and relatives. He is subject to attractions of all sorts and much might happen to him from the standpoint of health, economy and social behavior before he makes the next establishment.

As a drifting person, he may become a poor employment risk, a spreader of social diseases, and a general menace to society. In accord with the establishment of life patterns, we can expect his other behavior to continue in much the same fashion. In the cases studied, eleven of the men had records of irregular employment. He may then turn to anti-social methods of maintaining himself and might even come in contact with the law. Four of these men had served prison terms for robbery, store breaking and fighting. In his travels, he might form love relations with other women. Not being free to marry, he might enter common-law relationships or have children out of wedlock.

The act of desertion itself can be significant to the social worker who plans with these families when they come to the attention of social agencies. The deserting wife who is a person possessing some ability to organize when a crisis arises will turn to such resources as savings, credits, moving to cheaper residences, earnings in or outside of the home, taking in boarders, forcing older children to work, getting help from employers, or borrowing from relatives, friends, neighbors and churches. These are the families who seldom come to the attention of social agencies.

On the other hand, if she is the dependent sort of person who must have direction when she is faced with new situations, she is likely to return to the parental home or to the outside for help. The sources to
which the deserted wife appeals, and the length of time between the
desertion and when she asks for help might give some indication of the
reasons for the desertion, or some understanding of the marital situ-
ation in the home prior to the desertion. It is believed that an immedi-
ate application indicates great insecurity and an urgent need for accep-
tance and approval.  

In the five cases studied from the United Charities of Chicago, the
following reasons were listed for their application to the agency: the
exhaustion or depletion of resources, inner pressures of guilt and anx-
xiety, or outer pressures of fear of being without money, concern for the
future, criticisms of neighbors or relatives, refusal of the parents to
allow the wife to return to their home, and the need for moral support.
In every case, the woman's original request early in the interview was an
urgent appeal, not for assistance in adjusting the marital difficulty,
but for financial support from the agency, or for the agency to assume
responsibility for securing money from the husband. Common factors in
the five cases were: the woman's urgent request for relief, the immedi-
ate cause for which was not substantiated in subsequent contacts; the de-
gree of the responsibility of the woman for the separation; and the
woman's need to return to the parental home.  

Characteristic of the cases studied was the filing of non-support
charges against their husbands. This may indicate their need to punish
the men, or to use the agency in the punitive role. Also in a proportion

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1 "Relief Practices in Desertion Cases," The Family, XXI(December, 1940), 263.
2 Ibid., p. 260.
of these cases, the women had returned to the parental home, the reasons for which were not given. They might have been motivated by economic or emotional reasons. However, from observation, it is unlikely to conceive of the widow returning with her family to the parental home.

The family's contact with the court and with the Family and Child Service agency whose primary purpose was to make a social study and recommendation to the judge, seemed to have advantages as well as disadvantages. The counseling consisted of interviews with both partners separately and then together. This afforded the couple a chance to discuss their difficulty in the presence of an objective, helping person. Removed from the scene of authority, that is the court room, they were able to arrive at a mutual agreement on the amount to be paid in accord with the needs of all members concerned and in accord with the husband's income. This method of reaching the decision afforded both partners an opportunity to participate in the plan.

One disadvantage of the plan, even though it was in accord with the plaintiff's request, was the placement of emphasis on money payment rather than assistance with adjusting the marital difficulty. Even though it was not the agency's function to the court, in two of the cases, the worker did continue counseling to the family:

Case 4

The first case was that of an immature couple, Mr. B., nineteen and Mrs. B., sixteen. Mr. B. seemed to be rather mature for his age and this was very helpful to the worker in planning with the family. Mr. B. had deserted the family when he lost his job because Mrs. B. nagged him about not putting forth sufficient effort to find another. After being able to verbalize on their problems, among which were irregular employment by Mr. B., insufficient support, interference by Mr. B.'s father and nagging by Mrs. B., the couple requested additional counseling. Continued contact with the family revealed that they had lived with
Mr. B.'s family prior to the desertion. Mrs. B. reported, and Mr. B. agreed that his father had given Mrs. B. quite a hard time. With continued service, they decided to move to a home of their own and try their marriage again. There were subsequent contacts with the agency in an effort to obtain financial assistance when Mr. B. was without employment. His age seemed to be a factor in his inability to keep regular employment, but he had demonstrated ability and desire to plan for himself.

Even though the problem of irregular employment and insufficient support continued in this family, they seemed to have gained enough from working with the agency to establish their own home and maintain their marriage through the crisis. The other case was that of Mr. and Mrs. T.

Case 5

This family was known to the agency as early as 1939 when Mr. T. requested financial assistance because he was without employment. There were several subsequent contacts with the agency, and they were described as being prone to depend on receiving assistance. Mr. T. had deserted earlier and Mrs. T. had filed non-support charges after which weekly payments were assessed by the court. At the second desertion, Mrs. T. returned to court and the case was referred to the agency. Mr. T. had not been contributing regularly to the family's support, was indulging in extra-marital relationships, and was drinking excessively. Mrs. T. showed signs of great affection for him as well as fear of him. The family continued with the agency and a reconciliation was affected. During the contact it was revealed that both Mr. and Mrs. T. had come from large families. Both had only gone to the eighth grade and had no special preparation for skilled employment of any kind. They were married at the ages of eighteen and seventeen, respectively. Mr. T. expressed the fact that he never felt that he quite belonged at his father's home and had always been eager to have a decent home of his own, better than that of his father. The worker reported that the home was clean and orderly, and that Mr. T. seemed quite proud of his family. After termination of contact, a young lady filed bastardy charges against Mr. T. Mrs. T. wrote a letter to the worker in his defense, telling of his increased tenderness to his family. Mr. T. admitted previous relationship with the young lady, but denied paternity. The charges were dropped.

Apparently, Mrs. T. had gained enough from the agency contact to reinforce her confidence in Mr. T. and to desire to support him in a crisis, and continue to live with him. A follow up study of these families to
determine how many reconciliations were effected and how many of the men continued to meet the court orders imposed on them would be interesting and valuable.

According to the reports from the Social Service Exchange, there were three subsequent contacts with the court and sixteen families registered with other social agencies. The agency receiving the largest number of applications from these families was the Department of Public Welfare. Even though there was not always given knowledge of the nature of these requests, it might be surmised that the request was for financial assistance as this is the agency which administers help with basic needs. There was also a large proportion of contacts with the Health Center. Health cards are required of people employed at domestic work or handling food which might explain this agency's contacts. It then appeared that the non-support payments, whether they were paid or not, were not enough to maintain the family and had caused the wives to seek employment. Considering that these men were employed at salaries inadequate to support themselves and their families separately, it would seem wise to attempt to effect reconciliations where feasible and advisable.

The trend in treatment of the deserter and his family seemed in this direction. Domestic courts are becoming increasingly aware of the value of social service. When the Family and Child Service Agency discontinued this service to the court in Winston-Salem in 1943 because of their increased caseloads, a social worker was hired in this capacity by the court. However, many courts, including this one, are understaffed in their social service departments, and some have not begun to use them.

Another agency serving the deserter and his family is the National Desertion Bureau of greater New York. It is a non-sectarian, private
bureau combining the services of a social agency and a legal aid society. It was founded in 1910, and is supported by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropy and the greater New York Fund. They attempt to locate the missing father or husband, cooperate with referring agencies and community resources, effect reconciliations where feasible and advisable, arrange for separate support, enter persecution proceedings where need be and contest divorce proceedings where it seems the best policy for the community and the family.¹

An act of legislation in this regard was the adoption of the Uniform Support of Dependents Law by thirteen states and two territories in 1949. This law, a reciprocal aid state law, provides for deserting husbands to be brought to court in the state where he is residing.² This law can be more beneficial if the emphasis is shifted from money payments entirely. That would depend on individual courts or studies such as this, showing the need for a different type of treatment.

¹ Merrill, op. cit., p. 503.
² Heggie, op. cit., p. 146.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Family and Child Service Agency is a private, non-sectarian agency which is supported by the United Fund of Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Forsyth County. The agency exists to strengthen family life (of the people of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County). There are two Divisions: the Children's Division, to find homes for children when it is no longer possible for them to remain in their own homes; and the Family Division, to help keep families together. The latter service is rendered through family counseling, budget planning, planning for health problems, employment counseling, and legal counseling through a Legal Aid Society.

During a five year period between 1913 and 1918, the agency provided case work services to the Municipal Court in non-support cases. Its function was to make a social investigation and recommendation to the judge on non-support charges coming to the attention of the court during this period. This service was discontinued due to insufficient staff after the Family and Child Service Agency's caseload increased, limiting the time they had available, and the court hired a worker in this capacity.

Thirty of these cases that were accepted by the agency between 1913 and 1915 for service wherein the husband and father had deserted the family, were studied for factors contributing to the desertion, and to evaluate the services rendered to these families. Seven previous studies of desertion were reviewed for factors which had been found to contribute to desertion, to determine how these factors compared with factors in desertion of today, and to determine if there are new factors in desertion.
Information pointed to the fact that desertion is itself an indication of some deeper conflict in the family unit, and that the man who deserts is acting in accord with an established pattern of reacting to conflicts and new situations. This pattern is the result of cultural, psychological, and economic influences in the person's early personality development. Desertion, then, is only a clue to understanding his earlier life experiences and how they affect his reaction to what has happened to him. In accord with this established life pattern, it was found that some of these men had also served prison terms for such offenses as stealing, robbing and fighting, and that there was a high record of irregular employment. It appears, then, that the deserter has little respect or love for others and their rights, and also lacks the initiative for assuming the adult responsibility of supporting a wife and family.

If it is true that a mature marriage adjustment requires that the individual must have freed himself of strong childish attachments, that his specific sexual drives be directed toward the person of the opposite sex, and that he must be able to assume the responsibility of marriage and a family, people with dependent personalities would make poor marriage partners. The dependent person needs direction and support when faced with new situations, and if he does not find this in his spouse, there is likely to be conflict. If he reacts to conflict through flight, his desertion might be seen as a method of escape from an unpleasant situation.

Among the previous studies and the present one, forty factors in desertion were listed, some of which were closely related and almost synonymous. What was listed as factors in desertion appeared to be reasons for family conflicts. This can well be seen since desertion is usually precipitated by marital conflicts. Desertion also may be due to
multiple causation. In the previous studies, there were from one to nine factors in a given case, and in the present study, there were from one to five factors in a given case. Among the factors listed in the studies, temperamental incompatibility, sex incompatibility, insufficient support, and irregular employment appeared most frequently.

Several theories have been advanced for desertion such as religious difference, difference in nationality, plenitude of jobs, and economic influences. The man who sought work away from home and gradually became a deserter showed noticeable effect, but this was not present in these families. This might be attributed to the fact that these families were among those wherein the husband had been brought into court to answer to non-support charges.

The most common among all theories advanced was that of economy. In the thirty families studied, the majority were from the laboring class, and in many instances, the wives were employed. This may be attributed to the fact that desertion occurs among the less fortunate who can ill afford divorces, and that economic reasons probably brought them to the court and social agencies.

In considering all of the theories advanced for desertion, the writer is inclined to believe with Muriel Lawrence, who surmises that the reasons listed for desertion by experts add up to failure to produce more stable and realistic young people. The young wife whose neglect of her home drives her husband away might be the daughter of parents who over-indulged her. The young husband who sees slight where there is none is likely to

be the dependent son of someone who did not love him properly. The young couple who split up over money troubles are likely to be the boy and girl who have been allowed to believe that dollars buy security, happiness, and self respect. When we consider that many families endure the family conflicts while other men walk out on their families, it appears that immaturity is basic to all of the factors leading to desertion.

Certain factors were found to be characteristic of the deserted families. It had been advanced that desertion reached a peak in the first year of marriage and a second high around twenty-five years of marriage. In the previous studies, the marriages terminated in the first year in almost 50 per cent of the families, while in the present study, the average duration of marriage was two years. The families were small with an average of three to four children in previous studies and two in the present one. In some instances there had been previous desertions and there were also husbands who deserted when their wives became pregnant. The latter might be an indication of the husband's reaction to crisis—his wife having a baby. Whether he leaves because he does not want the financial responsibility, or because he hates the disorderly fashion of the home which might have developed from his wife's pregnancy, the fact remains that he did leave until the crisis was over.

Because of the economic factor in desertion, much of the responsibility rests with social agencies. If it is the purpose of these agencies to help individuals to live more useful lives for themselves, and contribute to society, they then have a responsibility to the deserter and his family. The wife has the problem of small children who are often unsupervised while she is employed; there is a stigma attached to the fact that her husband has left her; she is subjected to possible guilt feelings; and she must
learn to function in a new role to her children. Desertions create an unhealthy environment in which children must grow and contribute largely to delinquency. The deserting husband has no destination because, as a rule, he does not plan to leave and is subject to become a drifter and a general menace to society. The wife, through formation of companionship with other men, conceives illegitimate children. The same may be true of men who establish relationships with other women, not being free to marry them. There is a need for social action to curtail this chain reaction.

Work might begin with the family at the initial contact before the family ties are completely destroyed. The wife's request for help may be utilized as a tool in understanding the problem. Her need for financial assistance is not always the reason for seeking help, but she may be wanting the agency to function as a parent substitute, or in an authoritative role toward her husband. The source to which she applies for help and the length of time that expired between the desertion and the application may indicate the role she is wanting the agency to fulfill.

Of the families studied, approximately one half of them had returned to this and other social agencies in the city. The majority of requests were made to the Department of Public Welfare which may indicate the need for additional money. This may be further supported in that the wages of a laborer are probably inadequate to maintain himself and his family separately.

In a much smaller number, there had been subsequent court contacts. How much of this could be attributed to the brief counseling of the agency could not be determined. There is a trend in domestic courts to employ social service workers, but like many agencies, they are still understaffed; while others have not begun to use them. It appears then,
from the number of subsequent contacts with relief agencies and fewer court contacts, that these families might benefit from counseling early after desertion.

After subsequent years of experience in the area of social work, the writer would be interested in a more intensive study of this sort to determine more of the personality structure of the deserter. Some areas suggested for further exploration by this study were: How the deserter reacts to other situations as job, war, and other responsibilities and crises; the results of the families receiving service as opposed to those who did not; how many of the deserters had subsequent court records; and how many returned to the home to make satisfactory adjustments as heads of their families. Most of the studies made of desertion were made from the case records of other workers who had only their specific purposes in mind during the interview, therefore, there appears to be a need for more studies of desertion involving personal interviews if we are to understand the problem of desertion and of the deserter.
APPENDIX
SCHEDULE

I - IDENTIFYING INFORMATION:

A - Case number       B - Date of application
C - Date of marriage
D - Ages of parents: mother father
E - Siblings in the home:
     age sex

II - DATE OF DESERTION:

A - Last       B - Previous

III - DESCRIPTION OF HOME:

A - Owned       B - Rented
C - Number of rooms
D - Physical condition

IV - EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC STATUS PRIOR TO DESERTION:

A - Occupation: mother father
B - Working hours: mother father
C - Family income: actual approximate

V - FAMILY CONFLICTS:

A - The kinds of discord present prior to the desertion
B - The immediate cause of desertion

VI - PREVIOUS AGENCY CONTACTS AND CAUSE OF CONTACTS:

A - Social agencies
B - Courts or legal bodies

VII - ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:
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