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Excerpt from
“Children in Street Work”
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Bureau Publication No. 183
1928
Newspaper Sellers

Selling newspapers does not necessitate a boy's leaving school, but this very fact results in its being undertaken by many children too young to work except at tasks that are a necessary part of their training. Where the compulsory school attendance department is efficient it does not appear to interfere with school attendance. In some places newsboys are no more retarded in school, on the whole, than other boys; and, where they are retarded, too many factors in the home and school environment are involved to prove a direct connection between newspaper selling and failure to make normal progress in school. The physical effects of the work need to be investigated more thoroughly and more extensively before definite conclusions can be drawn as to whether or not the newsboy's health suffers as a result of his work and in what respects it suffers. But whether or not the educational or physical effects are immediately measurable it cannot be denied that boys who sell papers all the daylight hours after their release from school have no opportunity for wholesome recreation, nor time for the preparation of home lessons (except at the end of a long working day) and that they work at least as many hours a day as are regarded as suitable for adults (though almost half are under 12 years of age); and those who sell early in the morning or late in the evening, or at such times as make it impossible to have meals at proper intervals, as many do, are following a program even less favorable to normal development.

The moral influences surrounding newspaper sellers in their work make it a dangerous occupation, also for the immature. Conditions in and around newspaper-distributing rooms differ. Small towns and cities escape certain of the evils that flourish in the notorious “news alleys” of some of the larger cities. But distributing rooms too often attract the type of man from whom the newsboy may learn at first hand the language, philosophy, and technique, so to speak, of the loafer and the tramp, or even of the thief, the gambler, and the moral pervert. The fact that in two of the four cities in which the Children's Bureau investigated this aspect of newspaper selling the boys were exposed in their work to seriously unwholesome associations and influences indicates that such associations and influences are not uncommon in newspaper selling and may develop anywhere at any time. Newsboys have a delinquency rate several times as large as that of other groups of boys. Much of this is accounted for, to be sure, by poor home and neighborhood environment, but boys so handicapped are obviously in greater need of protection than more fortunate children if they are to develop into law-abiding members of the community. The number whose lives may be unfavorably influenced by their contacts in newspaper selling is much larger, owing to the turnover, than the number selling papers at any one time would indicate. Many boys sell papers only a few weeks or months, but at impressionable ages a few weeks may undo the work of years on the part of the schools in training for citizenship.

The similarity between the findings in the Children's Bureau surveys and those in surveys made 10 or 15 years ago offers little foundation for the hope that conditions will improve of themselves. The indications are that in certain respects they are likely to grow worse instead of better. Competition between newspapers, which grows more rather than less intense, not only increases the number of newsboys but also, as the Children's Bureau surveys show, create especially unfavorable conditions for boys who sell. The increase in midday editions is likely to increase the temptation to stay out of school to sell, and no doubt children will do so unless the school attendance department keeps a close watch; the growing popularity of late-evening editions or morning papers provides new opportunities for selling late in the evening.

These considerations seem to justify the conclusion that newspaper selling by children should be regulated just as other forms of child labor are regulated. The failure of the State laws and city ordinances regulating street work in the cities where the surveys were made shows that the provisions of the laws and the details of administration must be given careful consideration. A State law may have the advantage over a city ordinance in providing a degree of supervision over local administration that is desirable and giving protection to children in places that would not of their own accord enact measures regulating street work.

The age minimum for licenses to sell newspapers should be as high as public opinion will support, looking toward the prohibition, as soon as practicable, of the work for boys under 16, just as street work now is very generally prohibited for girls under that age wherever regulations are in effect. Some of the worst features of newspaper selling are of a kind that make it as little desirable for boys 12 to 15 as for those of 10 or 11. Prohibition of selling for children under 16 has the further justification, if further justification is needed, of causing no inconvenience to the public. As has often been observed by writers on street work, European cities have few if any newsboys. Elderly men and women and the physically handicapped, as well as such devices as newsstands or self-service rack, can take care of street sales. The prejudice that high school boys of 16 or over have against newspaper selling because it is considered "kids' work" would be met, also, by the removal of the younger boys from the streets. Satisfactory proof of age, at least as good as that required under the child labor law regulating industrial employment, should be demanded of all applicants for licenses to sell papers.

Where newspaper selling for children under 16 is not prohibited but is regulated, hour regulations should prohibit night work and work during school hours. Fixing the hour for stopping in the evening at 6:30 would permit newsboys to reach home at a reasonable time after dark in the winter (incidentally, it would also take care of the peak of the trade, for which boys are most desired) and would automatically restrict the number of hours of work a day. Fixing the morning hour for beginning at 7 would make it possible even for boys whose home environment does not favor an early bedtime to get sufficient sleep. Whatever arguments may be advanced as the need of schoolboys for newspaper selling during the rush hours, none can be urged against the adequacy of stands and racks for the comparatively few early-morning and late-evening purchasers.

Although the educational provision contained in most child-labor laws can be omitted from the law regulating newspaper selling, unless the child is leaving school, it should contain a provision requiring a statement signed by the principal of the school and the teacher of the class that the child attends certifying that he is regularly enrolled in school and that he is able to sell papers without retarding his progress in school. The law should provide also for the revocation, on the recommendation of the child's school principal, of the license to sell.

The possibility of physical impairment as the result of work outside school hours and the strain and exposure incidental to newspaper selling is sufficiently great to make desirable the requirement of a physical examination, such as is required under the best child-labor laws. Periodical physical examinations of newsboys were recommended by the heart committee of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association as a result of its findings in its study of the health of newsboys.³

If the law refused a newsboy's license unless the applicant was accompanied by his parent or guardian, responsibility for complying with the terms of the law could be fixed more effectively; and, moreover, those whose parents disapproved of the work and many whose parents were indifferent in regard to it and who therefore have no real reason for selling papers would be kept out of the work.

Adequate penalties should be provided in the law. A penalty should be placed upon the child, the parent, and the newspaper publisher or news dealer supplying papers to unlicensed boys. The law should also contain a provision penalizing publishers, news agents, or others permitting boys to loiter about such places as circulation rooms and newspaper offices.

Whether the regulation is by State law or local ordinance, it should designate specifically the person responsible for its enforcement. Enforcement should be centralized in one agency, the person directly responsible, however, being given authority to delegate his power to subordinates. The enforcing official should be properly qualified and should have a sufficient number of properly qualified assistance to issue badges with care, and to do the necessary street patrolling, school and home visiting, and inspection of distribution rooms and "news alleys." Spasmodic or even periodical patrol and inspection cannot be expected to give successful results. In smaller communities the administration of the street-work regulation may be combined with other duties, but complete responsibility should rest upon one agency, for division of responsibility for enforcement between any two or more agencies is always unsatisfactory in regulating street work.

Although satisfactory enforcement may be achieved by an efficient official in any department, enforcement by a well-administered school-attendance department, especially where it has charge of the issuance of employment certificates to children entering other occupations, gives promise of best results, since most newsboys are schoolboys. Enforcement of street-trades regulations by the police is not desirable.

³ The Health of a Thousand Newsboys in New York City, p. 39.