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**COHORT RECIDIVISM
MEASUREMENT; A SUGGESTED
IMPROVEMENT OF THE
EVALUATION CAPABILITIES OF
STATE CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMS**

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When debate occurs concerning the expense of various correctional/offender programs, the most common response is that they entail a savings in "human costs" that defy calculation. However, when various correctional programs must "compete" for scarce resources as in annual budget requests for expansion or establishment of programs, justification, for good or bad, usually relies on a quantitative base. Most popular in terms as a quantitative measure of the effectiveness (success) of these programs is that of recidivism. Recidivism rates for most practical purposes are utilized as a direct indicator of success or failure in the rehabilitation of offenders through programs of probation, parole and imprisonment. If a correctional program's failure is equated with reversion to crime by program participants and program success with its observable avoidance, then recidivism is obviously the most appropriate of the so-called objective measures of program outcome. Undoubtedly there are many shortcomings in the belief that recidivism is the sole indicator of effectiveness, yet until more comprehensive theories of crime and criminal rehabilitation are developed, effectiveness of offender programs will continue to be judged by the extent to which they reduce the incidence of further criminal acts.

Consistently, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania objectives provided in regard to the appropriation of State funds to correctional/offender programs are stated in terms of the reduction of the recurrence of crime (adult and juvenile) by altering the behavior of criminal offenders. Currently State programs included in the Commonwealth Budget document (Volume II) under the program subcategories: 1) Reintegration of Juveniles, and 2) Reintegration of Offenders utilized measures of "program success" which are intended to reflect the impact of various correctional programs upon their ability to achieve stated objectives. Programs included in these budget subcategories include those of the State Correctional Institutions, the State Probation and Parole Board, as well as State grant-in-aid programs intended to improve county activities in the correctional area. Implied by the objectives stated in each of the budget

subcategories mentioned above is the ability of program administrators to measure rates of recidivism in such a way that it is known to what extent a program's activity has reduced the recurrence of crime by offenders. To date, however, those program measures which are being displayed as evaluative indicators in the Commonwealth's Budget Document (Volume II) are either nonexistent, critically deficient, or misleading. Consequently, the Commonwealth must explore more adequate methods by which recidivism data can be collected, analyzed, and, most importantly, used for the ongoing evaluation of correctional programs.

More Accurate Measurement Data Needed

Given the overall inadequacy of current recidivism measures to permit clear-cut inferences about program effectiveness to be drawn, it is recognized that those agencies of the Commonwealth dealing with correctional and offender programs must pursue more appropriate methods by which program data can be collected and processed. These methods must promote the accurate determination of recidivism among specific groups of offenders. A number of State agencies are concerned with the activity of criminal offenders both during Commonwealth supervision, and after release from such supervision. However, current practices in data collection and processing among programs do not permit the analysis of offenders as they come into contact with the criminal justice system. Because of this, as many have suggested, it is believed that it is desirable to have a centralized collection of criminal justice data concerning the offender population in the State. Using this data, individual agencies with programs directed at some aspect of this population can calculate recidivism measures for those offenders exposed to their program's activity. The problem, then, is what methods can be best employed to bring data together from various offender programs in the State so that uniform and statistically meaningful criteria can be adopted for measuring recidivism?

The most suitable method known for measuring recidivism among groups of offenders is to select a base group of offenders who were exposed to some program activity during a chosen interval of time. For this group, the percentage of success and failure (however defined) at successive periods of time may be calculated. Good measures of recidivism should also include success or failure for some period after offenders are released from supervision to indicate the degree to which offenders refrain from criminal offenses after release from various government custodial programs. Such a method is often referred to as the "cohort approach", and it is believed by many to provide a more accurate picture of recidivism among offenders as well as to provide more relevant data for evaluation of studies of offender programs and their outcomes over long periods of time.

Problems of Measuring Recidivism

The first prerequisite in the collection of information needed to derive recidivism rates is a comprehensive set of statistics that will describe offender behavior both while subjected to program activity and for a period after release (follow-up). Statistics of this type should cover the following general points: (1) characteristics of the offenders; (2) offenses committed; (3) dispositions during supervision (prison, probation, parole); and, (4) dispositions after release. This body of information would present an excellent picture of how various offender programs are doing in achieving stated goals. Furthermore, with this information readily available, critical areas in rehabilitation could be identified and examined more closely, i.e., offenses with the highest-associated recidivism rates, differences in recidivism among age, race, religious groups, and differences among various programs in preventing recidivism after release. Much of this information could be put to immediate use by administrators of State Programs dealing with offender groups in planning their programs, explaining these programs to the public and to legislative decision-makers, and in increasing the long-run effectiveness of programs. Centralized availability of this data would assure basic information for evaluation and studies which presently either do not exist or for which large commitments in time and money must be made.

Cohort Approach

In order to develop accurate and meaningful recidivism statistics for offender programs in the State, the gathering of uniform data for all programs dealing with an offender population is needed. In addition, so that follow-up data concerning offenders who are released from these programs and are re-arrested and/or reconvicted for further crime is available, police arrest and court disposition data is also needed. This data can be collated with uniform offender program data to provide an accurate picture of criminal offenders' absence of further reported crime. A central organization having the task of gathering uniform data of this order could make consistent and periodic interpretations, and provide a repository for program evaluation. This data collection unit would be in the position to not only help various organizations who deal with offenders in analyzing pertinent data about their program, but also to publish meaningful data that would be beneficial to the correctional field as a whole.

With the data mentioned above, the criticism that many existing offender program measures are not using the proper base for calculation of recidivism type measures can be overcome. The suggested cohort method uses as a base a group of offenders who have experienced a significant event together during the same period of time. In this case, exposure to

correctional program is considered the significant event. For the cohort approach, success or failure of individuals in the cohort group at successive periods of time provide rates which are not absolute and will appropriately change with the passage of time. For any one cohort group - for instance, a group of 1,000 parolees placed during a one-year period - one year later, ten may have committed further offenses as indicated by court disposition data. If having committed a criminal offense is defined as failure - A 1.0% (10/1000) failure rate at that time is the case. A year later, if 90 different individuals in the same yearly cohort group are indicated by court records as having committed an additional crime that recidivism rate might be represented as:

Year 1	Year 2
10	90

1000 = Yearly Cohort Group

or a failure rate after two years of 10%. Successive rate determinations using this approach is represented by the following formula:

$$\frac{N^1 N^2 N^3 \dots N^4}{\text{Cohort Group}}$$

Cohort Group

where N equals number of individuals in the cohort who commit a further crime during a given time interval. Rates can theoretically be calculated till the death of all individuals in the cohort. However, good measures of recidivism call for the establishment of limits on the amount of time the post-program period must be free of recidivism before activity is deemed successful.

The cohort approach discussed above overcomes two principal deficiencies of current program measures utilized in the Commonwealth budget document. First, it takes into consideration the post-program period activities of offenders and, secondly, it presents a preferable alternative to the one-time measurement approach commonly utilized in the derivation of recidivism measure.

Recommendation

The cohort approach possesses excellent potential in that if utilized on an ongoing basis, immediate retrieval of recidivism data along various criteria will indicate beyond a doubt the merits of the method. If this is proven, incorporation of this method State-wide would seem to be the obvious next step and a justifiable emphasis area for the State.

Realizing the critical need in the area of recidivism measurement, especially as related to the evaluation of State-funded

programs, it is believed that a demonstration project utilizing the cohort approach with criminal offender data would be desirable. Such a project might be best accomplished utilizing the data collected on offenders supervised by the State Board of Probation and Parole. The Board's program would be a logical choice because of its centralized data storage source (as opposed to county or institutional data collection) and the Board's apparent willingness to improve its data evaluation capability. Additionally, follow-up concerning offenders eventually discharged from the Board's supervision is available from Pennsylvania's Governor's Justice Commission's, Judicial Statistics Division. Using these two sources, the proposed design would be to follow yearly additions to the Board's caseloads (cohort groups) noting their performance both while in the program and after program release. Data concerning the behavior of individuals included in each cohort could be collected yearly by the Board for the period in which individuals are supervised. Once individuals are released from supervision, the names could be matched with court disposition data from the Judicial Statistics Division for a period of years to determine if those released from Board supervision are subsequently convicted for new criminal acts. Yearly monitoring of the cohort groups from both sources would then provide an excellent picture of recidivism among those whom the Board supervises. The establishment of such a project is of extreme importance in both the effort to evaluate criminal justice programs and as a means for administrators to decide how to improve and consolidate programs seeking the same goals.

We received the following note from former Welfare Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia, Randolph E. Wise, who served as Conference Chairman of the 18th National Institute on Crime and Delinquency in Philadelphia in June 1971, which was reported on in great detail in the Summer-Autumn 1971 issue of *THE QUARTERLY*: "I am in receipt of a copy of the Proceedings of the 18th National Institute on Crime and Delinquency. I hasten to offer my congratulations for a job extremely well done. The proceedings are excellent in format, content and coverage. Its completeness represents a Herculean job, and I commend you for its successful completion."

... In the fields of education, housing, and legal equality for the indigent, critical decisions face the state and national legislatures, the courts, and the people themselves, testing our commitment to the equality for all races in the brotherhood of mankind.

Robert M. Landis
Past Chancellor
of the Philadelphia Bar Association
in his Keynote Address
at the Celebration of Brotherhood
Commitment Week, February 1972

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