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Chapter VII

Conclusions and a General Recommendation

Is probation the brightest hope for corrections or should it be abolished? Seeking to contribute to a general assessment of current knowledge of adult probation, we sought evidence from available studies bearing on a variety of general beliefs widely held or recently stated by criminal justice scholars or leaders. The most general conclusion reached is that necessary evidence on most of these critical probation issues is not available. Although more than 130 study reports were reviewed, definitive answers to fundamental questions could not be answered with confidence.

If we ask who is placed on probation, some observed differences with selected imprisoned offenders may be cited; but a detailed profile of such differences, generalizable to probationers and prisoners in general, cannot be given. The necessary research has not been done.

If we ask whether probation is more effective as a rehabilitative treatment than is imprisonment, we must respond again that the necessary research has not been done.

If we ask whether the personal characteristics of offenders are more important than the form of treatment in determining future recidivism, we must answer that evidence tends to support this conjecture, but that critical tests of the hypothesis have not been performed.

If we ask whether the size of the caseload makes any difference to results in terms of recidivism, we must answer that the evidence is mixed. From limited evidence, it appears that intensive supervision may result in more technical violations known and acted upon and that this may lead to fewer new offense convictions.

If we ask who succeeds and who fails on probation supervision, we may reply that a useful technology for development and validation of prediction instruments is available, that there is some information on the question (for some jurisdictions), that attempts to develop such instruments for probationers have been rare, and that these attempts have been put to relatively little use.

If we ask what is meant by the term "recidivism," we must answer that there is no commonly understood definition of this widely used concept. Recidivism studies in probation have employed such widely differing definitions that their results cannot meaningfully be combined or compared.

If we ask "what works," out of interest in discovering what forms of treatment and supervision provide more effective results when applied to probationers generally or to any particular classification of offenders, we must reply that there is limited evidence and that it is mixed. However, present evidence certainly does not justify the conclusion that "nothing works."

If these issues are indeed critical to adult probation, the most obvious conclusion to be reached is that too few resources have thus far been applied to providing adequate evidence on the questions raised. Trite as it may be to end a research report with the plea that "further research is needed," this is inescapable.

This is not to say that nothing has been learned, but rather that there have been too few studies of these probationer issues, many of which -- because of the nature of the studies or because of faulty research designs or implementations -- cannot give the definitive, general answers that are sought. As a result, these studies cannot give the needed guidance to planners, judges, or probation managers that could provide a systematic program for increased adult probation effectiveness. We, therefore, propose a model that can be used in any probation system to ultimately provide the answers that are desired.

In any probation system, a management information system is needed. Smaller agencies might have to collaborate or join larger systems in order to develop and use this system. The management information system must be designed to provide feedback on such critical issues as are discussed in this report. This requires the reliable collection of standardized and comprehensive information on the characteristics of probationers at the time of sentence. Also needed is a system of follow-up, with carefully defined and agreed-upon

measures of outcome. Prediction measures, based upon relevant information about offenders, must be developed and tested to assure their validity. Such measures can provide, for any classification of probationers, the expected outcomes (such as recidivism rates) through the follow-up system. Differences between the expected and observed outcomes can then be assessed, to provide some information on the programs that appear to be useful and those that do not -- for what kinds of offenders, with respect to various definitions of "success" and "failure." Those treatment programs identified as apparently effective can then be investigated by the use of more rigorous research designs.

Such a system can provide a continuous assessment of probation programs, making use of presently available technology, guiding the development of probation programs on a much more rational basis than the hit or miss basis that has thus far characterized program development in this field.

If probation is on trial, the evidence is not yet in. Much of the presentation of both the "prosecution" and the "defense" must be regarded as scientifically inadmissible. Methods are available to provide the needed evidence in a systematic management information program. Those who judge probation can then be better informed, and more rational decisions about adult probation may be expected.

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