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Court Information Systems Phase I Evaluation

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Court Information System Assessment

The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals in its volume, Report on Courts, proposed the following standard* in the area of court administration:

"There should be available...computer services adequate to perform functions such as multiple indexing, jury selection, and case scheduling. Provision should be made for input and access by all participants in the court process, including the prosecutor and public defender, as well as the court itself. Costs should be minimized by joint use of centrally located computer systems. Courts with a sufficiently large workload should utilize the computer for additional services. The system should be designed with flexibility to be modified as necessary to reflect the requirements of each court...."

This judgmental assessment of the existing state of knowledge concerning court information systems is based on the information available concerning the efforts made by trial courts, in response to such a standard, to design, develop and implement information systems which improve caseflow management as well as supporting other court operations and management. Included in this assessment is an examination of the approaches taken by the courts in meeting the following types of significant issues which have arisen

- Issues Concerning the Organization and Conduct of Court Information System Development Projects;
- Issues Concerning Factors in the Design and Use of Court Information Systems; and
- Issues Concerning the Impact of Court Information Systems on the Justice System.

Following an extensive literature search to identify both issues and sites of operating systems, structured telephone interviews were used in a nationwide survey of 65 trial courts, as well as of 10 regional LEAA court and system specialists and 24 state court administrators or justice planning officials. Later, thirteen field site visits were made to a representative group of courts with operating court information systems. This assessment presents the resulting findings, conclusions and observations concerning the usefulness of such systems to the courts and to the justice system.

* Standard 11.1, Court Administration, p. 217, Report on Courts, National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, Washington, D.C., 1973.

Utilizing the general framework developed as a part of the Phase I Evaluation of Court Information Systems, this assessment examines each of the framework elements with respect to the assumptions for the achievement of overall system goals, the measures which can be used to evaluate performance and the availability of data to perform such measurement.

B. Assessment Bounds

This examination of court information systems performance is concerned with the equipment, programs, procedures and personnel which provide information support to both court management and to routine operations in medium to large trial courts.

The relationships between the court information system, its data base, and the court's management and operational functions are depicted in Figure 1. It should be noted that the information system supports both the routine day-to-day information handling required to process cases, as well as using that data to build a data base which also supports court management activities. The information system operates, of course, within the larger context of overall court activities. This assessment, however, is limited specifically to the court information system itself and not to the broader capability of courts to utilize the information supplied by the information system in performing such critical court activities as caseflow management.

The information systems considered include only those which directly supported both operational and management activities of the court. Individual information systems supporting only district attorney or other prosecutorial office (e.g., PROMIS), probation or parole offices, defender organizations or other such court-related agencies have not been included. Nor have juvenile court information systems, which are currently being evaluated by the National Council for Juvenile Court Judges, been included.

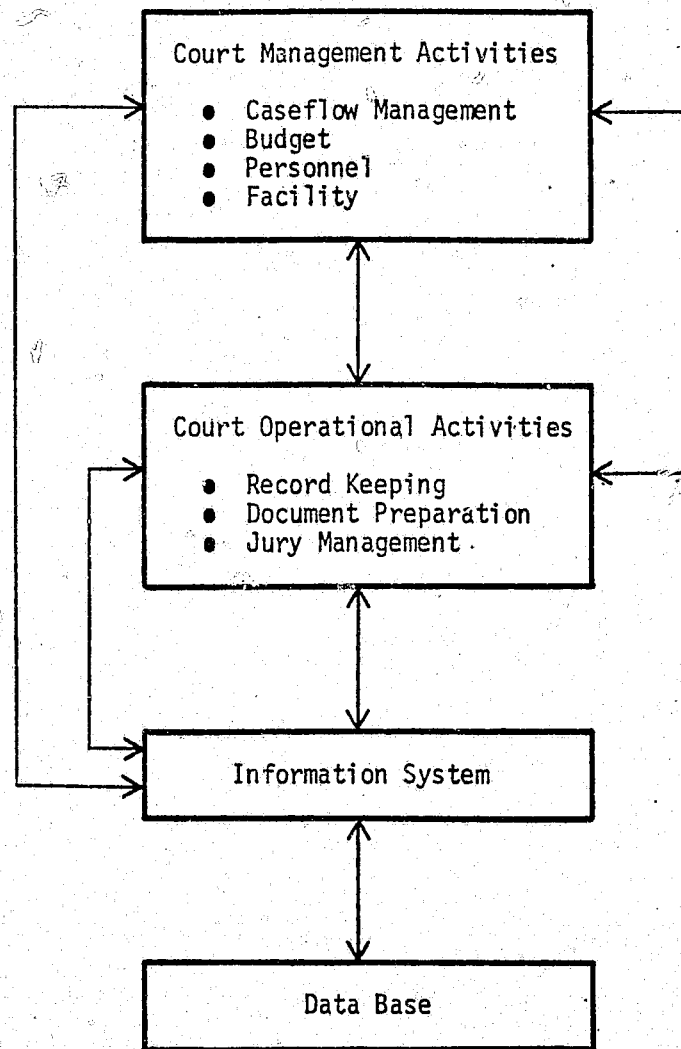
The Phase I investigation of court information systems is directly concerned with those systems, whether funded directly or indirectly by LEAA, state, county, or local governments, which have the following functional characteristics and overall goals:

- support trial (civil and/or criminal) courts;
- support routine court operations;
- provide the capability to directly support caseflow management; and
- are currently operational in their jurisdictions.

II. DESCRIPTION OF COURT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

A. Background

To improve their administration and management, many courts have developed or attempted to develop "court information systems". The justification for such development is often based on the potential value of such a system in



Relationship of Court Information System to Court Operations and Management Activities

Figure 1

helping a court reach such goals as reducing or avoiding costs, reducing time to disposition, improving the court's public image and in improving the quality of justice. The specific information processing functions which have been undertaken in the attempt to achieve these general goals vary extensively from one jurisdiction to another; the degree to which the systems have assisted the courts in successfully reaching those goals varies even more greatly.

The term "court information system" is freely used in the literature to describe a variety of the information processing tasks performed in response to the needs of court operations and/or management. Some of these tasks or applications which have been suggested for such systems are listed in Table 1.

Regardless of the tasks performed, a court information system is composed of personnel, hardware, and software (programs or procedures for system use). While much attention is generally focused on the equipment (usually including a computer) when court information systems are discussed, of equal or perhaps greater importance are the people who use it, the procedures and computer programs which guide the system's operations, and the court management functions which the system supports.

Taken together, these three elements can enable such systems to support the accomplishment of some of the tasks listed in Table 1, and serve the courts in achieving some of their overall goals. For example, by receiving timely and accurate information, a judge may be able to effectively schedule cases and thereby reduce the time to disposition of the caseload. Prompt, accurate response to inquiries, timely notices to witnesses, and fewer case continuances may improve the public's image of the court. Making better use of available resources by having accurate data directly available, reducing the number of times the same data is handled, and reducing the number of required appearances of witnesses and jurors, can save significant amounts of money. By evaluating statistics and taking action on the basis of management reports, caseflow can be improved. The quality of justice itself can be enhanced through management review of reports covering bail or sentencing patterns, more effective allocation of resources among the rehabilitative agencies, and through improved communications among court agencies and case participants.

B. Court Information Systems Definition

The term "system" as applied to a court information system implies a certain organization or relationship among its composite elements. In contrast, a "data processing application" may have been independently developed and implemented to accomplish a single task such as jury selection. A court information system as used in this assessment would meet the following three tests:

First, it should be designed to satisfy information needs at several levels of the court and court-related organizations. At the operational level, documents, reports and information necessary for day-to-day activities should be provided. For court management and administration, both exception reports and statistical summaries should be produced.

Secondly, a common data base should be developed and used by all system applications within the court. Case data should be captured and stored only once, and all reports of court activity and all inquiries of court data should then utilize the same data source. This does not necessarily mean that all

TABLE 1

POTENTIAL COURT INFORMATION SYSTEM APPLICATIONS

A. Management

Case Flow Management (Cases overdue, cases behind schedule,
cases listed by age)
Attorney, Prosecutor, Judge, etc. Assignment
Statistics on Court Activity and Status of Cases
Personnel Management
Court Room Assignment
Planning, Research and Evaluation
Resource Allocation and Utilization

B. Administration

Accounting and Budgeting
Payroll; Other Financial Functions
Personnel Data Processing and Records
Inventory and Property Control
Purchasing Goods and Services
Jury Selection and Administration
Bond, Fine, Alimony and Child Support Payment Accounting

C. Operational Functions

Case Scheduling
Docketing
Register of Actions Maintenance
Calendars Preparation
Indices Preparation
Notices, Summons, Subpoena, and Other Operational Document
Preparation
Warrant and Summons Control
Probation Support
Parking Ticket Processing
Traffic Citation Processing
Prisoner Inventory
Interface with Criminal History System, including Disposition
Reporting
Case Transfer Between Courts

data must reside in one large file, but that all pertinent data is captured, stored only once (except for reasons of security), and logically related.

Thirdly, the data base should be built up directly from routine recording of operational transactions. Thus, no special effort would be required to gather the data for the system since data entry becomes a routine part of normal operations.

In contrast, court data processing applications may spring up to serve a particular and relatively narrow need (e.g., printing traffic citations or summonses) without consideration of the requirement for management reports, the need for answering inquiries, or the advantages of integration with other court activities. Separate and unrelated applications may be used to process small claims or to list criminal cases with no comprehensive management reports spanning the different case types. Under these circumstances, records are typically maintained by separate court offices, in incompatible formats, covering different time periods, and lacking elements of data which could be useful to other agencies.

A data processing application which focuses exclusively on a single activity such as gathering statistics is not, therefore, a court information system, since it usually involves special data collection, is not based upon routine case transactions and does not use a common data base.

In undertaking this assessment of court information systems, it was necessary to define and bound the universe of such systems to be considered. The following paragraphs briefly describe a number of facets of "court information systems" and then specify the characteristics which constituted those systems of assessment significance. The resultant universe thus provided a basis for consideration of the court information systems which, it is believed, are of greatest interest to the justice community and to system development decision-makers within the courts.

1. Support to Caseflow Management. The universe of information systems serving courts is quite broad, encompassing such applications as the production of statistics, accounting, budgeting, jury selection and management, as well as individual case processing including generation of court calendars, preparation of notices to case participants, maintenance of dockets, preparing reports of overdue cases, and other operational functions. While support to a number of useful court services can be provided by solely administrative information systems, this assessment is concerned only with those systems which are intended to support caseflow and caseflow management in addition to any administrative functions. This set of operational and management activities is significant not only because movement of cases is the heart of trial court operations, but also because the caseflow function can be greatly aided by the availability of accurate and timely information. The basic elements of caseflow management activity, which can be supported by a court information system, include: scheduling of cases; record keeping, monitoring caseflow; assigning judicial and other court resources; maintaining a central source of information; and developing statistics.

It should be noted, however, that "information" alone cannot perform case-flow management. The accomplishment of that activity is a judicial responsibility and requires a commitment on the part of court management to take action on the basis of the available information as a part of a continuing program of management and administration.

2. Court Levels Supported. Information systems have been devised to support all types and levels of state, county and municipal courts. Significant differences in operational activity, of course, exist between the trial courts, those courts which actually hear evidence and try cases, and the appeals courts which perform the function of judicial review. While an information system can be of benefit to both levels of courts, its contribution to caseflow management would be far greater in trial courts. For that reason only trial court information systems are included within the court information system universe considered in this assessment. However, information systems serving any level of trial court are included. Thus, systems assisting courts of general jurisdiction or inferior courts of limited jurisdiction have been considered. Such courts may hear civil and/or criminal cases and where computerized information systems are involved, usually serve a medium to large-sized community.

3. Court-Sponsored Information Systems. Within a jurisdiction there are often individual information systems which operate to serve a specific agency or organization such as those systems serving only the District Attorney or other prosecutorial offices, defender organizations, probation, or other non-court (but court-related) agencies. While such systems may provide some elements of caseflow management activity, the assessment deals only with systems designed to serve the court directly.

4. Scope of Court Information Systems. Information systems which serve the courts have been developed by individual courts as well as counties (to serve all courts within the jurisdiction); by states (to serve all or a selected subset of its courts); and also developed as part of a comprehensive criminal justice information system (CJIS) serving the criminal justice community (including law enforcement, probation and correction agencies). All such court information systems were considered in the assessment, however, where a CJIS had been developed for a jurisdiction, only the performance of those system elements directly involving the court has been studied.

5. Extent of Automation. Support for the different aspects of a court's operation does not, of course, necessarily require a computer or other electronic data processing equipment. Equipment used in an information system can range from the non-computer utilization of index cards, desk calculators, magnetic display boards, and memory typewriters through to the use of microfilm storage and retrieval devices, powered files and other manual or semi-automatic data processing equipment. Although many information systems are, indeed, operated using such techniques, the amount of data to be manipulated and constantly repeated, combined with the ever-decreasing price of data processing equipment, make computer-based systems potentially very cost effective for the utilization in the courts. This is particularly true of those trial courts with heavier caseloads. For these reasons the assessment has been limited to court information systems employing some form of electronic data processing whether with or without an "on-line" capability.

C. Field Site Visit and Information System Features

Site visits were made to the following jurisdictions selected from those which met the criteria previously described. These courts represent approximately one-third of all the jurisdictions with currently operating court information systems in the United States.

- Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Cleveland)
- Dallas County, Texas (Dallas)
- Tarrant County, Texas (Ft. Worth)
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh)
- Beaver County, Pennsylvania
- Santa Clara County, California (San Jose)
- Alameda County, California (Oakland)
- San Francisco, California
- Union County, New Jersey (Elizabeth)
- State of Colorado (Denver)
- Broward County, Florida (Ft. Lauderdale)
- District of Columbia (U. S. District Court)

While these courts were not selected randomly, they were picked to provide a representative cross-section of the court information systems now operating in the United States. The following paragraphs briefly describe both the operating systems as they were observed and some characteristics of the projects which produced them.

1. Court Information Systems Features - General Characteristics. From the description of the criteria for court information systems it would appear that the selected systems would represent a fairly homogeneous set. However, this was not the case. For example, of the thirteen jurisdictions visited, nine served multiple courts while four served only an individual court. Superior or upper courts were served by twelve of the thirteen systems, four of which also served lower court levels, while one system served municipal or lower level courts only.

Seven systems provided information on criminal cases only, while six processed data for both civil and criminal cases. This is not surprising in view of the fact that funding for system development was almost universally obtained through LEAA via the state planning agencies.

In addition, five of the court information systems visited were part of a more comprehensive criminal justice information system (CJIS) serving other criminal justice agencies as well.

Twelve of the systems provided some on-line capability, either for data entry or data retrieval, with only one system being entirely batch oriented. However, several of the "on-line" systems depended upon batch inputs and provided only on-line inquiry capability.

2. Court Information System Development Projects. Projects to produce these systems were undertaken by the court in seven jurisdictions (four by court administrators, one by the clerk, one by a judge, and one by the state court administrator), by a CJIS committee (four), by a bar association (one), and by the Federal Judicial Center (one). The majority (nine) of the courts utilized county data processing facilities, only two courts had their own computer (one of which was a minicomputer), one state court administrator provided the computing facility and the Federal Judicial Center provided the data processing equipment in one instance.

The time required for the analysis of system requirements and conceptual design of the information systems ranged from three years to zero. In the latter case a "turnkey" system was procured and installed without any significant analysis. However, eight of the thirteen systems required approximately one year for the analysis phase of system development. The time for system implementation ranged from one year to four years, with the average time less than two years. However, several of these implementation times covered an entire CJIS project. Only two of the systems were using "packaged software" while another has recently stopped using such a package.

Costs for court information system development ranged even more widely, from a high of four million dollars to less than half a million. Development costs in excess of a million dollars were not uncommon. With the exception of one court system funded by the Federal Judicial Center and the two systems funded to a significant extent by their counties, funding for the remaining ten systems came almost entirely from LEAA via the state planning agencies. (It should be noted that one of the criteria for selecting sites to be visited was to observe some systems which had been funded by county rather than LEAA money. Thus, the proportion of LEAA-funded court information systems may be even higher.)

Annual operating costs for the systems varied as extensively as did the development costs. Although two systems expended about a hundred thousand dollars per year for operations, many spent well over a million dollars per year. (The reader is cautioned that these cost figures may contain significant inaccuracies because of the different budgeting and accounting methods used by the various jurisdictions. While there was an attempt to obtain a comparable set of figures, such items as court personnel costs, allocation of computer time, etc. were seldom treated in the same manner in each jurisdiction. Nonetheless, it appears that the wide range of annual operating costs on the order of ten-to-one does exist among the systems.)

These general characteristics indicate the variety of information system development projects and types of courts which they serve. Specific features of the thirteen court information systems visited are summarized below.

3. System Features Supporting Routine Court Operations.

- Two systems (15%) produce court dockets (where a docket is a synopsis of significant events in a case).
- Three systems (23%) produce notices for case participants.
- Ten systems (77%) produce court calendars (where a court calendar is a list of cases scheduled for a particular date. In some jurisdictions this was termed a "docket").
- All thirteen (100%) systems provide rapid response to queries. One system was, in fact, able to accomplish rapid response with a batch computer system which provided revised microfilm case records prepared overnight.
- Nine of the systems (69%) provide printed indexes of cases and participants.
- Six of the systems (46%) provide jail lists or indications that defendants and/or witnesses were incarcerated. (However, it should be noted that four of these were elements of a CJIS.)
- Nine of the systems (69%) provide one or more operational reports used by other (i.e., non-court) agencies.

4. Features Supporting Court Management.

- Nine of the systems (69%) produce some form of aged-case or overdue case report, which could be used to monitor caseload.
- Eight of the systems (62%) provide information on an individual's caseload, most often for judges operating under an individual calendaring system.
- Reports on sentencing patterns are produced in only two (15%) of the thirteen systems.
- Eleven systems (85%) yield statistics of various types including a number of different reports summarizing various court activities over time.
- In six of the systems (46%) statistical reports for other agencies are produced.
- In none (0%) of the systems visited was there any attempt to automatically schedule cases.
- Only one (8%) of the thirteen systems has been the subject of a relatively comprehensive evaluation. In another, a limited cost comparison before and after the system installation was made by an outside agency.

III. COURT INFORMATION SYSTEMS (CIS): AN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

A. Background

In developing a framework as a basis for the judgmental assessment, the project team was guided by the Phase I Study Work Description*. That document describes the framework in terms of the assumptions that underlie the project design. Chains of such assumptions link the expenditure of funds to project activity (or intervention), the project activity to the immediate outcome, and the immediate outcome to the impact on the overall problem.

Although it was expected that the framework structure would directly result from the field site visits and from the structured telephone interviews, it was necessary for the project team to draw upon other resources. The site visits and telephone interviews revealed that in no jurisdiction was a formalized set of defined, consistent and measurable goals and objectives established prior to the development of the court information system. In fact, the system designs were, in general, based only on an implied assumption that the courts would operate more effectively if an information system, utilizing advanced technology, were installed and operating. Consequently, no detailed, quantitative project evaluations had been performed. In only one court had even a qualitative evaluation been attempted.

This section of the report summarizes the framework structure developed by the project team for use in the judgmental assessment of court information systems. It is believed that the framework will be of considerable assistance to system designers and decision makers in the courts, LEAA and the state planning agencies who are involved in planning, designing and implementing court information systems.

B. Approach to the Development of the Assessment Structure

Members of the project team were not, of course, dependent only on the site visits and interviews for information on court information projects and systems. Rather, there was a considerable background of past experience in various fields upon which the project was able to draw. Such experience included information system analysis, design and implementation in a number of diverse court, criminal justice and law enforcement areas. In addition, the project team made use of general information on project management and evaluation.

Combining this background with the information obtained earlier in the evaluation effort, the project team identified a small set of fundamental court problems which were then restated in the form of goals. Next, corresponding sets of information-based court actions that could help solve these problems were selected. A similar process was then used to identify generic goals for information system designs which would collect, process, store, retrieve and communicate the information required to support such court actions. Corresponding sets of information system actions that would help meet the goals were

*Work Description for a Phase I Study Under the National Evaluation Program, NILECJ/LEAA, April 30, 1974.

then identified. Finally, a tentative set of measures of accomplishment was developed for each of the identified goals.

C. General Assessment Framework Structure

1. Nature of Information Support Systems. Many actions can be taken that will have a direct impact on court operations. For example, increasing the number of judges assigned to trial work, together with making corresponding increases in other associated resources, can be expected to directly increase the rate of case dispositions. By contrast, establishing a new or improved information system to support court operations and management cannot have this kind of direct impact. Of itself, the information system will not improve the speed with which cases are handled, or the quality of the judicial process. It will not improve the image of the court, and will probably not reduce court operating costs. Indeed, it is only when the outputs of the new or improved information system are suitably utilized by court managers and operating personnel, and made the basis of their activities and decisions, that the information system will have a beneficial operational impact. Like other support functions, information activities have only an indirect influence on court production or court results.

To impact on court operations, one first needs a person -- a staff worker or manager -- who is motivated and able to take action. If such a person is provided with better information, through a new or improved information support system, he can use this data to improve court activities.

The indirect nature of the support provided by an information system leads to more complex relationships within the assessment framework than would otherwise be the case. The framework, in fact, has been constructed using two largely separate areas, a court operations' area and an information system's area. Within each area a set of framework elements (i.e., broad goals or objectives) is defined, assumptions are made concerning what actions are needed to support the goals or objectives, and measures of achievement are established. This general framework structure is indicated in Figure 2.

2. Framework Elements. The assessment framework for court information systems contains three sets of elements relating to Court Operations, Court Management and Administration, and the Court Information System. The first group represents desirable attributes of court activities. The second reflects two general objectives of court management, and the last identifies information system objectives that will contribute indirectly to the realization of these attributes.

a. Policy Goals for Court Operations:

- (1) Reduced Time to Disposition
- (2) Improved Public Image
- (3) Improved Quality of Justice, and
- (4) Cost Reduction or Avoidance.

It can be seen that these goals reflect the following aspects of a sound judicial process:

- Provides a speedy trial -- i.e., does not involve undue delay.
- Interacts well with the involved members of the public, and commands their respect.
- Meets generally accepted criteria for the impartial administration of justice.
- Is carried out in a cost-effective manner.

It is believed that these four goals reasonably characterize the major objectives of an effective court, and also relate to the most frequently cited court problems.

b. - General CIS goals of Court Management and Administration:

- (1) Utilization of CIS to more effectively manage the court.
- (2) Effective Management of the CIS Project.

c. Court Information System Objectives:

- (1) Improved Information System Outputs. (Greater usefulness of system outputs to the users of the information.)
- (2) More Effective Data Handling. (Availability of efficiently produced, timely, accurate and accessible information.)
- (3) CIS Cost Containment or Reduction. (Efficient use of material and personnel resources.)

In summary, then, there are nine elements in the main evaluation framework: four are elements applicable to Court Operations, three are applicable to the CIS and two are applicable to court management.

D. Overall Structure

The framework structure for assessment is depicted in Figure 2. Each element is comprised of a general goal or objective, such as Reduced Time to Disposition, and two or three subgoals or subobjectives, referred to only by abbreviated titles. Below the framework elements the supporting Assumptions, the Information-Based Court Actions and the CIS Program Actions which, if undertaken, would contribute to the Achievement of the goals, are indicated (but not defined). Below the Actions, the Measures of Achievement -- parameters, ratios or indices of the degree of success in achieving the goals -- are also referenced. (See Figure 3 for example of one framework element.)

It should be noted that the "Assumptions" relevant to the Court Operations and Management elements are those that are information-based. The phrase "information-based" means that CIS outputs are required in order for the actions

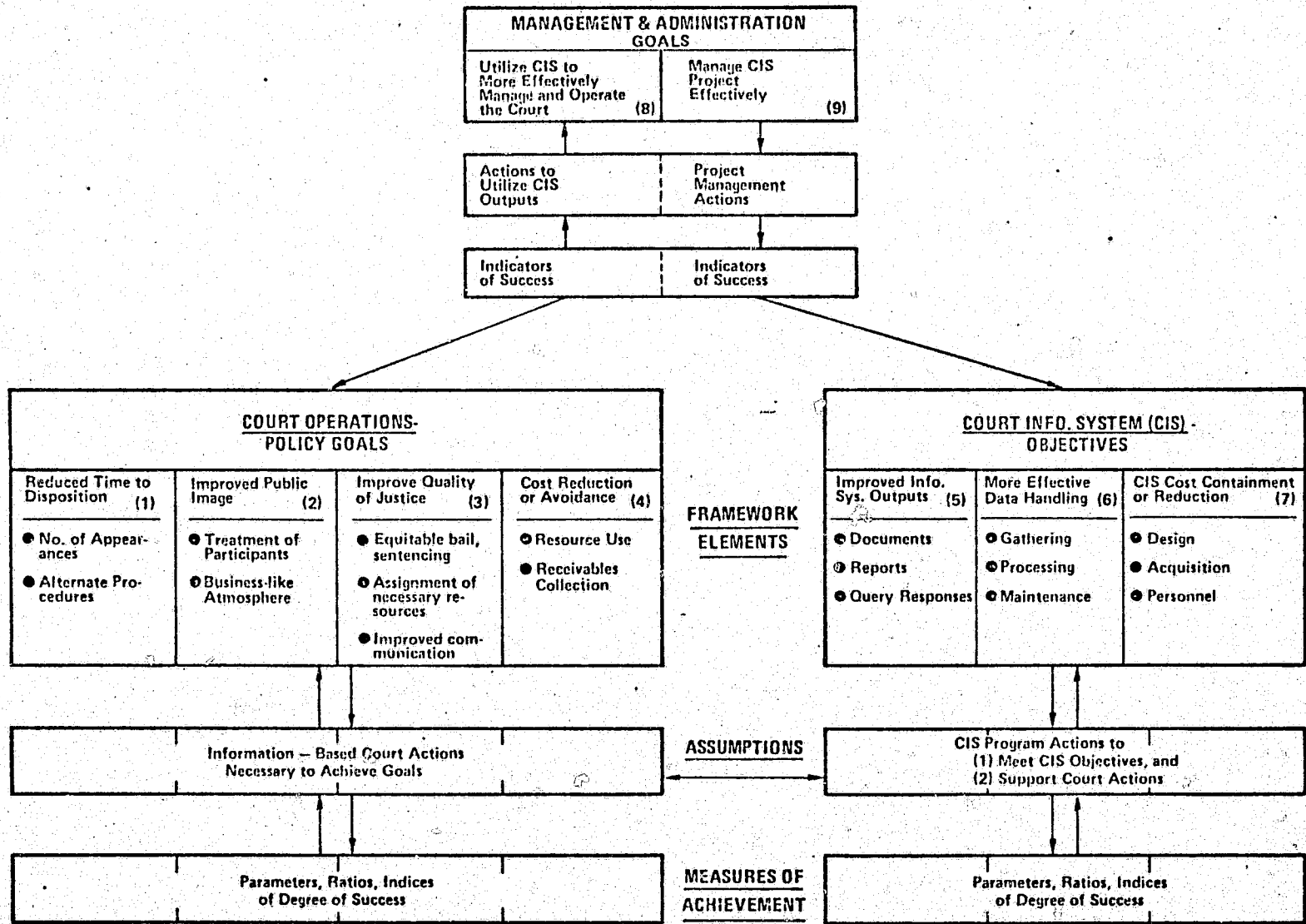
to be successfully carried out. While there may be many non-information-based actions that would be helpful in meeting the stated goals, these are not relevant to the information systems assessment. Such assumptions, therefore, have a dual aspect; they are designed (collectively) to meet CIS Objectives and individually to support the Court Operations.

E. Organization and Management -- A Necessary Pre-requisite

The assessment structure just discussed, and the nine goals that are included in it, are only part of the assessment picture. In order for the goals to be accomplished, a suitable management structure is required, both for the court operation itself, and also for the CIS project. This is portrayed in the upper part of Figure 2. Although the requirement for an effective management structure may seem obvious, studies of court operations and the site visits showed that lack of effective management is commonly the greatest problem.

Courts by their nature involve several different types of professional personnel and corresponding functions -- judges, prosecutors and clerks, for example -- which though inter-related are often relatively autonomous. Frequently, there is no mechanism that manages the several functions, or that is concerned with the overall management of cases. The autonomy is to some extent necessary, since the judicial and prosecutorial functions, for example, cannot be merged without compromising the quality of justice. But the autonomy tends to extend beyond areas in which it is necessary, to areas, like caseflow management, where it is not. Also, judges, who are recognized to be the most senior court personnel, are not usually "managers" by either training or experience and may be reluctant to assume that role. Even in those courts that have established the position of court manager or administrator, that position is often ineffective because of lack of real "clout" (managerial mandate), lack of resources or other factors. But, clearly, for a court information system program (or any improvement program) to be successful, requires mechanisms not only for planning the necessary changes, but also for implementing them. These mechanisms could be provided through a number of different organizational forms -- but the mechanisms must exist, and must be effective.

Similar considerations apply to the management of a CIS development project. Literature in the field of information system projects indicates that to have a high probability of success such a project must meet several conditions. There should be an orderly sequence of phases, including setting objectives, detailed design, acquisition of the necessary equipment and software, documentation, training, installation and test. There must be full participation by management and operating personnel who will use the system. There must also be suitable policy and decision mechanisms to resolve issues and make trade-offs between conflicting interests. Finally, there must be an identification of sources of both long and short-term system development and maintenance funds. Many information system projects have been conducted without adequate recognition of the importance of these conditions -- with results that have varied from mediocre to disastrous. These problems could have been avoided if good practices had been followed.



FRAMEWORK
FIGURE 2

Figure 3

Detailed Framework Element Sample

FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 1

COMMENTS BASED ON SITE VISITS

Policy Goal: Reduced Time to Disposition

- Subgoals:
- Reduced number of required court appearances
 - Greater use of procedures (e.g., master sessions, pretrial conferences) not requiring court appearances.

Assumptions: Information-based Court Actions that should Reduce Time to Disposition

- Avoid Scheduling cases when participants legitimately not available.
- Identify overdue cases at several points in the case-handling process.
- Identify in advance potential problems (e.g., attorney with excessive caseload).
- Ensure all participants get timely notice of scheduled events.
- No CIS observed attempted to do this. Generally, data on participants' activities was insufficient.
- Most CIS's provided aged listing or other report on age of case. A few also reported at intermediate points in the process.
- Only one court attempted to do this.
- Three courts prepared and sent notices of upcoming events. Some courts overcame the problem procedurally.

Measures of Achievement: Parameters, Ratios, Indices that are Associated with Reduced Time to Disposition

- Reduction in case backlog as fraction of annual workload
- Reduction in number of continuances per case.
- Reduction in average time to disposition.
- Reduction in number of dismissals for lack of speedy trial.
- Increase in number of cases disposed (per month, per judge, etc.).
- Some data available for post-CIS; baseline data may be difficult or impossible to assemble.
- Data probably available for post-CIS; baseline data might be gathered by sampling.
- Data probably available for post-CIS; baseline data might be gathered by sampling.
- Data available from sampling, both before and after CIS.
- Data available for post-CIS; some baseline data available, accuracy is questionable.

IV. COURT INFORMATION SYSTEMS: AN ASSESSMENT

A. Introduction

As a result of in-depth discussions held with court administrators, judges, court management consultants, LEAA regional court and systems development specialists, state planning agency representatives and other personnel involved in developing, implementing and operating court information systems, a wide range of significant issues concerning such systems were identified. (See Figure 4.) These discussions were supplemented by an extensive literature search, which examined existing documentation dealing with the requirements, uses, and operation of court information systems. These primary issue areas are discussed in detail in an earlier product of the Phase I Evaluation effort.*

Following the on-site field visits made by the project team to courts participating in court information system development and operation, it was possible to examine the actual approaches taken by those courts in meeting the significant issues involved in system implementation.

B. Findings Concerning Court Information Systems Utilizing the Assessment Framework

Using the framework developed in the Phase I Evaluation effort, the following summarizes some of the findings and conclusions resulting from the visits to jurisdictions with operating court information systems. The framework (shown on Figure 2) describes a structure which relates the organization, management, goals, assumptions and measures of achievement of court information systems.

With regard to the measures, in no court visited have well defined measurable project goals been established. Therefore, baseline data concerning the state of affairs before the court information system became operational (pre-CIS) was virtually non-existent. In many courts intervening events will render pre- and post-CIS measures virtually meaningless (e.g., adoption of a court rule requiring disposition of a criminal case in 180 days or major changes in court procedures such as the change from the use of a master calendar to an individual calendar scheduling system). In addition, it appears that much of the pre-CIS data which was routinely gathered is of doubtful accuracy. While this renders comparisons of pre- and post-CIS activity difficult, such comparisons are not entirely precluded. Much basic data can be extracted from the individual case records.

* Burton Kreindel, Robert H. Adams, Robert V. D. Campbell, Susan P. Hobart and John P. Moreschi, National Evaluation Program, Phase I Final Report: Court Information Systems: Preliminary Findings and Issues, The MITRE Corporation, November 1975, MTR-3282, Volume I, NCJ-37883.

Figure 4

Significant Court Information System Issues

1. To what extent have analyses of court information requirements been made prior to the design of court information systems?
2. To what extent should a court attempt to use its own personnel resources to develop and implement a court information system?
3. Is adequate funding available to support not only the design and implementation of court information systems, but also to permit continuing operation and maintenance of the systems after they become operational?
4. Has the information made available by court information systems been used effectively for caseload management?
5. To what extent have courts which are developing court information systems transferred computer programs and/or systems currently operating in other jurisdictions?
6. Have courts, which are planning to develop court information systems, made use of objective, informed and technically competent consulting support assistance?
7. To what extent do courts establish a separate project organization to direct the implementation of the court information system and where in the court's organization is the responsibility for project management placed?
8. What role have the eventual users of the court information system played in the system design and development process?
9. In what way has the application of the "separation of powers" doctrine affected the development of court information systems?
10. How strong has been the support of judges and court administrators in court information system planning and development?

Figure 4 (Concluded)

11. To what extent have court personnel been adequately trained and motivated to operate and use court information systems?
12. Are courts acquiring dedicated data processing equipment for use in operating court information systems?
13. Are court information system computer programs and procedures being adequately documented so that system improvements can be made and so that system transfers can be accomplished?
14. What limiting effect have long-standing court practices and rules had on the implementation of court information systems?
15. In what ways has the installation of an information system constrained or restricted traditional court activities or organization?
16. How effective are court information systems in collecting, processing, storing, and retrieving court data?
17. How has the quality of justice been effected by court information systems?
18. Is useful data available from past evaluations of court information system projects?

Many of these primary issues reflect the fact that the objectives of court information system projects can be achieved, not only through their direct intervention in the processes of the criminal justice system, but also through the second order effect of improved caseflow management and court administration on judicial operations. It became apparent during the data gathering activity that many of those concerned with the operation and utilization of court information systems feel that the success and effectiveness of a system project is dependent in large measure on the acceptance of the system by court personnel and its utilization in management and administration. The system design, itself, may be of secondary importance in accomplishing overall system objectives.

Summary of Assessment Findings and Conclusions

1. The movement of cases is the key element in reducing court delay and the need for information support to accomplish case movement is recognized.
2. Over thirty comprehensive court information systems are in operation and more are planned.
3. Little authoritative information concerning court information systems is available to the courts or to other planning and funding decision makers although there is a considerable need.
4. Court information systems require significant funding support both for development and continuing operation.
5. There is little transfer of lessons learned from one court information system project to another. The wheel is being re-invented.
6. There is no trend to court-owned computers. Most court information systems use county data processing centers.
7. The availability of LEAA funding may be the spark that initiates a court information system project rather than any expressed need of the courts.
8. The "separation of powers" doctrine has not interfered with the joint use of computing facilities by the judiciary and the executive law enforcement agencies.
9. Court information system projects have not had any clear statements of goals and objectives and their analysis of the information requirements of the courts has generally been inadequate.
10. System development projects have had poor work plans and have had minimal involvement of judges, or other court operational or management personnel in system planning or design.
11. Current systems have many design deficiencies which result in inefficient and costly operation.
12. Management reports, which could be useful for accomplishing caseflow management and court administration, are seldom used by court personnel.
13. More court information systems utilize on-line computer terminals for output of data to court users than use such terminals for rapid input and output.
14. No formal quantitative evaluations of court information systems were uncovered by the research team.

15. There is little base-line data readily available for use in conducting evaluations of the effectiveness of court information systems.

In general the assessment concluded that court information systems are operating, but are still evolving into a useful, integral part of normal court operations. While their potential for reducing the average time to disposition, improving the quality of justice and improving the court's public image appears to be substantial, there has been insufficient evaluation to conclusively determine their effect. Such systems are, however, increasing in both numbers and complexity and play a significant role in those jurisdictions where they have been introduced.



END