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A PLAN FOR THE REORGANIZATION OF CRIMINAL STATISTICS IN THE UNITED STATES.

LOUIS N. ROBINSON.¹

Before submitting a plan for the reorganization of criminal statistics in the United States, I wish to present briefly the facts of the present situation.

The Federal Census Bureau has recently changed its plan of collecting criminal statistics. It will be remembered that prior to the last census such criminal statistics as it obtained were mostly gathered at the time of the regular population enumeration, and related mainly to persons confined in penal and correctional institutions on a certain day of the year. The limiting in 1900 of the decennial work to four main lines of inquiry made necessary a change in the manner of collecting criminal statistics. In 1903 schedules were sent out to the keepers of jails, penitentiaries and reformatories, and this time the emphasis was laid upon commitments during the calendar year. The intention is, I believe, to pursue the same policy in the future. The next report of this nature would then appear some time after the main work of the 1910 census is completed. The Census Bureau has also made a beginning toward the collection of judicial criminal statistics. Certain counties in various states have been selected and clerks from the census office sent there to fill out prepared schedules by reference to the criminal dockets. The first report will be for 1906. What plans for the future of this work are being contemplated I am unable to say.

Many of the states have collected judicial criminal statistics, a very few prison criminal statistics, and some statistics of prisoners. The following table will give some idea of the nature and extent of this work of the states:

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TABLE SHOWING EXTENT AND NATURE OF THE WORK OF THE STATES
IN THE COLLECTION OF CRIMINAL STATISTICS.

State.	Collects Judicial Criminal Statistics.	Collects Prison Criminal Statistics.	Collects Statistics of Prisoners.
Maine	Yes		
New Hampshire	Yes*	Yes*	Yes
Vermont	No	Yes	No
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	No
Rhode Island	No	Yes	No
Connecticut	No	Yes	No
New York	Yes	No	Yes
New Jersey	No	No	No
Pennsylvania	Yes	Yes	No
North Carolina	Yes	No	Yes
South Carolina	Yes	No	No
Florida	Yes	No	No
Ohio	Yes	No	Yes
Indiana	No	No	Yes
Illinois	No	No	Yes
Michigan	Yes	Yes	No
Wisconsin	Yes	No	Yes
Minnesota	Yes	No	Yes
Iowa	Yes	No	No
Missouri	No	No	Yes
North Dakota	Yes	No	No
Tennessee	No	No	Yes
Alabama	Yes	Yes†	No
Louisiana	Yes	No	No
Texas	Yes	No	No
Oklahoma	No	No	No
Montana	Yes	No	Yes
Wyoming	No	No	Yes
Colorado	No	No	Yes
Utah	Yes	No	No
Nevada	Yes	No	No
Idaho	Yes	No	No
Washington	Yes	No	No
Oregon	Yes	No	No
California	Yes	No	Yes

*Nature not known, as data were not at hand.

†Exact nature not known, as data were not at hand.

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The character of the statistics in each state has been noted in earlier parts of this work. It is sufficient here to state that the statistics are, from the point of view of a student of criminology, almost without exception worthless. The reasons for this state of affairs are, broadly speaking, four. It must be remembered that the states have had a double purpose in view in the collection of these statistics. They were intended to furnish information for administrative purposes, as well as to give an index of the nature and extent of criminality in the community. If anything, the administrative purpose was less evident in the judicial criminal statistics than in the others. But these judicial criminal statistics enabled the state authorities to gain an oversight of the work of the courts and the attorneys, though the compilation and analysis seems quite generally to have been made with the sociological idea uppermost. Likewise, the prison criminal statistics and statistics of prisoners were intended to afford information to the state officers, or to state boards, of the needs of prisons, jails and reformatories for money, buildings, etc., as well as giving information on the state of criminality within that territory. As the first reason, then, for the poor quality of the state criminal statistics I would give the presence of two purposes in the collection and the non-recognition of the fact that this circumstance rendered necessary a plan of procedure somewhat different from that which would be required where the success of but one purpose was sought.

A second cause may be found in the ignorance on the part of those charged with the collection and analysis of the statistics of the principles and methods of statistical science. This ignorance is excusable, since until recently very little opportunity for training along these lines existed in this country.² A proper understanding of the task before them would have made possible the elimination of many errors which cannot at this late date be rectified. The attitude of officials may be given as a third cause. The work has been done, as so much official work is often done, not so much for the sake of obtaining trustworthy and valuable results as to carry out the letter of the law. This has resulted in a lax enforcement of the law and incomplete returns. A fourth cause is to be traced to the presence of the spoils system in the appointment of the members, or of the secretaries of the state

²It is a fact that a large part of the statistical work done to-day by social workers is scarcely worthy of the name. A careful study of the statistical papers of the Pittsburg Survey will make this plain.

boards of charities. These positions often mean a comfortable berth for the hangers-on of the party in power, the position of secretary, at least, generally carrying with it a fair salary.

This, then, is the situation, and without some change in the present organization there can be little hope of improvement for some time to come. What is needed, if this country is to have criminal statistics comparable in value to those of European nations, is a reorganization of the existing methods of collection. The plan for reorganization which I here submit is not radical, or even new, since it is one already in force in another field of statistical work.

From 1850 to 1890, inclusive, much the same situation existed as regards mortality statistics. At each census statistics of those who had died during the year preceding were collected by the enumerators at the time of the regular enumeration. The notorious inaccuracy of these statistics brought about a change of method in 1900.

The power to collect mortality statistics rests with the individual states and cities. Many of these had, from time to time, passed statutes on this subject. Without reference to any uniform plan, there was necessarily a wide difference in their requirements. Some few of the states and cities had succeeded in obtaining adequate results, but most of these attempts were from the beginning doomed to failure because of a disregard for the statistical principles involved.³ All this the census office knew, and it elaborated a plan, the main feature of which I shall here try to describe. Briefly stated, it was to join forces with the states to secure mortality statistics of such a nature that they would both satisfy the requirements of the state boards and organizations, and at the same time give to the census office the requisite data for the compilation of mortality statistics comparable with those of other nations. Needless to say, a great deal of preliminary work and study was necessary before the plan could be put into operation. Congress passed a resolution asking for the co-operation of the states in the work, and the census office, after trying to determine the reasons for failure on the part of the states and cities, worked out the details of a system which it hoped would meet with success. This included, among other things, a standard form for reporting details and the adoption of the international classification of the

³See p. ix, column 1, of the Special Report of the Census on Mortality for 1900-04.

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causes of death. It issued pamphlets showing exactly what must be done to procure mortality statistics of value. It also sought to secure the co-operation of all societies and organizations which it thought might be interested in the work. The state legislatures were called upon to act, and the registration area, a district comprising those states and cities which "possess records affording satisfactory data in necessary detail," has, during the period from 1900 to 1908, grown from ten to seventeen states. It is the hope and expectation of the census office that this registration area will be gradually extended through the admission from year to year of other states, which shall have in the meantime attained the required standard of excellence in the collection of mortality statistics, either through the passing of new and better laws or the enforcement of existing ones.

From this brief sketch of the method of collecting mortality statistics in this country, the close analogy between the organization of mortality statistics as it existed in 1900 and the present organization of criminal statistics is, I believe, clearly apparent. The power to collect criminal statistics, as well as mortality statistics, resides in the individual states. Many of these states are now attempting to collect criminal statistics, and their efforts are attended with the same results as those which followed their endeavors to obtain mortality statistics. A few are meeting with success, but in many cases failure has been the sole result of many years of wearisome effort. I fail to see where the present plan of the census office offers any permanent solution of the question. It may secure judicial criminal statistics from a few states, perhaps, but the expense must necessarily be very large—too large to render the extension of this scheme advisable. Furthermore, it means in many states a duplication of the work and a consequent economic loss of time and money. Neither does it aid in the solution of the difficulties which confront the state boards. Their reports will be based on worthless statistics, and no uniformity in the matter of presentation of facts will exist among the several states.

I believe that the plan which has been so successful in reorganizing the mortality statistics of the country would work equally well in the case of criminal statistics. I have tried to show that the conditions were virtually the same, and surely the success of the plan in the one instance argues strongly for its adoption in the other. I shall not attempt here to work out the details of the

plan. I have no doubt, however, that the method of procedure which was adopted for the collection of mortality statistics would prove equally suitable for the reorganization of criminal statistics. It would certainly involve a careful study of the needs of the state boards of charities and of state officials and of the causes of their failure to obtain the statistics required. The classification of crimes ought also to be undertaken, and here co-operation with European authorities might prove very beneficial. The help of all the societies and organizations for the study of the dependent and criminal classes ought to be enlisted, and specialists called in to draft a program of work which would give the required results. This work would, of course, be done by the census office, since it is the only body in a position to procure the service of experts. The registration area would, of course, be small to start with, but I am of the opinion that its growth would be more rapid than that for mortality statistics has been. Since the same statistics would serve both the purpose of the states and that of the federal government, there would be no duplication of work. Uniformity in the reports from the states would be secured, and the influence of the permanent Census Bureau ought to make for an ever-increasing standard of excellence.⁴

*Regarding the methods to be followed on the forthcoming census in the collection of criminal statistics we are informed by the Director of the Census Bureau that "the statistics of crime now being collected by the Bureau of the Census relate to the prisoners and juvenile delinquents sentenced to imprisonment in the various penal institutions of the country. The data will relate to three classes: (a) the prisoners and juvenile delinquents serving sentence on January 1, 1910, (b) the prisoners and juvenile delinquents committed to serve sentence during the year 1910, and (c) the prisoners and juvenile delinquents discharged during 1910. The points covered will be sex, race, age, marital condition, country of birth, parent nativity, literacy, ability to speak English, offense, sentence, and a few other similar details.

"The chief difference between this investigation and the one conducted in 1904 will be that the present investigation will include statistics for the enormous number of persons committed to penal institutions for the non-payment of fines. This class was omitted from the 1904 report. In other respects the scope of the two reports will be very similar."—THE EDITORS.