

Spring 1932

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Recommended Citation

Ruth E. Collins, Contribution of Social Work to Parole Preparation, 22 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 864 (1931-1932)

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CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL WORK TO PAROLE PREPARATION¹

RUTH E. COLLINS²

That most important step in the prisoner's career, his parole, is one that should challenge the attention of all persons who give serious thought to the constructive treatment of the law violator. By permitting the prisoner to serve part of his sentence in the community, the last step of his rehabilitative process and the one to which all institutional effort should point, is being accomplished. The parole law exists primarily for the purpose of consideration of the individual offender, whom Healy so aptly describes as "the dynamic center of the whole problem of delinquency." It makes possible the realization that there is more to the problem of handling the criminal than his mere isolation within prison walls, more to be accomplished than his mere quarantine for a definite term of years, more to a prison sentence than retributive punishment.

No parole can be effective without first understanding the parolee. Proper parole consideration could well be termed in words of that practical yet idealistic philosopher, Spinoza, who said: "Human nature should not be laughed at, should not be shocked at, nor held in disdain, but should be understood." Before we can plan for the parole period of the law offender, we must have an understanding of the problems of his world; we need to know the social forces, both present and past, that have evolved the social group before we can understand the individual member of this group.

There are innumerable definitions of crime, but one that is admirably succinct and comprehensive is that of Professor John Gillen, of the University of Wisconsin, who defines a crime as "an act which is believed to be socially harmful by a group of people who have the power to enforce their beliefs." Although this group may insist that its primary concern is that of protection from the harm the criminal might do its members, it must be mindful that this very society can best be protected by dealing with the individual who has committed the crime, rather than with the crime he has committed. The day

¹Delivered at the 61st Annual Session of the American Prison Association at Baltimore, Md., October 22, 1931.

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must come when the maximum penalty will have been served and the gates of the prison will be opened for the former prisoner to take his place side by side with other members of the social group. How best to prepare for this very important day, the day that tests the efficacy of all our machinery for handling the offender, is the paramount question.

It is our social contacts that breed crime—the individual, whose habitat is an isolated island, commits no crime; only as associations are built up and human relationship developed do individuals commit wrongs, become immoral or violate the rights of others. Society is made up of mental and human relationships that radiate a network of influences at once both uplifting and demoralizing. It is much easier to continue creating elaborate court procedure, costly institutions and numerous legislative measures to protect us from the man who commits an overt act against our civil, property or personal rights than to attack the origin of those many contributing influences and factors to be found in our social organization.

The problem is not going to be alleviated by an expensive and more elaborate legal procedure or more ostentatious custodial equipment. We grasp this as a solution because it is more easily comprehended by our finite minds, more pleasure to construct, more flattering to our egotism and perhaps less challenging to our mental resources than would be a persistent and patient study of human relationships and the development of those intangible factors in the community which make for good citizenship.

What is needed is careful examination, open-minded study and analysis of the factors, both past and present in the life of the individual criminal, that have been responsible for his anti-social behavior. Given an individual with no overwhelming physical or mental handicaps, his attitudes and reactions are developed by his social relationships and if an ill-adjusted personality results, one that is so out of line with the norm of society that it is necessary to isolate him, his recovery can only be achieved by a reorganization of these same social forces, to a constructive purpose.

I am reminded of the nineteen year old girl who was sentenced to prison on a charge of Robbery Armed; her mother had died when she was twelve, she was taken out of school and was compelled to work early and late helping her father operate a small farm which was heavily mortgaged and upon which there was little return. The demands of her farm duties robbed her of feminine companions and although she had a native refinement, she developed the same

bravado and roughness of manner the farm laborers exhibited. Finally when her father was unable to meet the mortgage about to be foreclosed, she fearlessly dressed herself in man's attire—wearing overalls was no novelty to her—walked into the bank of the small town where she lived and at the point of a revolver, demanded money from the cashier. She gave as her only reason for this vicious act, the fact that she was so eager to help her father from economic disaster. To her mind the bank loss was of no moment. Her associations or lack of associations had given her no basis for judgment of legal rights. She was desperately in need of money and it did not occur to her that she was offending anyone's rights by taking it. In prison, special attention was directed to her reading, her companions, her industrial training; and by the time she was ready for parole, she had a reorganized sense of social values. A place was found for her in a garment factory—she had learned to function in the work of garment making with aptitude; a congenial home environment was found for her, and her parole period showed that her viewpoint had been changed from a selfish, unsocial one to one that was more constructive and socially harmonious.

The tremendous force of purely social influences is strikingly demonstrated as we observe the younger generations in homes of foreign parentage. Our juvenile court records show a direct ratio between delinquency and extent of contact with American urban life. The older generations reared in homes where traditional force had not been broken nor parental control weakened formed very different behavior patterns from their younger brothers and sisters. By being exposed to the excitement of the city streets, unsupervised recreation and allurements of youthful escapades of bravado, they experience a conflict of ideas, so different from the ideals so carefully nurtured by their elders. The counter influences resulting from the intermingling of different cultural groups thus come to shatter the confidence normally engendered by parental affection. Instead of a stable personality, one is created which is as restless and helpless as a chip on the waves of the sea.

No individual lives to maturity without acquiring a position in his relationship to other members of his social group, and in turn this group maintains a position with relation to other groups within society. It is this status that makes for our social relationships, reactions, and finally our behavior pattern. Probably the most fundamental element in the forming of our status in society is our place of residence—merely to transfer our abode from the rooming house

to a private club makes a tremendous change in our poise and outlook on life; unless, perchance, we belong to that fortunate or unfortunate group of individuals who are able to create their own world apart from the mundane surroundings. Most of that group, however, wends its way into the mental hospitals.

Again and again, most convincing studies have shown us the correlation between the character of neighborhoods and delinquency. "To begin life over again," in prison vernacular, demands looking into the nature and environment of the home and locality from which the prisoner came. We may find as we probe into this factor how often can be applied Stephen Leacock's parody on the poem we all learned in our early school days: "I remember, I remember, the house where I was born, the little window where the sun came peeping in at morn," etc. His parody reads, not so cheerfully, "I wish I could remember the house where I was born, and the little window where perhaps the sun peeped in at morn. But father can't remember and mother can't recall where they lived in that December—if it was a house at all. It may have been a boarding-house or a family hotel, a flat or a tenement; it's very hard to tell. There's only one thing certain from my questioning as yet, wherever I was born it was a matter of regret!"

Again, often it is our social position that is a criterion as to whether our behavior is classed as delinquent or praise-worthy—in a home of social distinction the child who refuses to attend school is not termed a truant by the juvenile court but is sent to a finishing school; to write checks on an inadequate bank account is not treated as fraudulence, but may be commendable generosity if one's father is affluent; to refuse to work may be merely temperamental if one's family will care for one.

During the last year the Federal penal institutions received 10,185 prisoners from the various Federal courts over the country—they represent a tremendously wide range of types of social background as above described. The parole law provides for their consideration individually. What a travesty is this legal step, if the prisoner is lost in the huge heterogeneous group and no cognizance is taken of each individual's own social factors and attitude during all that time which the court deemed should be preparation for his parole, his period of incarceration. His social study, analysis and treatment should commence the moment of his admission to the institution and continue through his entire career rather than be postponed to the date of his parole consideration.

This statement may appear trite to this group familiar with modern parole procedure, but even where an ideal parole law and procedure may be in vogue, it is far too frequent that constructive parole planning does not take place until the parole docket is prepared. In any broad consideration of parole practices, the carefully worked out program carried on in a very few of the states must not be overlooked. But, the fact remains that the great majority of the states still are woeful examples of a neglected parole system.

Stress should be laid on the prisoner's appropriate placing in the institution; industrial, recreational and educational placement. To have this assignment be any more than an arbitrary, "hit and miss" procedure, the administration must have a knowledge of the influences that have been responsible for his social behavior—knowledge of his antecedents, his industrial and educational experiences, his social responsibilities and his attitude towards them. But this knowledge is to no avail if merely placed in a file, and forgotten, as is so often done. Perhaps this is not a reflection on the prison administration so much as it is on the appropriations committee that fails to approve equipment necessary for the utilizing of this material. Here again, it appears so much easier to secure appropriations for steel structures, something that can be concretely measured, than for that less definite, yet much more meaningful equipment, personnel. As a prison administrator with a vision remarked to me the other day, "I could run a prison in a zoo if I only had the right sort of personnel." As was brought out in this morning's session on the Wickersham report, the man on the street, who is also the man on the appropriations committee, is not yet willing to accept that a correctional sentence is not merely locking the subject within steel walls.

The knowledge of the prisoner's earlier experience and attitudes should form the basis for choosing and assigning his institutional contacts and activities. The simplest analysis could have averted the tragedy of the man whose industrial experiences had robbed him of any dexterity he might have possessed that would be necessary for machine operating. His work assignment placed him on a button-hole machine; as his nerves became more and more taut he asked for transfer to another kind of work, but was denied, his foreman thinking he was merely indolent. Several times he made the same request and finally in despair he threw the machine down the steps, destroying a \$600 piece of machinery, excusing the act by saying he knew of no other way to get relief than "to break the thing." Needless to say he spent many an hour in isolation.

In any enlightened effort to handle the problem of the man from rural sections sentenced to serve five years, as so frequently happens, it is of essential value to know that he has come into the net of the law-enforcing agencies with a physical and cultural background that have been conditioning factors solely responsible for his present status.

A week ago in going over records of a group of men recently admitted to one of the Federal penal institutions, a random sample was chosen illustrating such a circumstance. This was the case of a man who had lived his entire life in an isolated, mountainous section; was illiterate with no schooling facilities ever available to him; owned a small acreage of land possessing little fertility; married at the age of eighteen; was the father of seven children and his family although on the brink of poverty was a harmonious unit. Since a child, he had observed his neighbors and his own family engaged in the manufacture of liquor as a means of a meagre livelihood—to him, distillation of liquor appeared as social an occupation as farm work. The history of his delinquencies dates from the year 1910 and he has a record of having served twelve sentences prior to the one he is now serving. Although some of these were short sentences, it is surely an indictment on our correctional program that apparently nothing has been done to aid this man to develop his potential capacities for a more progressive and constructive mode of living; so that after twelve different imprisonments he is the same ignorant, socially unassimilated being. He is going to learn a better way of living only by much patient working with him in an industrial and educational training which will in turn create improved environmental opportunities.

Since the treatment does not end with the mere recital and analysis of the factual data in his pre-institutional career, it is the social worker's task to proceed with empirical methods to build up and integrate the interpretation of these facts into a practical working concept, as the social case worker does in the community. In this program there is a singleness of aim with all of the departments in the institution. However, the social worker can well serve as the coordinator of these specialized services and resources which the institution provides. What does the local welfare organization do when a problem family is referred to it—after finding the nature of the needs, any of the resources or services that the community affords—the health clinics, the employment agencies, the recreational centers,

and even the discipline of the courts—are at the disposal of its workers in their scheme for rehabilitating the family.

In some of the institutions of Germany, particularly Saxony, social service has been a part of the prison program since 1923 when professionally-trained social workers were employed. Dr. Thorsten Sellin and others who have observed this staff at work, tell us that these men serve primarily as friends and counsellors to the prisoners and that their background covers a broad knowledge of the principles of social work, economics, community organization and a working knowledge of adult education, criminal law, psychiatry and psychology. Besides being engaged in the intra-mural social work, these men go into the home of the prisoner, contact his family and aid in making any adjustment necessary for his satisfactory return.

In the year 1930 the Federal government initiated a social service program for its penal institutions. This provides for a unit of three to five men in each of the larger institutions and a single worker for each camp and the women's institution. The positions are filled from a civil service register with professional rating for which an examination was held last year. The requirements were for a college degree with a major in social science or allied subject and the senior member of the unit must have had either two years of professionalized experience or a substitute of post graduate work in a college of recognized standing.

Their duties are to furnish the social and personal data on the prisoner's case; to be the coordinating factor in the working out of his institutional plan with the various departments existing for his reclamation—the medical and psychiatric service; the library and educational service; organized recreational service; religious service; industrial resources; and, perhaps of even greater significance is the extra-mural service of contacting the community resources in an effort to adjust relationships between the family and the prisoner, correlating the prisoner's plans with those of his family, arranging sustained supervision of economic aid to the family when necessary and with the aid of local agencies build up what may be a devitalized home. In this way, from the day of the prisoner's admission to the institution, step by step, a parole preparation is to be accomplished. A preparation that will furnish the Board of Parole with as much understanding of the man as it is possible to procure; as much remodeling of attitude as correctional influences could provide and as satisfactory placement in the community as the capacity of the prisoner and the community affords.

One of the major tasks of this unit is the creating of a rapport between the prisoner and this staff. As the offender gains faith in the sincerity of relationship with those entrusted with his rehabilitation, a confidence is developed which will permit him unconsciously to reveal his inner self. Then and then only will there be a remolding of those forces to the higher standard set for him. Before we established this service we called upon an outstanding penologist and psychiatrist for counsel. It was his advice that even before setting about to formally gather a record of the man, the social worker should mingle amongst and with the prison body, building up a rapport that later would make for the determining of an underlying attitude, the sine qua non of individualized treatment. We are aware, however, that the social workers must be men of the highest integrity and possess extraordinary wisdom and tact lest what might be a most constructive influence becomes highly destructive.

Prison social work calls for discerning and persistent effort to withstand its many discouragements, made the more prevalent by virtue of the abnormalities of a prison environment. This very abnormality demands all the more that preparation be made for transition to the more normal environment—the parole period. Prisons are built to house humanity and it must never be forgotten that it is made up of beings whose very power lies in those varying creative instincts that preclude adherence to a scientific pattern of conduct and permanence of attitude. Last winter as I passed by the new suspension bridge under construction from Manhattan to Jersey, I was much impressed with the tremendousness of its power and magnificence of its durability, being insured as the gigantic cables were bound and anchored into huge concrete anchorages. But the endurance and stability of iron and mortar are not possible when treating with human beings.

The social worker with his professional judgment, his knowledge of social relationships and their resultant complexities, analyzes the individual prisoner and helps him to develop the capacities he may possess to recover his normal place in the community and to lead a more worthy and progressive life. More than in any other field of social service does the social worker in the prison have to employ patience, insight and objectivity to see the man behind the handicap, to recognize what there is in the man to work *with* as well as *against* and to be able to enlist existing social resources, both intra and extra mural to that goal of our entire program—the reintegration of the individual.

But there is much more in our planning for the parole of the individual than the work with the man himself, if our purpose is to be anything more than a gesture in the treatment of crime. The numerous influences that continue to feed the streams of dependency and delinquency are there to greet the paroled man on his discharge from prison. The parole law is but a forlorn hope and all of our constructive efforts with the individual prisoner are abortive unless there is developed a more positive program for comprehensive and coordinated social work in the communities—one that is commensurate with the social needs.

The task of parole planning and supervision which the Bureau of Prisons is facing is well nigh overwhelming. Prisoners are sent to the Federal institutions from scattered regions, covering vast areas. To do even a semblance of social work in their parole preparation requires contacting their families and working out their proper placement in the community. Our problem is not analogous to that of the state small in area and well organized as to resources. Constantly as we appeal for cooperation in aid to a family; for assistance in securing data on the prisoner's social background; or for help in placing the parolee, we are met with the reply that no community social agency exists. It is not infrequent that no agency is provided in an entire county or group of counties or that the funds of an existent Welfare Bureau have been exhausted and not even volunteer representatives are available.

A uniformly high standard of public welfare must finally prevail in all the states of the Union before we as a nation can dare to have any sense of achievement as to our treatment of the problem of delinquency. It must be a matter of universal and not local standards. What we need is a consistent and concerted effort first to enlighten and then unify and coordinate all public welfare facilities. Any contribution social work may make to parole preparation is inextricably bound to the social forces surrounding the parolee. Whether he lives in the hills of the Appalachians or on that thoroughfare, so full of movement and turmoil, Halsted Street of Chicago, the parolee's progress is gauged by the standard the community sets for him.