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# A COMPARISON OF COUNTY JAIL INMATES WITH THE WORKING COMMUNITY FROM WHICH THEY COME

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During the course of an investigation of the working population in San Jose, California, the county seat of a prosperous agricultural and fruit raising district just south of San Francisco, the writers secured certain social data from male inmates of the county jail.<sup>1</sup> These prisoners were men who had been arrested by the sheriff for offenses ranging from vagrancy and petty larceny to grand theft and murder. Some awaited trial, others had already been sentenced to county jail terms or were about to be transferred to the state prison. They probably represent typical jail populations for Pacific Coast cities, having approximately 60,000 inhabitants.

Sixty-seven prisoners were interviewed by trained persons who recorded information on identical forms. The fact sought concerned the occupational level of fathers of these inmates, their own occupations, schooling, vocational training, marital status, nationality, age at beginning work, idleness, and amount of "climbing" or "falling" which might indicate success or failure.

In the several displays of the data which follow, the county jail inmates are compared with the census or with a sample comprising seven per cent of the general male working population, used in the larger study referred to above. This sample was representative of workers on all occupational levels in the community from among whom the county jail inmates had been apprehended. Thus, it is possible to determine to what extent and in what respects these prisoners deviate from the general run of employed persons. In these several displays the relatively small number of jail inmates calls into question the statistical reliability of differences. However, the differences noted in the frequently unrelated displays of data are all in the same direction, denoting considerable agreement and lending credence to the deduction drawn from them.

A comparison of county jail inmates by age groups with male

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<sup>1</sup> Percy E. Davidson and H. Dewey Anderson, *Occupational Mobility in an American Community*, Stanford University Press, 1936. This study was completed under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration.

workers in San Jose according to the census of 1930 reveals the following facts:

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Percentage of</i>	
	<i>1930 Census</i> N=17745	<i>Jail Inmates</i> N=67
10-19 years .....	3.7	13.0
20-30 years .....	34.0	46.3
35-54 years .....	43.8	33.3
55 or over.....	18.5	7.4
All ages .....	100.0	100.0

Some noticeable differences appear. The proportion of adolescent persons in the county jail is more than three times that of the male working population of corresponding age. On the other hand, there are proportionately fewer persons over 55 years of age in jail. Sixty per cent of the county jail inmates were less than thirty-five years of age, suggesting that in proportion to their number in the general population of workers younger men are more unstable than older ones.

The level of regular occupation of county jail inmates is next compared with that of employed males according to the 1930 census. Since the data do not permit a more precise age comparison, the gainfully employed at San Jose are represented by the distribution of workers below 35 years of age. Forty per cent of the jail inmates were above this age, so that the jail inmates are being compared with a much younger group which had had less time in which to achieve occupational status.

<i>Level of Regular Occupation<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Gainfully Employed 10-34 Years of Age</i> N=6706	<i>Jail Inmates</i> N=67
Professional Persons .....	5.4	0.0
Proprietors, etc. ....	8.8	3.7
Clerks, etc. ....	23.0	13.0
Skilled .....	19.2	20.4
Semiskilled .....	17.0	11.1
Unskilled .....	26.5	51.9
All Levels .....	99.9	100.1

<sup>2</sup> The occupational classification employed is that of A. M. Edwards, *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 28, 1933, 377-387.

Despite their greater age, the occupational status of the jail inmates suffers by the comparison. Not one attained professional status. The two groups are equally represented at the skilled level; otherwise the jail group holds a distinctly lower position on the scale of levels. Half the group is located at the level of unskilled labor.

The occupational status of the father serves as a rough index of the home situation in which the son was reared. Below is shown the distribution of the jail population on the level of the father's regular occupation, together with a corresponding distribution of a sample of gainfully employed at San Jose.

However, the occupational status of fathers of respondents of different age groups is not directly comparable, by reason of the noteworthy trend during the life span of the existing working population away from the older proprietor, skilled, and unskilled categories toward the professional, clerical, and semiskilled. It would be desirable therefore to make comparison of like age groups of sons. The data do not permit this with precision but a rough comparison can be made by again using the age group below 35 years of the San Jose sample with which to compare the jail group. Since 40 per cent of the jail group are above 35, it is being compared with a much younger group whose fathers are likely to be found somewhat more often in the professional, clerical, and semi-skilled categories. This expectation is realized only in the case of the clerical group, which contained no sons among the jail inmates.

<i>Fathers'</i> <i>Regular Occupation</i>	<i>San Jose Sample</i> <i>Sons Grouped by Fathers' Level</i> N=438	<i>Jail Inmates</i> N=63
Professional .....	4.5	11.1
Proprietors, etc. ....	44.1	28.5
Clerks, etc. ....	7.1	0.0
Skilled .....	18.3	33.3
Semiskilled .....	6.8	11.1
Unskilled .....	19.2	15.9
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Totals .....	100.0	99.9

There is an excessive proportion of jail inmates with professional, skilled, and semiskilled fathers, a deficient proportion with proprietor and clerical fathers, sons of unskilled fathers being about equally represented in the two groups. However, the jail population is too small to place great dependence in these differences.

The major source of jail inmates is found to be the manual labor levels. These levels of labor contributed 60 per cent of the jail inmates and 44 per cent of the gainfully employed sample.

Next is shown, in whole numbers, the spread on the several occupational levels of jail inmate sons grouped according to the level of the father's occupation. At the bottom of the table the percentages for all levels are shown in comparison with those of the age group 20-34 for the total sample of San Jose workers, a somewhat younger group.

Level of Fathers' Occupation	Number of Com- parisons	Jail Inmates					
		Prof.	Prop.	Clerical	Skilled	Semisk.	Unsk.
Professional ...	7	1	..	1	3	1	1
Proprietor .....	18	1	1	4	1	3	8
Clerical .....	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Skilled .....	21	..	1	1	7	6	6
Semiskilled ....	7	..	..	2	1	1	3
Unskilled .....	10	..	1	..	..	..	9
All Levels ...	63	2	3	8	12	11	27
Percentage for All Levels							
Inmates .....	100.1	3.2	4.7	12.7	19.0	17.5	43.0
Sample 20-34 years of age....	99.9	11.4	8.4	21.9	16.7	22.6	18.9

Each line of the table should be read. For example, the first line shows that the seven professional fathers have jail inmate sons fairly evenly spread on the occupational levels from the top to the bottom of the scale. Only one son attained his father's professional level of occupation. Among the fathers of jail inmates every level of worker is represented except the clerical.

The decided "pull" toward the bottom of the occupational pyramid for sons of all fathers indicates that these "black sheep" sons do not usually reach the equivalent level of their fathers. Of the 63 sons, 7 succeeded in climbing above their fathers' occupational level, 19 attained the same level, 37 dropped below their fathers' status. In spite of the small numbers of the jail group, the compared percentages plainly confirm this trend.

Having noticed the level of origin and achievement of these jail inmates, their full-time schooling is now compared with that of workers at large in the same community.

<i>Amount of Schooling</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Sample</i> N=1184	<i>Jail Inmates</i> N=66
None .....	2.7	4.5
Elementary School		
1-4 years .....	9.8	19.7
5-8 years .....	33.7	43.7
High School		
1-2 years .....	13.9	10.6
3-4 years .....	19.7	15.2
College		
1-2 years .....	5.9	...
3-4 years .....	8.4	6.1
5 or more years.....	5.9	...
Total .....	100.0	100.0

The differences in amount of schooling of jail inmates and the general working population are markedly in favor of the latter. A fourth of the jail inmates had four years or less of schooling as against an eighth of the general sample, although the jail population is much younger than the general body of workers, and therefore would be expected to have had considerably more schooling. This would suggest that age is not the factor accounting for the differences in amount of schooling shown, since young workers normally possess the larger amount of schooling.

About seventy per cent of the jail inmates had schooling limited to the elementary grades or less, whereas only 46 per cent of the general body of workers had such meagre schooling. However, 26 per cent of the jail inmates had all or part of a high school course. In this respect too, the general population was better off, for 54 per cent of these workers had high school or beyond. Six per cent of the jail inmates had gone to college, although 20 per cent of the general sample had secured that advanced schooling, a figure that is somewhat magnified by an undue representation of teachers in the sample.

The data assembled below are indicative of the ages at which jail inmates first began permanent work (defined as the first employment of eight consecutive months or more). The comparison is here made with the total San Jose sample. The jail group, being distinctly younger, would be expected to have profited by recent prolonged schooling trends and child labor legislation to delay their entrance into regular employment.

<i>Age at Beginning First Permanent Work</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Sample N=1128</i>	<i>Jail Inmates N=67</i>
Below 10 years.....	1.3	...
10-13 years .....	14.5	14.9
14-17 years .....	45.0	58.2
18-21 years .....	20.4	23.9
Over 21 years.....	8.7	3.0
Total .....	99.9	100.0

The mean age of beginning first permanent work for the San Jose sample is 17.2 and for the jail inmates 15.1 years, although the evidence is not unfavorable to jail inmates in the matter of exceptionally early employment. When the data are read in connection with the preceding table, it is evident that the jail inmates not only had considerably less schooling than the general working population but began permanent work, on the average somewhat earlier. Jail inmates either engaged in more short-time jobs or experienced considerably more idleness than was the case with the general sample. That this idleness is a fertile medium for the cultivation of crime is a matter of common knowledge. The mean number of months' idleness between the time of leaving school and of securing the first permanent job was 4.3 for the San Jose sample, for the jail inmates 11.9 months. Among jail inmates 46.8 per cent had experienced no idleness of this character, but 40.6 per cent had been idle from one to more than three years.

The table below gives an indication of the comparative occupational stability of the jail inmates as contrasted with the general working population, in terms of the number of different occupations followed.

<i>Number of Occupations Followed</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Sample N=1242</i>	<i>Jail Inmates N=67</i>
One .....	19.8	11.9
Two .....	17.9	14.9
Three .....	17.2	11.9
Four .....	15.1	20.9
Five .....	10.9	16.4
Six .....	8.5	10.4
Seven .....	4.5	3.0
Eight .....	2.9	7.5
Nine or more.....	3.2	3.0
Total .....	100.0	99.9

The mean number of different occupations followed by the two groups was 3.6 for the San Jose sample and 4.2 for the jail inmates. However, it is to be remembered that the latter is a distinctly younger group and consequently had not had comparable time in which to change from occupation to occupation. Yet these jail inmates show greater mobility, for the percentage of San Jose workers who have followed a single occupation is almost double that of the inmates who have done so. Most differences found, while statistically not highly significant, are all consistent, showing the jail population to be more mobile. Considerable movement from one occupation to another characterizes both groups, 30 per cent of the San Jose workers and 40 per cent of jail inmates having had more than four different occupations during their working careers.

As a rough measure of the vocational success of the jail inmates, the level of the regular occupation attained by them may be related to the level of their beginning occupation, for the purpose of noting to what extent they have "risen" or "fallen" during their occupational careers. In itself change of level is not a precise measure of success, but in lieu of change of income status or some better measure it will serve. The comparison in this case is made with the 10-34 age group of the sample, a much younger group which had not had as much time in which to attain final status. Nevertheless, the jail inmates are found to have fallen far short of making comparable progress in their occupational careers. The facts are as follows:

Occupational Level	Percentages			
	San Jose Sample		Jail Inmates	
	First Job N=500	Regular Occupation N=543	First Job N=67	Regular Occupation N=67
Professional .....	4.4	9.8	3.0	0.0
Proprietors, etc. ....	2.4	7.2	6.0	3.7
Clerks, etc. ....	26.2	20.4	7.5	13.0
Skilled .....	6.0	14.5	10.4	20.4
Semiskilled .....	23.2	21.8	17.9	11.1
Unskilled .....	37.8	26.3	55.2	51.9
Total .....	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1

It may be noted, first, that whereas 33 per cent of the sample began on the three upper levels, only 16 per cent of the inmates did so; also, that while 37 per cent of the sample achieved regular occupation on these levels, 17 per cent of the inmates attained this status. At the lower levels it appears that, whereas 61 per cent

of the sample begin in semiskilled or unskilled grades of labor and 63 per cent are located on the three manual labor levels in regular occupation, in the case of the inmates 73 per cent began on these two lowest levels but 83 per cent are found regularly engaged at manual labor. It thus appears that the distinctly younger sample made an equal or somewhat better showing in advancement than did the older jail group. However, the noteworthy difference is in the lower status of beginning labor with the jail group.

Reading across the top line of figures, it appears that 4.4 per cent of the San Jose sample began in the professional level, and that 9.8 per cent are on that level in regular occupation. An appreciable percentage of those now engaged as professional persons "climbed" to that level from some occupation below it. Among jail inmates 3.0 per cent of the total began as professional workers, but none is on that level in regular occupation. This indicates that those who began on that level were forced to a lower regular occupation, and that none of the jail inmates who began lower on the scale ever succeeded in reaching regular occupations at the professional level.

The same characteristic upward movement is noted for the San Jose sample of persons on the proprietor level, but some of the jail inmates have fallen from original proprietor status. The clerical level appears as an important starting point for many San Jose workers from which some move to regular occupations above or below that level. But the clerical level appears not so much as a starting point for jail inmates as a final level of regular occupation reached from some beginning occupation above or below it.

The skilled level, is, for both groups, not so much a level of beginning employment as one of ultimate regular occupation for persons who have come to it from either levels, especially the semiskilled or unskilled. The semiskilled level for the sample is an important beginning level from which workers ultimately move largely to regular occupations above it. It has less importance of this kind with the inmates. The unskilled level serves the San Jose workers considerably as a starting point from which to climb, although a fourth of all workers fail to secure regular employment above that level. The picture is even more dismal for jail inmates, of whom over half begin in unskilled occupations and almost as many are located there in regular employment.

It is safe to conclude that the general run of gainfully employed persons in the community have climbed into positions above

their beginning working level decidedly more often than have those persons who are now in the county jail.

In the table following the marital status of jail inmates is compared with that of the San Jose workers.

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Sample</i>	<i>Jail Inmates</i>
	N=466	N=67
Single .....	43.1	58.3
Married .....	51.7	37.3
Divorced .....	1.3	2.9
Widowers .....	..	1.4
Undetermined .....	3.8	..
<b>Total .....</b>	<b>99.9</b>	<b>99.9</b>

Unmarried and, therefore, persons with fewer responsibilities are more frequent among these inmates.

A comparison of the jail group with the sample shows that the San Jose sample had a mean number of children of 1.88; the jail inmates 1.96, in spite of the fact that the jail group is much younger. Nineteen per cent of married persons of the former group had no children, whereas 24 per cent of the latter were childless. The data do not indicate that the two groups differ materially in the composition of their families. Excessively large families in either group are few, 87 per cent of the San Jose sample and 96 per cent of the jail inmates having less than four children.

A comparison of the country or region of birth of the jail inmates with that of the total sample from San Jose yields the following figures:

<i>Country or Region of Birth</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	
	<i>San Jose Sample</i>	<i>Jail Inmates</i>
	N=1242	N=67
United States .....	75.4	65.7
Europe .....	17.4	8.0
Canada .....	1.7	1.5
Latin America .....	0.8	11.9
Pacific Islands .....	2.8	11.9
Orient .....	1.9	0.0

The great preponderance of both groups is native-born, but since the jail inmates are a much younger group the expectation would be a larger percentage among them of this origin. The somewhat greater proportion of jail inmates among the foreign-born is

to be charged to those from Latin America and the Pacific Islands. These jail inmates who come from Mexico and the Philippine Islands are known to be among the lower occupational levels, least favored socially and economically in Pacific Coast communities.

### *Conclusions*

This analysis of social data concerning the inmates of a county jail and the normal working population from which they come seeks to make pertinent comparisons between the two groups. Are the persons who run afoul of the law and become inmates of the county jail simply wicked people who get caught, as so many believe, or are they less fortunate circumstanced economically and socially than the general run of people in the community? Some light has been shed on this question by the facts assembled in this study.

Judged by the occupational levels into which these jail inmates were born, the meagre schooling they received, their greater idleness prior to securing permanent employment, the lowly status of their beginning employment and the limited progress upward indicated by their ultimate regular occupations, their greater occupational instability, the relatively small earnings and low standards of living permitted by their regular occupations, the fact that the preponderance of them are single men not held by the settling ties of family, lacking the stabilizing influences of home obligations and the moral discipline of marriage—all these measures of social circumstance combine to suggest that jail inmates are not identical with the normal working population, but are a group of men whose social and economic conditions of origin, training, schooling, opportunity, and achievement are more limited and circumscribed than is true of the general body of the gainfully employed in the same community.

It does not follow that early attention to the occupational needs of these inmates would have wholly prevented their conflict with the law, for personal factors may underlie their occupational difficulties and partly account for them. It is probable, however, that a suitable occupational preparation and guidance and more favorable social and occupational opportunity would have made a very decided difference in their careers. In any case, a relation of criminal behavior to the occupational status of jail inmates and their fathers is definitely suggested.