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CENTRAL STATE BUREAUS FOR THE COLLECTION OF CRIMINAL STATISTICS

C. C. Van Vechten¹

The demand for centralized state criminology units represents in fact two quite distinct needs. The first is for a centralized identification bureau to do the sort of thing that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is doing so spectacularly well in the national field. This is essentially a police function and one which involves participation in the business of current administration. The second need is for a statistical information service which would be of value in influencing policy determination by presenting and interpreting the whole broad range of figures regarding the genesis, prevention, and treatment of crime and of criminals. Such an agency would have no interest in persons except as they were illustrative of type problems and the great part of its material would deal with summaries.

It is my conviction that these two functions cannot be effectively combined in any single agency. You cannot expect the policeman to be a competent analyst and critic of the system of which he is a part; nor can you expect a statistician to make good as a detective. This fact, as I submit, amply demonstrated by the Federal Bureau

of Investigation. Here is an agency which is a conspicuous success as a police agency. It gets, keeps, and produces when needed, identifications and histories of criminals; frequently it is able to deliver the person as well. But does any statistician feel that the F. B. I. is doing a competent statistical job of analysis and interpretation of the figures they obtain? True they count crimes and criminals but mere counting is not statistical analysis. When J. Edgar Hoover gets up and tells an audience the exact number of crimes committed in a given interval of time he is guilty of an outright misstatement for widely varying degrees of accuracy of reporting "crimes known to the police" is the only hypothesis by which the intercity differences in such crimes as burglary can be explained. The one-sided view of the F. B. I. on such a subject as parole is probably inevitable to an active agency but it does not represent an objective statistical analysis.

When the proposed "Uniform Criminal Statistics Act" is considered in terms of the two divergent functions discussed it will be seen that it fails completely to recognize the severance of function. It is my conviction that a Bureau set up in terms of the act must fail at one or both the functions it at-

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tempts to cover. Almost certainly it would fail to provide competent statistical analysis.

Assuming that you are familiar with the text of the act in question, I would like to discuss it from the point of view of the fundamental objectives sought.

Sec. 1. Why put the agency under the attorney general? His functions are mostly civil. The identification part of the work is already being competently done in this state by a bureau attached to the state police.

Sec. 2. According to Mr. Leonard of our Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research "violates every principle of good statute making." If the director of the bureau is to develop good criminal statistics he should have tenure not the two year term he would have in Michigan under this statute. And why a seal of Office? And why write the salary into the Law? And why not budget the cost of the bureau as any other expense of government? Most important why not specify statistical qualifications if you want a statistical bureau?

Sec. 3. Attempts to be specific as to duties. A competent man doesn't need such detailed instructions; an incompetent wouldn't follow them. The effect of such efforts is in fact to limit the activities of the bureau.

Sec. 4. Why "promulgate classifications," especially in view of the provisions of Sec. 9 for adopting the existing ones of the F. B. I.? And what difference is promulgating going to make anyway?

Sec. 5. Means little as is. Better, "let the Director prepare rules and

forms which shall be transmitted to the Director not later than the tenth of the month following, etc., etc., and on failure to perform the Director shall notify the State Treasurer who shall withhold such funds as may be owing the local community." This wouldn't be done either, of course, but it represents teeth in a law which will be difficult to enforce.

Sec. 8. The picture of a statistician sleuthing around a penitentiary is ridiculous. The identification work there can and should be done by professionals.

Sec. 9. Is apparently in conflict with Sec. 4 on classifications. Also it is unnecessary because it could have been covered by adding the word *File* in Sec. 3.

Sec. 10. Meaningless if statistical analysis and interpretation is wanted. If we want a state identification bureau the title should be changed. It is the fundamental point of this paper that the two cannot be combined.

Sec. 11. On Cooperation is silly unless you have an incompetent, then meaningless.

Sec. 12. Here the Director acts as a consulting criminologist telling the whole state how things should be done. Quite out of character with his other duties. The possibilities of this sort of thing are indicated by J. Edgar Hoover's efforts along this line.

Secs. 13 and 14. Here I have the objections as to Sec. 10 and others. Particularly 14 would prevent study of the records by university people or privately financed research organizations. This whole difficulty is the product of

the unfortunate confusion noted in the beginning. A statistical as distinguished from an identification bureau has no need for personal data which, though a part of the public records, cannot be made public.

The inescapable conviction which I obtain from study of this bill is that it would set up the Director as a small sized Dick Tracy with statistics as a sideline. That is not the sort of Bureau I am anxious to see. It is as a criminologist rather than as a statistician that I speak when I say I am virtually inter-

ested in an agency to gather, analyze, and to some extent interpret for my state as a whole the data relevant to all aspects of the problem of crime. I am not sure but that a state central statistical board with a coverage much broader than the field of crime is the next desirable step. I am convinced, however, that the sort of Bureau which would result from the enactment of this uniform Criminal Statistics Act would postpone rather than advance the date when we have available comprehensive, valid, and reliable criminal statistics.