The Function of a Research Department in an Institution for Delinquents

Walter Webster Argow

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc

Part of the Criminal Law Commons, Criminology Commons, and the Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons

Recommended Citation
THE FUNCTION OF A RESEARCH DEPARTMENT IN AN INSTITUTION FOR DELINQUENTS

Walter Webster Argow

"... the test of the survival of a field of treatment of human behavior ills is whether or not its methods are moving in the direction of science."—Harry M. Shulman.

Criminological research, Michael and Adler inform us, is in a sorry condition. In the first place, research presupposes a scientific point of view; and they say that criminology has not yet achieved its science-hood. And in the second place, what has been done is of limited use because of the haphazard choice of the field of inquiry and the resultant discoordination and non-applicability of the findings. To this may also be added the charge that the idea of research is so misunderstood or misused in its practical application in the field that what passes for research may better be defined as either statistical record keeping or administrative press agentry. In spite of this admittedly sorry condition there has grown up in some quarters a definite feeling of need for the clear, cold inquisition of the scientist. Some states have begun to set up research departments in connection with their correctional machinery to assay the products being turned out. Such is the case, for example, with New York. In 1932 there was set in operation a new institution for the treatment of delinquent boys. It was unique in that it "made a beginning toward the University idea in dealing with the problem of delinquency when it invited the Columbia [University] Medical Center to organize a treatment and research department in the... School." It was to be a "laboratory for the study of [adolescent] behavior with particular reference to the problem of modifying anti-social conduct." For the first few years most effort was spent in building an "organization for day-to-day service and treatment." Later with an enlarged personnel it was possible to devote more time to pure research activity.

In line with these new developments it is the purpose of this study to survey the trends of research in correctional schools in general, to point the way toward coordination of study and also to indicate methods of initiating research activity. We shall leave to the coming field of Sociometry the task of evaluating the departments themselves.

The primary task of research

Research and the need for proper equipment do not have to be sold to

Criminology, New York University.


Quotations from the unpublished "Protocol for Research in Delinquency" (6).
institutions of higher learning for the simple reason that they are founded on the idea of scientific inquiry and evaluation. Neither does Industry have to be convinced of its value; and of late, Business has become aware of the wisdom of seeing into the future by means of analyzing the past. But Public Service administrations are slower to accept the experimental approach, and most correctional administrators seem likewise hesitant. For, rooted deeply in the punitive philosophy of treatment, and held strictly responsible by a fearful and prejudiced public for the safe incarceration of offenders, they have little interest in the detailed individuo-centric approach of the hospital, let alone the time-consuming and apparently useless exploration of long range research. It is thus the first task of research to explain to the “powers that be” the meaning of the concept of individual differences and its application to correction: that the changeless practice of incarceration for all and understanding for none is a serious waste of economic and human resources—leaving cries of “injustice” and damnification to the moralists and the reformers.

The second task of the institutional criminologist is that of justification. One in research soon discovers that he is in a field of operation dominated by the “practical” approach. He is very quickly made to see that his studies are considered boondoggling unless he can show results in terms of dollars or effort saved. Although this may give him a good training in the utilitarian evaluation of his work, it may require additional labor of a nature which those who are steeped in the research point of view find burdensome.

The next task is even more trying than the last. Once the worker has completed his study he must submit his findings to the administration. Should these cast an unsavory reflection on the personnel—and if they are not objective about it—he is likely to find ill-will hampering his further efforts. The task here is one of simplification, of breaking down his conclusions into their simplest steps so that comprehension may be followed by assimilation and (fond hope!) change.

Vold makes a fourth point, stated as a caution rather than a task.

"[Research] seeks primarily to describe and compare various types of treatment applied to the various types of men in the hope that it may be possible to control certain conditions for set periods of time and to hold constant certain factors in ways that tentative judgments may be made with reference to their respective merits or demerits.—The research function is to stand impersonally on the side-effective.” Thorsten Sellin, "Penological Research in a State Welfare Department" (14) p. 391.

"In a correctional system such research must first of all be utilitarian and chiefly concerned with the practical application of its results to penal treatment. It should be conducted for the deliberate purpose of suggesting means, however tentative, for solving the many problems in human relations which face the correctional worker.” Ibid., p. 392.
lines and compare the various methods that may be applied by means of specialized technical devices and the most careful application of scientific methods. In order to do this it is an essential prerequisite that the research worker himself be not too vitally concerned with the type of treatment applied. He must be technically familiar with the methods and objectives of the treatment attempted, but it must in no case be his treatment in the sense that his personality becomes involved in the need for justifying his own good sense in prescribing it. In such a situation research would be impossible."

These, briefly, are the primary tasks of a research worker. As to the direction and the area of his studies, we shall assume these are left somewhat to his trained judgment, but they will probably be influenced greatly by the needs and demands of the institution. In general, study will be focussed on two main areas: the inmate and his treatment, and the special problems concerned with each, to be considered next.

The fields of study

There are two ways of seeking out the fields of study of an institutional research department. One is to inquire from a professional staff-member in each institution just what is being done, and the other is to scan the current literature for reports by institution staff-members. There are disadvantages in both methods: in the first, it is doubtful that one would get sufficiently comparable answers because of the variety of activities one finds classed as research in various places; and in the second, there may be much legitimate research being carried on which is not reported on outside of a local bulletin. For this study the first method was employed, and the results from the survey of institutions is reported in the Appendix. Now, the divisions of research activity:

1. Research concerning the inmate

Much has been written by criminologists concerning the personality, personal living conditions, etc. of criminals per se in their attempts to understand them and to discover an etiology of crime. In an institution organized along casework lines this topic is usually handled by the Diagnostic Clinic, which tries to ferret out the cause of the anti-social conduct in each case. This is followed by the Classification Committee, who digests the clinic’s report and then attempts to prescribe the remedial treatment or “classify” the case. Usually this is where most institutional research-service stops, but the Research Division should now step in to carry the study on into two more
areas, namely, the establishment of syndromes of behavior, and the determination of the various causative, precipitating and concomitant factors and their coefficients of effectiveness. Sellin also suggests that one of the early tasks of the research department is “to discover, if possible, which prisoners are corrigible”\textsuperscript{10}, and therefore scientifically worthy of treatment effort. From the case work point of view, Research might also carry the study on by an evaluation of the effectiveness of treatment prescribed by the Committee.

Of course, the Research department’s activities will follow a variety of approaches and therefore should be staffed by experts trained in various fields such as psychology, psychiatry, neurology, medicine, sociology, social work, education, etc. It is extremely unlikely, however, that any one institution could afford such a staff. (The Warwick plan, it will be remembered, was based on offering the School as a ”laboratory” for the use of a University faculty, thus diminishing the need for extensive full-time staffing.) It is suggested, therefore, that a department with a limited personnel be built around a clinical sociologist or social psychologist as coordinator, and enlist the part-time services of such operating staff members as psychiatrists, psychologists, educators and social caseworkers.

2. Research concerning treatment

Most hospitals—at least mental hospitals—have long recognized the need for a research department to devise and test new methods of treatment. This is distinctly not the case with correctional institutions. As the closest thing to it, there might be considered the prognostication tables which aim at predicting success on parole and so indicate the type of factors, personal as well as environmental, that coincide with successful correction or “adjustment.” The Children’s Bureau study of the treatment of 751 delinquent boys\textsuperscript{11} is a lonely example of the type of treatment-research which could be undertaken. However, investigation is made difficult because penologists are still struggling to formulate a satisfactory definition of what constitutes “good adjustment.” Surely that which is accepted by the prognosticators, i.e., abstinence from further criminal behavior during the period of parole, is hardly adequate for the scientist seeking objective data. A more defensible procedure would be that followed in the aforementioned Children’s Bureau study, which involved a breakdown of the concept into consideration of types of adjustment such as employment, economic, social, etc. Each case was rated individually by a field agent and then checked over by a supervisor. The results disclosed a significant variation between the types of adjustment.

Inextricably bound up with treatment-research is the task of designing and testing apparatus. In the correctional

\textsuperscript{10} Sellin, op. cit. (14) p. 391. Dr. H. D. Williams in a paper entitled “Institutional Treatment and Aftercare of Juvenile Delinquents” (17) also points out that the institution worker, as does

\textsuperscript{11} “Institutional Treatment of Delinquent Boys,” part two (10). See Chap. 7.
school this is difficult because most of the "apparatus" used is not of a material nature. As Sellin points out:

"Penal treatment must always remain chiefly a function of personal relations between the prisoner and those regarded by him as in authority, from the lowly guard to the lofty warden or commissioner. The institution with the finest physical embellishments may be a menace to the public welfare, if the personal relations to which I have referred, and which are the only real vehicles of corrective treatment, are such that they are destructive instead of restorative in their effects."12

In this regard, studies of the qualifications of various non-professional staff members such as work supervisors and cottage parents (in schools for young delinquents) would be immensely valuable to administrators and civil service boards alike. Very little has been done to define what constitutes a "good" supervisor or teacher.13

One more type of treatment-research is the evaluation of procedures employed. As pointed out previously this frequently precipitates a strain on personnel relations. However, if the research department is organized at the outset with the understanding that it is above (in the sense that it is impartial) the confines of any one service department, and is established not as a detective agency or efficiency department but as an assay office, much hard feelings may thereby be avoided, or at least, minimized. It should also be understood that it is not the specific function of this department, as Vold indicates, to examine "... specialized treatment procedures from the point of view of offering what is 'best' to the caseworkers, or supplying the administrator with the latest information on a subject..."14 The former should come under the heading of professional training; and the latter, administrative assistance. However, the researchist may be the best man available for these tasks and also he may find it wiser not to refuse requests unless they are sufficiently burdensome to hinder his own work.

Operating requirements of a research department

There are a certain few minimum requirements for the professional operation of a research department which, when stated flatly, sound simple and obvious but are all too frequently slighted, or omitted entirely. It is the type of thing which is usually taken for granted in a university, but in the practical environment of the institution, frequently must be fought over and justified down to the last budgetted nickel.

The first requirement, assuming that the institution has signified its intention of undertaking research by providing a personnel for the job, is an equip-

---

13 The writer attempted in his master's thesis, The Educational Approach to the Control of Crime (2) p. 87, to find the criteria of a "good correctional education advisor" and finally ended unsatisfactorily with the following:
1. Have something to teach.
2. Be able to vivify facts.
3. Be able to think vicariously.
4. Be willing to be forgotten.
5. Strike a balance between sentimentality and professionalism in his point of view.
6. Be neither a dictator nor over-indulgent in his program.
7. Be neither blusterous nor wheedling in his approach.
THE FUNCTION OF A RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

ped laboratory. Under this heading, for example, would come such equipment as a medical-chemical laboratory, psychologist's testing room, psychiatrist's and social worker's interviewing rooms, teacher's test class, and game and special activities rooms. In a correctional school these suffer serious under- or mal-equipment, if they are present at all. Whether or not there will be sufficient staff members to use them to their fullest advantage is a question the institution should already have considered and answered.

Second is the clinical library. This is still a primary requirement of a research staff. In it should be, in addition to the standard works on various scientific subjects, a growing file of appropriate periodicals and a continually expanding collection of reprints, special reports and other selected professional documents. The potential value of such an aggregation of written matter is however directly dependent upon its classification system and reference catalogue. Too often such expensive and valuable collections are allowed either to gather dust as a formidable pile in an unused corner or to dwindle away into the private libraries of a changing personnel. A part-time librarian seems essential to even small collections as he at least acts as a magnetic force for all incoming material. It should also be his job to see that the long-desired pamphlets are actually sent for and kept handy.

Third is a study-office, or "ivory tower," wherein those who are embarking on or continuing research activity can find the peace and quiet necessary for creative concentration. If the research is carried on part-time with service duties, a "place apart" in which to keep one's material, analyze it, and write a report, and which moreover breaks the association with routine activity, may improve the quality and hasten the completion of the study. Parenthetically, Dr. Eric Kent Clarke, formerly of the New York State Industrial School, believes that the two cannot be combined successfully:

"Research cannot be mixed with service, for the pressure of the latter invariably eliminates the continuity of the former. This demands a separate staff, free from service duties, yet which is allied sufficiently to the service unit so that the study may not lose sight of the human element and degenerate into a statistical study of unrelated facts that have little meaning."16

Fourth, to be considered in conjunction with the above, is time off from service duty in which to pursue the research project. Often the operating schedules of the professional staff are so heavy that research is either let slip by or done inadequately in odd or overtime moments. The sloppy state of criminological research may be laid partly to this condition.

Last is the extension of this time off to include attendance at scientific and professional gatherings at which the researchist may have the opportunity of review and exchange of ideas and problems in the field of his study. This coming after it has been more thoroughly tested.
should also include field trips and visits to other institutions for similar reasons.

Altogether these requirements represent the specifications of a research department considered on the professional level to which it is entitled and also must measure up. Elementary as they may sound to some, it is surprising to discover on surveying the field how few institutions have, or even seem to desire, the most fundamental of them. Purposely omitted were consideration of the specifications of a researchist and methods of staffing a research department. The latter problem will be considered next.

Methods of staffing the department

The basic problem, institution administrators tell us, is not that of conducting a research department properly, but of getting the necessary staff and funds for one in the first place. To continue with Dr. Clarke's statement above:

"For years to come, the State can take little responsibility for the development of sufficient service. "Consequently research must come through channels that are independently financed, coordinated as a vital part of this service unit, and free to go into all the factors that merge to create the expensive luxury of maintaining correctional schools for delinquents."

But where are these channels of independent financing? One is that suggested in the previously quoted "Protocol by the Clinic Staff for Research in Delinquency":

"It is proposed that a . . . University Committee on Research in Delinquency, with representatives from the different faculties with interest in this problem, be formed to consider plans for graduate apprenticeship or internship and research at Warwick. . . . In the administration of this project, it is proposed that the University Committee be coordinat-ed with a committee for the institution consisting of the department heads of the different divisions at Warwick . . . ."17

The underwriting of the expense was to be worked out jointly by the University and the School, the former probably offering a small monthly stipend and the latter supplying maintenance. Such a system would bring together, for their mutual benefit, the eager student in search of a tangible problem and the neglected field of service sadly in need of trained investigators.

The second plan is that suggested by Vold: "Research workers in the various social and physical sciences could be placed as internes in correctional institutions. The device suggested is the post-doctoral fellowships and grants-in-aid of the Social Science Research Council."18

Still another plan is that suggested by the fourth item in the last section, which is the part-time use of the professionally trained members of the staff as research people in their various fields. In this case there should be a full-time coordinator of research to plan out a program, coordinate the projects, and in general to assist by centralizing the findings and preparing them for use.

---

17 Warwick State School Clinic, op. cit. (6) p. 2.
18 Vold, op. cit. (16) p. 186. A similar plan is that devised by the "Council for Clinical Training of Theological Students," a private organization of psychiatrists and specially-trained min-

isters, which pays a small stipend to selected theological students who work for three to nine months under chaplains in certain mental hospitals and correctional institutions as part of their training for the ministry or chaplaincy.
This is probably the simplest way to initiate research activity.

Far better, however, would be the mobilization of scientists and enlightened administrators in a group effort to convince state correctional departments of the need for the establishment of a recognized institutional or bureau research department; arguing, as does Dr. Karl Bowman in his 1937 Superintendent's report on Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital:

"The primary function of every hospital—and also every institution for the ‘socially ill’—is the care and treatment of patients, but intimately linked up with this are two other functions, that of research and that of teaching. It is universally agreed that hospitals which are teaching centers and research centers develop a higher standard and the presence of an eager body of critical students and of various research projects results in more careful and adequate care of the patients. Furthermore, hospitals which are centers for research and teaching attract the best physicians to the staff and enable the hospital to secure a better personnel than would otherwise be the case.***

It is time that our states and municipalities realize that it is good economy to subsidize research to determine methods of prevention and cure of mental [and social] disorders." 20

Likewise, it is time our states stopped this expensive procedure of merely recording the maintenance in, and passage through, our institutions of delinquents, juvenile and adult, and began spending their funds to find out why they are there.

Summary

In summation, then, the functioning of a research department in a correctional institution involves first the recognition of these three primary tasks of the workers: (1) selling the need for study of the individual differences of inmates; (2) justifying their efforts to those who do not have the research point of view or necessary background; (3) interpreting and explaining their findings to those with whom they are concerned that they may initiate the suggested changes.

Second, the field of study includes problems in the case analysis and classification of the individual inmate, and survey, development, and evaluation of treatment techniques and apparatus.

Third, the operating requirements of a research department functioning on a professional level include: an equipped research laboratory, a clinical library, a study room or office, and time off from service duties to carry on research and to attend conferences and field trips concerning the problem.

Fourth, the devices of staffing these departments include the use of the institution as the formal field work area for university graduate students in fields allied to criminology, the provision by private research foundations of internships in criminology, the creation of the position of research coordinator linked up with the part-time employment of the professional staff on the tendency this has to make the research worker appear as a hired detective or “outsider” to the operating staff. It does, however, make for a better coordinated program of research.

research projects, and the establishment of a staffed research division in the institution's organization or in the state department.

Finally, this brief sojourn into the field of institutional criminological research indicates that there should be a persistent effort on the part of the more progressive people in the field to convince correctional administrators that only through well planned and intensive research can we progress to defensible theories of causation and effective treatment techniques.

APPENDIX

Report of the Survey of Research Activity
On January 8, 1939, letters were sent to 112 state training schools for delinquents selected from the 1938 list published by the American Prison Association. This form letter, carrying the signature of Supt. H. D. Williams, inquired:

1. "What are the titles or statements of any research problems which you have undertaken recently or are about to begin?"
2. Who are the people (names and positions) who are working on these?
3. Do you have a research division as part of your institutional set-up?
4. Is it a part of a division on records and statistics?
5. If neither, in what way are research studies handled?
6. What is your feeling about the feasibility of research in a correctional institution?
7. Have you any comments or suggestions to make on how a research department may be set up if it is not already provided for in the institutional plan?
8. Would you advocate a central clearing house for reporting research studies undertaken?"

As to be expected, replies staggered in over a period of six weeks and then practically ceased. However, the answers received justified the effort. Except in a few cases the responses showed a warm appreciation for research, but for these few research should either have been specifically defined or called by a less elegant name.

The following results are based upon the replies received up until February 20, 1939:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Number replying to questionaire</th>
<th>Number carrying on some research work</th>
<th>(of those replying)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Number replying to questionnaire</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>46, or about 41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Number carrying on some research work</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18, or about 39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. How research work is handled:
1. By special division in the school ................................ 2
2. By state department extension service ................................ 5
3. By part-time-regular staff ......................................... 11
4. By visitors (not staff members) ................................... 7

D. Types of projects undertaken:
1. Diagnostic and therapeutic in school ................................ 12
2. Aimed at revealing basic principles ................................ 5
3. Not related to school activity .................................... 2

E. Opinion of research work:
1. Worthwhile ............................................................. 27
2. Of limited use ....................................................... 5
3. Of little or no use to school ...................................... 2

F. Recommend clearing house of research topics:
1. As a function of U. S. Children's Bureau .......................... 5
2. As a division of the National Association of Training Schools ........................................ 1
3. As a state department function .................................... 6
4. Unspecified ..................................................................... 13

G. Suggested system of staffing research division:
1. Division in institution ................................................ 7
2. Part-time use of staff .................................................. 4
3. Solicit aid from colleges ............................................. 8
4. Resident fellows in research ......................................... 3
5. No method suggested ................................................... 10

H. Research projects listed:
2. "Is there discrimination against the colored girl?" by Mrs. Jean Watkins, Girls' Industrial School, Delaware. Ohio.
5. "Ohio Juvenile Courts," same author, same place.
12. "Cases sent to Indiana University Hospital from the Indiana Boys School," same author, same place.

21 State and National Correctional Institutions 1938 (18).
THE FUNCTION OF A RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

13. “Neighborhood influences on boys admitted from West Indianapolis,” by Lowell Good, same place.


15. “Rate of admissions from all cities in Indiana, 1928-1938,” same author, same place.

16. “Effect of health on general institutional adjustment,” same author and Donald Hadden, same place.

17. “Comparison of scores on Stenquist Mechanical Assembling Test and Stanford Revision of Binet Test,” by Maurice O. Hunt, same place.

18. “Study of disciplinary program, its seasonal trends and effect of administrative changes,” same author, same place.

19. “Neighborhood influences on boys admitted from Greencastle,” by Fred Kreuger, same place.


22. “Comparative study of home conditions of 100 inmates,” by a staff member, same place.


24. “Evaluation of treatment of girls below 10,” by a staff member, Long Lane Farm, Middletown, Conn.


27. “Histories of 800 boys committed by federal courts,” by J. J. Zamites, National Training School for Boys, Washington, D. C.


30. List of 35 studies made by Bureau of Juvenile Research in various state institutions, Claremont, Calif.

31. “Comprehensive Case Index Card and Catalogue,” by the Clinic Staff, State Training School for Boys, Warwick.

32. “Validation of the Pintner Personality Test for a delinquent population,” by Wm. Kogan, same place.

33. “Study of employment while on parole,” by social service department, same place.

34. “Public Attitudes toward various cause and treatment notions,” by W. W. Argow, same place.

35. “Case studies of sex variance,” by the clinic staff, same place.

36. “Relation of parole and discharge to age and intelligence,” by Schachne Isaacs, same place.

37. “Evolution and Persistence of Groups in a Psychiatric Observation Ward for Boys,” by Dr. R. L. Jenkins (and Dr. F. J. Curran), same place.

38. “A Psychometric picture of delinquent boys,” by Daniel Clarke, same place.

Finally, certain schools are notable for their attempts to implement a research program. Those people who are interested in this field will probably find contact with the following institutions fruitful:

Indiana Boys’ School, Plainfield..........

Bureau of Juvenile Research, Claremont, Calif.

Girls’ Industrial School, Delaware, Ohio........

State Industrial and Agricultural School, Industry, N. Y........

State Training School for Boys, Warwick, N. Y........

Bibliography


17. Williams, H. D., "Institutional Treatment and Aftercare of Juvenile Delinquents." (mimeographed copy from author. Warwick State School.)


