

1941

Practical Results of the Classification Program

William J. Ellis

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

William J. Ellis, Practical Results of the Classification Program, 32 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 72 (1941-1942)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

PRACTICAL RESULTS OF THE CLASSIFICATION PROGRAM¹

William J. Ellis²

There is general agreement that one of the greatest single contributions within the last quarter century to penology and correctional efforts has been the introduction of the classification program. By classification we refer to that process through which the background and social history of the offender are studied, his individual aptitudes, abilities, disabilities and needs are examined and appraised so that the treatment he may receive can be based on factual data and related to his special requirements. This process is comparable to that utilized by progressive educational institutions to focus a developmental program and to provide the specific types of training which may bring the greatest benefits. It is comparable likewise to the staff meeting which is a recognized part of the activities of a modern general or special hospital.

As applied to the penal and correctional field the classification plan has experienced increasing approval and today is accepted in the institutions under the supervision of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and in many of the State systems as a basic approach to the problems of prison management and planning. Thus, since many of our institutions are recognizing the value of classification and individual treatment, it is appropriate for the American Prison Association on its seventieth

anniversary to take stock, to review and evaluate the benefits that classification brings to modern penology.

Some of the criticism which has been directed toward classification is really more pertinent with respect to those who make extravagant claims for it. From the standpoint of responsible administration we should recognize at the outset that classification is not to be regarded either as a specific or as a magic formula. Its mere introduction does not automatically insure improved or satisfactory operation of a prison. Classification cannot be effective unless it is directed by well trained, competent personnel, nor unless it is adequately supported and backed up by the administrator at the head of the institution as well as the supervising agency. Furthermore, lip service will never accomplish the aims and objectives of a modern program of classification. In too many instances the work of conscientious, careful Classification Committees falls short of maximum effectiveness because of failure to provide diversified work, educational programs and the indicated diversified custodial conditions.

When properly and sensibly employed, classification becomes a highly important administrative device which throws important light upon many of our problems, both of administrative and of individual adjustment, and

¹ Read at the American Prison Association Congress, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 21, 1940.

² Commissioner, Department of Institutions and Agencies, Trenton, N. J.

points the way to their solution. It has great value, therefore, as an administrative procedure and in many successfully operated correctional institutions has become virtually indispensable.

In this discussion of the practical results of classification let us for a moment mention its more obvious benefits, namely those which the prisoner derives as a result of special individual study. That value of classification is primary, but we are concerned with some of the other basic benefits which flow from the application of this procedure.

Classification can serve a dual purpose. First, our evaluation of each prisoner permits us to develop for him an individualized program suited to his needs. Special services and training are made available to him. That is the primary value of classification—generally recognized and accepted.

But classification has another major application. We gather information on one particular man, then a second and a third. Finally, we have accumulated a body of information which is just as surely an exact means of analyzing an entire prison population as is the individual record the means of analyzing the situation and problems of any one man.

This accumulated information when properly tabulated and analyzed provides valuable data on the problems which an entire group of prisoners presents. It tells us how many require close supervision and the number who are relatively trustworthy. It indicates the educational and training needs of those men as well as their industrial capabilities. These and other points of

information are readily available to guide us in our efforts to adjust the prison program to the basic individual needs.

The value of individual classification is real but its results are best recognized in terms of individual experiences. But the benefits of group classification as a guide to progressive prison planning are so definite and tangible that they deserve special consideration.

In this paper, therefore, I propose to discuss the practical results of a classification program from an administrative standpoint:

- (A) As a guide to custody,
- (B) As a measure to facilitate transfer,
- (C) As a measure by which to develop programs of work and employment,
- (D) As a guide to the educational, training and recreational activities,
- (E) In the comparatively little used but challenging field of improvement of County Jails,
- (F) As an aid to sentencing procedures,
- (G) As an essential requirement in connection with parole and release consideration,
- (H) As a contribution to research, looking toward the solution of problems of crime and delinquency.

(A) *As a Guide to Custody*

First, therefore, let us consider classification in that area of activity which constitutes a challenge to every penal and correctional institution manager and warden, namely effective custody. It is a common observation that in the construction of penal institutions in the past the requirements for the most dangerous and difficult individual in custody have dictated the type of construction, with the result that in general it is a truism that in many Commonwealths there are more than enough

cells of the maximum custody type, with walled institutions designed to care for this class of prisoner, but into which prisoners of all types and classifications and all degrees of custodial risk have had to be placed. As a result, in some institutions a comparatively small number of chronic trouble-makers have compelled excessive restrictions for the whole prison population. This has meant that too many prisoners were locked and double-locked behind tons of stone and concrete built at enormous expense. Some prisons can best be described as fortresses and others closely resemble a modern battleship.

In other jurisdictions wardens are trying to operate a modern prison program, keeping men in steel cells who do not require such extravagantly built quarters. As a matter of fact, such construction may constitute a positive detriment to the ultimate objective of protection of society and the reformation and restoration of these prisoners to a law-abiding life. Too often such structures symbolize an oppressive public attitude which speaks louder than words and counteracts the progressive spirit of modernly constructed, staffed and managed institutions. Alexander Paterson, one of the most competent observers of prison management in America, has commented on prison housing and offered as a text the thought that "any building should express a purpose and a spirit."

The lack of information as to the types of prisoners who require various grades of custody in times past has constituted a genuine handicap to the work of rehabilitation and these errors of

judgment need not be repeated today because of the availability of information accruing from the classification studies. It is clear that the careful study of classification material provides information essential to intelligent prison planning and operation. It is information of this kind that has formed the basis of the extensive developments in the Federal Bureau of Prisons and of the more recent developments in a number of progressive states. It is possible to ascertain with reasonable accuracy the number of prisoners who must be kept in strict custody. We may also from this data determine the number upon whom such custody will exert a demoralizing effect. Utilizing classification material we are in a position to approach intelligently the problem of planning institutions and various grades and degrees of custody with the assurance that our procedures will be a proper guide as to the number of men for whom provision must be made.

The provision in one state (New Jersey) will illustrate this point. Some years ago, confronted with the necessity of providing additional accommodations for prisoners, classification of population served as a major guide to development and made possible substantial savings in a comprehensive construction program. The Department was confronted with a central prison built to house approximately a thousand men but having almost twice that number within the walls of an ancient institution. In addition there were several hundred other prisoners maintained in barracks type institutions on farm tracts. Overcrowding was acute. Analysis of the classification material

indicated a real need for an institution intermediate between the maximum security of the main prison and the minimum security possible on the two prison farms.

The real need, therefore, was for the medium security institution; in fact, it was through the analysis of this information that Dr. F. Lovell Bixby, then Director of Classification, originated, as far as I am able to learn, and applied for the first time the designation of maximum, medium and minimum security to the several types of institutions. The classification material also indicated the approximate size that such an institution should be, for it became clear that among the nearly two thousand men under the supervision of the prison there were about six hundred who should be housed in a medium security institution, and this could be done without taking any undue risks. Therefore, a medium security institution was planned and buildings adapted to this estimated capacity.

That new institution was built at a total cost of less than \$1,200,000.00, or a unit cost of approximately \$2,000.00 per man; this in contrast to the cost of expanding maximum security, which would not have served the purpose nearly as well and which certainly would have run, at prices then prevailing, to as much as \$3,500,000.00 to \$4,000,000.00, requiring high walls, fortress construction, etc. Not only would such an institution have proven needlessly expensive but it would not have been as well suited to the program and its objective.

In addition to the six hundred men placed in the medium security insti-

tution, this state has maintained another farm unit with approximately 250 prisoners, so that of the approximately 2,000 prisoners, 850 have been cared for without the necessity of the typical maximum security, walled institution. The removal of more than forty per cent from the main prison has relieved overcrowding there, made its program more effective and has accomplished its purpose without excessive cost.

Actually, the savings go far beyond the initial saving in construction. The development of the medium security institution permitted extensive work opportunities, which is one of the most important considerations from an administrative standpoint. The maintenance of a large group of men on prison farms enables these units to supply their own diversified farm products and to contribute substantially to the reduction of costs in the main prison through the production of milk, fresh vegetables, canned goods of all types, pork products, etc. Savings such as these are tangible and understandable. Moreover, these benefits are in addition to the gains which come from a medium security prison which offers constructive surroundings, some moderation of the excessive restrictions and an opportunity for men to adjust in an environment that more closely approximates community life. A large share of the credit for the direction which this development has taken must necessarily be given to the classification procedure which clarified the needs in the planning stage, and which indicated with substantial accuracy the types of custody that were desirable.

(B) Classification Facilitates Transfer

Proper selection of men for transfer to farm and camp units is a constant problem to the prison administrator. So, also, is the job of properly selecting men for jobs outside the prison walls and in those activities where supervision may be partially relaxed. Here again the classification material available as to the individual serves a practical and realistic purpose. Wisely employed, a classification process will safeguard to a large degree against possible escapes. The fact that the two farm institutions I have mentioned had only one successful escape last year indicates that the committee reviewing the classification material has done an excellent job in providing the data upon which intelligent selection of transfers is based.

Furthermore, the selection of men for special medical or psychiatric treatment is readily revealed by the classification process and the transfer of these men to appropriate medical and psychiatric institutions comes as a direct administrative contribution of this important agency of administration. Other types of transfer look to the material gathered together in the all-round study of individual prisoners as basic and furnishing a reliable and substantial guide to the authority which is called upon to make such administrative decisions.

(C) Classification Helps Develop the Work Programs

An indispensable factor in prison management is the provision of adequate work and suitable employment. The Prison Industries Reorganization

Commission has given us a splendid example of how this method of approaching the solution of prison labor problems can be applied. We have had many illustrations in time past of prison industries which have concentrated on limited types of production designed to make profits and to absorb numbers of relatively unskilled men. Some institutions have concentrated on just one or two major forms of occupation and in some instances have done this to the extent of building up virtual state prison monopolies. In such an institution the needs of the prisoner is about the last consideration. His mental and physical capabilities, his aptitudes, his vocational needs and his possible community readjustment are too frequently ignored. The emphasis upon production is so great that the training needs of the individual either go unrecognized or are deliberately overlooked.

We are agreed that the training of prisoners for useful work is a responsibility of the prison and an essential to proper community adjustment. We are compelled, also, to recognize the need for diversified types of work to furnish interest and incentive to men of all levels of intelligence and capabilities. It is from the classification program that we get our surest guide both as to the types of industries that can successfully be developed and as to the number of men who are in need of the diversified training. In general it may be confidently asserted that the success of the diversified employment program is directly related to the quality of the classification procedure and its active

support on the part of prison management.

(D) *Classification Serves as a Guide to the Development of Education, Training and Recreational Programs*

Closely allied to the function of classification as an aid to the extension of opportunities for employment in prison is its utility as a guide to the type of educational and industrial program that is appropriate to the particular institution. Included on the Classification Committee are the director of education and the head of the recreation and training activities. These specialists have made studies of the degree of education which each prisoner has attained, his interest in further development and his capabilities for utilizing the period of prison incarceration as an opportunity for general or special instruction.

When this material is brought together through the classification procedure, the type of vocational training, the extent of correspondence school and related reading and other activities can be intelligently developed.

More and more students of penology are coming to realize the essential place that constructive hobbies and leisure time activities have in community life. Prison administrators have recognized the possibilities of developing outlets of this type under institution conditions. As a product of the thoughtful use of classification material we have many striking examples of the possibility of developing these areas under competent leadership.

(E) *Classification as an Aid to Jail Inspection and Improvement*

In some jurisdictions it has been found possible to apply the experience of the classification procedure to problems at the county jail level. If we recognize that classification is more than a procedure and represents a really fundamental point of view, we naturally turn to it as a guide in problems related to those of penal and correctional institutions. The examinations made by physicians, identification officers and others help to develop an evaluation of individual offenders and this same material, although in elementary form, is frequently available in connection with surveys, studies and inspections of the local jails.

While the jails in New Jersey do not generally employ the classification technique as a routine, the Division of Jail Inspection includes studies of prisoners in custody, their offenses, their length of sentence and related material, and brings these data together for the benefit and understanding of those concerned with jail management. The findings of these studies are made available to local officials. In several such institutions routines have been established to exclude certain classes of offenders from the local jails. Jail populations in some counties have been drastically reduced, while in others checks have been instituted on the local committing magistrates. A review of all jail sentences by the presiding judge of the county is a good insurance against abuses common in sentencing to local institutions. It may be safely said that classification is thus guarding

against indiscriminate commitments to institutions of this sort.

(F) *Classification as an Aid to the Courts in Sentencing*

There have been a number of important studies which have thrown light upon sentencing practices and indicated that the sentences imposed by various courts show wide variation. Among the suggestions that have been made for improving this situation have been those of establishing sentencing tribunals which could make studies of individuals who have been tried and, prior to sentence, could offer recommendations as to the type of correctional treatment that should be undertaken.

Recently we have had the recommendations of the Youth Correction Authority developed by a committee of the American Law Institute, which has recommended a very comprehensive program along this line, directed primarily to young men of the ages sixteen to twenty-one. While the possibility of realizing many of these suggestions seems somewhat remote, classification prior to sentence is within the range of possibility and in some jurisdictions the probation departments are already making available through the clinical studies and social investigations much of the material which should be in the hands of the sentencing judge.

An excellent illustration of the possibilities of utilizing classification as an aid to sentencing is afforded by the experience under the provisions of a New Jersey statute enacted in 1935, Section 2:192-1.1 of the Revised Stat-

utes. Under this procedure the Court before determining on the treatment to be accorded a convicted offender may send him to an institution designated by the Commissioner of Institutions and Agencies for thorough-going classification study. Under this statute a number of institutional centers are designated in New Jersey to which the judges send the prisoner for a period not to exceed forty-five days. Here he is carefully studied by specialists in accordance with the classification procedure and a comprehensive report and recommendations supplied to the judge so that when the prisoner is returned the judge has the benefit of these classification findings in order that he may consider them in connection with the responsibility for treatment. Thus the benefit of the classification procedure is made available to the judge prior to sentence and the court is in possession of full and comprehensive, expertly gathered information as to the offender, as well as to the circumstances of the offense.

Such a plan puts a great deal of responsibility upon the Classification Committee, which must do a thorough and painstaking work. In New Jersey this facility is utilized chiefly for problem cases for the courts sitting in rural counties where facilities for clinical study are not otherwise available. These medical, psychiatric, psychological and other studies, supplemented by careful social investigations and other routine checks, provide the judge with a type of information which is essential if he is to make the most effective use of the various facilities for correctional treatment that are at

his disposal. Thus those persons who in the judgment of the classification procedure can be adjusted through probation are recommended for suspended sentence or probation, and in this way considerable expense involved in institutional commitment can be avoided.

(G) Classification as a Prerequisite for Parole and Release Consideration

In many jurisdictions a major responsibility rests upon the warden or superintendent for making recommendations as to men who are applying for consideration for release on parole. Intelligent and impartial handling of these applications is essential in order to maintain morale, in order to protect the paroling authority, and to assist those responsible for later supervision of the parolees. This function is doubly important in reformatories and other similar institutions where the indeterminate sentences prevail and where institutional parole committees act upon applications for release to the community.

The classification procedure, properly developed, produces a practical result in that it tends to build up confidence on the part of the local staff and institutional officers. The prisoner also knows that release is not made on any basis of individual favoritism or capricious judgment, but is based upon the findings of a group of persons who are interested in his successful adjustment on parole.

The law enforcement officers, also, are assured that the decision is based on careful appraisal of factual material, and this is an added assurance in the

public relations of the reformatory or other correctional administration.

In New Jersey the classification procedure has developed to such a point that within the past two years the Constitutional Court of Pardons, with unlimited authority to release men under confinement, has incorporated in its procedure the provision that before passing on any applicant for pardon or parole, the prisoner must have been reviewed by the Classification Committee, and its recommendation serves as an important and essential basis for the deliberations of the Pardon Court.

(H) Classification as an Aid to Research

Penal and correctional institutions fall short of the realization of their fullest possible effectiveness unless the materials that are gathered in the course of study and treatment of offenders are used for the purpose of throwing further light upon the causes of crime and delinquency. Some of the most important work which has infused a scientific spirit into correctional practices flows from the thorough-going case studies which are essentially based on classification material on individual offenders. This material, when carefully analyzed by competent research students, provides a mine of valuable information which can throw light on the solution of problems of crime and point to methods of delinquency prevention. These studies need not be restricted merely to statistical tables and formulae but are often of great value when they go beyond this to the development of clinical case histories, which when faithfully studied serve to

illuminate some of the most puzzling problems in this field.

In a modern, progressively managed penal or correctional institution the classification procedure will not become a static or routine device. It will serve as a stimulus and as an instrument for education of the staff, particularly if officers from the various departments of the prison are brought in from time to time to participate in discussions and to benefit from the considerations which are developed in harmonizing the various reports and in planning programs of assignment, transfer, discipline, education, etc.

One of the great dangers to the classification procedure is that it will not have the active leadership and presence of the superintendent and leading administrative officers of the institution. This work is of such prime importance that the members of the Classification Committee readily become aware of any failure to give their efforts administrative support and leadership.

In this connection it is well to observe that with the development of officer training courses in some of the more progressive institutions, rank and file employees are developing a keener understanding and a clearer insight into the nature of their work. Specialists, instructors and division heads feel some incentive to keep abreast of modern methods and practices in their

special fields of activity. Where the classification procedure is at its best the desire for contact with new findings in this field is not limited just to the few who may constitute the Classification Committee, but it can and should permeate the entire staff.

The Classification procedure, then, is like a leaven that leavens the whole loaf. It is a device which makes it possible to "pass experience around." It makes practical and essential contributions to the further training of prison personnel. It has been the experience of many of us that out of the classification procedure have come some of the most important guides to the type of material essential in developing the training programs for the staff members, as well as throwing light upon the educational processes among the population of the institution.

Possibly one of the most important considerations in this connection is that where this work is well done and where it is guided by aggressive leadership and a sense of responsibility, there develops among the personnel a feeling of personal interest in the proper placement and adjustment of prisoners.

Summing up, therefore, the classification program, properly supported, adequately staffed and faithfully applied, offers a sound foundation for constantly improving the standard of institutional management and an indispensable aid to the solution of administrative problems.