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CLASSIFICATION IN THE STATE PRISON

Elmer R. Akers¹

Introduction

Classification in prison work is, essentially, case study and individualized treatment of inmates. It is a method of handling them on the basis of the physical, intellectual, vocational, attitudinal and other characteristics embodied in each individual. It recognizes that the important element in prison management is the individual prisoner. If his incarceration is to benefit him and, indirectly, society, he must be handled so that when his term has been served he will be ready to go out a better man physically, mentally and morally than when he entered. Classification implies, first, an intensive analysis of the offender, and second, his placement in a work or school program suitable for the exercise of his talents to the end that himself and others concerned will profit from the program.

The classification of the work of the Michigan Department of Corrections is provided for in the corrections law (Act No. 255, Public Acts of 1937), which became effective July 22, 1937. This law provides for the following steps in the disposition of prison inmates: First, securing complete and detailed information with regard to each offender; second, placing him—by transfer if necessary—in the institution (Ionia Reformatory, Jackson Prison, Marquette Branch Prison) best suited to deal with him; third, filing with the Parole Board a copy of the information secured and prepared by the classification staff “so as to be readily available when the parole of the prisoner is to be considered.”

Preparing and Assembling Data on the Individual Prisoner

Newly admitted inmates are kept in the “quarantine block” for one month. During this month they are interviewed and examined by the Classification staff members whose work involves the analysis of inmates in preparation for the meeting at which will be decided: (1) Institutional placement, and (2) type of institutional program—work, school, medical treatment, etc.—in those cases where the inmate is to be continued in the Jackson institution. In the cases of inmates to be transferred to the Ionia Reformatory, it is left to the Classification staff of that institution to work out a program for them. Men committed to prison in the upper peninsula of Michigan are handled by the Classification Staff in the Marquette Branch Prison in approximately the same manner

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as at Jackson. Once each week all the men received in the prison during the preceding seven days are required to attend a meeting at which a prison social worker, whose experience in prison work covers approximately twelve years, informally lectures on problems of institutional adjustment. He explains the opportunities afforded by the institution for profitable use of time, energy and ambition, some of the moral and intellectual hazards that may be encountered and how best to deal with them, etc. The psychologist administers psychological tests to all the inmates, and to those who desire and for whom is planned a trade training program he administers trade tests. If an inmate is illiterate (from 100 to 200 such are received each year) or if his eyesight is too poor to read, he is given an individual intelligence test.

Each and every inmate is given a thorough physical examination which, as our head prison physician has said, "compares very favorably with that given by the Army and the Navy. . . . In order to have an adequate classification of the inmate, you must know whether he is physically capable of doing ordinary labor, what type of work he is able to do—or if he is able to do any. If we find that he has a physical defect which can be repaired—and if he desires it—that sort of thing is done. Then he is certified to the Classification group as to his ability to do labor. . . ."

The sociologists prepare complete case histories, obtaining their information by interviewing the inmates, then verifying and supplementing the information secured from the inmates by writing letters of inquiry to parents, employers, social agencies and other institutions in the communities which have had contact with the families, and so forth. There are four sociologists, each handling the commitments from a section of the State. The results of the examinations made by the physician, the psychologists, and the educational director, are turned over to the sociologists who, in turn, incorporate them into the completed "Classification Summary" for the classification meeting. It is regarded as part of the responsibility of each sociologist to assist each inmate he has interviewed in the solution of certain types of social and personal problems in cases when this becomes necessary. Also, each sociologist will prepare a "Progress Report" on the inmate when the time comes for him to appear before the Parole Board.

The purposes of these interviews by the sociologists, physicians, psychologist, educational director, chaplain, and others, are: (1) to obtain a clear, detailed, well-defined picture of the inmate and the problems, the abilities and the liabilities he presents; (2) to furnish a basis for the use of the Classification Committee in outlining a program involving the various training and treatment facilities of the institutions—Jackson, Ionia Reformatory and Marquette Branch Prison; (3) to furnish to the Warden and the Director of

Corrections the data basis used by the Classification Committee in recommending the inmate's institutional placement; and (4) to provide a body of information which will be useful to the parole officials when the time comes to consider the inmate for parole. This will later be supplemented by a "Progress Report" to the Parole Board, covering the inmate's institutional record, his plans, etc. (This is discussed more fully below.)

It is the duty of the Director of Classification to see that prisoners are called before the Committee at the end of the "quarantine period" of one month, that the records on the prisoners are in shape for the meeting, that the action taken in that meeting is carried out, etc. He supervises the work of the inmate clerical workers who do the bulk of the typing and some other routine work in the department.

The Classification Meeting

At the end of the thirty day "quarantine period" each newly admitted inmate is brought before the Classification Committee

The inmates enter the room one at a time to be classified. The Committee members present have before them copies of a convenient "classification summary" of the most essential data from the inmate's complete folder. The completed folder, containing a case history and the results of all examinations and tests given, is available for anyone who wishes to examine it. There is some informal questioning of the inmate and he is given a chance to explain his preference regarding the school or work assignment under consideration for him, and frequently his wishes in the matter are a determining factor in the program finally adopted. In so far as his attitudes seem well-founded and oriented toward better social adjustment in the future, they receive the consideration they merit. Many—perhaps most—newly received inmates have no worthwhile social and vocational aims and ambitions (this is, of course, one main reason they find their way to prison), and we regard it as one of our major tasks to arouse these in them and to so arrange their institutional program that foresight, initiative and responsibility will be encouraged.

If the inmate has dependents, their situation and needs, in so far as his work or school training program while in prison is concerned, is considered. For example, if the inmate is young, intelligent, the father of three or four children, and without trade skill, the Committee regards it as partly its responsibility to see to it that this man learns a trade in order to insure his capacity to support his family when he is paroled. During the past year there have been several cases where such inmates came up for parole and were "passed" by the Parole Board to learn a trade.

The steps taken in the Classification meeting include:

1. Decision as to institution in which the inmate will serve his term. (Ionia, Jackson, Marquette.)
2. In those cases where the inmate is to be continued at Jackson: Work or school program. If school, what school.
3. Degree of custody: Close, medium, minimum.

The matters considered in arriving at the program for an inmate include the following: His physical condition as indicated in the medical report, age, intelligence as indicated by his I. Q. rating, experience, skill, criminal record, attitudes, maturity, trustworthiness, sense of responsibility, his own desires and plans, and the community and family situation to which he is likely to be returned.

Transfers

Jackson is the receiving institution for male prisoners from the lower Peninsula. Approximately two-thirds of them are retained here. Most of the other third, consisting mainly of young, first-termers under twenty-four years of age, are sent to the Ionia Reformatory. All transfers, whether to Ionia Reformatory or to Marquette Branch Prison, or from those institutions to Jackson, must be approved by the Director of Corrections, Dr. Garrett Heyns. The inmates transferred to the Marquette Branch Prison include those deemed most dangerous, the most intractable, those who have been chronic disciplinary cases in Jackson, especially escape and assault cases, and a few other types. There are a few inmates who become psychotic, or whose pre-incarceration mental instability grows more aggravated. Such cases, when recommended by the psychiatrist for removal and approved for transfer by the Director, are transferred to the Ionia State Hospital for Criminal Insane.

Some prisoners are returned from Ionia and Marquette, and occasionally, from the Ionia State Hospital, to Jackson, sometimes for medical treatment, sometimes because of chronic maladjustment in Ionia, or for special segregation as in cases of sex perverts discovered at Ionia. Retransfers from Marquette to Jackson often indicate the recognition of improvement of conduct and maturation of outlook in the inmates.

Types of Work

The main divisions under which assignments fall are the industries, general maintenance, general labor and farm and forestry work. It should perhaps be pointed out that the general maintenance work includes teaching in one of the four school departments (Academic, Agricultural, Commercial and Vocational), clerical work, etc. There are nine industries and these employ approximately 1,500 men. General maintenance work requires about

half of total population (total inmate count has been in the neighborhood of 5,400 men, the last four or five years). The types of employment here include a wide variety, ranging from window washing to teaching. Some of these jobs afford valuable apprenticeship industrial training. Most of the men employed in the industries (textile mill, shoe factory, auto license plant, binder twine, cannery, et al.), have not previously done that sort of work. A better example is that represented in the clerical workers, most of whom have learned typing, bookkeeping and other accomplishments required in the prison Commercial School.

The foregoing paragraph is intended only as a brief discussion of some of the types of work available to inmates. The Classification Committee may assign a prisoner directly out of quarantine to one of these types of jobs, or they may—and often do—classify him to the “labor pool” from which the Employment Committee or the Deputy Warden or the Assistant Deputy Warden may assign him to work as openings occur. About two years ago at the instigation of the Director of Corrections, the Assistant Deputy Warden began sitting with the Classification Committee. This has very greatly coordinated the work of the Committee and the custodial officers.

Degree of Custody

Men retained in Jackson are classified as to custody: close, medium and minimum. The immense size of the institution and the variety of its enterprises make it possible to prescribe any one of several degrees of custody. About three-fourths of the prisoners are under close supervision, that is, inside the walls at any one time. Except in those cases where the minimum term imposed by the sentencing judge was very short, all newly received inmates are classified for close study. When they have served part of their term, and have only a year or so left, and provided they have proven themselves trustworthy and otherwise made a good adjustment, they may be reclassified for medium or minimum custody, which means they may be assigned to work outside the walls. This is regarded by most inmates as a promotion—as indeed it is. A medium or minimum custody assignment is a “half-way station” involving more freedom and other conditions approaching those the man will meet in adjusting on parole.

The writer has just checked with the institution record office to see what number of men are on “trustee assignments.” The number is 1,007. The total prison population as of this date (10-24-42), is 5,288. The number used on medium and minimum custody assignments reaches a maximum of 1,300 to 1,400 in May and June of each year when the amount of farm employment is at its highest. Since a large part of these had only a few months remaining

to serve, they have already been paroled, leaving this number much reduced.

Types of Education

The educational department includes an Academic School, an Agricultural School, a Commercial School and a Vocational School. Each of these is directed by a trained civilian employee. The decision to enroll in one of the schools is usually a result of the enrollee's own initiative. Occasionally, the Classification Committee believes such a program is necessary and therefore they advise it, and, in rare cases, *require* a man to complete certain grades, if his intelligence rating indicates the capacity for it, before they will classify him for a work assignment. Approximately one hundred men come into prison each year who are illiterate—at least in English. Most of these are enrolled in the Academic School. At the time of the most recent tabulation (9-30-42) there were 206 students in attendance in the Academic School. At that date, 442 inmates were taking courses "by extension" from that department. Taking "extension courses" is done by inmates having work assignments but using part or all of their spare time for study. The total teaching personnel numbered forty-nine. There were twenty-one men taking courses from the University of Michigan, Extension Division.

Newly received inmates are quite generally advised to extend their educational training in their spare time by taking "extension work." In this way some have completed the sixth grade (equivalent to the eighth grade in the public schools), and thus qualified themselves for enrollment in the Vocational School where they have learned a trade. If the inmate has finished high school before coming to prison, he may still find school work to do here by enrolling in one of the other schools, or even by correspondence work from an outside school.

Reports We Receive—In Some Cases!—From Probation Officers

The Michigan law provides that pre-sentence investigation reports must be provided to the sentencing judges. The law is as follows:

Public Acts of 1939, No. 286.

Chapter XI. Section 14.

"Before sentencing any person charged with a felony, and if directed by the court, in any other case where any person is charged with a misdemeanor within the jurisdiction of the court, the probation officer shall inquire into the antecedents, character and circumstances of such person or persons, and shall report in writing thereon to such court or magistrate. If such person is committed to a state penal institution or the Detroit House of Correction, a copy of such pre-sentence investigation report and if a psychopathic or psychiatric examination of such person has been made for the court, a copy of the report thereon shall accompany the commitment papers. . . ."

If with every prisoner received in this prison there were sent to us a probation report, our work would be greatly reduced, our understanding of the inmate and his family situation would be fuller and freer of guesses, and we would have more time for "case work" treatment. From some courts we receive no probation reports, from others, reports of little value, and from still others, excellent ones.

Some time ago we were asked to set forth in a written statement a description of the type of probation reports we find most helpful, or, if we received none that were adequate, what points we would like to have covered in these reports. Following is part of the statement:

"To The Michigan Probation and Parole Association:

"We have been asked to make suggestions relative to probation reports received in this institution. The questions asked pertain specifically to the quality of these reports, and to any additional information that we might consider important enough to be included. We would like to present the purposes to which we apply the information which is afforded by the probation reports we receive; and, also, the points which, if covered, will contribute toward these purposes. It must be kept in mind that our efforts are directed toward returning the inmate to his family and his community better prepared to function in both.

"This requires: (1) the correction of remediable physical defects and ailments; (2) melioration of attitudes; (3) furtherance of education along lines called for by the patient's mentality, his previous vocational and educational experiences; and, (4) the inculcation of steady work habits.

"To attain these objectives we feel that we should have certain information about the man, his family and his community. A good probation report comprises a complete social history of the offender, including family, personal, and marital data, together with an estimate of the offender's place in the community. If these points are covered completely, the offender's cultural background, his socio-economic status, his occupation, his leisure activities, type of associates, his past fulfillment of social obligations, and his contacts with primary and secondary groups will stand out clearly. We consider it most important that a detailed picture of the offender in the context of his normal environment be presented. That analysis of the social background will aid us in our recommendations for parole placement, always keeping in mind the assets and liabilities of that background of which the inmate is a product. It is in this particular respect that the probation officer has a decided advantage over the prison sociologist, since he has access to the offender's home and can make a direct observation of his social milieu. Of course, certain cases require that particular factors be given more weight than others in the probation officer's report, and should be left largely to his discretion."

In Addition to Our Routine

We have, in some measure at least, the belief that our qualifications for our work should include besides competency in our routine task as sociologist, psychologist, deputy warden, or whatever officer may be in question, also the spirit of a mental and moral physician. It is not enough to have this department complete, well rounded and smoothly operating in a mechanical sense; our own attitudes toward the maladjusted men we deal with day by day must be such as to win their confidence, respect and emulation. Bet-

ter be understaffed and over-worked to such an extent that we are unable to accomplish all the routine work, than that we should be callous to a genuine need for sympathy, a friendly word of encouragement, or a need for a heart-to-heart discussion of a personal problem. Our attitude and practice may be indicated by quoting from a recent writer who says: "the best method of teaching is by example, and if we practice tolerance, forbearance, cooperation, and thoughtfulness, which are precisely the opposite of those attributes which distinguish the criminal, we are sure to make a powerful impression on the inmate."²

We have a tremendous volume of routine interviews and reports, but we believe in individualized treatment of criminals, which, of course, implies the giving of personal consideration. In addition to preparing social histories on all newly admitted prisoners (more than 2,000 in 1941), progress reports to the Parole Board on all men considered for parole (approximately 2,400 in 1941), supplementary social histories on returned parole violators (375 in 1941), we handled about 750 reclassification cases and 720 "social follow-ups."

Inmates are encouraged to ask any classification staff member for interviews regarding personal problems. These interviews we have called "social follow-ups." We cannot see all our prisoners periodically, but we try to encourage initiative on their part in seeking help toward improved fitness for readjustment in society upon their release.

Surprisingly little force is applied in our prison. It is used only where encouragement, the social pressure of inmate and official opinion, and the inmate's pride and desire for progress will not suffice to secure the necessary conformity to the institutional rules.

Citizens—and newly admitted inmates—are frequently surprised to discover how little concerned we are about the particular type of crime committed by a certain inmate. We consider it much more important to know what sort of a person the inmate is. We are dealing not with forgers, murderers, burglars, drunkards, as such, but with maladjusted men, men born and raised it may be in penury, homes broken by parental conflict and separation, homes devoid of the spirit of social responsibility, communities lacking decent facilities for children's play and wholesome social intercourse for adults.

We furnish "Progress Reports" to the sentencing judges in cases where they request them. There are a few circuit court judges in the state who correspond with the men they have sent to prison and periodically visit them in prison. This sort of thing is greatly appreciated by the inmates, and we find that it lends support to

² F. Emory Lyon, "The Spiritual Factor in Crime Treatment"; *Journal of Criminal Law, and Criminology*, 34, No. 3, September-October 1941.

the objectives of the Classification Committee as described above. We are glad to have judges and other properly interested parties come to see any prisoners they may be concerned about, and also to see our work and confer with us.

We never miss an opportunity to speak to groups of citizens—parent-teacher groups, church groups, college and university classes, and others—when asked to do so. We regard it as one of our duties to help broaden among our employers, the people of Michigan, their understanding of the purposes, methods, achievements and weaknesses of the prisons in this State.

Progress Reports to the Parole Board

One month before an inmate's minimum term expires, he is called before the Parole Board for consideration for parole. In preparation for this hearing, the sociologist whose district includes the court from which he was sentenced and who probably interviewed him when he was received (unless the inmate's term has been longer than the period of the sociologist's service) prepares a progress report to the Parole Board discussing the following points: The inmate's conduct record, educational accomplishments, his work record—particularly any increase in industrial or professional competency; how he handled his earnings and any money sent in by relatives or friends; what he has done in his leisure time; the correspondence and visit contacts maintained with relatives and friends; his previous criminality, if any, and any evidences of maturation of personality or improvement in the ability to get along with people—these and other changes which are likely to modify his former weaknesses or habits which led to crime; the adequacy or inadequacy of his parole plan is commented upon, and what the sociologist believes are likely to be the man's chief parole hazards. Sometimes, suggestions based upon a thorough familiarity with the inmate's record and two or more interview contacts with the inmate himself are made as to the advisability of rural placement as compared with urban, or vice versa.

A Few Proposals, Projects, and Plans

There you have briefly the story of classification in what is often spoken of as "the biggest prison in the world." Much of the progress indicated in this story has been greatly facilitated by improvement in mutual understanding and cooperation between the classification and other departments of the prison. There has grown up a salutary *esprit de corps* between the Parole Board and our department. Melioration in other respects might be noted. But we are becoming increasingly aware of certain weaknesses, certain failings, certain needs, among which are these: Few of the judges and prosecuting attorneys have been sufficiently con-

cerned about our work and objectives to secure first-hand acquaintance with them by visiting the prison, and specifically, our department. We are understaffed—seriously in point of psychiatric service to inmates handicapped by remediable personality defects. Also, almost no significant research has been done with the data afforded by a five-year accumulation of classification records.

Presently we will begin using a very complete information blank for recording information to be tabulated by the use of the Hollerith machine. This will afford the statistical data for research studies. We hope our work in this direction will materially stimulate some of the studies frequently called for of late. In a recent paper, Doctor Walter C. Reckless³ has noted the need for studies testing the effectiveness of the classification methods at present used. He suggests the need for study of the "response of offenders to various kinds of handling or treatment.—What about the inability of certain groups of offenders to take assistance or constructive program?—What sorts of treatment situations are related to success or failure in later outcome?"

Obviously, such questions point to the need for attacking much the same problem as that dealt with in the various parole prediction systems which have been evolved, but attacking it at an earlier stage. The earlier the better. With our inadequate staff of classification workers, it would be well if we knew which methods were most effective and which men most worth helping.

³ An Experimental Basis for Revision of Correctional Programs," *Federal Probation*, Vol. 6; No. 1, January-March, 1942.

Appeal by a Nose

Oklahoma City, May 27, '43 (AP).—Old Boston, the surly bloodhound that tracked down dozens of criminals and would bite his own keeper if he was too slow, was just another dog to the courts in his lifetime.

Now, four years after his death, his nose work has legal standing. The criminal Court of Appeals affirmed a two-year sentence on an arson conviction on the strength of Old Boston's detecting.

It was the first time the court accepted a bloodhound's evidence.