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PREDICTION OF PAROLE SUCCESS IN WISCONSIN

John L. Gillin¹

In 1922 the writer began research on how probation was working in Wisconsin. A little later studies directed towards determining whether prediction tables could be set up on the basis of information found in the records of the Bureau of Probation and Parole in the Board of Control were begun. And still later an attempt was made to ascertain what had happened in the State in the administration of executive clemency, and whether a prediction table could be constructed to aid the Governor in selecting applicants for clemency. Four studies covering these three subjects have now been completed. They were two studies on parole, one of parolees from the Wisconsin State Reformatory, one of those from the Wisconsin State Prison; one on probationers placed by the courts under the supervision of the State Bureau of Probation and Parole; and one on those granted executive clemency by the governors between 1930-38. Only the results of the two studies on parole are dealt with in this report.

The first of these studies, that on the parolees from the Reformatory, is unique in a number of respects: (1) Instead of taking a group of parolees whose cases were closed 1930-1935 and treating them as a unit, we took the 629 released from supervision in 1933-1934, analyzed the factors associated with success and failure on parole, and then tested these factors for stability by a group of 763 closed in the years immediately preceding, and another of 236 closed in 1935. (2) Only those factors found stable in the three groups were used as a basis of prediction of success or failure on parole. (3) The methods used by Burgess on Illinois parolees and by the Gluecks on Massachusetts parolees were then applied to the Wisconsin group in order to see if the factors Burgess and the Gluecks found in their studies were valid when applied to the Wisconsin Reformatory group.

What were the results? (1) It was found that some of the factors isolated as statistically significant in the original group of 629 were not at all statistically differential when applied to the other two groups. (2) Throughout the three groups only four factors remained constant in their significance—criminal history, work record, behavior in the institution and length of time on parole. (3) On applying the Burgess method to the three groups we found that the method gave no more consistent results when applied to the three groups in our study. The same was true of a modified Burgess method. Either of the cumulative tables, show-

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ing the application of the Burgess and of the modified Burgess method to our three groups, compares unfavorably with the single classification of record of arrests and outcome on parole. These findings were most disappointing—indeed devastating. For they not only destroyed the hope with which we started out, that we might be able to find a method by which the parole authority in this State might select more exactly than by the rule-of-thumb methods in use, those who gave promise of succeeding on parole, but also they showed that none of the methods developed in other states, and so enthusiastically acclaimed, when applied to our material was of any value. That is not to say that the methods worked out in other states is of no value in those states. It may be that the Wisconsin Reformatory prisoners are peculiar in some undiscovered respects. So far as Wisconsin is concerned, it is clear that the data found in the records of the Reformatory and of the Board are inadequate to provide a knowledge of the factors which are closely associated with success or failure on parole.

The second study on parole, that of parolees from the Wisconsin State Prison, was equally if not more disappointing. In the study of parolees from the Reformatory it appeared that previous arrests were stable in all three groups studied, but in the study of parolees from the Prison even that proved to be unstable in the three groups, and also had no significance in a single group.

It must be said in view of these findings that prediction tables based upon the information in the records of parolees in Wisconsin are impossible. And, those who have made up prediction tables in other states without testing their findings for stability over a period of time are shouldered with the burden of proof that their factors are stable. Until they test them, as we have done, their findings are open to suspicion that their prediction tables are worthless no matter how large was the sample on which they based them.

What shall be said then about the possibility of constructing prediction tables for parolees? So far as we can see from the results of our investigation in Wisconsin, the data to be found in the records at present do not reveal the factors which determined the behavior of the parolees. The data on the early backgrounds of the parolees are not those which throw light on the factors which gave the set to the personality and character of the parolee. After all, what we were trying to discover were: (1) What characteristics of the personality of these parolees are associated with their behavior, (2) what in their experience and constitutional make-up determined those characteristics. Before these things can be learned we shall probably have to attack the problem in a different way. By careful personal interviews and investigation of the

communities from which these men come we shall have to dig down below the surface data now in the records to determine (1) just what attitudes and habits these prisoners have, and (2) what experiences are associated significantly with those attitudes and habits, and thus assumedly had an influence in producing them. For prediction purposes only the first has been thought necessary. But even that is not enough. All studies thus far have gone on the assumption that a man was the same after prison experience as before, and that therefore no account need be taken of what that experience did to his attitudes and habits.² Certainly that is a gratuitous assumption. Some method must be devised to ascertain whether or not his prison experience has had any effect on his outlook on life, and if so, just what effect. Further, probably we shall have to ascertain whether all prisoners who are considered for parole have common or different kinds of personalities, or have the same or different habit systems and characteristics. If we should find, as my study of murderers, sex offenders and property offenders in the State Prison of Wisconsin seemed to show, that they have different types of personalities, then we can test the association of these characteristics peculiar to different groups of prisoners with their success or failure on parole. By that method we might get groups with more homogeneous characteristics. It was hoped that psychological and psychiatric examinations would give glimpses of just such characteristics, but so far the findings of those disciplines have not been of much help in differentiating the characteristics of those who succeed and those who fail on parole. Neither have the types of investigation by parole officers supplied the data necessary to such differentiation. And nothing has been done to ascertain what characteristics have been developed by the experience of incarceration. The studies by the Gluecks on conditions favorable or unfavorable to success on parole has value in indicating to parole officers the conditions to which the parolee should be subjected on parole, but they did not test those conditions for intercorrelation with factors in pre-parole experience, nor do the post-parole conditions aid much in determining parolability.

The proposal we have made is faced with difficulties. (1) Personal interviews with the prisoner and with people in the community in which he was reared costs time and money. Yet, experience up to date indicates that only by interviews can the characteristics of the personality be discovered, and under what conditions these characteristics developed. If in that way parolability can better be determined and fewer mistakes made, the expense of time and money would be justified. (2) It might be thought

² The Gluecks have shown that a prisoner's post-parole experience is important in his later conduct. See their *Later Criminal Careers*.

that any attempt to measure the effect of treatment while in the institution on the personality of the prisoner would encounter grave difficulties. But such investigations as have been made among students to determine what changes in opinion and attitude taking a certain course has had, would not disturb prison routine any more than existing physical, psychological and psychiatric examinations. Such a test might well be made on an experimental basis first, taking only a small number, until trial had shown what test statements or questions gave the best results. Possibly such a test would show that it would have to be supplemented by personal interviews. That would require more time and money. My own experience in studying the inmates of the Wisconsin State Prison indicates that institution authorities are ready to cooperate with serious students in whom they have confidence. I should not expect serious opposition to even a controlled experiment in the treatment of the inmates. (3) So shaping the interviews of the prisoner and of the people in his community that the real factors in his behavior are revealed. Interviewing is a difficult art, if one is not to suggest his own answers, if one is not to be diverted from fundamental to superficial matters, and if he is to succeed in unearthing the subtle emotional influences which it is suspected have so much to do with the determination of responses to social situations, the determination of habits and the formation of meaningful associations. (4) So recording the results of interviews that the important factors may be quantified and analyzed statistically. These are real difficulties but they are not insuperable. No finer challenge to young scholars can be thought of than to overcome these and other such difficulties. The advancement of the bounds of knowledge is supposed to be one of the most important tasks of the scholar. Also no better use can be found for the expenditure of money by individuals, foundations and universities than in helping ambitious young scholars to explore these jungles of ignorance.