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## ON REHABILITATING CHRONIC TRAFFIC OFFENDERS

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Criminologists and penologists for years have been concerned with ways of rehabilitating criminal offenders so that they may safely rejoin the non-criminal population. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a program for rehabilitating drivers who frequently and consistently are involved in traffic violations and/or traffic accidents (i.e., chronic traffic offenders). Although efforts have been made in this direction, at least two factors seem to have neutralized them. One is the tendency of the populace to regard breaking traffic laws as considerably less serious than criminal violations; the second is a tendency of responsible public officials to regard violations as causes in themselves.

As a consequence, current efforts at rehabilitating chronic traffic offenders take the form of traffic court schools. And they are schools in a literal sense: six to twenty hours of lectures, films and discussion about traffic laws, local traffic ordinances and driving skills. The author knows of approximately 100 such schools. Yet over 38,000 persons were killed in traffic accidents in 1955, and more than 1,300,000 were injured or permanently disabled (13). The discrepancy between current rehabilitative efforts and these annual tolls cannot readily be defended—either in terms of the number of schools or in terms of their nature—particularly when traffic accidents and violations are considered in behavioral terms.

### THE CASE FOR A NEW APPROACH

Research indicates that social and psychological factors are the primary causes of traffic accidents and traffic violations. Selling (16, p. 77) found that a significant percentage of traffic law violators and accident repeaters were emotionally maladjusted, and that "emotions, attitudes, and related personal factors are significant in the accident experience of these individuals." Brody feels there is evidence that "personal problems constitute an important factor in the causation of traffic accidents" (2, p. 50). Tillman and Hobbs (20, p. 325) report that factors of maladjustment characterized accident-repeating taxi drivers to a significant degree. In his study of commercial bus drivers, Wisely determined that the accident-free group could not be distinguished from the repeater group on visual acuity, depth perception, night vision, glare recovery, complex reaction time or mental ability tests, but he found differences in temperament and emotions which were significantly characteristic of the repeater group (21). The Eno study bore out the conclusions reached by Wisely on psychophysical deficiencies, and pointed out that "a number of investigators have found

indications that emotional factors, mental upsets, and psychological maladjustments are significant in accident experience" (4, p. 105).

More specifically, these and other studies show that chronic traffic offenders are in actuality a highly select group when their personal characteristics are compared to those of the general population: they tend to resent authority and restrictions upon their behavior; generally speaking, they seem to be hostile toward those who exert this authority and toward those who enforce it (whether the enforcement is legitimate or not); many of them appear to be inadequately adjusted, personally and socially, and tend to rationalize their behavior (including driving) until it becomes acceptable to them; they tend to feel inadequate and insecure, though not to a marked degree; sometimes they behave in an emotionally unstable fashion; they tend to have an erratic job history; many are quite ignorant of the regulations society has placed upon their behavior; for the most part their intelligence quotients are neither high nor low; and in many cases they have not been reared under an atmosphere which accepts the prevailing social norms (2, 4, 8, 10, 16, 20, 21).

#### SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CRIMINALS, DELINQUENTS, AND CHRONIC TRAFFIC OFFENDERS

These findings suggest that some psychological similarities may exist between chronic traffic offenders on the one hand and criminals and delinquents on the other.

#### BEHAVIORAL SIMILARITIES

Delinquents and prison inmates share behavior patterns which are clearly antisocial. Although inmates are more overtly hostile to society than delinquents, and although chronic traffic offenders certainly are less hostile and antisocial than delinquents, all three behave antisocially. Some observers may feel that drivers are *not* antisocial, since in committing traffic violations they do not damage property, and do not injure society in an immediately observable way. But available data indicate that the likelihood of a driver becoming involved in an accident increases as he commits violations, and an accident means property damage, personal injury, even a fatality. Certainly these sequellae constitute antisocial behavior: the eventual damage to society is not unlike that caused by delinquents and criminals. Furthermore, the simple fact remains that chronic violators do "break the law"—and generally they do it consciously.

Tillman and Hobbs (2) report that accident repeaters have a behavioral history of frequent short term employments, and readily tend to become distracted and annoyed while driving. Hodge (8) provides some rather convincing data on the behavioral similarities of delinquents and chronic traffic offenders in his study of 207 juvenile traffic offenders of the County of Los Angeles. The subjects were broken down into five groups, group I containing all those with five or more violations in six months. He then checked the names in each group against the Central Juvenile Index (delinquency records) and obtained the following results (8, p. 34):

Group	Number in group	Percent of N	Number of Group in CJI	Percent of Group in CJI	Number with Court Records
I	96	46.4	11	11.6	4
II	52	25.1	11	21.2	3
III	24	11.6	11	45.7	3
IV	16	7.7	6	37.4	3
V	19	9.2	11	57.9	4
	207	100.00	50		17

The data suggest that the more traffic violations a juvenile has, the greater are the chances that the juvenile also will have a record of delinquent behavior. Hodge feels that "Because of the relatively small sample it is not possible to draw fully objective conclusions . . . . But the sharp increase in CJI records and juvenile court records for those juveniles having three or more citations would probably indicate that their violations were symptomatic of deeper lying maladjustments within the home and the community." This would seem to be particularly so when it is realized that these violations were incurred within a six-month period.

#### MOTIVATIONAL SIMILARITIES

Several studies have shown that a resentment of authority characterizes most criminals (11, 14, 19, 22). Lach reports that negative attitudes toward authority were common among the accident repeaters he studied, and he noted further that adolescent repeaters evidenced behavior patterns which fitted the behavior patterns of delinquents (10, p. 35). Tillman and Hobbs describe the behavior during adolescence of their adult repeaters in similar terms (20).

A need for recognition is another characteristic of most criminals and delinquents (18). Apparently, they resort to asocial and antisocial behavior in an effort to obtain recognition.<sup>1</sup> This point of view was epitomized by the Gluecks when they concluded: "It seems clear, therefore, that the delinquent boys . . . grew up in an atmosphere not conducive to the development of emotionally well-integrated, happy youngsters conditioned to *obedience to legitimate authority*." (6, p. 133; italics by the present author.) Again, such characteristics have been reported by Tillman and Hobbs, (20) as well as by several others (8, 10, 16).

Finally, the social deterrents and legal penalties threatening criminals and delinquents are considerably stronger than those facing chronic traffic offenders. Where imprisonment may well be the outcome of a criminal offense, fines, license suspensions and occasional revocations are the order of the day in traffic courts. Consequently, many chronic offenders may feel that they can violate traffic laws with relative impunity. This feeling may be compounded by a realization that, if "gotten away with," a traffic violation leaves behind it no tell-tale evidence; such is not the case in criminal acts. Accordingly, traffic violations are not generally regarded by drivers as on a par with civil or federal offenses.

<sup>1</sup> It is significant to note that it is recognition obtained from individuals and groups whose sets of values, like those of criminals and delinquents, also are distorted; it is not recognition from society in general, whose approval in the last analysis is probably the approval they really seek.

This rapid analysis seems to show that a great many chronic traffic offenders bear a certain psychological resemblance to delinquents and criminals in terms of behavior patterns and motivations; the primary difference between the two groups appears to lie in the degree or depth to which they possess these characteristics. Thus, not current efforts but the rehabilitative techniques found to be effective with criminals and delinquents may well be more suitable for the rehabilitation of chronic traffic offenders. As Lach says, "... it would seem that too often treatment of chronic traffic offenders deals only with the symptomatic results of their 'delinquency.' They are sent to traffic schools, put on probation, limited in their driving, lectured on traffic safety, and told of the serious consequences of their behavior." (10, p. 35). It is known, of course, that behavioral changes rarely are effected by such directive techniques.

Because present rehabilitative efforts are what they are, no direct evidence supporting the burden of this paper seems to be available. However, there is indirect evidence which in combination with the preceding analysis, seems to argue rather strongly in favor of an adaptation of the work of McCorkle at Highfields (12), Slavson (17), Hadden (7), et. al.

The first source of this evidence is the New Jersey Traffic Accident Prevention Clinic located in Trenton. Here chronic offenders undergo psychological and psychophysical examination. The indirect evidence is twofold. First the psychological test results (from the Sacks Sentence Completion Test and the Thurstone Temperament Schedule); preliminary findings on the first 947 offenders and some 219 non-offenders indicating approximately 55 percent of the offenders show no better than borderline adjustment. The same description applies only to about 15 percent of the non-offenders. And secondly, the changes which come over the face-to-face behavior of offenders; undoubtedly these changes are temporary, but it should be noted that they develop in but one to two hours.

The second source of indirect evidence lies in a pilot study conducted by the author, in cooperation with the Magistrates' Courts of New York City. Eight out of twenty of the most serious traffic offenders referred by the Magistrates were studied. Of the eight, none had fewer than 12 moving violations and/or accidents in a two-year period. Extended, relatively unstructured interviews totalling about six hours were held with each subject in a clearly non-directive atmosphere. The Sacks Sentence Completion Test was administered during the intake and at the end of the series of interviews via the split-half method. Despite the fact that the interviews were designed solely to collect data and form hypotheses, all but one subject showed distinct improvement on the attitudinal level after the six or seven weekly interviews.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Safety research indicates that social and psychological factors are the primary causes of accidents and violations. Analysis of related research discloses that the personal and social characteristics of criminals and delinquents also are typical of the majority of chronic traffic offenders, although the latter appear to possess these characteristics to a lesser degree.

Current rehabilitative efforts do not seem to be based on these observations. It

would appear that the behavioral changes desired derive from the attitudinal level in the case of chronic traffic offenders, whereas with criminals and delinquents more profound personality problems are involved. As a consequence, it is suggested that group therapy techniques found successful with criminals and delinquents be correspondingly modified for use with chronic traffic offenders.

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