

1957

County-Wide Delinquency Recording System, A

John M. Martin

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

John M. Martin, County-Wide Delinquency Recording System, A, 47 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 682 (1956-1957)

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.

A COUNTY-WIDE DELINQUENCY RECORDING SYSTEM

JOHN M. MARTIN

The author is a Lecturer in Sociology at Fordham University. Formerly he was Director, Curriculum in Correctional Administration at the University of Notre Dame. He has worked also as an institutional caseworker for the Massachusetts Department of Correction.

Mr. Martin, a member of the Juvenile Study Committee cited in subsequent pages, acknowledges the valuable assistance provided to him by the other members of the Committee in the preparation of this paper. He alone, however, assumes responsibility for its content.—EDITOR.

In any given problem, first get the facts, then weigh and decide and only then take action. Afterwards be sure and check results.

Stuart Chase in *The Proper Study of Mankind* . . .

Statistics on juvenile delinquency are usually collected for three, somewhat overlapping, purposes: to provide public information; to guide administrative planning, control and supervision; and to serve as a basis for research into the etiology of delinquency and for the evaluation of agency programs.¹

A wide variety of Federal, state and local agencies have compiled data on the juvenile offender. The "Uniform Crime Reports" published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the "Juvenile Court Statistics" published by the Children's Bureau are important examples of the Federal Government's efforts in this area. Various states have also been active. The work of the California Bureau of Criminal Statistics in gathering data on children referred to probation departments and juvenile courts is an excellent example of state fact-finding programs.² Local communities have also compiled similar information. Kvaraceus has written of the Passaic (N. J.) Plan for the control and treatment of juvenile delinquency, including a description of its statistical recording system.³ Schwartz has reported on an experiment in delinquency measurement in the District of Columbia.⁴ Craig has written of New York City Youth Board efforts to count the problem and delinquent children in the area it serves.⁵

All of these recording systems are, of course, subject to a number of limitations, the most important being that, since they only record reported delinquency, their summations do not represent the *actual* number of delinquents in the areas with

¹ E. E. SCHWARTZ, *Counting Delinquent Children*, CHILDREN, Vol. 1, No. 6, Nov.-Dec., 1954, pp. 227-231.

² W. K. GIESECKE and I. RAMSEIER, *An Accounting Plan for Juvenile Probation*, JOUR. OF CRIM. L., CRIMINOL., AND POL. SCI., Vol. 43, No. 6, March-April, 1953, pp. 705-718.

³ W. C. KVARACEUS, *JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND THE SCHOOL*, World Book Co., Yonkers-on-Hudson, N. Y., 1945.

⁴ E. E. SCHWARTZ, *A Community Experiment in the Measurement of Juvenile Delinquency*, NATIONAL PROBATION ASSOCIATION YEARBOOK, 1945, pp. 157-181.

⁵ M. M. CRAIG, *Measurement of the Extent of Children with Problems and of Delinquents in New York City*, REACHING THE UNREACHED, (Rev.), The New York City Youth Board, 1954.

which they are concerned. Yet this short-coming should not be interpreted to mean that information on reported delinquents is not useful. If it is faithfully and systematically recorded, it is representative of the children brought to the attention of community agencies. With respect to these cases, such information does satisfy the three purposes for which delinquency statistics are usually gathered. The chief danger to be avoided here, particularly with respect to the etiology of delinquency, is to assume erroneously that data on reported delinquents is representative of all delinquents in the community.

This article describes a central recording system for reported delinquents⁶ recently established in St. Joseph County, Indiana. The report explains why such a system was established, how it was established, as well as the mechanics of the system itself.

In January, 1955, the Board of Directors of the Council of Community Services of St. Joseph County, Indiana authorized the Council to form a Juvenile Study Committee for the purpose of recommending a program of action relative to delinquency in the County. This authorization reflected a growing public concern with delinquency. For a number of months, in the County and elsewhere, press reports and official interest had focused attention on the problem. In late 1954, for example, the State of Indiana sponsored a series of delinquency workshops throughout the state. Later, the South Bend City Council⁷ devoted several public sessions to a discussion of the best ways to combat the problem in the city.

In authorizing the Committee, the Directors suggested that it focus its attention on the problem of delinquency prevention and control on a County-wide basis. No other instructions were given to the Committee, since the Directors believed that, once formed, the Committee itself would be the best agency to decide which particular aspects of prevention and control should receive attention.

The Executive Director of the Council of Community Services and his staff contacted various agencies in the County active or interested in the welfare of adolescents and asked that they appoint representatives to the Juvenile Study Committee. The response was favorable and a number of people joined the Committee. In this manner individuals from both community agencies and interested lay groups, particularly from official agencies which dealt directly with the delinquent child, were drawn into the Study Committee. Thus, not only did representatives from official agencies share full responsibility with lay groups for the recommendations made by the Committee, but the representation of official agencies on the Committee insured the interest and cooperation of these agencies in any program which the Council of Community Services, through the Study Committee, might seek to initiate. The importance of winning the support of official agencies cannot be overestimated. Alpert's description of the demise of the state judicial statistics collected by the Bureau of the Census between 1932 and 1946 is an apt illustration of how cooperative community efforts in the field of crime and delinquency are fated to

⁶ That is, children under the juvenile court age limit of eighteen who, because of their deviant behavior, have been identified as "delinquent" by one or more agencies in the County. They range from children whose delinquency is merely an allegation to those who actually have been adjudicated delinquent by the court.

⁷ South Bend is the principal city in St. Joseph County.

fail if the support of official agencies is not cultivated. Lack of official interest and cooperation, together with incidental supervision and related impediments, rendered the state judicial statistics ineffectual and they were abandoned.⁸

The members of the Study Committee immediately set about the task of defining their specific objective. This was not easily accomplished. However, it soon became apparent that, although "common-sense" explanations for delinquency and plans for its prevention and control in the County were abundant, as were a number of conflicting statistical reports, verified and consistent knowledge about it was much less available. Particularly lacking was a clear-cut picture of the extent and distribution of reported delinquency in the County, as well as an over-all view of what particular agencies were doing to combat the problem. For example, no one knew the exact number of delinquents brought to the attention of County agencies during any given year nor precisely what was happening to such delinquents. The Committee finally agreed that, quite aside from knowledge about the etiology of delinquency, any effective program must be built upon factual knowledge about the extent and distribution of reported delinquency in the County and a careful assessment of what particular agencies were doing with the cases brought to their attention. Therefore, the members set as their objective the attainment of such knowledge. It should be noted that the members explicitly excluded from consideration any investigation of the etiology of delinquent behavior.

Specifically, the Committee decided, as will be seen, that answers should be sought to nine questions. The members felt, paraphrasing Charles Booth, that almost every fact needed to answer these questions was already known to someone, and that the information had simply to be compiled and put together.⁹

Members of the Committee also agreed that, since a number of agencies dealing with delinquents in the County were not registering their cases with the existing Social Service Exchange, an effective means for improving the functioning of agencies dealing with juvenile offenders in the County would be to gather data in such a way that it would accumulate on individual delinquents. Information recorded in this manner could be scanned by agencies in the County to determine the reported delinquent histories of children brought to their attention and to establish which agencies, if any, had previously dealt with such children because of their delinquency. Similar data has been gathered in like fashion on delinquents in other jurisdictions.¹⁰ The Committee unanimously agreed that its secondary goal would be to compile data on individual juveniles.

The following plan describes the procedure which the Juvenile Study Committee devised to implement its dual objective. After endorsement by the St. Joseph County Probate-Juvenile Justice, the plan was approved by the Board of Directors of the Council of Community Services and, after several organizational meetings were

⁸ H. ALPERT, *National Series on State Judicial Criminal Statistics Discontinued*, JOUR. OF CRIM. L. AND CRIMINOL., Vol. 39, No. 2, July-August, 1948, pp. 181-188.

⁹ P. V. YOUNG, *SCIENTIFIC SOCIAL SURVEYS AND RESEARCH*, 2nd ed., Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, 1949, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Cf.*, e.g., P. V. YOUNG, *SOCIAL TREATMENT IN PROBATION AND DELINQUENCY*, 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, 1952, pp. 83-85, for a description of the Central Juvenile Index developed by the Los Angeles (Calif.) County Probation Department.

held among the representatives of concerned agencies, the plan was put into effect on September 1, 1955.

Essentially, the Committee decided to

- I. Compile data on reported delinquents in St. Joseph County in such a manner that it could be used to answer the following questions:
 1. How many juveniles, because of their delinquency, are brought to the attention of the school, the police, the court and other agencies in the County during a twelve-month period?
 2. Of the children brought to the attention of such agencies, how many are provided with assistance?
 3. What is the nature of the assistance provided?
 4. Of those brought to the attention of such agencies, how many are dismissed without receiving assistance?
 5. Of those provided with assistance, how many are again dealt with because of their delinquency?
 6. Of those dismissed, how many are again dealt with because of their delinquency?
 7. Do certain residential areas in the County provide disproportionate numbers of children who, because of their delinquency, are brought to the attention of County agencies?
 8. Do the delinquent activities of reported delinquents in the County tend to occur in particular areas and neighborhoods?
 9. Do the delinquent activities of reported delinquents in the County tend to occur on particular days and during particular hours, and during particular months of the year?

The Committee felt that answers to these questions would provide the *minimal* information necessary for a systematic and informed approach to the delinquency problem in the County. That is, the members felt that only after these questions were answered would the community know the true magnitude and scope of reported delinquency within its boundaries, be in a position to direct a coordinated and concerted effort toward its reduction, and be able to assess the effectiveness of present, as well as future, efforts at prevention and control. The specific content of future measures would, of course, depend as much upon the willingness of the community to finance new techniques and to endorse changes in existing procedures as upon the answers obtained to the nine questions.

- II. Record the data gathered in such a manner that, as the information is accumulated, it will constitute a central index of reported delinquents in the County which can supply information (e.g., prior offenses and dispositions, as well as the names of other agencies having previous contact with the child) to various agencies in their daily task of dealing with individual children.

In seeking to implement its dual objective the Committee found that, although several of the agencies dealing with delinquents in the County, including the Social Service Exchange itself, had developed their own methods of statistical recording, differences in the various available record systems precluded central tabulation of the data they contained. In addition, the information itself was not complete enough to answer the questions raised by the members of the Study Committee. Therefore, the members decided to establish a central recording system wherein information could be gathered together to answer the questions posed and which could also

serve as a central index of reported delinquents in the County. For these purposes, the following steps were undertaken:

1. Agencies dealing with juvenile offenders in the County were asked to participate in the central recording system. These agencies were:
 - City, town, county, state, and federal police organizations.
 - City, county, and federal courts and probation departments dealing with juveniles.
 - State and federal juvenile parole authorities.
 - The county prosecuting attorney.
 - Pupil personnel departments in city and county school systems.
 - Selected public and private child welfare agencies normally dealing with delinquent children.

All agreed to participate.

2. The existing Social Service Exchange office in the County was selected as the most logical and least expensive place to locate the records of the central recording system.

Here information about reported delinquents is being accumulated in files entirely separate from the general files of the Exchange.

In no way does such information constitute an "official record" for the children listed in the recording system. Only designated agents of participating agencies have access to the files of the system.

3. Two forms were constructed for gathering and recording data:

The first, called the *Juvenile Referral Sheet*, is filled in by any agency making initial contact with a delinquent or receiving a delinquent on referral from another agency.

On it are recorded the name, birthdate, sex, address, telephone number, name of school, name of father or guardian of a particular child, as well as date of contact or date received on referral, name of contacting or receiving agency and case number, type of offense, time and place of offense (where it can be specified), date of case disposition or referral, and type of disposition or name of agency to which child was referred.

The second form, called the "Central Juvenile Index Card," is filled in by the Social Service Exchange upon receipt of a Referral Sheet.

On the Index Card are recorded the name, birthdate, sex, address, telephone number, name of school, name of father or guardian, as well as date of contact or receipt, offense, name of contacting or receiving agency and case number, date of disposition or referral, and type of disposition or name of agency to which the child was referred.

4. Participating agencies, at the time they *dispose* of individual children brought to their attention, who for them have become "cases of record," mail to the Social Service Exchange one Referral Sheet for each child contacted or received.

Referral Sheets are made out on all cases whether they have been disposed of officially or "unofficially."

If agencies subsequently deal with the same child because of further delinquency, additional Referral Sheets are made out and filed with the Exchange.

All Referral Sheets received by the Exchange are filed in chronological order.

5. When the Social Service Exchange receives a Referral Sheet on a particular child, it makes out an Index Card, recording on it data supplied by the Referral Sheet.

Data from subsequent Referral Sheets mailed to the Exchange on the same child are added to his already existent Index Card.

In this way each Index Card lists in chronological order the reported delinquencies of particular children, the name and case number of contacting or receiving agencies, the date of contact or receipt, and the disposition and date of disposition of the case.

The Index Cards themselves are filed in alphabetical order at the Exchange.

6. When a participating agency contacts or receives a child on referral and wants to know what information, if any, the Index Card file contains on the child, its authorized agent makes an inquiry at the Exchange.

The Exchange supplies the inquiring agency with a chronological listing of Index Card entries on the child.

In cases where no entries exist, the Exchange reports this fact to the inquiring agency.

Present plans call for progress checks to be made of the data contained on the chronologically filed Referral Sheets and for a full analysis to be made of such data after it has been collected for twelve months. It is anticipated that such analysis will yield initial answers to the nine questions raised by the Juvenile Study Committee. In addition, all agencies participating in the recording system will be polled to ascertain the usefulness the Index Card file has had for them in determining the delinquent histories of individual children brought to their attention.

This analysis and evaluation will be undertaken chiefly to determine the potential worth of the recording system as a fact-finding instrument in the County. If the system proves useful, it is anticipated that it will be maintained, perhaps with some modification, on a permanent basis, for without the continuous acquisition of information the system could not fulfill its intended purposes. For example, the full value of the Index Card file as a clearing house for information on individual children can only be realized after it has been in operation for an extended period of time.

Since in many cases the system will record information on children who have simply been identified as "delinquent" by nonjudicial agencies, analysis of Referral Sheet data will clearly distinguish between these children and those who have actually been *adjudicated* delinquent by the court. This same distinction will be observed in listing the delinquent histories of individual children on the Index Cards. As Tappan has so nicely pointed out, since delinquency is actually a legal status, there is a real need to delineate and separate the functions of judicial and nonjudicial agencies.¹¹ Therefore, although for the purpose of measuring the extent and distribution of delinquency and for tracing the delinquent histories of individual children it has become common practice to include both categories of children and their activities, the Committee decided that the recording system they proposed should make a sharp distinction between the two entities. The members felt that failure to do this would tacitly accept the police, school and similar nonjudicial agencies, as well as the court, as arbiters of legal issues, would confuse rather than clarify the essential nature of delinquency as a legal concept, and would conceivably assign the onerous label of delinquent to children who would never find themselves adjudicated as such by the court.

The Juvenile Study Committee acknowledged at the time it proposed the establishment of the recording system described in this paper that it was recommending neither a spectacular nor even an original undertaking. Rather the members felt that their suggestion was merely a preliminary bookkeeping operation necessary to the development of a systematic and informed approach to the prevention and control of delinquency in their community.

¹¹ P. W. TAPPAN, *JUVENILE DELINQUENCY*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, 1949, p. 51.