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SOME SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MISDEMEANANTS¹

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Those who do not adjust to their society; who become dependent because of illness, poverty, or criminal behavior have long attracted the interest of social scientists and social actionists. Sometimes it seems that we are more interested in the poor, the sick, and the "bad" than we are in the normal citizen, but be that as it may, most of us find failure fascinating. This paper is an outgrowth of that fascination.

Previously, we have published studies of a population of an almshouse.² In them we described the social characteristics of the population, and compared them with the same characteristics of the siblings of the population members. As a result of this work, our attention was directed to what appeared to be an overlapping population consisting of chronic petty criminals, who are repeatedly incarcerated in county jails, workhouses and houses of correction.

This population roughly corresponds to the Federal Bureau of Investigation category "Class II Criminal", and we direct our attention to a sample of it in this paper. While there have been some general studies of the petty offender published such as Queen's,³ most have been in the nature of reports of Commissioners of Correction,

¹ This study was originally conceived by Dr. A. Warren Stearns, and was supported by Research Grant M H 110 (C2) from the National Institute of Mental Health of the National Institutes of Health, U. S. Public Health Service. The work was done at Tufts College. Interviewing was done by Ullman, Demone and Stearns. Supplementary data was obtained and coded by Demone and Ullman, with valuable assistance by A. S. Metz. The statistical analysis was done by Washburne. The responsibility for the interpretation of the findings and the writing of this paper rests solely with Washburne and Ullman. The writers wish to express their particular thanks to Mr. John F. Brocklesby, Deputy Master, Middlesex County House of Correction.

² A. WARREN STEARNS AND ALBERT D. ULLMAN, *One Thousand Unsuccessful Careers*, THE AMER. JOUR. OF PSYCHIATRY, 105, Number 11, May, 1949, pages 801-809; ALBERT D. ULLMAN, HAROLD W. DEMONE, JR., AND A. WARREN STEARNS, *Does Failure Run in Families?* AMER. JOUR. OF PSYCHIATRY, 107, Number 9, March, 1951, pages 667-676; and ALBERT D. ULLMAN, *The First Drinking Experience of Addictive and of "Normal" Drinkers*, QUAR. JOUR. OF STUDIES ON ALCOHOL, 14, June, 1953, pages 181-191.

³ S. A. QUEEN, *THE PASSING OF THE COUNTY JAIL*, Wenosha, Wisc., George Banta Publishing Co., 1920.

or studies like Bromberg and Thompson's⁴ which have a specific and restricted purpose. The literature is scanty in comparison to that which deals with the felon, and, what is particularly important, there is very little which gives one insight into the sweep of the careers of such persons. Consequently, we have directed our study of the petty offender somewhat in the manner of the natural historian. We want to describe the essential characteristics of our subjects rather than to present intensive analysis. Our feeling is that the generation of testable hypotheses about chronic petty criminals must await the accumulation of the kind of facts we have at hand concerning felons.

THE SAMPLE

Our sample consists of 1000 males who were consecutive admissions to the Middlesex County House of Correction in Billerica, Massachusetts, which serves an area, mostly urban, bordering on the city of Boston. The upper limit of sentences to the House of Correction is two-and-a-half years, and most of the crimes for which inmates have been committed have been in this sense adjudged as relatively minor. Therefore, despite the confused legal basis of the misdemeanor-felon dichotomy, the inmates are considered misdemeanants.

The 1000 men in our sample were admitted to the House of Correction in 1949 and 1950. Each of them was interviewed at that time and material which was chiefly factual was obtained. Supplementary information concerning the men in our sample was gathered from records of the Massachusetts Department of Probation and the Social Service Index. In fifty percent of the cases, members of the prisoner's family were interviewed, and for some, pertinent superior court records were scanned. Other data was obtained from agencies such as the local police. Most of the information supplied by the prisoners themselves was found to be substantially accurate.

Table I indicates that most of the inmates had been incarcerated at the time of the interview for crimes against the public order, with drunkenness and nonsupport accounting for most of the offenses in this category. Drunkenness was the most frequent cause of conviction, and after nonsupport, the next most frequent present offenses were larceny, breaking and entering, and assault, in that order. These five categories of offenses were the only ones for which more than six percent of the sample were serving sentences at the time the investigation was made.

The listing of the offenses for which a group of men are serving sentences at any given time is not sufficient to indicate the scope of their criminal activities. A better measure—though by no means a perfect one—is provided by an account of all the crimes for which they have ever been convicted. Therefore, the records of convictions and dispositions of 996 of the inmates were obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Probation. Some of the men had truly amazing records of arrests and convictions. One man had been convicted of crimes associated with drunkenness no less than 176 times in the course of 16 years! Lists of 60 or 70 separate convictions were by no means uncommon, and the mean number of convictions was 17.5.

Table II presents the histories of 996 House of Correction inmates, with the crimes

⁴ W. BROMBERG AND C. B. THOMPSON, *The Relation of Psychosis, Mental Defect, and Personality to Crime*, JOUR. OF CRIM. L. AND CRIMINOL., 28, 1937, pages 70-89.

TABLE I
OFFENSES FOR WHICH 1000 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF
CORRECTION WERE SENTENCED AT THE TIME OF THE INTERVIEW

Crimes Against the Person: Total.....	102	9.8%
Assault.....	71	6.7%
Assault, indecent.....	4	0.4%
Assault to kill.....	0	—
Assault with a dangerous weapon.....	1	0.1%
Assault to carnally abuse a female child.....	10	0.9%
Conspiracy.....	4	0.4%
Manslaughter.....	1	0.1%
Rape and attempt.....	4	0.4%
Robbery and attempt.....	5	0.5%
Other crimes against the person.....	2	0.2%
Crimes Against Property: Total.....	250	23.7%
Arson and other burnings.....	3	0.3%
Breaking, entering and larceny.....	94	8.9%
Forgery, fraud, cheating and false pretenses.....	28	2.7%
Larceny.....	111	10.5%
Malicious mischief.....	6	0.6%
Receiving stolen goods.....	7	0.7%
Trespassing.....	0	—
Other crimes against property.....	1	0.1%
Crimes Against Public Order, Etc.: Total.....	620	58.8%
Chastity, decency, morality, offenses against.....	40	3.8%
Contempt of court.....	2	0.2%
Disturbing the peace.....	8	0.8%
Drunkenness.....	318	30.8%
Escape.....	1	0.1%
Liquor laws, violating.....	1	0.1%
Motor vehicle laws, violating.....	63	6.0%
Narcotic drug laws, violating.....	2	0.2%
Nonsupport.....	146	13.8%
Tramps, vagabonds, and vagrants.....	21	2.0%
Weapons, carrying.....	11	1.0%
Other crimes against public order.....	7	0.7%
Unknown: Total.....	82	7.8%
Total offenses.....	1054	

of which they had been convicted classified according to a system used by Dr. A. Warren Stearns in an early study of a state prison population.⁵ "Acquisitive crimes" are all those which are usually committed in order to obtain property. Most of the crimes classed as "crimes against property" in Table I, except for malicious mischief, trespassing and arson due to negligence are included in this category. Robbery and attempted robbery are also regarded as acquisitive crimes. "Procreative crimes" are all sex crimes, including assault to carnally abuse a female child, indecent assault, rape and attempt, and various offenses against decency, chastity, etc. "Pugnacious

⁵ A. WARREN STEARNS AND JOHN V. CHAPMAN, *The Kind of Men in State Prison*, THE JOUR. OF ABNOR. PSYCHOL., March, 1921, pages 342-344.

TABLE II

ADULT CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS AND NUMBER OF CONVICTIONS PER INMATE OF 996 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS, BY INEBRIATE AND NON-INEBRIATE INMATES AND BY CATEGORY OF OFFENSE*

Category of Offense	Non-Inebriates (N-345)		Inebriates (N-651)		All Inmates (N-996)	
	Number of Convictions	Convictions per Inmate	Number of Convictions	Convictions per Inmate	Number of Convictions	Convictions per Inmate
Drunkenness	75	0.2	11,217	17.2	11,292	11.3
Acquisitive Crimes	967	2.8	1,135	1.7	2,102	2.1
Traffic Violations	472	1.4	882	1.4	1,354	1.4
Pugnacious Crimes	143	0.4	453	0.7	596	0.6
Procreative Crimes	125	0.4	150	0.2	275	0.3
Other Crimes	449	1.3	1,339	2.1	1,808	1.9
All Crimes	2,231	6.5	15,196	23.9	17,427	17.5

* Source: Massachusetts Department of Probation Records.

crimes" include all crimes of violence against other persons in which the violence is not incidental to the desire to acquire money or property. All other offenses are classed as "Other crimes", except arrests for "Drunkenness" or "Traffic violations".

There were so many arrests for drunkenness, and problems associated with drinking played so important a role in the clinical picture that, for Table II, we divided the population into those who were problem drinkers, or, as we call them, inebriates, and those who were not. A man was considered to be an inebriate when he was found to have been arrested for drunkenness two or more times, or in a very few cases, when there was definite evidence that the man had had trouble other than arrests as a result of drinking, as, for instance, a commitment to a state hospital for an alcoholic psychosis. Many, although by no means all, of the men classed as inebriates were alcoholics. However, we did not attempt to make any such diagnosis and the term "inebriate" must not be taken to be the equivalent of "alcoholic." The remarkable fact is that 651 of the 1000 men fall into the inebriate category.

Table II indicates that the criminal career of the inebriate misdemeanant is somewhat different than that of his more sober fellow inmate, at least in his later years. The inebriate tends to be arrested and convicted for drunkenness again and again (an average of 17.2 times) without his repeated punishments having much effect on his behavior. The inebriate also tends to be arrested and convicted for his share of crimes other than drunkenness on an average of 6.1 convictions per inebriate. The non-inebriate has been convicted on an average of 6.5 times, acquisitive crimes being the most frequent cause. The next most frequent were traffic violations.

Table III indicates that the criminal careers of our misdemeanants tend to start early in life, nearly half of the sample having suffered their first arrest in adult life before they had reached the age of 21. A large number of the men revealed in interview that they had also been in the hands of the juvenile authorities. However, we had no way of obtaining systematic information on this point.

Table IV presents the distribution of the ages of the inebriates and others of our sample, and compares them with a similar distribution of the ages of the entire

TABLE III
AGE AT FIRST ADULT ARREST OF 959* INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE
OF CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS**

Age	Percent (N-959*)
17-21	49.1
22-26	21.3
27-31	11.5
32-36	5.6
37 and over	12.5

* Unknowns were eliminated from the sample of 1000.

** Source: Massachusetts Department of Probation records.

TABLE IV
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE AGES AT TIME OF INTERVIEW OF 966 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS, BY INEBRIATE AND NON-INEBRIATE INMATES AS COMPARED TO THE PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE ENTIRE ADULT MALE POPULATION OF MASSACHUSETTS IN 1950*

Age in Years	Percent of Non- Inebriate Inmates: (N-345)	Percent of Inebriate Inmates: (N-651)	Percent of All Inmates: (N-996)	Percent of Adult Male Population: (N-1,703,567)
75-79	0.0	0.8	0.5	3.7
70-74	0.6	0.6	0.6	3.3
65-69	0.3	3.3	2.2	4.8
60-64	0.6	3.3	2.3	6.2
55-59	1.7	5.9	4.3	7.4
50-54	2.0	7.0	5.4	8.0
45-49	2.6	12.6	9.2	8.2
40-44	4.9	16.4	12.1	8.9
35-39	11.0	18.6	16.8	9.6
30-34	10.4	13.1	12.0	10.2
25-29	11.3	10.4	10.8	10.7
20-24	32.5	7.3	15.9	10.1
15-19	22.0	0.5	7.9	8.9
Median Ages:	24.3 years	40.0 years	36.0 years	40.3 years

* Source: UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS; CENSUS OF POPULATION: 1950; Volume II; Part 21; Table 15; Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office; 1952; page 21-39.

adult, male population of Massachusetts in 1950. Here it will be seen that more than one-half of the non-inebriates of our sample were under 25 years-of-age at the time they were interviewed, while, on the other hand, one-half of the inebriates were 40 or more years-of-age. The age distribution of the non-inebriate misdemeanants is closer to the age distribution of felons. The inebriates are quite unlike felons in their age distribution. In fact, the ages of the inebriates are similar to those of the general adult male population of Massachusetts, although the youngest and eldest are not well represented among them.

Our previous study of the inebriates in a state infirmary indicates that the patients there are older than the general population, and that the majority of them had had

long experience with houses of correction.⁶ This leads us to believe that inebriates tend to "graduate" from the House of Correction and to wind up in welfare institutions in their old age. Is there similar "graduation" to the State Prison on the part of the non-inebriates? We hope to be able to report on this at a later time. At the moment, it appears that this succession does not occur except in rare instances.

Despite the fact that the age distributions of inebriate and other misdemeanants differ quite considerably, the two groups cannot be regarded as separate populations. There is ample evidence that many of the inebriates have engaged in criminal activities which are not related to their drinking problem.

Indeed, we found that more than half of the convictions of the inebriates who were under 35 years-of-age at the time of the interview had been for types of crime other than drunkenness, and that these crimes were distributed in frequency and type about as they were among non-inebriates of similar age. Specific differences in the career patterns of inebriate, non-inebriate and other classes of misdemeanants will be discussed in a future paper. Here we will restrict ourselves to the presentation of certain social characteristics of the sample as a whole.

NATIVITY

Only 7.6 percent of the inmates of the House of Correction were born outside of the United States. This compares with 19.4 percent of the adult male population of Massachusetts in 1950.⁷ That the preponderance of native-born men among our misdemeanants was not simply a function of their youth was demonstrated when we compared the nativities of the 153 of them who were over 50 years-of-age at the time of their interview with those of the 558,310 men in Massachusetts who were over 50 at the time of the 1950 census. Only 29.4 percent of our older inmates were foreign-born, whereas 41.8 percent of the men of like age in the general population were foreign-born.⁸ This difference was significant at the 5 percent level and corresponds to similar findings among felons. Of the few men in our sample who were foreign-born, most came from Ireland, with Canada and Italy being the next most frequent. In this, the foreign-born misdemeanants conform to the patterns found in the adult male population of Massachusetts as a whole, and there is no evidence to indicate that any first-generation nationality group provides a disproportionate number to their ranks.

RACE

The House of Correction was, however, somewhat selective of non-white racial groups. Such groups comprised 3.5 percent of the sample of misdemeanants and only 1.75 percent of the general adult, male population of Massachusetts. This finding was statistically significant at the 1 percent level. However, the facts that the numbers involved were so small and also that the House of Correction was probably also selective of urban population elements, leave its interpretation open to doubt.

⁶ *op. cit.*, *Does Failure Run in Families?* Tables V and VI, P. 670.

⁷ UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS; CENSUS OF THE POPULATION; 1950; Volume II; Part 21; Table 53; Washington, D. C. (U. S. Government Printing Office) 1952; page 21-110.

⁸ *Ibid.*

TABLE V
YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED BY 996 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE
OF CORRECTION AS COMPARED WITH THE INMATES OF THE STATE PRISON* AND
THE ADULT MALE POPULATION OF MASSACHUSETTS, 1950**

Years of School Completed	Percent Misdemeanants (N-996)	Percent Prisoners (N-296)	Percent Adults Males (N-1,635,145)(a)
None	0.7	1.6	2.4
1-8	49.6	77.1	32.9
9-10	29.8	7.8	17.8
11-12	16.3	10.1	31.8
13-14	2.9	2.0	5.2
15 and over	0.7	1.4	9.8

(a) Unknowns were omitted in each sample.

* Source: MAXWELL B. GROSSMAN, STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION FOR THE YEAR ENDING DEC. 31, 1951, Table 30; Boston (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts: Public Document No. 115) Page 34.

** Source: UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS; CENSUS OF THE POPULATION; 1950; Volume II, Part 21; Tables 64 and 65; Washington, D. C. (U. S. Government Printing Office) 1952; pages 21-139 and 21-145.

EDUCATION

Our sample of misdemeanants differs both from the prison population and from the general population in educational background. Table V indicates that there were more high-school graduates among the misdemeanants than among the inmates of the State Prison in 1950, and that fewer of the misdemeanants had completed high school or gone to college than had the adult males of the state. It is interesting to note how frequently, as compared to the other two groups, the misdemeanants had dropped out of school at the end of nine or ten years of attendance. These differences were all found to be statistically significant at the one percent level, and perhaps they are evidence of an inverse correlation between amount of education and the severity of crimes for which men are convicted. However, all differences with the male population must be interpreted with the fact in mind that many college students from elsewhere were classed as residents of Massachusetts in the 1950 census of the population. Furthermore, many of the differences among the three groups may be related to differences of their age distributions.

OCCUPATIONAL STATUS

Occupationally, our inmates rank lower than one would expect simply from examining their educational records. Table VI indicates that the highest occupational status attained by the inmates up to the time of their incarceration was most frequently classed as "laborers," with "operatives and kindred workers," and "craftsmen, foremen and kindred workers" being the next most frequent classes. In comparison with the employed male population of Massachusetts, there were significantly more laborers and farm laborers among the inmates than would be statistically expected, about the same number of private household and service workers, and significantly fewer than would be statistically expected of all other types of workers. In

general, the higher the status of the occupational class, the fewer the representatives of that class, relative to the number in the population of Massachusetts, were to be found among our misdemeanants.

As still another measure of socio-economic status it might be noted that of the 480 inmates who had been in the armed services, only three had held commissions.

MARITAL STATUS

Our sample of misdemeanants showed a pattern of marital statuses which was markedly different from that shown by the adult male population of Massachusetts

TABLE VI
HIGHEST OCCUPATIONAL CLASS ATTAINED BY 978 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS COMPARED TO THE OCCUPATIONS OF THE EMPLOYED ADULT MALE POPULATION OF MASSACHUSETTS, 1950*

Occupational Class	Percent of Misdemeanants (N-978)	Percent of Population (N-1,224,105)
Professional, Technical and Kindred Workers.	2.0	9.0
Farmers and Farm Managers.	0.8	1.1
Managers, Officials and Proprietors.	2.0	11.6
Clerical and Kindred Workers, (Except Farm)	2.1	7.6
Sales Workers.	3.4	7.7
Craftsmen, Foreman and Kindred Workers.	20.4	21.7
Operatives and Kindred Workers.	20.6	24.7
Private Household and Service Workers.	8.6	7.8
Farm Laborers and Foremen.	2.1	1.1
Laborers (Except Farm and Mine)	37.2	6.9
Unknown.	0.7	0.8

* Source: UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS; CENSUS OF THE POPULATION: 1950: Volume II, Part 21; Table 29; (Washington D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office) 1952; page 21-50.

TABLE VII
MARITAL STATUSES OF 1000 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS AS COMPARED TO THE INMATES OF THE STATE PRISON IN 1950,* AND THE ADULT MALE POPULATION OF MASSACHUSETTS**

Marital Status	Percent Misdemeanants (N-1000)	Percent State Prisoners (N-296)	Percent Adult Male Population (N-1,710,155)
Single	41.1	44.6	29.7
Married	42.8	46.0	63.9
Divorced	12.9	7.8	1.6
Widowed	3.1	1.7	4.8
Unknown	0.1	0.0	0.0

* Source: GROSSMAN, MAXWELL B.; STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER OF CORRECTION FOR THE YEAR ENDING DEC. 31, 1951, Table 30 A; Boston (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts: Public Document No. 115) page 34.

** Source: UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS; CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1950; Volume II, Part 21; Table 56; (Washington, D. C.; U. S. Government Printing Office) 1952; page 21-118.

TABLE VIII
 THE PEOPLE WITH WHOM 1000 INMATES OF THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY HOUSE OF
 CORRECTION, BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS, HAD BEEN LIVING JUST PRIOR TO
 THEIR INCARCERATION

Person	Percent of Inmates
Parents	34.2
Wife	21.4
Alone	20.6
Siblings	11.1
Other Relatives	3.6
Children	1.1
Other	3.8
Unknown	4.2

as a whole. As may be seen in Table VII, significantly fewer of the misdemeanants were married at the time of the study than were the men of Massachusetts at the time of the 1950 census, and many more of them were divorced. This pattern of low marriage and high divorce rates is echoed by the population of the State Prison; and, in fact, the marital statuses of misdemeanants and felons are, in these cases, remarkably alike. The degree of marital disruption among the misdemeanants is further emphasized by Table VIII, for here it can be seen that despite the fact 42.8 percent of the men were married at the time of the study, only 21.4 percent of them were living with their wives during the period just prior to their incarceration. About one-third of the inmates said that they lived with their parents, and about one-fifth of them lived alone.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have presented data concerning some social characteristics of 1000 men who were consecutively admitted to the Middlesex County House of Correction, Billerica, Massachusetts, during 1949 and 1950. These men had all been convicted of crimes which were adjudged sufficiently minor to warrant sentences of two-and-one-half years or less. The men had often had long careers of petty crime, their most frequent offense being drunkenness. They had, however, been convicted of an average of 6.3 crimes other than drunkenness. Sixty-five percent of the men were problem drinkers. The group ranged in age from 15 to 79 years, their median age being 36. The non-inebriate inmates were significantly younger than both the inebriate inmates and the general adult male population of Massachusetts at that time.

The men in the sample were disproportionate in the incidence of native-born, and the birth-places of the relatively few foreign-born among them were distributed much like those of the foreign-born adult male population as a whole. There were twice as many Non-White's as would be expected from general population figures, but the number is so small that its significance is doubtful.

Educationally, the men in this sample appeared to be superior to the inmates of the State Prison, but not as well educated as the population. Occupationally, they

had held mostly low-status jobs, and there was a preponderance of unskilled laborers among them.

The marital histories of these men indicated a high degree of family disruption. They were very similar to the felons in the State Prison in their high divorce rates and their low marriage rates, as compared to the population as a whole.

In conclusion, the picture which this population presents is one of two groups. First, there are those men whose criminal careers are largely a reflection of a pattern of problem drinking. Clinically, they appear to be the younger editions of those we studied in the almshouse. The second group is composed of younger criminals whose careers appear to be not unlike those of more serious offenders who are to be found in the state institutions. Obviously, follow-up of these men would be desirable, and comparison with the felons in state institutions would be insightful.