

1959

## Survey of Classification Systems in the United States

Rodney M. Coe

Albert J. Shaffer

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

Rodney M. Coe, Albert J. Shaffer, Survey of Classification Systems in the United States, 49 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 316 (1958-1959)

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.

# SURVEY OF CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES\*

RODNEY M. COE AND ALBERT J. SHAFTER

Lt. Rodney M. Coe is currently serving a two year tour with the United States Army. Formerly, he was Research Associate in the Social Service Department of the Woodward State Hospital and School, Woodward, Iowa.

Albert J. Shafter is Associate Professor and Assistant Director, Rehabilitation Institute, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.—EDITOR.

## INTRODUCTION

The correctional administrator has always had a highly complex position, demanding many different skills and roles. This position became even more difficult when it was recognized that inmates within the institutions were individuals, representing variations in personality, intelligence, values, goals, etc. Moreover, the contradictory nature of the institution—to punish and to rehabilitate—accentuates this problem.

It is now recognized that if the correctional institution is to perform its function of reform or rehabilitation, it must cope with the personality of each inmate. Often, he will be antagonistic and uncooperative toward the staff members. However, the staff is expected to gain cooperation so the inmate may receive maximum benefit from his stay in the institution. This, in part, involves offering socially acceptable values to replace unacceptable values the inmate already has.<sup>1</sup> Consideration must be given also to the fact that some inmates may lack the mental capacity to obtain concrete reformation from a fast moving treatment program. Therefore, his program must be adjusted to fit his abilities. The point being, each inmate presents a different problem, whether it is teaching socially acceptable values or specific industrial skills. Therefore, each inmate's treatment program must be devised according to his capabilities.

This fact becomes even more important when one examines the paradoxical nature of the correctional institution. Its purpose is to reform, but criminals are sent there to be punished. Every movement within the prison is regulated although

\* The writers acknowledge the financial assistance granted this study by Dr. Grace M. Sawyer, Superintendent, Woodward State Hospital, Woodward, Iowa.

<sup>1</sup> Cf., E. H. SUTHERLAND AND D. R. CRESSEY, *PRINCIPLES OF CRIMINOLOGY*, 5th ed., Lippincott, New York, 1955, pp. 320-327; and W. C. RECKLESS, *THE CRIME PROBLEM*, Appleton-Century Crofts, New York, 1955, p. 595.

the staff is expected to develop individual initiative in the inmate. Overcrowded conditions cause idleness in the institution, but one objective of reformation is to teach the inmate how to make an honest living.<sup>2</sup>

Given the conditions described above, it follows that correctional administrators would establish methods to meet these problems systematically. The method has generally been called the classification system and may be described as a systematic attempt by which diagnosis, treatment, planning and the execution of the treatment program are coordinated and focused on the individual case.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the classification system has been widespread in the past few years, but, surprisingly enough, prior to this study, the techniques used by the various correctional institutions had not been reported as a group. This paper will report the various methods of classification used throughout the nation; enumerate some of the problems encountered by administrators in the functioning of the system; and, suggest the components of a "minimum" classification system.

The data for the study were obtained by sending a written questionnaire to ninety state and eighteen federal institutions, all for males. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions concerning various aspects of the functioning of the classification system. There were 58 usable returns from state institutions and thirteen from federal prisons. Usable returns were defined as questionnaires with all pages completed. Several were returned only partially answered and one had a page missing.

## RESULTS

The first question of the survey dealt with the classification program in general. Fifty-one of the 58 state institutions and all thirteen federal insti-

<sup>2</sup> PAUL W. TAPPAN, ed., *CONTEMPORARY CORRECTION*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1951, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> AMERICAN PRISON ASSOCIATION, *MANUAL OF CORRECTIONAL STANDARDS*, New York, 1954, p. 261.

tutions stated they utilized a classification program of some type. Of the remaining institutions not having a classification program of any sort, four gave as the reason a lack of funds and personnel, three planned programs in the future, and one respondent stated the institution was so small that a formalized program was not necessary. This would indicate that the great majority of respondents believe the classification system does have real value in the overall treatment program.

The second question concerned the main instrument of the classification program—the classification committee. Ten different titles were used to describe the committee, the most frequent being “classification,” 37 state, all 13 federal. Other titles given were “program committee,” “clinic,” “guidance committee,” and “institutional treatment staff.”

The personnel comprising the committees are as varied as the number of institutions. There are indications that the composition of the committees is somewhat situational in certain instances, dependent upon the administrator and the individual's personality as well as position and qualifications. In general, however, membership on the committee most often consists of representatives from the administrative, professional and technical staffs.<sup>4</sup> As Table I indicates, five state institutions use only technical and administrative personnel, and one institution uses only professional and administrative personnel. It will also be noted that all committees include a representative from the administrative staff which is either the warden or his deputy. In more than two-thirds of the institutions reporting, this person served as chairman of the committee. Whether he is so or not, it is important that administration be represented in order to give the committee authority to make final decisions concerning disposition of cases.

The majority of the committees meet once a week at a regularly specified time although there is variation in the number of meetings. Determination of the number of meetings appears to be dependent on the size of the staff as well as the number of cases to be processed.

Respondents revealed conflicting philosophies of administration in reporting whether the inmate was present during the discussion of his case. For example, of the 49 state institutions answering

<sup>4</sup> Administrative staff members are those in the position of warden, deputy or associate warden, etc.; psychologists, sociologists, physicians, vocational directors, parole officers, etc., are professional workers, while technical personnel are the correctional officers and the men under their immediate supervision.

TABLE I  
MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEE

Member	State Institutions	Federal Institutions
Administrative	51	13
Professional	46	13
Technical	50	13

this question, two reported the inmate was present throughout the discussion, thirteen stated he was never present, while 34 institutions permitted the inmate to be present during part of the discussion. Six federal institutions never permitted the inmate to be present while seven said the inmate was present part of the time. As one might expect, inmates were generally verbally notified as to the disposition of their case, although a few institutions gave the inmate notification of assignments in writing also.

Question number three of the survey dealt with the admission-orientation phase of the classification process. Although this segment is called by many different names, (segregation, indoctrination, quarantine, etc.), every institution followed the same general routine, i.e., giving the new inmate some type of orientation to the institution. In almost every institution, the inmate is placed in a segregated cell for periods ranging from one week to sixty days. He is given various types of literature explaining rules, procedures, routine, etc. More importantly, he is examined and studied by almost every member of the institutional staff. For example, he is examined by the physician in regard to his general health and to determine if he has any communicable diseases. The sociologist or social worker obtains a case history, including early background. The psychologist interviews him to evaluate mental capacity and the psychiatrist, if available, evaluates mental stability. Members of the vocational department determined his preferences for types of work. The chaplain attempts to interest him in church activities.

Toward the end of the segregation period, a technical officer explains the institutional regulations and the routine which the inmate will follow when he is placed in the general inmate population. In turn, each member of the staff interviews the inmate to see where he would best fit in the overall picture. It is then the responsibility of the classification committee to coordinate the information obtained and to recommend what they consider the best course of action to enable the inmate to gain the maximum benefit from the

treatment program. The final decision, of course, is left to the warden.

After the inmate has been sufficiently acclimated to his new environment, the committee does not discontinue interest in his affairs. First, each inmate has a file which reflects his daily activities in the institution. Responses to question number four reveal that in addition to the initial report by each member of the committee and daily work progress reports, almost all institutions stated other papers were kept in the file, e.g., outside correspondence, military service data, visitors reports, parole and conduct reports and occasionally legal papers regarding the inmate. Not only were the files used by the classification committee and other authorized institutional personnel, but they are available, also, to other official agencies having a need for the information.

Question number five dealt with reclassification and it was found that to a large extent the success of reclassification is dependent on the maintenance of adequate files. All institutions indicated that, after a certain amount of time had elapsed, (usually from three months to one year), the inmate is brought before the committee for reclassification if necessary. Thirty-eight state institutions and all but one federal institution reported that at any time the inmate may request a reclassification hearing. If it appears that he has a legitimate reason for desiring reclassification, the committee will honor his request for a hearing.

#### PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE COMMITTEE

From all outward appearances, it would seem that once an inmate is classified and periodically reclassified, his treatment program should proceed without difficulty. This, unfortunately, is seldom the case as found by responses to question six. There appear to be two major reasons for the difficulties in classification program experiences. First, the paradoxical nature of the institution which has been described above. The second was reported by a number of institutions and may be summarized as overcrowding, understaffing, and lack of trained and experienced staff.

The survey revealed 26 state and eight federal institutions reporting overcrowded conditions. Almost all institutions reported they lacked an adequate number of trained staff to handle cases. The practical implications of these findings are quite obvious. The classification committee must necessarily devote less time to each individual,

TABLE II  
FREQUENCY OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS

No. of Meetings	State Institutions	Federal Institutions
Three times per week	5	1
Twice per week	10	1
Weekly	29	12
Bi-Weekly	2	
Monthly	1	
Not Given	2	
Other	2	
Totals	51	13

thus making it impossible to render the necessary supervision for each inmate's program. Overpopulation means there will be an insufficient number of jobs for the number of inmates and that if a job opening does arise, it might not be suitable for the treatment program of the inmate being considered. This may necessitate assigning men to jobs not necessarily in their best interest, but rather in the best interest of the institution itself. Moreover, with understaffing and overcrowding, the committee will have a heavy caseload and reclassification or consideration of reclassification will not be effected. A final problem is that of retention of staff. Where there is high personnel turnover, members of the committee are unable to develop the familiarity with inmates and institutional policies which would make them most effective.

#### DISCUSSION

In conclusion, an attempt will be made to derive a "minimum" classification system obtained largely from responses to question seven of the survey. It must be remembered that in reality no one single system can be utilized in its entirety by all institutions. For as each inmate needs an individual treatment program that will best fit his needs and capabilities, so each institution needs a classification system that best fits its needs and capabilities.

It is essential that the institution have highly trained personnel, for they are dealing with a human being who has fears, hopes and desires like anyone else. The committee must be able to aid the inmate in overcoming his fears and in realizing his hopes and desires, provided of course, they are socially acceptable. If they are not acceptable, the committee must direct his actions in the proper channels. Also, there must be sufficient personnel

to handle the number of cases. It is not unusual for a staff member to do the job to which two or even three members should have been assigned. In this situation, it is impossible for the personnel to render the most efficient job on any case.

The composition of the committee will vary according to the size and needs of the institution. However, each committee should include at least one representative from the administrative personnel to give the committee direction and authority. Of the professional personnel there should be, as a minimum, a physician, sociologist or social worker, psychologist, chaplain, vocational director and the parole officer. Also, there should be at least one representative from the technical staff to round out the committee. This committee would be responsible for the normal classification processes and the admission summary which is the result of the admission-orientation phase. That is, after each member has completed his report compiled during the segregation period, a copy of each report plus other allied papers would be put together to form the admission summary which would become the file on the inmate. Through the use of this file and daily work progress reports, the committee should determine when an inmate is ready for reclassification and of what nature it should be. Ideally the committee would have an active interest in each inmate's affairs from the day he arrives at the institution until the day he is released.

The inevitable question now is, does it work? John Bartlow Martin says that "classification is a high sounding name and a paper program. . . little more than a weapon of security and an employment agency where the warden finds the men he needs to do his chores."<sup>5</sup> The survey, however, reveals that almost all prison administrators in spite of seemingly unsurmountable obstacles, considered the classification program necessary for a successful treatment program. But Mr. Martin does have a point in saying that "... of all the prisoners in the country, less than one-third need maximum security imprisonment for the protection of society. Yet nearly all get it."<sup>6</sup> Under present conditions, an insufficient number of minimum and medium security institutions exist; therefore the authorities have no choice but to send a convicted criminal to a maximum security prison no matter

which type of institution would best fit his treatment program. This means youths and first offenders are often confined with professional criminals in outdated bastilles which, not uncommonly, are the only places available for confinement of felons. In recent years the concept of an Adult Authority and a Youth Authority has evolved as an answer to this problem.<sup>7</sup> Professor Paul W. Tappan states that

"The Youth Authority idea . . . is based upon a theoretical policy of vertical integration: a small board being entrusted with the entirety of powers and functions to deal with young offenders from start to finish. . . . This policy is based primarily upon a desire to achieve uniformity in diagnostic and treatment impact, 'to individualize' handling of an offender through a single agency."<sup>8</sup>

Through coordinated use of diagnostic and reception centers, a sufficient number of varied types of institutions, (minimum, medium and maximum security) and Youth and Adult Authorities, certainly a good number of the problems cited above can be alleviated. Unfortunately, lack of varied types of institutions again hampers efficient operation.

To balance the scale, the advantages of a classification system must also be mentioned. The most frequent response from the survey was that the system brings out the inmate's capabilities and potentialities, thus enabling the committee to direct the treatment program in the most effective manner. Many institutions, also, said the classification program makes the inmate aware of his responsibilities and aids in institutional adjustment, provides better knowledge of the inmate and improves trade training.

Penal institutions have made enormous advances in the rehabilitative processes. There is room for further improvement. Construction of new institutions of varied types to insure classification in the strictest sense and to ease the overcrowded situation, larger appropriations to staff institutions with well trained personnel and a continuing research program in penology are but three which will aid society's job of rehabilitating those who have violated her laws.

<sup>7</sup> NEW HORIZONS IN CRIMINOLOGY, H. E. BARNES AND N. K. TEETERS, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1952, P. 634.

<sup>8</sup> PAUL W. TAPPAN, *Young Adults Under Youth Authority*. J. CRIM. L. CRIMINOL. AND POL. SCI. 47, (1947), p. 640.

<sup>5</sup> JOHN BARTLOW MARTIN, *TEAR DOWN THE WALLS*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1954, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 183.

## RESOURCES

1. AMERICAN PRISON ASSOCIATION, *Manual of Correctional Standards*, The Association, New York, 1954.
2. BARNES, H. E. AND N. K. TEETERS, *New Horizons in Criminology*, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1952.
3. MARTIN, J. B., *Tear Down The Walls*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1954.
4. RECKLESS, W. E., *The Crime Problem*, Appleton-Century, New York, 1950.
5. SUTHERLAND, E. H. AND DR. CRESSEY, *Principles of Criminology*, 5th ed., Lippincott, New York, 1955.
6. TAPPAN, P. W., ed., *Contemporary Correction*, McGraw-Hill, 1951.