

Winter 1960

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### Recommended Citation

Oscar W. Ritchie, Thoughts Upon an Impact Study of an Industrial School for Male Delinquents, 50 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 462 (1959-1960)

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# THOUGHTS UPON AN IMPACT STUDY OF AN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL FOR MALE DELINQUENTS

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The test of a law, court procedure or administration of justice in any of its aspects, is to be found in its effect upon people; first of all, of course, upon the people to whom the law, procedure or administration is directly applied. Consequently, nothing that courts and penal institutions do is complete before authorities have discovered their impact upon those who have been through the mill.—EDITOR.

The reflections presented here are based upon a recently completed study of the impact of an industrial school upon its resident male delinquents. Specifically, this study was concerned with determining the relationship between the delinquents' assessments of the industrial school and the length of time they had spent in residence.

The delinquents' assessments were obtained through a questionnaire administered en masse to the total student population of the institution. When the questionnaire responses were classified into "favorable" and "unfavorable" categories and compared on the basis of the varying lengths of time spent in residence by the respondents, no significant differences were found.

Despite this finding, time is a central consideration in the containment of delinquents. What is more, because of its heterogeneous population, if this school does in fact make an impact upon its charges, the time required to do so can be expected to vary rather widely.

It is probable, however, that the total character of this institution is such as to preclude the exertion of any considerable impact upon those committed to its care. For certainly, the rehabilitative influences of an institution are not unrelated to its size, personnel, facilities, and the other components of its total structure. For the purpose at hand, then, some reflections upon certain aspects of the total institutional structure might well prove fruitful.

The observations or reflections which follow are based upon information gained from official records and reports as well as general but relevant literature. In addition, they are supported by information, impressions, and insights gained from personal visits to the institution and formal and informal discussions with members of both staff and student populations.

But first, a list of the structural and operational

features of this institution which probably interfere with its effective functioning would include:

1. Its excessively large student population.
2. Its heterogeneous but relatively unclassified student population.
3. Its inadequacies in professional personnel and services as well as in educational, recreational, and vocational facilities.
4. The minimum contacts and relationships between the boys and their families as reflected through letter-writing, familial visits, and conferences with the field counselors.
5. The relative lack of positive efforts toward the development of self-discipline as well as the general absence of opportunities for decision-making and responsible behavior.
6. The absence of consensus regarding treatment techniques and methods; and the great concern for and emphasis upon custody and control.
7. The numerous rules rigidly and categorically enforced and the little attention to the individual needs of the boys.

## OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study discussed in this paper was concerned with an analysis of delinquents' assessments of a particular industrial school. Thus, caution must be exercised against drawing broad, or final conclusions even though they be limited to the particular population in question. Despite the need to exercise such caution, this particular experience suggests that the basic research approach utilized might well be refined and applied to the same problem as it relates to other institutions similar to the one under analysis.

## ASSESSMENTS

Ideally, the prime objective of industrial schools is to bring about positive changes in the attitudes, values, and behavior of committed juvenile offenders. With this objective in mind, it is gener-

ally recognized—and expected—that all offenders committed to these institutions will be released eventually. The question, then, is not “whether” to release, but “when.”

To a considerable extent, this question must be answered in terms of the boys' demonstrated readiness for release. To make this determination, their behavior and the relevant values and attitudes need to be evaluated from time to time. Furthermore, it may be that the key to making reliable predictions regarding post-institutional behavior lies in periodic evaluations of the impact of the correctional experience upon these young people as they, themselves, define that impact. Thus, there is the need for an instrument which can make the type of soundings which will provide data which are significant and necessary, not merely for release purposes, but also to help in measuring the over-all effects of industrial school experience. Such an approach, it would seem, promises to throw some light upon juvenile offenders' changing self-conceptions. In addition, it might also provide some indications of their probable future behavior.

It is altogether likely, therefore, that through the use of assessments it will be possible to isolate some of the relevant factors in the interplay of forces which combine to exert impact upon such persons under commitment. Furthermore, through the use of assessments, the delinquents' ability to objectify themselves and their situations, to refrain from projecting their own shortcomings upon others, and to manifest a readiness for self-discipline and responsible behavior all may become more susceptible to determination and evaluation. If, as seems entirely probable, assessments can be utilized toward these ends, they would thereby contribute toward release planning, as well as toward the over-all evaluation of industrial schools.

#### “REFORM THRESHOLD”

One result of the writer's reflections upon this study has to do with the meaning of reform as it applies to the industrial school setting.

Generally, reform means changes in the committed offenders' values, and behavior which are in the direction of socially sanctioned norms. How long after—or before—release, must these changes be manifested before they can be said to be indicative of reform? If it is assumed that the industrial school does bring about reform, how can the inevitable influence of post-institutional factors be measured and evaluated? If, however, the reform process extends beyond the industrial school situation well into the delinquent's period of free movement within the community, does this mean that the industrial school is but one of several components of the reform process?

Finally, if residents in a correctional institution are to learn to conduct themselves in a socially approved manner—as reform implies—how can this learning be facilitated? One obvious answer to this last question is that the institution should provide progressively greater opportunities for the exercise of self-discipline and the assumption of responsibilities not inconsistent with those characteristic of the free community. But even though these optimum conditions exist, there is no adequate assurance that those whose behavior is acceptable, or even exemplary, while they are institutionalized will continue that level of behavior during the post-institutional period, or even any part thereof. This would seem to suggest, therefore, that the concept of reform might well apply to the post-institutional period only in terms of committed offenders' *probable* behavior after release. Perhaps rather than saying a committed offender is reformed, or not reformed, it should be said he has, or has not, reached the “reform threshold.”