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A STUDY OF POLICE ERRORS IN CRIME CLASSIFICATION*

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Official criminal statistics are a basic source of data for many criminological studies, and since their introduction (probably traceable to a circular letter inspired by Napoleon to his Secretary of Justice Abrial in 1800) (3), they have been the object of studies designed to improve their accuracy and reliability.

It is generally recognized, however, that official statistics do not give an accurate or valid picture of the amount and kind of real criminality in a community. Some authors, like Reckless (13), assert that "crime is such a behavior variable, because of conditions of reporting, that volume comparisons in time and place cannot be reputedly made." Sellin (15, 16), Sutherland (17), Caldwell (2), Exner (4), Hurwitz (8); Korn and McCorkle (9), and many others agree on the extreme difficulties of obtaining valid statistics on crime. So many factors are involved in criminal statistics after police reporting that the number of criminals sentenced to prison may be very low compared to the number of crimes known to the police. Besides Van Vechten (18) in America, European authors have tried to estimate the extent of this phenomenon, taking into account various reporting deficiencies. Heindl (7) estimates that only between 0.3 percent and 1.0 percent of committed crimes are actually prosecuted; and Kurt Meyer (10) suggests that there are variable rates between the number of committed and prosecuted crimes,

* This study has been conducted by the Social Science Research Center of the University of Puerto Rico, with the collaboration of the Police of Puerto Rico. To its superintendent Mr. R. Torres Braschi, we wish to express our gratitude for help in planning and executing the study.

widely different for different crimes, with maximal prosecution rates for such crimes as murder and minimal rates for such crimes as criminal abortion.

The phenomenon of unrecorded crime is commonly referred to as "Hidden Criminality" or the "Dark Number," and its extent is influenced by many factors, of which the following are a few (15, 16):

- a. Willingness of the victim or of other citizens to report the crime, including fear of consequences of reporting;
- b. Expectation of effective police action on the part of the public;
- c. Opinion of the public regarding the level of police services;
- d. Physical facilities for reporting;
- e. Accuracy and reliability of the police in classifying reports;
- f. Investigative efficiency of the police;
- g. Escape and evasive behavior on the part of the criminal;
- h. Arrest action;
- i. Administration of justice, especially prosecution;
- j. Probability of conviction;
- k. Application of measures such as probation and pardons.

These factors tend to reduce, often in a selective and unpredictable way, the number of offenses known to public authorities and the number of offenders relative to offense types. Consequently, it is never known whether research conducted on known criminals is truly representative of the real universe of all criminals. This fact has been clearly recognized as one of the major difficulties of scien-

tific research in criminology. It is also acknowledged that the factors which tend to reduce the number of convicted criminals for committed offenses are influenced by such variables as socioeconomic level, race, intelligence, etc., of the criminal and of the victim. Some authors including Murphy, Shirley and Witmer (11), and more recently, Nye (12), have tried to bypass the research obstacle of hidden criminality by using questionnaires or interviews on delinquents and nondelinquents, asking their subjects directly how many and what types of offenses they had previously committed. This procedure, of course, is affected by the willingness of the subjects to cooperate, by the inevitable reluctance and fear to confess crimes which were never discovered, by selective and unconscious forgetting, and by a variety of other factors that may function to overstate or understate their participation in unrecorded crime.

Sellin (15, 16), who has studied in detail the methodological and practical aspects of crime reporting, has stated a principle almost universally accepted: "The value of criminal statistics as a basis for the measurement of criminality in geographic areas decreases as the procedure takes us further away from the offense itself." Consequently, statistics published by the police are considered a much better or valid source of information for determination of the amount and variety of crime than are court statistics or prison statistics.

PURPOSE OF THE PUERTO RICAN STUDY

In the present study we have attempted to examine the correctness of Puerto Rican police officers in reporting crimes; that is, the ability of these officers to translate facts of crime related by the public to official records of reported crimes. Police departments in the United States generally follow the rules for reporting that are outlined in the *Uniform Crime Reports* (5), first prepared in 1929 and modified slightly since then. Admittedly, there is a great variability in the accuracy of reporting by different police departments (9). The Puerto Rican Police now uses this same reporting system, and a clearly written and detailed booklet (*Manual de instrucciones para los estadísticas policíacas*) gives police officers the necessary instructions for crime classification to be used in making reports. As on the mainland, two large groups of crimes are presented: Part I, which includes the "major" crimes of criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, auto-theft; and Part II, which includes all

the other types of crime. It is unlikely that the most efficient police bureaucracy, even through detailed crime classification and set of instructions, could be completely accurate. As Beattie (1) has recently stated, "there is a great deal of unevenness and variability in the data, despite the fact that uniform instructions are issued."

As an additional part of our analysis of the Puerto Rican police crime reporting system we will try to assess the influence of factors such as intelligence, rank and other characteristics of the officers.

METHODOLOGY

Among the many factors which may have effects on the accuracy of the police reporting process, particularly in the classification of crime, the following have been chosen as the most accessible and measurable in a preliminary analysis:

- a. Rank of officers engaged in reporting;
- b. Intelligence of officers engaged in reporting;
- c. Personality traits of officers engaged in reporting;
- d. Years of service of officers engaged in reporting;
- e. Education of officers engaged in reporting;
- f. Effectiveness of officer training in identifying and classifying crimes.

The Puerto Rican Police began using the Uniform Crime Reporting system in July, 1958. Previously a classification based on the Puerto Rican Penal Code had been used. The police force is composed of about 3,000 men for an island population of approximately 2,300,000 inhabitants. As part of a general program of extending police services, a central statistical division was recently established to collect and publish statistical data on crime for the entire island. The figures, forwarded by all the units on the island police, are collected centrally and often revised and corrected whenever the classification given to criminal acts by the various units appears dubious or evidently mistaken. The number of such corrections has been decreasing as these units have become more familiar with the classification system. All the information on a criminal complaint is first recorded by a police officer, and each police station transmits to central headquarters the reports of these crimes that have already been classified for uniform crime reporting purposes. At the central office necessary corrections and final total recordings are made. The personnel charged with classification of crimes include district commanders, mostly first and

second lieutenants and sergeants who are in charge of this activity throughout the island.

The universe used in the present study was composed of all personnel (86) who were available from among the 100 who are directly involved with crime reporting and the crime classification process. The 14 men who could not be tested were on leave or ill at the time the study was conducted. All subjects were tested on the same day, and they were informed of the general purpose of the study. All the protocols were anonymous and precautions were taken to insure that none of the data could be identified with any of the men in the group. The following instruments were administered to all 86 subjects who were divided into four groups of 21 or 22 in each group.

a. *Ohio Classification Test* (14). This is a group test of mental ability, developed in 1951, by D. E. Sell and based on four sub-tests which "examine 5 of 7 primary general abilities as analyzed by Thurstone. Almost no verbal ability is examined." The test correlates highly with other measures of intelligence (corrected for attenuation of .90 with the Wechsler Bellevue and .83 with the Revised Beta Examination). As no Puerto Rican standardization is as yet available, we were forced to use American normative data. Consequently the figures given below should not be taken as representative of real mental ability levels of our subjects and can be used only for inter-group comparisons.

b. *Four Scales from the California Psychological Inventory* (6). This is a personality inventory developed by H. A. Gough. The four scales used in the present study were: Social Presence (Sp), Responsibility (Re), Socialization (So), Achievement via Conformance (Ac). Although many personality traits could be relevant to reporting ability, it was felt that these four scales comprise the most basic characteristics likely to influence the attitude of a police officer towards reporting.

c. *A Questionnaire* especially constructed for our purposes and designed to obtain background information concerning rank, education, and years of service of each subject was distributed.

d. *Twenty-two Stories*, describing 22 types of crimes. The stories were not identified by the type of crime classification they intended to portray. Each story was checked by legal consultants to make sure that all the necessary

and sufficient constitutive elements of the narrated crimes were included. The officers were asked to identify and to classify the 22 stories and then to rank them in order of seriousness. To avoid the establishment of sets, the 22 stories were printed on cards which were presented in random order. The sequence of stories was consequently different for each of our subjects. (Copies of these 22 stories may be obtained upon request.)

Instruments a, b, c, and d were rotated among the four groups of subjects so that the order was different for each group and potential practice and set effects were balanced.

FINDINGS

The following table summarizes descriptive data on the 86 officers who make up our study population:

Rank	Number	Percentage*
Sergeants.....	17	6.1
2nd Lieutenants.....	40	42.1
1st Lieutenants.....	29	59.2
	86	26.5

* Percentage of total number of men with same rank.

The mean personality scores on the California Psychological Inventory for all subjects were as follows:

Socialization (So).....	37.5
Achievement via conformance (Ac).....	27.1
Social presence (Sp).....	26.8
Responsibility (Re).....	30.8

The mean I.Q. scores on the Ohio Classification Test for all subjects were as follows:

Sergeants.....	113.1
2nd Lieutenants.....	99.6
1st Lieutenants.....	96.1
All Subjects.....	101.1

All the intelligence and personality scores are within the normal range for an American population, with the possible exception of the mean score for *Social Presence*, which is equivalent to a standard score of 37, still in the normal range, but towards the lower end.

TABLE 1

Years of Service	Sergeants	2nd Lieutenants	1st Lieutenants
5-9	3	1	—
10-14	5	5	—
15-19	3	14	1
20-24	6	17	11
25-29	—	1	8
30-34	—	1	8
35-39	—	1	1

The years of service in the Puerto Rican Police Force of our subjects are reported in Table 1. It will be noted that no sergeant has more than 25 years in the service and only one 1st lieutenant has less than 20 years in the service.

The educational level of our subjects appear in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Education	Sergeants	2nd Lieutenants	1st Lieutenants
Less than High School	2 (12%)	4 (10%)	8 (28%)
High School	11 (65%)	28 (70%)	18 (62%)
College	4 (23%)	8 (20%)	3 (10%)

An analysis of the results of the identification and classification of the 22 stories, describing 22 types of crimes revealed the total number of errors in identifying stories to be 120. Distribution of subjects who made errors in identifying the stories, by rank and by number of errors appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3

	All Ranks	Sergeants	2nd Lieutenants	1st Lieutenants
No errors	26 (30%)	3 (18%)	14 (36%)	9 (31%)
1 error	27 (32%)	6 (35%)	13 (32%)	8 (27%)
2 or more errors	33 (38%)	8 (47%)	13 (32%)	12 (42%)

Table 4 shows the instances of concordance of judgment and fact, or correct crime classification, and of errors in judgment.

Only the four crimes of murder, abandonment of children, prostitution, and violations of liquor laws were correctly identified by all subjects. The category containing the largest number of errors was robbery, which was identified correctly only by 59 percent of the subjects. The other category in

which a considerable number of errors occurred is voluntary manslaughter, correctly identified by only 87 percent of our subjects.

Table 5 shows the ranking given by the police officers to the 22 crimes which are listed on the left according to the maximum length of sentence as fixed by the Puerto Rico Penal Code. As is apparent from this table, the ranking given by the police seldom coincides with the ranking by statutory maximum length of sentence.

Below is listed the percentage distribution of subjects whose judgments of order of seriousness were concordant with the order of seriousness according to the penal code. The rank order correlation between the two ranges for the 86 subjects from .153 to .819, with an average correlation for all subjects at .558.

Murder.....	94%
Robbery.....	9%
Burglary.....	19%
Forgery.....	0%
Assault and Battery (Attempt to commit manslaughter) ..	5%
Rape.....	9%
Voluntary Manslaughter.....	10%
Incest.....	7%
Grand Larceny.....	7%
Embezzlement.....	1%
Arson.....	2%
Abandonment of Children.....	2%
Seduction.....	2%
Narcotic Drug Laws.....	3%
Inv. Manslaughter.....	1%
Larceny (temp. use of vehicle).....	6%
Prostitution.....	10%
Possession of Firearm.....	3%
Aggravated Assault and Battery.....	7%
Alcoholic Beverages Law.....	9%
Receiving Stolen Property.....	8%
Assault and Battery.....	27%

On the basis of expectations of a high degree of concordance, these data indicate that agreement between the sentence ranking and the ranking given by our subjects is extremely low, except for murder. The major implication of this finding is that police officers need more or better training in understanding the process of crime classification and recording.

As another step in the analysis we tried to determine whether there were differences in the variables which were available for our study population. We divided them into two groups: subjects who made no error or only one error in the identification of

TABLE 5
RANK ORDER OF SERIOUSNESS GIVEN BY POLICE OFFICERS (N = 86)

	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Rank according to length of sentence.....	81	4			1																	
Murder		8	11	11	9	6	4	2	7	1	6	2	1	1		2	2	5	2	2	1	3
Robbery		5	16	12	17	6	6	5	7	5	1	3	1	1		1						
Burglary			1		3	2	4	3	4	5	9	4	4	1	7	8	8	4	4	7	6	2
Forgery			1	1	4	1	1	6	2	4	5	9	9	7	10	9	7	4	3	3		
Assault & battery (attempt to commit manslaughter)																						
Rape	1	16	16	14	12	8	4	5	5	2	1		1							1		
Voluntary manslaughter	2	39	4	14	3	5	9	4	3			2	1									
Incest	1	2	11	8	7	12	7	6	10	7	5	3	1				3			1		2
Grand larceny		5	6	3	9	10	13	12	6	4	4	4		4	1	1	2		2			
Embezzlement				1		1	2		2	3	1	5	6	6	8	10	5	6	10	7	6	7
Arson		2	4	10	9	11	13	9	4	6	5	2	1	2	3	2	1	1				1
Abandonment of children					1			1		1	1	2	2	5	4	1	3	10	8	9	19	19
Seduction		1		2	2	8	12	8	12	13	5	6	3	3	1	4	2	2			1	1
Narcotics		2	2	4	5	4	3	10	9	4	7	10	4	3	3	3	3	2	1	2	4	1
Involutary manslaughter	1	1	14	3	1	5	6	6	8	13	9	13	3		1	2	1		1	1	2	5
Larceny (temp. use of vehicle)		1			1	3	2	1		3	4	3	9	11	7	5	7	8	7	3	9	2
Prostitution		1		1	1	1		2	1		1	8	2	10	8	9	9	10	5	12	3	2
Possession of firearm without license									2	3	5	10	9	7	9	4	8	6	3	6	5	4
Aggravated assault and battery				1		1	1		1	3	2	5	6	5	5	10	9	15	6	11	3	2
Alcoholic beverages law									1	2	6	3	9	4	7	8	9	5	6	8	7	11
Receiving stolen property						1			2	1	2	5	14	10	10	1	8	6	9	8	7	
Assault and Battery							1		1	1		2		4	6	3	4	4	16	16	14	23

crimes; and subjects who made two or more errors in the identification of crimes. No meaningful or statistically significant differences were found relative to any of examined variables: intelligence, personality traits, years of service, or terminal education.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSION

Although many comments could be formulated on the basis of the data presented above, we shall limit our discussion to a few main points.

It is most probable that the large proportion of errors made in the identification and classification of crimes constitutes a serious source of misinformation in the criminal statistics which are collected by the Puerto Rican Police. The amount of actual errors made in routine reporting is unknown, but the present study suggests that it is substantial and certainly is a relevant factor in any reference to criminal statistics. Another interesting finding is the lack of conformity between the ranking assigned by police officers, according to "seriousness" of the crimes and the maximum length of sentence. Moreover, the amount of variance found among the police officers, according to the same ranking is striking. These findings reveal not merely that differences of opinion exist about the scale of values concerning different crimes, but imply that there may be differential law enforcement resulting from these opinions.

No personality factor was found to be associated with the presence of classification errors. Although a larger research with additional psychological instruments and more extensive interviewing might elicit significant associations between personality variables of the officers and errors in reporting, we can presently assume the most probable cause of errors is the lack of specific training in the legal identification of crimes according to the classification manual. Obviously this area of study should receive greater attention in the training program of police officers.

In general, our data can be interpreted as additional proof of the low validity of crime reporting statistics and of the need for more careful control and specific training in this important police activity. Whether these findings and conclusions are valid for police officers and departments in

other parts of the United States can only be determined by replication of the kind of study which was conducted in Puerto Rico. We might also suggest that a fruitful future research design should test the interpretation of our data regarding the need for more specific police training in identification and classification of criminal offenses. Two groups of police officers, one of which is subjected to special training and the other given only the regular training program, could be used as experimental and control groups to test the hypothesis that the experimental group would correctly identify and classify crimes in significantly greater proportions than would the control group.

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