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THE NATURAL HISTORY OF AN INMATE COMMUNITY IN A MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON*

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Recently a large number of programs have been implemented to bring about correctional change. Most of these projects have been conducted in minimum security institutions or in community-based facilities. This article reports some of the problems and consequences of establishing an anti-criminal inmate community within a maximum security prison which is committed primarily to the goals of surveillance and restraint. The inmate community evolved only after a number of critical events and situations that led to a confrontation between different groups of inmates. The results suggest that efforts to establish inmate communities are dependent in part on the divergent and conflicting normative perspectives held by different types of inmates. Without conflict, it is doubtful that there would be sufficient motivation for inmates to engage in a collective problem-solving effort. More documentation of efforts to create change is needed.

Since the middle of the present century the sociological perspective on delinquency and crime has had an increasing impact on correctional practice. The major thrust of this position is that the individual's behavior is a product of the social system of which he is part, and therefore any effort at change must be directed toward the system rather than the individual. Nowhere is the impact of this point of view more clearly seen than in efforts to change inmate communities from those traditionally opposed to the official organization to those that are unified with officials in the goals that are pursued. These programs have sought to change existing social structures by increasing channels of communication, encouraging inmate decision-making, and decreasing the social distance between staff and inmates. The programs at Highfields,¹ Provo,² and Essexfield³ are well-known examples of utilizing the inmate social system as the instrument of change.

Recently a number of projects have begun to

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¹ MCCORKLE, ELIAS & BIXBY, *THE HIGHFIELDS STORY* (1958).

² Empey & Rabow, *The Provo Experiment in Delinquency Rehabilitation*, 26 AM. SOC. REV. 679-794 (1961).

³ Elias & Pilnick, *The Essexfield Group Rehabilitation Project for Youthful Offenders*, CORRECTION IN THE COMMUNITY, California Board of Corrections, Sacramento, Monograph No. 4, (June, 1964), pp. 51-57.

study and document systematically some of the consequences of changing existing social structures. In the Pine Hall Project at Chino, a minimum security institution for adult felons, Briggs attempted to use inmates as "social therapists" (leaders) within the program and reports that over seven months lapsed before the idea was successfully implemented. A number of the inmates used their new role as a "front" for illegal operations, and as an opportunity to get closer to the staff in order to manipulate them.⁴

In a comparative study of juvenile institutions, Street, Vinter, and Perrow made a number of incisive observations on some of the consequences of implementing a milieu treatment model in one of the institutions.⁵ They observed that it was difficult to define and reconcile the milieu treatment model to the inmates and that the movement toward permissiveness and the abandonment of universalism produced ambiguity, group machinations, and crisis. In their opinion, the cost of operating a less disciplined and universalistic program is the creation of feelings that staff personnel play favorites and have lost control.⁶

A more recent study of the consequences of increasing staff-inmate collaboration has been reported by Empey and Newland.⁷ In researching

⁴ BRIGGS, *Convicted Felons as Social Therapists*, CORRECTIVE PSYCHIATRY AND THE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL THERAPY 9 (1963).

⁵ STREET, VINTER & PERROW, *ORGANIZATION FOR TREATMENT*, (1966).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

⁷ Empey & Newland, *Staff-Inmate Collaboration: A*

the Silverlake Experiment, a short-term residential community treatment program for juvenile offenders, they observed that the preferred reactions toward the persistent delinquencies of a small group of boys were punitive. This was true of the staff as well as the boys who were not engaging in delinquency. The permissive goals of the program tended to be abandoned and there was a "general strain toward custodialism."⁸

THE INMATE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

These studies tend to point up some of the problems and consequences of creating social change in minimum security settings for juvenile and adult offenders, and for residential treatment programs in the community. This paper examines some of the consequences of creating social change in a maximum security prison by tracing the evolution of an inmate community over the first ten weeks of its history. The data were derived from the Inmate Development Project, a five-month program designed to demonstrate the feasibility of implementing permissive, democratic policies within an institution committed primarily to the goals of surveillance and restraint.

The site of the project was the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla, Washington. The program was housed on two tiers of the maximum security cell block of the prison.⁹ Each of the tiers contained twenty-five single-man cells. In addition to the fifty cells, there were several rooms that were used for group discussions, a classroom, and an auditorium. The inmates who participated in the program left the cell block for work, yard recreation, meals, and receiving visitors. Apart from these activities, however, the men were restricted to the confines of the cell block.

The program was based on the notion that the creation of an anti-criminal culture would be facilitated by utilizing an indirect approach where inmates would be given as much freedom as possible to make their own decisions and have easy access to the feedback of information regarding

the results of their decisions. Staff expectations regarding appropriate inmate conduct were minimized. Only five general rules were communicated to the program inmates when they were admitted into the project unit. These were: no escape; no fighting with weapons; no persistent fighting; no homosexuality; and no drug use. Inmates were informed that violation of any of these rules could result in expulsion from the program. The general nature of these rules is readily apparent, and thus the inmates were given ample opportunity, and indeed implicitly encouraged, to act out and reveal themselves in terms of their daily behavior.

An important part of the program was the information system to be maintained by the staff by observing and recording inmate behavior. The staff was instructed not to suppress delinquent behavior but rather to feed the information back to the inmates at the appropriate time and place where it could be examined, discussed, and interpreted. Ideally, subsequent inmate decisions would be based on information already collected, discussed and evaluated. As mentioned above, the strategy involved an indirect staff role so that whatever the context of staff-inmate interaction, the staff member would play an indirect or "collaborative" role.

The program was structured in terms of discussion groups and work crews. The participants had been pre-assigned to one of four small groups. Each of the small groups served both as a work crew and discussion group. Thus, the work situation was utilized as a source of important information regarding inmate decision-making that could be collected and fed into the small group discussion. Work was available during the morning hours five days a week for each of the four crews, and consisted mainly of cleaning and maintaining various buildings and areas around the institution. During the early afternoon hours, each of the groups engaged in discussions five days a week. The staff consisted mainly of correctional officers, and had been pre-assigned to each of the small groups. They were to be with the inmates during working hours and discussion sessions as well.

The final organizational feature of the program consisted of the large group meeting which was held five days each week during the late afternoon hours. Everyone connected with the program, officers and inmates alike, could attend this meeting. Participation in any of the program activities was not mandatory. Inmates were simply informed that work, small group dis-

Study of Critical Incidents and Consequences in the Silverlake Experiment, 5 J. RESEARCH CRIME & DELINQ. 1-17 (1968).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-16. Street, Vinter, and Perrow also observed that there was a general strain toward custodialism even in those programs that were "treatment-oriented." See Street, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 159-177.

⁹ A second program was implemented in another two tiers of the same cell block. A comparative analysis of the two programs has been conducted and will be presented in a forthcoming report.

cussions, and the large group meeting were available during various hours of the day. Involvement in any or all of these was solely an inmate decision.

The focus of the program was on present, here-and-now behavior and not incidents or situations that had occurred in the past. During the group meetings, for example, an important dimension of the staff's role was to keep the discussion revolving, insofar as possible, around current and immediate concerns and issues. Staff avoided dogmatic answers to questions and encouraged inmates to come up with their own decisions on matters being discussed. Punishment and other forms of negative sanction were minimized so that inmates would understand that there would be no retaliation from the institution. The handling of deviant behavior was not accomplished in the traditional manner but was to be questioned and examined in group discussions.

The major theoretical concern guiding the selection of inmates was Schrag's typology of offenders.¹⁰ In this classification system, there are four general types of offenders: the *prosocial*; the *antisocial*; the *pseudosocial*; and the *asocial* offender.

Prosocial offenders are generally regarded as "normal" individuals identifying with the legitimate values and norms of the society, and rejecting delinquent values.¹¹ Typically, this type of offender has not had a long and systematic career in crime, and when committed to prison he remains isolated from the inmate culture. Antisocial offenders are those individuals with a history of delinquent subcultural involvement. There is general agreement that this type endorses illegitimate behavior prescriptions and tends to reject conventional norms. When committed to prison, antisocial offenders become quickly assimilated into the convict culture, and achieve positions of power

and prestige within the inmate community. The pseudosocial offender is the manipulator, and is above average in role-taking and other symbolic skills. In prison these offenders tend to possess a storehouse of information which is "sold" to either staff or inmates. They are the prime innovators of inmate programs and manage to be released at the earliest possible time. The asocial offender acts out his primitive impulses, is extremely hostile, and demands immediate gratification of personal interests. He is regarded by prison officials as dangerous, a troublemaker, and a serious escape risk.

The research design called for eleven inmates selected from each type-category and distributed in varying proportions throughout the four small groups.¹² Thus, a total of forty-four inmates participated in the program.

Three important situations existed during the first ten weeks that were in large measure responsible for the emergence of the inmate community. The first involved the small groups *vis-a-vis* their work details. Second, a great deal of tension developed in the program, primarily as a result of the increasing frequency with which delinquencies were being committed. Third, during the latter part of the ten week period, a number of critical incidents occurred that stimulated the group to

¹² Group I consisted of six antisocials and five asocials; Group II consisted of six prosocials and five pseudosocials; Group III consisted of four asocials, three antisocials, two prosocials, and two pseudosocials; Group IV consisted of four pseudosocials, three prosocials, two asocials and two antisocials. Prosocial inmates were defined in terms of five criteria: (a) five or fewer prior arrests; (b) no prior commitments in an institution for juveniles; (c) no prior commitments in an adult correctional institution; (d) present offense category to include one of the following: murder, assault, non-support, non-violent sex offense, or grand larceny by check; and (e) no official report of conduct infractions since time of present commitment. Antisocial offenders were defined in terms of three criteria: (a) the offender must have been sixteen years of age or younger when arrested for the first time; (b) at least one prior commitment to an institution for juveniles; and (c) at least one prior commitment to an adult correctional institution. Pseudosocial offenders were defined in terms of three criteria: (a) the offender must have an I.Q. of above 105; (b) the offender must have held a white collar job prior to his present conviction; and (c) the offender must have been 25 years of age or older when he was arrested for the first time. Asocial offenders were classified into three categories. Class I asocials had an official record of at least five serious institutional conduct infractions; Class II asocials had an official record of fewer than five infractions, but at least one report of escape or attempted escape; and Class III asocials were 23 years of age or younger at the time of selection and were currently serving time-for armed robbery or assault with a deadly weapon.

¹⁰ The initial work on offender-types may be found in Schrag, *Social Types in a Prison Community*, unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Washington, Seattle, 1944. A more recent discussion of this typology may be found in Schrag, *Some Foundations for a Theory of Correction*, THE PRISON: STUDIES IN INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION AND CHANGE 309-358 (Cressey ed. 1961).

¹¹ The descriptions of the four types that follow are based on the discussion of offender classifications found in The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, *Task Force Report: Corrections* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), pp. 2021. See also, Wheeler, *Socialization in Correctional Communities*, 26 AM. SOCIO. REV. 692-712 (1961); Garabedian, *Social Roles in a Correctional Community*, 55 J. CRIM. L., C. & P. S. 338-347 (1964).

make its initial attempts toward the collective solution of problems that existed in the program.

THE WORK PROJECTS

In correctional programs using the inmate social system as the instrument of change, work takes on special significance. Work provides a situation in which a large number of spontaneous decisions are made. It is a natural setting where a variety of habits and attitudes are revealed and may be observed. Since the program placed heavy reliance on the discussion of current issues and concerns, the work projects became one of the most important sources of "curriculum materials" which could be observed and discussed.

It became apparent almost immediately that there were significant differences between the small groups in terms of how they addressed themselves and approached the problems associated with their respective jobs. Group I showed virtually no concern over its work project while Group II inmates exhibited considerable motivation and developed extensive plans regarding their particular job. Groups III and IV fell somewhere in between. Since Groups I and II represented the extremes in terms of their handling of the work projects, the descriptions that follow are restricted to the members of these two groups. In addition, comparing Groups I and II on a number of criminal career variables indicates that members of Group I were younger, arrested earlier in life, and had considerably more involvement in crime, as measured by number of prior arrests, and previous institutional commitments. In addition, not only did the administration consider more of the members of Group I to be greater security risks (as measured by custody status prior to the project), but they were also defined as disciplinary problems as seen by the number of official infractions reports.

Responses of Group I

Members of Group I consisted of six antisocial and five asocial inmates. All of these individuals had had extensive institutional experience and most of them could be described as "hard core" convicts. Most of the asocials in Group I had reputations throughout the institution for being troublemakers.

The members of small Group I were informed that work would be available for them every morning in the institution's recreation building.

Their job was to keep the building clean. Other than this, nothing else was told to the members of Group I. There was almost nothing in the way of planning or discussing the work, what it should involve, what the different tasks might be, or what the Department of Recreation might expect in the way of a good job. Instead, they simply went over to the recreation building and each group member took the job that seemed to be to his liking. The program staff anticipated that the stronger, more powerful asocials would take the easier jobs, but it did not work out that way. Some of the rougher and more influential members of the group also had some of the dirtiest jobs.¹³

For the first week or ten days, a few of the rooms in the recreation building were cleaned, but many of them were not. The inmates were erratic about showing up for work. If someone did not show up for work, nobody did his job nor was anything said about it during the small group discussion sessions. In short, during those initial days, much of the work was not being accomplished and work attendance was very unstable. Before long, the institution's director of recreation began to lodge complaints that the recreation building was looking like a pig pen. This criticism grew louder and stronger in the ensuing three weeks. But during this period, there was never any acknowledgment by the group that the criticisms might be valid, or that a problem might exist with the group.

The program supervisor, who at the time was also the Group I discussion leader, was aware of what was happening and began to question the group about the work project and why it was not going well. The group simply denied that a problem existed and claimed that they were doing a good job. They felt that if there was a problem, it lay with the director of recreation and not with them.¹⁴ The situation deteriorated rapidly until

¹³ It is, of course, possible that some of the influential inmates selected the undesirable jobs so that they could be in certain parts of the recreation building.

¹⁴ The program supervisor made the following entry in his diary: (The first problem that confronted members of Group I) . . . was the frequent criticism from the Recreation Department about the job (in the recreation building). This criticism lasted for at least a month. I usually brought this criticism up in the small group meetings . . . but there was never any acknowledgment that the criticisms might be valid. They said, rather, that the Recreation Director wanted the job back for his boys, or just because the crew wasn't under him (the Recreation Director) he was being particularly hard on them, and that the gym was never so clean, etc., etc.

the director of recreation issued the group an ultimatum: either start doing work properly or some of the population inmates would be given the job. The response to his ultimatum was not surprising. The members of Group I told the director of recreation what he could do with his job. Thus the group lost the job and also its first test to cope with a collective problem.

This situation provides some important insights regarding the responses of antisocial and asocial inmates. It is clear that the job, with its necessary contact with members of the administration, was much too demanding for the members of this group at this early stage of the program. To do a good job cleaning the recreation building would have involved some rather elaborate planning and organization. Doing a good job, of course, implied conforming to the expectations of the Department of Recreation. Thus a large part of the planning would have necessitated contact with institution officials to discuss details of the job and to arrive at mutual understandings about it. But as it was, however, members of Group I did not express the need for this kind of planning.

Responses of Group II

Members of Group II offered a striking contrast to those in Group I. The stage was almost immediately set in the program during the first two weeks. Group II members perceived the inmates in Group I with distrust and suspicion. A "kite" written by a prosocial inmate from Group II and intended for one of his friends in the general population was intercepted by a pseudo-social center man who in turn gave it to the project director. The prosocial's evaluation of the program and his perceptions of the program inmates are revealing.

... There are two programs as you probably already know by now. The program I'm in is sort of a permissive set-up, i.e., we were broken down into small groups of eleven men each, each group was assigned to a work project, but then we were left to divide up the work and set up our own schedule. Everything we do is decided by the group itself. This sounds great at first but when you stop and think about it you'll begin to see the kind of trouble a bunch of cons would run into on a deal like that. There is constant bickering and arguing going on all the time. . . . The forty-four men on the first floor are the ones that have every-

thing scheduled for them and they don't seem to have any of the problems like we do . . . (We don't have to do anything if we don't want to) . . . I know that the reason that they are letting us get away with this is to see how we react under this type of treatment. And believe me these guys for the most part are acting like the animals they are. That what makes the program lousy for me. . . .

Group II was assigned the work project of cleaning and maintaining the second floor of the project unit. Almost immediately, this group began to plan and organize its work activities. They discussed what jobs there were, who was to do which job, what sort of supplies and equipment would be needed. The organization of the work project and the division of labor which emerged very early in this group remained fairly stable throughout the life of the program. More frequently than not, each member of the group showed up for work in the morning. Whenever the job was not done to the group's satisfaction, it would be discussed in the group.

It is instructive to note that during the first five weeks of the program, these inmates spent a great deal of time discussing their work project in minute detail. For example, on one occasion, the group determined that it was running short of purex and consequently spent the whole session on how they were going to obtain more. When this and other similar topics were exhausted, other details of the job would be explored. In short, during the first weeks they showed a tremendous concern over their work, rather than discuss some of the more obvious problems that were developing in the program.

EMERGENCE OF DELINQUENCY

Almost from the outset, the permissive situation in the program invited the emergence of delinquencies.

It became apparent to all of the inmates that there was a good deal of freedom within the project unit itself, and that there was no punishment for engaging in delinquent behavior. Delinquency emerged and flourished during this early period.¹⁵

¹⁵ An inspection of one of the diaries written by a program officer reveals the increasing frequency of delinquencies with the passage of each day in the program:

Feb. 12. Was asked today by inmate M to pick up some drugs for him and he would make it worth my while.
Feb. 22. After breakfast this morning, inmate S took

Since the identity of the inmates who were engaging in delinquencies was known, there is little doubt that during the first ten weeks of the program the majority of these acts were being committed by a relatively small number of inmates, primarily the asocials from Groups I, III and IV. The tension and uneasiness began to mount in the program, and it was during this period that the prosocial and pseudosocial inmates in Group II were spending a great deal of time discussing the trivial details of the work project. It is readily apparent from the daily record of tape recordings that while members of Group II were deeply concerned about the delinquencies that were occurring, they felt more comfortable discussing less controversial topics during the initial weeks of the program.

THE PROBLEM SOLVING PERIOD

A number of critical incidents took place that had important consequences for the development of collective solutions to some of the problems that existed in the program. First, the members of Group II had become increasingly frustrated with the way the program was going and finally began discussing some of the issues, such as the "pruno" drinking and the fear that was being instilled in the program inmates. These discussions were very important, for they helped to develop cohesion in the group and gave its members a sense of

half a pitcher of butter back to the unit, and thus Program B (the second program) was short of butter.

Feb. 26. Inmate S is very concerned about his being robbed of cigarettes from his cell. He voiced this on the tier and had a hot discussion with R and B over it, with S doing all of the listening of course.

March 4. Inmates E, B, R, and J are playing poker for high stakes.

March 8. I observed R talking from the windows on five different occasions today. (Talking from the windows of the project unit to the inmates in the general population was strictly against institution rules, and was very likely to bring pressure on the program from the Associate Superintendent of Custody.)

March 19. Inmate M, instead of going upstairs to a meeting, went into L's cell. I walked by, the lights were on. I came by 20 minutes later and the lights were out. Every time they can, they are with each other.

March 21. Inmate A took two steaks off of the line at noon chow today. He was in the middle of the line so couldn't have known if there would be enough to go around.

March 21. Inmates M, B, A, and L are drunk. Inmate L, from Program B, was up here on "D" tier during church services drinking with the above men.

March 22. Inmate F has a home-made radio in his cell made from components of the PA system on "D" tier. Most of the speakers from the PA system have been torn apart.

March 23. Inmate F has now joined R, J, and L in the art of making pruno.

identity. These discussions were restricted to the small group sessions. It soon became apparent, however, that all they were doing was talking about problems without doing anything to solve them.

The second incident is closely related to the first. Two of the members of Group II were threatened by some other inmates. One of the threats was precipitated when a pseudosocial denounced the convict code in the large group meeting. During the same period of time, a second Group II member, an older prosocial inmate, was also threatened apparently for something he had said outside the group discussions which was not appreciated by some of the other inmates in the program. Group II had developed enough solidarity that these two threats were perceived as threats to the whole group. Consequently, four of its members decided to confront the large group with some of the things that were happening in the program.

A third incident occurred when two asocial inmates from Group III became drunk and smashed a large electric wall clock hanging in one of the main rooms of the project unit. Most of the inmates and staff in the program knew the identity of the offenders, and many became concerned since it had been rumored that one of them was carrying a knife. This incident caused a great deal of informal discussion on the tiers of the cell block.

The fourth incident, interestingly enough, involved one of the asocial inmates from Group I who had a reputation throughout the institution for being a "tough" and who saw himself as a leader. Even though he was one of the most deeply involved in delinquent behavior, he began to question the meaningfulness of some of the program's activities such as Toastmasters and the bridge club and felt that these were not instrumental to the problem of rehabilitation. In addition, as a result of the clock incident mentioned above, he became involved in a spontaneous discussion where the need for rules was the topic of conversation. During this discussion, he formulated a plan which he decided to present at the large group meeting. In essence this plan called for the group to arrive at mutual understandings where it would talk over things that came up in the program and would reach understandings that were collectively developed.

The four critical incidents outlined above had considerable influence on the development of a

tradition of collective problem-solving. The asocial from Group I, and the four inmates from Group II, began to bring some of the issues into the open. The fact that an acknowledged leader who had a reputation for being a "tough," was now publicly declaring the need for mutual understandings had no small impact on others in the program. His plan freed many of the inmates in the program to state publicly what they had been expressing in private. The asocial went on to play an active role in the large group, exerted a positive influence over the program, and was partly responsible for the emergence of subsequent inmate leadership in the program.

The first collective decision of the big group was to set up the expectation that everyone would attend the big group meeting. It was felt that if the group were to arrive at mutual understandings, then everyone in the program would have to be present. A committee was established to post a notice on the bulletin board stating that everyone in the program was expected to attend the large group meeting. While the inmates by no means resolved every problem that existed in the program, they did in fact take an important first step in establishing the norm of arriving at collective decisions regarding problems. This first step was taken ten weeks after the program had begun.

QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

The shift in inmate outlook during the period of time covered can perhaps best be viewed by examining their attitudes toward the program strategies that were outlined earlier. Approximately four weeks after the beginning of the

program, and again in the tenth week, a questionnaire was administered to the program inmates. Responses to one set of items in the questionnaire reflect the degree to which they endorsed the various strategies that had been built into the program. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. From the data presented, it can be seen that the percent of inmates endorsing these strategies increased from the first to the second administration of the items. While some of the percentage shifts are not great, they are nevertheless consistently in the same direction and suggest an increasing commitment to the strategies of the program. Limitation of space precludes a detailed discussion of these findings.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described some of the processes involved in the emergence of an inmate community during the first ten weeks of the Inmate Development Project. Almost immediately upon launching the program, inmate dissatisfaction and frustration became apparent. The ambiguity of the program, coupled with its permissiveness and lack of traditional controls had much to do with the inmates' frustration. The lack of direct staff involvement and intervention invited a wide variety of delinquencies to emerge, and compounded the problem for the majority of inmates who were not involved in deviant behavior within the program. The uncertainty, fear, and frustration grew until the four critical incidents precipitated the problem-solving phase.

The events that took place during the first ten weeks suggest that inmates with divergent and conflicting normative perspectives are needed to effect the emergence of an inmate community whose goals are consistent with those of the officials. Without them it is doubtful that there would be, at least among close custody inmates, sufficient motivation for attempts at collective problem-solving. From one vantage point the behavior of the asocial inmates might have been viewed as disruptive for the entire program but from another perspective their influence was functional in that it brought various behavior alternatives into bold relief. The prevalence of delinquency, the tension and frustration were all instrumental in pressing the inmates for a greater clarification of program goals and means for achieving them.

The consequences of creating social change are

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF INMATES ENDORSING STRATEGIES OF THE PROGRAM*

	Fourth Week	Tenth Week
1. Staff role is indirect	49	77
2. Inmates publicly talk about each other	51	68
3. Inmates decide on discipline	64	81
4. Inmates devise and direct activities	71	100
5. Inmates discuss concrete events	79	86
6. Inmates organize activities	79	86

* Percentages are based on approximately N = 42.