

AN EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

Department of Correction

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this report is to evaluate the current process for collecting information about inmates committed to Mass. Correctional Institutions. The procedures for collecting data which are followed today have evolved over the past few decades with no major changes. It was felt that this would be an especially appropriate time to assess this information gathering process inasmuch as the legislature has passed a law requiring the Department of Correction to establish a reception-classification unit. Since a major function of this new unit will be to collect information on incoming inmates a systematic analysis of current procedures seemed to be called for at this time. By undertaking this study prior to the construction of this new facility it is hoped that the most meaningful system of data collection could be developed by the time the doors of the reception-classification unit are opened.

METHOD

It was felt that the best way to evaluate these data collecting procedures was to go to those people who are most involved in this process and ask them their opinion of it. As a preliminary step, all the kinds of information now being gathered were summarized according to four methods of collection--the initial interview, correspondence (i.e. letters of verification), field contacts, and clinical diagnoses and tests. This summary provided a frame of reference for the respondents. An open-ended interview was administered to each respondent.

The interview schedule was designed in an unstructured manner so that spontaneous opinions could be elicited.

The sample consisted of nineteen individuals who were very much involved in the collection and use of information. These included the directors of treatment and head social workers at the three major male institutions as well as several correctional social workers at MCI-Concord and MCI-Walpole, the two receiving institutions. Also, relevant personnel at the central office and at DLM were interviewed.

FINDINGS

Perhaps the most general finding that emerged from the study was the feeling that some kind of change would be desirable and, indeed, necessary. The area which the majority of respondents spotlighted as most in need of change involved the issues of duplication of effort and the overriding emphasis on the collection of specific details. These two crucial issues were at the heart of several other problems which will be highlighted in the course of this analysis.

As an illustration of duplication of effort, an example may be cited from the interview of one of the correctional social workers. At the time he was being interviewed this respondent happened to have an inmate's folder on his desk. Going through it he found three separate reports on the inmate, each of which included the same letters of verification which had been sent to several sources. One of these was a case history which was done by Probation personnel while he was awaiting his superior court trial. The second was a report compiled

at MCI-Bridgewater while he was there for observation. The third was the usual investigation carried out at the institution. The overlap and repetition of information found in these three reports serves as cogent example of duplicated--i.e. wasted--effort.

Also in this context, a head social worker pointed out that, "Somebody else has usually done most of the work being done by correctional social workers." He emphasized the case history of the Board of Probation as one source of information that is routinely duplicated by the institutional social workers under the present system.

As for the question of details, there was a consensus of opinion that there were just too many minute facts being collected that were rarely, if ever, used in the overall programming of an inmate. Some of the areas of detailed information that were most often criticized by respondents were; the accumulation and verification of the exact dates and specific names of all schools attended and all places of employment, and the collection of names, maiden names, ages, residences and other facts concerning comparatively unimportant relatives--i.e. those relatives who have little or no contact with the inmate.

This critical combination of duplicated effort and the collection of a mass of details has serious implications for role of the correctional social worker. First of all, he tends to get so bogged down in paperwork that he has little time for genuine social work. For example, the initial interview becomes a fact gathering exercise rather than an opportunity to orient the inmate to the

institution, to deal with his anxieties of being sent to prison, and, in general, to establish the kind of rapport essential to meaningful social work.

This necessary preoccupation with paperwork tends to preclude the possibility of the social worker meeting with the inmate at regular intervals after the initial interview. Also, the worker has no time to make field contacts or work with the family of the inmate.

It should be stressed that the social workers themselves are generally quite dissatisfied with their clerical chores which must be done at the expense of what they consider meaningful social work. One respondent who has been a correctional officer for fourteen years prior to becoming a social worker reported that he had done more social work as an officer than he is able to do now. This same man stated that he envied the chaplain because he was in a position where he could avoid clerical work and engage in counselling. One social worker indicated that he felt that the major reason for the high rate of turnover of correctional social workers at the institution where he worked was the fact that there was really no time to do what they were hired to do-- social work.

Another problematic issue related to the combination of duplication and detail is the chronic condition of "fat folders". One head social worker felt that the folders include "a lot of valueless information" and he emphasized that in his opinion, "we have gone beyond the bounds of what is good, pertinent material". In commenting on the

inclusion in the folders of a large amount of what he felt was insignificant material--often in duplicate or triplicate copies--one social worker remarked that "every litter bit hurts".

One result of the "fat folder" phenomenon is that it becomes difficult to find a specific bit of information amidst the mass of paper. This tends to be a particular problem with the folders at the central office. At the institutions, there has been developed some plan for organizing the disjointed array of facts. However, the interviews of the present study indicate that the ways of organizing the material differ from institution to institution. Thus, when an inmate is transferred, the social worker must spend a great deal of time re-ordering the information in the folder according to the plan of his institution. For example, a social worker at Concord reported that it took him about one and a half days to re-arrange the folders that come from Walpole. In general, it was the social workers at Concord who were most critical on this point.

Recommendations of Respondents. Many respondents offered recommendations for coping with the problems created by the duplication of effort and the emphasis on details. One of ~~these~~ recommendations was that there should be a more intelligent use of information that has already been collected by other agencies. Special stress was placed on the use of the Probation report of the current offense since this contains much of the factual data that are collected (again) in the initial interview. Related to this recommendation was the feeling

that there should be more channels of communication between Correction and Probation so that, in general, there might be a more coordinated effort in the area of data collection. Some respondents also indicated that this same kind of coordination between Correction and Parole would also be quite useful in the information gathering enterprise.

Another idea that was proposed by some respondents was to substitute a self-administered questionnaire for the initial interview as it now exists. This would allow the social worker to focus on orienting the inmate to the prison and on dealing with what the inmate felt were salient issues in the initial interview. Also, the social worker could clear up any ambiguities in the information derived from the questionnaire and follow up on any striking information. This suggestion represents a step in the direction of genuine social work for the correctional social workers.

Related to this suggestion, one respondent at the central office felt that a training program for social workers--along the lines of that for correctional officers--should be established. The point was that if the social workers did become freer to do more of what is considered real social work, then it would seem to be a good idea to properly train them for it.

Another area touched on by many respondents was the issue of verification. Several felt that the blanket verification of all information that could be checked is not necessary. Some contended that a more selective system of verification would suffice. Techniques of random and spot verification were suggested as possibilities.

The notion of instituting a greater degree of uniformity among record keeping procedures at all institutions was emphasized by many social workers--especially those at Concord. This would eliminate the aforementioned arduous task of putting a record into the particular order of a given institution when an inmate is transferred. Accordingly, it would tend to cut down considerably on the clerical chores of the social workers. Further, it would alleviate the undercurrent of antagonism among institutions that results from this issue.

Another area discussed by many respondents was that of summaries. There were two distinct points of view with respect to summaries among those interviewed. Some felt that a greater effort should be made to incorporate summaries into the records. The primary reason for including summaries was the contention that these tend to be the only things in the folder that are read as a matter of course. On the other hand, other respondents could not justify including summaries in the folders. Their point was that if the records were in proper order and certain details could be eliminated, then the existence of summaries becomes superfluous. It seems to the researchers that this difference of opinion deserves further discussion.

Other recommendations from respondents included the insistence by some that more clerical help is needed to cope with all the paperwork. At Norfolk the suggestion was made that other institutions might profit by adopting its two-folder system for the storing of information. One folder includes all the source data, while the other

consists of the institution's running record of an inmate's behavior. Finally, one of the DLM workers suggested that all the specific educational information that is now being collected might well be replaced by an achievement test that would give a good indication of an inmate's current capabilities.

Conclusion

In the course of this report numerous issues have been raised and discussed. In conclusion, the researchers would like to raise one more issue which is felt to be much more basic than all of those already discussed. This issue involves the question of the superfluous nature of the entire enterprise of data collection--at least in terms of the general programming of inmates. In the analysis of the interviews there was some indication that the needs of the institution tend to preempt any decision that might be made concerning an inmate based on the information that is so assiduously collected about him. One gets the impression that this vast reservoir of data tends to lie fallow in the files and that there is a real question as to how much it is actually used for the classification or overall planning for an inmate.

Some concrete examples to support this impression should be presented from the interviews which represent the data for this report. One illustration comes from the interview of a correctional social worker at Walpole. In discussing the classification of inmates he stated that "everything depends on how far behind we are in number plates". Another example that points to the superfluousness of the

data collection process in the context of the general programming of inmates comes from one of the head social workers. He said that "a man is often on the street before the evaluation of all the information is completed". Finally, one of the DIM workers said that in his experience, "troublemakers get the best jobs to keep peace in the institution".

In many ways this issue of superfluosity is the most critical issue with respect to the whole matter of data collection. The findings of this exploratory study indicate that this area merits discussion in subsequent meetings and the attention of future research.