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1981

Report

RECIDIVISM 8/7/78

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Title of project: The Childhood and Family  
history of recidivist prisoners and the  
practical application of the findings of  
Correctional procedures

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NEW SUBJECT FILE Accno: 880633  
File: recidivism

Recidivists: Their Past and Families  
Compared with First Time Only Prisoners

Karl Koller  
Sylvia Gosden

Hobart

1978

The penal system differentially reaps its inmates from the ubiquitous and mostly trivial delinquency and criminality reported from the community. In this selective process intrude such factors as patterns of police activity, court attitudes and changing definitions of crime determining which individual is sentenced to prison.

Whilst there are various classifications of men in prison two contrasting groups stand out. There is a class of men who so persistently offend that detection is inevitable, who are repeatedly convicted and who return to prison on many occasions. By contrast there are inmates who experience one imprisonment and never return.

It is hypothesized that the recidivists and first time prisoners would differ numerically on demographic, criminal, delinquent, psychiatric and sociological criteria. Further these characteristics for each group of prisoners might show a patterning of relationships which would further differentiate the groups and point to aetiological processes.

#### MATERIAL AND METHODS

A group of recidivists was sought from prisoners serving sentences at the Risdon Prison, Tasmania's\*

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Karl E. Zoller, M.B.(Uni.N.S.W.); M.B., B.S.(Uni.Lyd); F.R.A.N.S.C.P.; F.R.C.Psych.; D.P.H.(London). Medical Commissioner, Mental Health Services Commission, Tasmania. 141 Hampden Road, Hobart, Tasmania 7000.

Sylvia D. Gosden, Dip.Soc.(Uni.N.S.W.); B.A.(Macquarie Uni. N.S.W.). Research Officer, Mental Health Services Commission, Tasmania. The Old Vicarage, John Edis Hospital, Creek Road, New Town, Tasmania 7008.

only prison. From the average of 260 male inmates at hisdon prison during the period of study (March-May, 1978) 40% were classified as recidivist. A recidivist was defined as a prisoner who had served at least three or more prison sentences. Searching the prison files in strict alphabetical order the first sixty recidivists were chosen for the present study.

The first time prisoners were also chosen from the prison files. Each ex-prisoner who had served only one sentence at hisdon in 1972 or earlier and had not returned by September, 1978 was eligible for inclusion in the present study. This meant that at least six years had passed for the ex-prisoner to return which experience had taught was an unlikely event. This sample of first time prisoners was selected in strict alphabetical order from about 4,000 prison files.

After each individual had been selected, information was sought from the personal prison file; classification and criminal record sheets; reports of prison, welfare and education officers (including Raven's Matrices tests); reports by psychiatrists, psychologists and probation officers.

The information available included basic demography, criminal, delinquent and psychiatric data not only for the 120 subjects of the study but for other members of their families.

Significance tests including chi squared and confidence

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\* Tasmania is the island state of Australia with population 414,000 (June, 1978)

intervals for mean differences were applied to the tabulated data.

The following variables were studied:

Demographic:

1. Age
2. Marital status
3. Education
4. Occupation
5. Parental family size
6. Prisoner's own family

Criminal and Delinquent History:

7. Types of offences
  - Property
  - Motor Vehicle
  - Sex
8. Average number of court appearances
  - Children's
  - Adults'
9. Children's welfare home admissions
10. Average number of charges
11. Average age first convicted
12. Average number of imprisonments
13. Average age at last or current imprisonment

Family Criminal History:

14. Brother in prison
15. Parent with prison record
16. Other familial prison record

Psychiatric and Behaviour Problems:

17. Adverse psychiatric reports

18. Problem drinking
19. Internal prison record

Other Data:

20. Religion
21. Service in forces
22. Physical marks
23. Birthplace

## RESULTS

Refer to Table 1 and Discussion.

## DISCUSSION

Whilst administrative statistics can only be a rough and ready evaluation of delinquency and criminality it is a mistake to reject them as useless (Rutter and Madge, 1976). For example, self-reported delinquency shows substantial even if imperfect agreement with administrative figures (West, 1967).

It was immediately apparent and statistically significant that the first time prisoners had presented less frequently in the courts, both children's and adults'; had been charged less often and had been much older (21 years versus 14 years) when first convicted. The recidivists on the other hand had been in gaol an average of six times. Almost half of the recidivists had spent a period in a children's welfare home compared with 14% of the first time prisoners.

The types of offences differed. There were significantly more property and motor vehicle crimes reported amongst the recidivists and more sex offences among the first time prisoners. Also 20% of these latter

offenders had no previous convictions and had been imprisoned following their first criminal conviction.

Only 4 first time prisoners had been referred to a psychiatrist; of these two were considered to be aggressive psychopaths and the other two had shown abnormal electroencephalograms. This compares with the near universal psychiatric and personality disturbance detected among the recidivists. Here psychiatric reports point to aggression, inadequacy, severe personality problems. The records emphasize poor family background, inability to learn from experience, immaturity and direction into crime by dominant peers. There is considerable evidence for broken homes and other examples of parental deprivation including several cases of extreme parental cruelty. In this light alcohol abuse was widespread with roughly half the recidivists identified as alcohol dependent and in need of treatment whereas less than 10% of the first time prisoners had been given this opinion.

Additional evidence for the exaggerated behaviour problems of the recidivist was revealed by conduct reports whilst in prison. The internal prison offence records showed that only 14% of the first time inmates had internal prison convictions and these were for lesser offences of being warned or cautioned for smuggling or disobeying orders. 86% of the recidivists had received internal convictions, involving serious offences of physical and verbal abuse directed at prison officers and uncontrollable behaviour including destruction of prison property and suicide attempts by violent means.

Other important differences between the recidivists

and first time prisoners revealed that the latter had significantly originated from smaller families, and had been more successful at school and work. One-third of the first time inmates had attended a high school for more than 3 years compared with only 8% of the recidivists. The reports suggested that recidivists were mostly "dull or borderline intelligence" whereas the first time prisoners had been mostly considered "average intelligence" and none were listed as mentally subnormal or educationally backward. This seems reflected in subsequent occupational status where almost all the recidivists were involved with unskilled manual jobs, often short-lived and seasonal. Indeed most recidivists were unemployed at the time of their last offence. By contrast the first time inmates had not only been more successful at school but well over half (62%) had achieved semi-skilled or skilled occupations including several highly skilled tradesmen.

Comparing the family trees of the two groups of prisoners, only a few members of the first time prisoner's family had been before the courts with a total of only three brothers actually incarcerated. This compares with the observation that one third of the recidivists had reported at least one brother (often two or more) in gaol as had been one father and one step-father. Despite a thorough search of the available administrative records these findings in relation to other family members are probably underestimates. We had made a particular search for marriages and relationships into other families with criminal records or where there was

evidence that the prisoner's own children had been before the courts or institutionalized. The only information found was that both prison groups were predominantly single men, though 21% of both groups stated they had commenced a family of average size compared with the remainder of the community (i.e. approximately 2.4 children).

More first time inmates had embraced the protestant faith and both groups had experienced in roughly equal numbers life in the armed services (about 13%).

There is little recent published work on the demographic, sociological and psychiatric aspects of male inmates (Griffiths and Gundle, 1976) and it was difficult to find other studies that exactly matched the comparisons of recidivist and first time prisoners. Andry (1963) agreed that the bulk of recidivism occurred among younger offenders whereas the bulk of those who did not return to gaol were aged 31 years and over. West (1967) agrees but also notes that some recidivists are not juvenile delinquents grown up. Andry (1963) again showed that the majority of recidivists were unskilled manual workers with a lower percentage for "non-recidivists". He also noted that recidivists are more likely to be convicted of breaking and entering, being drunk in charge of a vehicle whereas sexual offenders figure more prominently in non-recidivist cases.

Lutter and Badge (1976) have drawn attention to important continuities between behavioural difficulties in early life and juvenile delinquency and the indication



that there is a small core of delinquents whose severe and widespread problems continue into middle life. This tendency to persistence not only has an association with childhood problems but risk of re-conviction increases with the number of previous convictions (Knight and West, 1975). Gutter and Hodge (1976) review the literature of intergenerational continuities showing that a common situation was for boys with criminal fathers to acquire delinquent records but the mechanisms underlying these transfers are unknown. Also these authors point to first offenders as lacking psychiatric disorder but there is a significant association between criminality, delinquency and psychiatric problems most marked with recidivists involving abnormalities of personality and depression. Whereas Andry (1963) found no differences between recidivists and non-recidivists in school performance, Gutter and Hodge (1976) suggest performances below average with significant reading difficulties.

A final note: it is interesting to observe that roughly half of the members of each prison group exhibited prominent body scarring or disfigurements. Absent fingers were especially noteworthy amongst the recidivists.

Along these lines it was conspicuous that two thirds of the recidivists displayed noticeable and sometimes spectacular tattooing whereas only a quarter of their first time fellows had done so. In fact the tattooing on the recidivists most commonly involved the right or left forearm, often the fingers and also occasionally the legs and chest. Hearts, daggers, scrolls,

flowers and the names of girls with an occasional reference to "mum and dad" and "love" were characteristic. The tattooing on the first time inmates was also mainly on the upper limbs and for some reason had Indian heads were common with an occasional dagger, woman with a sword and stars noted; rarely were names recorded.

#### CONCLUSIONS

1. Within the prison population studied the recidivists and first time prisoners disclose two distinct, even if overlapping, clusters of men.

The first time prisoners reveal hardly a trace of the continuum of personal and family commotion detected among recidivists. The ubiquitous adverse psychiatric report with strong overtones of conspicuous consumption of alcohol was far less in evidence among the first time prisoners. Yet these latter prisoners are representative of some extreme forms of violence and sexual misbehaviour.

2. It is believed that had the administrative records been more comprehensive other members of the recidivist's family would have shown evidence of delinquent and criminal behaviour brought to official notice. As it was, one-third of the recidivists had at least one brother (often more) who had been to prison. There is remarkably little evidence, in comparison, that the contagion of delinquency and criminality affects members of the first time prisoner's family tree.

3. For the recidivists the findings might receive some explanation or at least an association with

circumstances of individual development.

The circumstances of individual development might include:

- (1) the location of the individual at a position of special psychosocial handicapping within the sibship
- (2) contextual and structural variables of the family

The recidivists are drawn from large families. This fact has long been recorded. Hare and Shaw (1965) have drawn attention to the increased strains of mothers (and also fathers) of caring for large numbers of children as reflected in indices of mental and physical ill-health.

The experience of being raised in a large sibship is likely to differ markedly from a child raised among a few siblings. Other factors, though not studied here, might include the special psychosocial handicapping of the first born, last born and middle order siblings. The literature suggests peculiar developmental problems at these locations within the sibship especially where there are young parents and numerical predominance of either male or female siblings (Birchneil, 1970; Schuck, 1963; Moller and Williams, 1974; Hare and Shaw, 1965).

Even so one is careful to interpret the deviant relationships within these families as being an indication of an absence of ties. The essential ingredients of any attachment, say with a parent, is a specific enduring affectional bond. Some of the patterns of attachment

behaviours within families mediate criminal and delinquent behaviour but the quality of the attachment between individual members is quite an independent process and not determined by situation and context.

4. By contrast the first time inmate and his family failed to reveal pervasive early adversity. Holmes and colleagues (Masuda et al, 1978) have shown an escalation of recent life change scores among prison populations. This accumulation of recent life changes involved particularly marital problems, changes in residence, minor violations of the law, changes in working conditions and financial problems. These life changes seemed to reach "crisis proportions" in the year prior to incarceration. In the context of the personal characteristics of the individual it was believed that these events predispose maladaptive behaviour triggering or accompanying criminal activity and imprisonment. One wonders whether recent life events might be the salient feature among a group of prisoners who experience gaol on only one specific occasion in their lifetime?

## SUMMARY

The Tasmanian research reported is part of investigations into recidivism with especial regard to associations with family background and personal adversity.

Sixty indubitable male recidivists and sixty first time male ex-prisoners who have never returned to prison were compared on demographic, delinquent, criminal, familial and psychiatric criteria.

The comparisons showed a patterning of relationships of the criteria. Recidivists showed widespread adverse family and personal commotion including abuse of alcohol; these findings were reflected in psychiatric, school and employment records. By contrast these characteristics were largely absent from the first time prisoners and their families.

A possible explanation of the findings was offered.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Mr. Mike Hornibrook, Controller of Prisons, Tasmania; Mr. Gordon Howie and Mr. Wayne Probert, Records Clerks at Risdon Prison; Christine Hooper for secretarial assistance and the Criminology Research Council for a grant.

TABLE 1  
RESULTS OF STUDY

	INMATE RESPONDENTS N=60	PAROLEE PRE. ON RE. N=60	SIGNIFICANCE
DEMOGRAPHIC			
1. AGE (YEAR OF BIRTH)			
1939 and before	3%	40%	F > .001
1959 and before	93%	58%	
2. MARITAL STATUS			
single	75%	65%	N/S
Married	10%	23%	
Separated	15%	6%	
3. EDUCATION			
> 9 yrs. high school	8.3%	33%	F > .001
4. OCCUPATION			
Unskilled	93%	38%	F > .001
Semi-skilled or skilled	7%	62%	
5. PARENTAL FAMILY I			
5 or more siblings	56%	38%	F > .05
6. PRISONER'S OWN FAMILY			
with children	21%	21%	N/S
av. per family	2.4	2.6	

CRIMINAL AND DELINQUENT HISTORY

7. TYPE OF OFFENSE			
Property	98%	38%	F > .001
Motor Vehicle	71%	16%	F > .001
Sex	17%	47%	N/S



TABLE 1 (cont.)

	INMATE RECEIVISTS N=60	FIRST TIME PRISONERS N=60	SIGNIFICANCE
8. AV. COURT APPEARANCES			
Children's	3.7	2.4	F > .001
Adults'	12	2.5	
9. CHILDREN'S WELFARE HOME ADMISSIONS	46%	14%	F > .01
10. AV. CHARGES	34	7	F > .001
11. AV. AGE FIRST CONVICTED	14 yrs	21 yrs	F > .01
12. AV. IMPRISONMENTS	6.4	1	F > .01
13. AV. AGE AT LAST OR CURRENT IMPRISONMENT	26.7	26.2	N/L
FAMILY CRIMINAL HISTORY			
14. BROTHER IN PRISON	34%	6%	F > .001
15. PARENT WITH PRISON RECORD	2%	Nil	N/S
16. OTHER FAMILIAL CRIMINAL RECORD	Nil	Nil	N/S
PSYCHIATRIC AND BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS			
17. ADVANCE PSYCHIATRIC REPORTS	81%	3%	F > .001
18. FREQUENT DRINKING	43%	9%	F > .001

TABLE 1 (cont.)

	INMATE RECEIVISTS N=60	FIRST TIME PRISONERS N=60	SIGNIFICANCE
19. INTERNAL PRISON RECORD	86%	14%	F > .001
OTHER DATA			
20. RELIGION			
C. of E. (PROT.)	55%	77%	F > .05
R.C.	28%	14%	
21. SERVICE IN FORCES	13%	23%	N/S
22. PHYSICAL MARKS			
Tattooed	63%	26%	t > .001
Scarred	58%	42%	N/S
23. BIRTHPLACE			
Born in Tasmania	90%	79%	N/S

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\* Average family size in Tasmania, 1978, is approx. 2.3 siblings (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Hobart)