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L. M. Jr. Hanks

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PRELIMINARY FOR A STUDY OF PROBLEMS OF DISCIPLINE IN PRISONS

L. M. HANKS, JR.¹

This study was directed toward the problem of differentiating on the basis of available material convicts who were disciplined from convicts who had not encountered disciplinary difficulties. The problem is relevant to both prison administration and to classification systems for segregation of offenders. From the point of view of a prison administrator our question might be stated: Are there accessible criteria by which one can predict that a given convict will violate the rules in a given prison? From the point of view of a board of classification: With which individuals must we allow for the effects of discipline in planning the individual program of rehabilitation? This study is an approach toward the answer to such questions.

As each prison possesses certain unique features of administration of discipline, it would have been advisable to set the problem over against the institutional features of the Wisconsin State Prison where this study was made. An adequate exposition of this system would lengthen this study to monograph proportions, so that we have had to omit this material. For a summary description of the general prison conditions the Handbook of the American Prison Association may suffice the interested reader.²

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 100 convicts who had been committed to solitary confinement (to be referred to subsequently as the disciplined group). Selection of those in the disciplined group was made as follows: the names of all persons committed to solitary confinement, beginning arbitrarily on March 1, 1936, were cumulated until the number reached 100. The last man to be included in the group was committed to solitary confinement in late August, 1936. This period was arbitrarily selected. Whether there are

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Illinois. The writer is indebted for their assistance in this study to the officials of the Wisconsin State Prison, particularly to Mr. Lysond Morgan of the Record Office, and to the State Board of Control.

² Handbook of American Prisons and Reformatories. Vol. I, 1933, Pp. 1000-1018.

seasonal variations in the number of commitments to solitary confinement is not known. The sole untoward event which happened was an attempted escape which involved three men, bringing them into the disciplined group. This, however, was not very influential in altering the constitution of the disciplined group.

Procedure

The results of this study have been divided into two sections: (1) Comparison of the group of 100 disciplined convicts with the prison population at large. (2) Comparison of the 100 disciplined convicts with another group of 100 convicts which had never been committed to solitary confinement and which was paired with the disciplined group on the basis of crime for which the individuals were sentenced, length of sentence and length of time served in prison. The data used for these comparisons were gathered from the record office and the files of the hospital of the prison. For the most part literal acceptance of this material on the records was maintained in the construction of the statistical material that follows:

Results

A. Comparison of experimental group with prison at large.

The total population of the prison is in the neighborhood of 1600. All records were not available for tabulation so that the number in the population for comparison does not always equal the total population. The prison population used for this study was 1402.

1. Occupation.

Comparison was made between the disciplined group of 100 and the prison population with respect to occupation previous to arrest. Using the state system of classifying occupations, tables were constructed to show whether any occupational group contributed more or less to the disciplined group than would be expected on the basis of the number of such an occupational class in prison. In only a single class did the differences between the disciplined group and the prison population approach statistical significance. This was the section classified as professional, including photographers, musicians, artists, students, nurses, bookkeepers, barbers, clerks, athletes and teachers, as well as those commonly referred to as professional, i.e., lawyers, doctors, accountants, etc. In this class a greater than expected number was found in the disciplined group, notably ten, as compared with an expected 4.4, calculated on the

size of the group's contribution. This difference is, however, not statistically reliable ($\text{Diff}/\text{SD diff} = 1.80$), though we may consider it as a suggestive difference between classes of occupations.

TABLE I
*Distribution of Types of Offense for the
Disciplined Group and Prison at Large*

| <i>Types of Offense</i> | <i>Disciplined Group</i> | <i>Prison Population</i> | <i>Diff/SD diff</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Chastity | 9 | 16 | 2.4 |
| Public Policy | 1 | 6 | 4.2 |
| Person | 9 | 15 | 1.9 |
| Property | 80 | 62 | 13.4 |
| Unclassified | 1 | 1 | 0 |

2. Type of Crime.

The disciplined group was compared with the prison population on the basis of type of crime. Table I represents these results. Using the state classification of crimes, offenses have been divided into four classes: offenses against chastity (all sex crimes), against public policy (non-support, drunkenness, vagrancy, repeater), against person (all except robbery),³ against property (including robbery, forgery, embezzlement, arson) and miscellaneous (including escape, habitual criminal, narcotic violators). From this table we may observe: (1) There is a significantly larger number of persons in the disciplined group who are violators against property than one would expect were there chance selection from the prison population ($\text{Diff}/\text{SD diff} = 13.4$); (2) There are significantly fewer in the disciplined group from the class of offenders against public policy than would be expected by chance selection from the prison population at large ($\text{Diff}/\text{SD diff} = 4.24$).

Following this lead further, offenses against property were subdivided according to statutory classification. The offenses treated were arson, burglary, larceny, forgery, embezzlement, fraud, injury to property, obtaining money under false pretenses, operating automobile without owner's consent, receiving stolen property, possessing burglar tools, robbery, accessory to the crime of robbery and extortion. Differences occurred to show that slightly more persons convicted of robbery and burglary were present in the experimental group. However, the only difference approaching

³ We have included robbery as an offense against property instead of against the person because we felt that psychologically assault against the person was incidental to the property offense.

statistical reliability was in the case of forgery where fewer were in the disciplined group than would be expected by chance selection from the total prison population ($\text{Diff}/\text{SD}/\text{diff} = 2.65$).

3. Length of Sentence.

The disciplined group was compared with the prison population with respect to length of sentence. No significant differences were found between the disciplined group and the prison population on this basis.

B. Comparison of disciplined group with a control group.

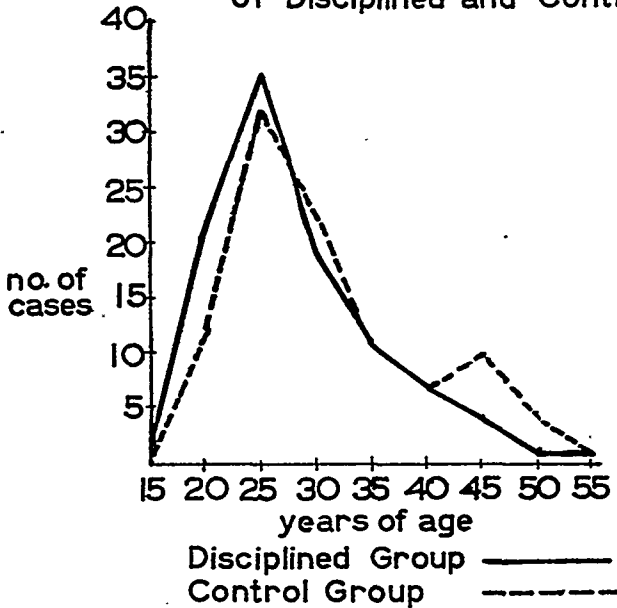
In selection of the control group it was not always possible to match men exactly for length of sentence and length of time served in prison. In a few cases where long sentences were involved the statutory sentence varied occasionally as much as five years. With the shorter sentences difficulty of matching did not arise, there being relatively more men with shorter than with longer sentences. Where it was impossible to match a man for crime and term, the case was thrown out, and a new one substituted that would permit matching. This occurred in only two instances.

1. Intelligence: On the basis of the latest measurement of intelligence by the original Stanford-Binet scale no significant differences in either central tendency or scatter was found between the disciplined group and the control group. (Av. disc. = 79.9, S.D. disc. = 14.96; Av. cont. = 80.6, S.D. cont. = 15.49).

2. Age: The disciplined group was compared with the control group on the basis of age at time of admission. The results appear in Table II where frequency distributions of the age of the two groups are represented. The average age of the disciplined group is 29.1 years while that of the control group is 35.1 years, a difference of six. The table shows that (1) the differences between the group in average is due to a slightly greater number in the disciplined group between the ages of twenty and thirty; and (2) slightly fewer cases are in the disciplined group than in the control group between the ages of 45 and 55.

3. Psychoneurotic Index: Each man on admission was asked orally the 100 questions of the Woodworth psychoneurotic inventory. Frequency distributions of the number of neurotic responses are shown in Table III for the disciplined and the control group. The average of the disciplined group is 12.09 neurotic responses with a range of 45; of the control group the average is 9.93 with a range of 30. In the main the experimental group is roughly sim-

TABLE II
Distribution of age at Time of Admission
of Disciplined and Control Group



ilar to the control group, but the extreme cases are all in the disciplined group; no cases above 30 incorrect responses are in the control group, while five of the disciplined group show 35 or more neurotic responses.

4. Previous Convictions: The solitary and the control groups were compared on the basis of number of previous convictions of felony. From our evidence it is impossible to distinguish the disciplined from the control group on this criterion. The average number of previous contributions for the disciplined group was 2.51 and for the control group 2.75. This difference is not statistically reliable. A larger number of convicts were in the solitary group than in the control group who had one previous conviction of felony (50 in the disciplined group as compared with 36), but this difference is also unreliable statistically (Diff/SD diff = 2.03). Five more individuals were in the control group who had four or more convictions as compared with one in the experimental group. This may indicate a tendency, but we have no reason from this evidence to place any reliance on this single sample because of its small size.

5. Background: If the convict at time of admission claimed residence in a town under 5,000 in population, he was classified as coming from a rural background; if from a town of larger population, he was classified as urban. Table IV shows the disciplined and control group divided on this basis. We observe that there are slightly more in the disciplined group from an urban background and slightly fewer in the disciplined group from rural background. The difference, though indicative of a tendency, is not statistically reliable (Diff/SD diff = 2.46).

TABLE IV
*Distribution of Disciplined and Control Groups
According to Size of Resident Community*

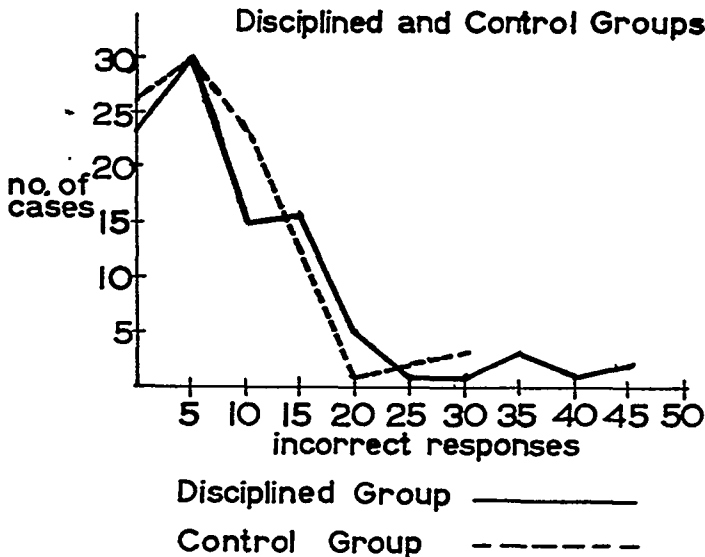
| | Urban | Rural |
|-------------------|-------|-------|
| Disciplined | 80 | 20 |
| Control | 66 | 34 |
| | — | — |
| Total..... | 146 | 54 |

6. Marital State: The individuals were classified at time of admission according to marital state, whether married, single, divorced, separated or widowed. Table V represents the results of this classification, the divorced, separated and widowed being grouped together. From this table we observe: (1) There are fewer in the disciplined group who are married than would be expected by chance. This difference is reliable (Diff/SD diff — 4.0). (2) Somewhat more persons are in the disciplined group who are single than one would expect by chance. This difference is statistically reliable (Diff/SD diff — 3.58). (3) No significant difference exists between the disciplined and control group for those who were separated, divorced or widowed.

TABLE V
*Distribution of Disciplined and Control
Groups According to Marital Status*

| | Married | Single | Divorced Separated Widowed |
|-------------------|---------|--------|----------------------------------|
| Disciplined | 10 | 72 | 18 |
| Control | 32 | 48 | 20 |
| | — | — | — |
| Total..... | 42 | 120 | 38 |

TABLE III
 Frequency Distributions of Number of
 Incorrect Responses to questionnaire for
 Disciplined and Control Groups



7. Health: After physical examination at the time of admission the individuals were roughly rated as to state of health into three groups: good, fair and poor. No reliable differences between the disciplined and the control groups on these ratings of health were found.

Conclusions

Should one be requested on the basis of these findings to characterize the convict who is most likely to become involved in disciplinary difficulties, he might be characterized as follows: (1) He may come from any occupational group but is more likely to be a disciplinary case if classified as professional. (2) He is more likely to be an offender against property than any other kind, with the possible exception of forgery. (3) The length of sentence is in no way related to his propensities for becoming involved in disciplinary difficulties. (4) He cannot be distinguished on the basis of intelligence test score. (5) If he continues to have a high number of psychoneurotic responses to the questionnaire, he should be considered a likely disciplinary problem. (6) He is more apt to come from an urban than a rural background. (7) If he is between the age of 15 and 25, he is more apt to be a disciplinary

problem, while if he is over 45, he is less apt to be a disciplinary problem. (8) He is more apt to be single than married. These may be considered as the probable characteristics of the offender who is going to be a disciplinary problem.

The question may be asked whether these characteristics are unified. Do they indicate a single, recognizable type or pattern? Certainly it is probably nothing new for a prison administrator to find that a young, single offender against property from the city is more apt to be a disciplinary problem than an older man from the country. Again, although we were unable to confirm it absolutely, the prison administrator knows that the habitual offender is more apt to be a model prisoner than he who has had only one or two previous convictions. In line with our findings regarding the psychoneurotic inventory, the man who has been disciplined several times is apt to be nervous, perhaps tends to become neurotic. However, the administrator will think of all these as different types of convicts. We have no reason to believe that they would represent any single type. Certainly the wide variety of offenses which lead to solitary confinement, varying from a continuous series of minor offenses to such major ones as insolence to a guard and escaping, would lead one to expect no single type of offender. Thus; if these evidences are sufficient, we may say that there are likely to be many kinds of offenders against discipline. The discovered characteristics may amass several types, no one of which is distinct or separate.

There is one objection that can be raised against this study. It is indicated that the attitude of the guards may often be largely responsible as a causal factor in sending men to solitary confinement. If the attitudes of the guards were the important factor, all of the foregoing tabulation would be useless. No direct evidence to answer this objection is available. From casual observation of the names of guards who turn in conduct reports to the Deputy Warden, a difference in frequency of these reports among various guards certainly is apparent. Some guards report many more breaches of conduct than others. This may be interpreted as being a measure of officiousness, ill will or sadism on the part of a guard, but this interpretation is not necessary for the following reasons: (1) Although some guards may be ready to report a convict for a breach of conduct at the slightest provocation, as a rule the convict must have done something previously to merit a report on slight suspicion. (2) Where a convict is committed to solitary confinement, the offense is usually based on more than suspicion;

the individual convict must overtly misbehave for the offenses, we found, such as fighting, insolence, continued talking, etc. (3) Even though there is wide variation in the number of offenses reported by various guards, this is, in part, a function of the situation in which the guard is found; for example in the prison school a large number of misconduct reports were made even though there were several different guards stationed there. (4) If personal likes and dislikes of the guards were the sole factor in causing commitment to solitary confinement, we should not have found the distinguishing characteristics that have already appeared. One guard would not dislike single men above all others, another dislike men between the ages of 15 and 25. Likes and dislikes do not run on such a basis. For these reasons we believe that the effect of the individual whims of the guards is not very important in defining the foregoing results.

Indications for Future Work

We believe that these easily available characteristics are of only slight value in determining who shall be the offenders against prison rules. More fruitful would be an attempt to define a number of types of convicts who are disciplinary problems and then to validate these types with objective criteria. Some such criteria might be: The attitude toward prison and society in general; expectation of future employment and the degree to which plans for the future have been made; the status in society from which the individual has come. These and others might be important as criteria of types of offenders. Then by determining the individual approximation to these types, a prediction of disciplinary difficulties may be made. We believe that this approach toward a definition of type of offenders is the most promising step to follow in the pursuit of this problem.

Summary

One hundred convicts, chosen at random from the list of those convicts committed to solitary confinement, were compared with the prison population at large in a number of respects. The group in solitary confinement was made up to an extent beyond chance greater than one would expect of offenders against property, excepting forgers. No reliable differences were observed in occupation or length of prison sentence. Comparing the group of 100 convicts with a control group of convicts never committed to solitary confinement, the disciplined group is more apt to come from urban environment, to be single, to have a large number of incorrect responses on the psychoneurotic inventory and to be slightly younger than the control group.