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A National Survey of Private Crime Commissions

Vincent J. Webb

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in San Diego, California

INTRODUCTION

Privatization is one of the most significant emerging issues in public administration. Studies of the phenomenon in the area of criminal justice have concentrated on greater private sector involvement in corrections (e.g. Camp and Camp, 1984; Mullen, Chabotar and Carrow, 1984) and policing (e.g., Shearing and Stenning, 1981).

Citizens crime commissions are a form of private sector participation in the public justice system that have been largely ignored by social scientists. With the exception of two articles that contain sections on the early history of the Chicago Crime Commission (Haller, 1970; 1971) and an analysis of the Chicago Crime Commission's efforts to combat organized crime from 1980-1984 (Hoffman, 1985), no systematic investigations have been undertaken of citizens crime commissions since Virgil W. Peterson's (a former Operating Director of the Chicago Crime Commission) pioneering work Crime Commissions in the United States (1945).

So little is known about citizens crime commissions in academic circles that no references are made to them in any of the major criminal justice and criminology texts. Hence, an important question is, "What is a citizens' crime commission?"

Citizens crime commissions are voluntary, non-profit organizations which operate in cities across the United States. In contrast to state crime commissions and Presidential crime commissions, citizens crime commissions are privately funded and have neither governmental status nor official power. Instead, they serve as pressure groups, attempting to alter the practices and policies of criminal justice agencies, and/or as vehicles for the articulation of the public interest.

Members of citizens crime commissions supply the necessary resources. Members, which are generally drawn from the economic elite of a community, contribute their name (i.e. prestige), money, and manpower.

Each crime commission has an executive director who is a paid, full-time professional. The executive director provides leadership and manages a commission's daily activities. To a significant extent, citizens crime commissions are a personification of their executive directors.

Executive directors provided the information for the present study which is a national survey of citizens crime commissions. The main purposes of this research are to describe the organizational characteristics of private crime commissions and to construct a typology of these organizations. The method used was a survey by telephone, with citizens crime commissions as the units of analysis. Executive directors of all commissions on the National Association of Citizens Crime Commission's 1984 membership list were contacted and asked to participate. Sixteen of the 17 executives participated in the survey. All survey interviews were conducted during October 1985.

The main research questions that guided this inquiry were: What are the origins of citizens crime commissions? How are they organized, and how do they function? What are their activities? How do they acquire funds to operate? What groups are their main constituencies? How effective are they? Are there different types of citizens crime commissions?

ORIGINS

Year Organized

We asked commission executives to provide the year that their commission was organized. Table 1 summarizes their responses.

Two decades stand out as banner years for the development of private crime commissions, the 1950s (n=4) and 1980s (n=6).

Table 1

Years in Which Crime Commission Were Organized

Years	Number
1910s	1
1920s	-
1930s	-
1940s	1
1950s	4
1960s	2
1970s	2
1980s	<u>6</u>
Total	16

Reason for Organizing

The commission executives provided a variety of responses when asked why the commission was organized. These responses can be summarized into five categories. Two executives indicated that the commission was formed in response to a concern about organized crime. Three executives gave police and political corruption as the reason for organizing. Eight executives indicated that their commissions were organized in response to an increase in crime, and three executives gave responses that can be characterized as "innovation diffusion", i.e., a crime commission seemed like a good idea. In addition, at least two executives stated that a concern about civil disorder was partially responsible for the formation of their commissions.

STRUCTURE

Patterns of Organization

Executives were asked about the way in which their commission was organized. Three patterns emerged. The responses of eight executives suggest

a highly organized commission, with such features, as a governing board, a board chairman, president, vice-presidents, secretary treasurer, executive director, and a range of other professional staff. A second pattern that describes four commissions consists of a fairly large governing board, an executive director and other professional staff, but no identifiable contingent of officers. A third pattern includes commissions that are more loosely organized than those described above. They tend to have relatively small governing bodies that can be described as advisory groups rather than a formal board of directors. One executive reported that his commission was a division within the local Chamber of Commerce.

The Role of the President

The executives provided nine different activities when asked to describe the role of the president (or in some instances chairman) of the commission. Two activities were dominant, namely presiding over meetings (n=7) and overseeing commission activities (n=7). Other activities included public relations, policy development, advising the executive director, raising funds, serving as spokesperson, and coordinating Commission activities.

The Role of Executive Director

With the exception of presiding over meetings, the executive directors mentioned these same activities when asked to describe their own role. In addition, they cited such activities as managing day-to-day commission operations, supervising staff, serving as liaison to criminal justice agencies, working with neighborhood groups, lobbying, and implementing policy.

Commission Staff

The size of commission staffs as reported by the executives ranged from one to nine. Most commissions (n=10) have full-time paid staffs of less than five; the rest (n=6) have staffs of between five and nine.

The types of positions staffed by the commissions include executive directors, deputy or assistant directors, fund raisers, investigators, research analysts, research assistants, office managers, administrative assistants, computer specialists, secretaries, and clerks.

Executive Director Functions

We asked the executives to list functions that they felt were the most important for the executive director role. These functions and the frequency that they were reported are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Most Important Functions of the Executive Director Role

Function	Number of Times Mentioned
Program development and operations	14
Liaison with criminal justice agencies	11
Public relations	10
Research	4
Lobby	4
Fund raising	1
Maintain contact with board	1

Three functions stand out. These are program development and operations (n=14), liaison with criminal justice agencies (n=11) , and public relations (n=10).

Board Size

The size of governing board ranged from 15 to 68 members. One commission gave 6 as the size of the board; two gave the size as being between 15 and 20; eight executives indicated that they had a board with between 20 and 25 members; one gave 35 members; and the remaining four indicated that they had more than 45 members on their board.

Characteristics of Board Members

Responses to a question on the occupational backgrounds of board members reveals that the corporate world is well represented. Corporate executives and banking and financial leaders were frequently listed as the types of individuals serving on the board. Nevertheless, many executives listed clergy, housewives, professionals, and small businessmen as board members.

Thirteen of the executives indicated that women served on their board and 11 of the 16 directors indicated that racial minorities served on their board.

Five of the 16 executives indicated that criminal justice or public officials served on their boards. Four of these indicated that they had only one official, and one executive indicated that 26 criminal justice officials served on the board. One executive responded that criminal justice officials served on commission committees, but not on the board.

Board Member Activities

Although the question "What do board members do?" resulted in a variety of responses, four activities were mentioned frequently. Setting policy was the most frequently cited board activity (n=10), followed by fund raising (n=8). Oversight and the provision of in-kind services are the two other activities, with four executives mentioning each.

General Members

The number of general members ranged from zero general members (n=6) to over 500 members (n=1). Two commissions have less than 100 general members; four commissions have approximately 200 general members; and three have between 300 and 400 general members.

GOALS AND RATIONALES

The Goals

Executives identified several different goals. Some mentioned only one goal, while others cited multiple goals. Goals acknowledged were: overseeing and upgrading the effectiveness of the criminal justice system (n=7), guarding against political corruption (n=5), educating the public about criminal justice issues (n=5), involving the public in solutions to criminal justice and crime-related problems (n=5), designing and operating community crime prevention programs (n=4), and assisting criminal justice agencies (n=3).

Why are Crime Commissions Needed?

A variety of rationales were given for private crime commissions. Some of the reasons are:

- Provide oversight to criminal justice agencies
- Serve as a watchdog
- Educate the public
- Front for citizens
- Serve as third party to balance interests
- Provide citizen involvement
- Articulate issues
- Assist law enforcement
- Protect citizens
- Plan for the future
- Improve effectiveness of criminal justice
- Involve the private sector
- Keep affluent people involved in criminal justice issues

MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

Monitoring as a Commission Activity

We asked if the commission engaged in monitoring criminal justice agencies and public officials. Nine of the 16 executives responded that their commission engaged in such activity and seven responded that their commission did not engage in monitoring. The nine executives from the "monitoring" commissions listed a variety of agencies that they watched on a regular basis including local, county, state, and federal agencies.

Strategies for Change

Executives were asked to indicate the approaches they used in "changing criminal justice agencies." Table 3 summarizes their responses.

Table 3

Approaches Used In Changing Criminal Justice Agencies

Approaches	Number
Expose	-
Work behind the scenes	9
Mixture behind the scenes of expose	6
Other	<u>1</u>
Total	16

None of the executives said that they used the expose approach. Nine executives indicated that they used the "behind the scenes approach," and six executives stated that they use a "mixed" approach. Generally, the executives that reported a mixed approach, preferred to use the behind the scenes approach first, and the expose approach only as a last resort.

RESOURCES AND POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

Funding

Donations were reported (n=10) as the most common source of funds for crime commission operations. Membership dues were the next most frequently reported source of funding (n=5). One executive reported that the state was the source of funding, and one identified the United Way as the main provider of funding.

Budget and Financial Resources

Annual budgets for commissions ranged from zero to \$380,000. Six executives reported budgets of less than \$100,000, five reported budgets between \$100,000 and \$200,000, three reported budgets between \$200,000 and \$300,000, and two reported budgets of \$300,000 or more.

We asked the executives to rate the commissions with regard to obtaining financial resources. Ten executives gave positive ratings, three executives described their success as fair or average, and three others described their success in negative terms.

Political Autonomy

Each executive was asked to rate their commission's ability to maintain political autonomy or independence. Fourteen of the executives gave very positive ratings, one gave an average rating, and one gave a poor rating.

CONSTITUENCIES

Main Constituencies

Table 4 summarizes the responses to the question, "What are the commission's main constituencies?" Business leaders along with top and middle management and professionals were mentioned most often as the main constituencies. The general public was also mentioned by just under half of the executives. Only four of the executives mentioned criminal justice and public officials as main constituencies.

Table 4

Crime Commission's Main Constituencies

Constituencies	Number of Times Mentioned
Business leaders	8
Top and middle management, and professionals	8
General public	7
Criminal justice and public officials	4

Broadening the Support Base

When asked if they thought that the commission should broaden it's base of support, ten executives responded "yes" and six responded "no". Some of the executives who thought their commission's support base ought to be enlarged cited these advantages:

- Provision of more input regarding community conditions
- An opportunity to increase the representativeness of the commission by including more citizens from particular segments of the community (e.g. minority groups)
- Procurement of additional financial resources through recruitment of more members
- Promotion of public awareness of the commission

By contrast, some of the executives against broadening the support base contended that the average citizen has neither the money nor the high social status that are critical to the functioning of a citizens crime commission.

External Relationships

We asked the executives to describe commission relations with the academic community, local politicians, and neighborhood organizations. Ten executives described relations with neighborhood associations as positive, one as negative, one as mixed, and four as nonexistent. It should be noted that some

executives described relations with neighborhood associations as inappropriate. Some executives also described associations with politicians as inappropriate.

Collaborative Efforts With Other Crime Commissions

With the exception of sharing information and ideas, the majority (n=12) of the executives indicated that they did not pursue collaborative efforts with other crime commissions. Four executives indicated that they engaged in collaboration that went beyond sharing information and ideas.

EFFECTIVENESS

Proposal Implementation

Two executives indicated that all of their commission's proposals during the past year had been implemented. Nine executives responded that most of their proposals had been implemented. One responded that few proposals were implemented, one stated that no proposals had been implemented, and three did not know how many of their proposals had been implemented.

Commission Impact

We asked the executives to assess the impact that their commission had on criminal justice policy during the past year. Eight assessed the impact as significant, four as moderate, one as limited, and one as no impact. Two executives did not know the impact of their proposals.

TYOLOGY OF COMMISSIONS

To form a typology of citizens crime commissions, we stressed the importance of goals and environmental situations. The logic behind our typology is that of Simpson and Gulley (1962), who studied over 500 voluntary associations in the United States. Their general position is that

organizations which must adapt to a wide range of external forces will differ in internal characteristics from those which interface with a narrower range of pressures.

More specifically, Simpson and Gully (1962) assumed that voluntary associations, pursuing numerous goals and attempting to satisfy the demands of the general community as well as their own members, face a more complex set of environmental pressures than organizations having few goals and no mandate to satisfy community expectations. As a consequence, such organizations are expected to be organized differently. For example, an organization with many goals and an external constituency would be expected to exhibit a concern for both grassroots membership and local community demands.

Following the reasoning of Simpson and Gulley (1962), we formed a typology of citizens crime commissions which is based on two criteria. First, commissions were classified as "focused" or "diffuse" based on the number of goals listed in response to the question, "What are the commission's main goal?" The 10 commissions whose executives cited from one to two goals were defined as focussed; the six commissions whose respondents cited three or more goals were defined as diffuse. Second, commissions were categorized as "internal" or "external", depending on whether or not the executives cited the general public in their answer to the question, "What are the commission's main constituencies?" The seven commissions whose executives indicated the importance of the community as a constituency were classified as externally oriented. (It should be noted that five of the seven executives of these commissions identified other constituencies along with the public.) The remaining nine commissions were classified as internally oriented.

Using these procedures, we arrived at the distribution of commissions depicted by type that is in Table 5.

Table 5

Citizens Crime Commissions By Type

Type of Commission	Number
Focused internal	8
Focused external	2
Diffuse internal	1
Diffuse external	5

Several observations are pertinent. The first one is that in terms of the range of pressures to which citizens crime commissions are exposed, the polar types are focused internal and diffuse external. Thirteen of the 16 commissions fit into these two types. A second point is that the focused external and diffuse internal organizations are intermediate types, yet they differ significantly from one another as well as from the other two more common types.

Both of the focused internal associations have very small budgets (zero dollars and \$22,500 respectively). Lack of financial resources may constrain these organizations from formulating goals and activities that meet the wide-ranging demands of their self-identified constituency, the public. As for the one diffuse internal commission, it is the only commission out of the sixteen surveyed that has a sizeable contingent (n=26) of criminal justice authorities and public officials on its board of directors. The four goals espoused by the executive of this commission may be understood as a reflection of the pressures connected with satisfying a variety of governmental and political forces, that in the unique case of this commission are simultaneously external as well as internal in nature.

CONCLUSION

In interpreting the findings what stands out are the differences among commissions. Some examples of this diversity are:

- The oldest crime commission was formed in the early twentieth century, whereas six commissions have been organized in the 1980s.
- Reasons for organizing commissions differ; not all commissions were established in response to corruption and scandal.
- Executive directors perceive their roles differently, with some stressing programmatic activities and others emphasizing liaison with criminal justice agencies, public relations, research, lobbying, fund raising, and maintaining contact with the Board.
- The Boards of crime commissions exhibit differences in terms of Board members' occupations, and the representation of racial minorities and women.
- Variety was discovered in both the number and the kinds of goals.
- Substantial disparities exist among the financial resources of crime commissions.
- Commissions seem to have divergent constituencies, with some mainly oriented toward the expectations and demands of top and middle management in business and others geared toward the general public as well as the business community.

Our typology is an attempt to make some sense out of these differences. It should be recognized that the typology is based on the perceptions of executive directors regarding only two organizational characteristics, namely goals and constituencies. Consideration of other key aspects of citizens crime commissions such as programmatic activities and executive's perceived role may reveal other patterns relating to citizens crime commissions.

In sum, the present paper represents a rather modest effort in an area where little research has been done. We plan to continue to investigate citizens crime commissions, exploring the relationship between organizational characteristics and perceived effectiveness.

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