

S. West Youth Custody Survey

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A recent large scale survey of who goes into Youth Custody and what contact, if any, they have with their throughcare worker during sentence shows the scope for diversion and the gaps in provision.

During an 18 month period from January 1986 to June 1987, two fairly comprehensive surveys were undertaken of Youth Custody prisoners (YCPs) in the South West Prison Region, encompassing all five Youth Custody Centre (Campsfield House, Erlestoke, Guys Marsh, Portland, Usk). Under a common system, the 'profile' of nearly two thousand receptions was taken. Furthermore, about one thousand about to be discharged YCPs were surveyed as to what throughcare contact they had had, and the arrangements for accommodation on their release. In every case, the home Probation or Social Services area was recorded, so that figures could be provided for each Probation area separately, as well as for the aggregate in the region as a whole.

Reception Profile

Nearly one third of receptions had had no experience of probation, supervision, or community service orders, but 40% had experience of local authority care. Over one third were sentenced with three previous convictions or less.

About one third were sentenced to six months or less.

About one third admitted that they committed the current offence under the influence of drink. About one fifth of receptions had a home area in a different region.

One tenth of receptions were aged 15 or 16.

One tenth of receptions were currently supervised by Social Services.

When the break-downs were done by individual Probation Area, the overall most striking feature was the *similarity* between Areas, and with the region as a whole.

The most important benefit from this information should be our knowledge about what sort of people go into custody now. Only by aiming our non-custodial measures at them

can we hope in future to get people on community-based orders that we are not getting already.

Throughcare Contact

Naturally, we could only measure quantity of contact (as perceived by the YCP) and not quality. However, we were able to give three different 'indicators':

1. Intensity of visiting — roughly the average number of visits per YCP, both as a whole and from each individual Probation area.
2. Consistency of visiting — looking at the proportion of YCPs who had had *no visits* during their sentence.
3. Consistency of contact — looking at the proportion who had had *neither a visit nor a letter* during their sentence.

Overall

About 10% recorded no contact at all, which is in many ways a disappointing result, yet I would have to say it is a much improved figure over the figures gained in small surveys from 1981 to 1985. It could be that we are improving in this area, even if we have some way to go.

Contact by Social Services was significantly and consistently poorer than that offered by Probation, 21% of those who were Social Services clients reporting no contact. (This has been recently reported to Directors of Social Services in the South West Region).

26% recorded no visits during sentence (35% among Social Services clients).

Distance from Institutions

It cannot be at all surprising that particularly remote areas like Dyfed and Cornwall scored relatively poorly in terms of visiting YCPs, but this is no bar to letters — and Cornwall Probation achieved the distinction of being the only area to achieve a contact (whether by visit

or letter) with every single one of the discharges surveyed from their area (20).

Specialisation v Non-specialisation

It was also not surprising to find that areas which have partially or wholly organised their throughcare into a specialist service appear to have an advantage. Oxfordshire and South Glamorgan consistently appeared close to the top of all three tables. However:

— Some other areas with specialist provision did not 'score' so well, notably Dorset and Avon. 37% clients of centrally located Avon recorded 'no visit'.

— Areas without specialisation who choose to treat throughcare seriously can nevertheless achieve good results, particularly in terms of consistency. Wiltshire, for example, was in the top four of all three tables.

Bearing in mind research from Huntercombe which showed that consistency of contact (more than intensity) is what achieves the most significant breakthrough with YCPs, specialisation may be an advantage in providing an effective throughcare service, but it is by no means essential. It can be done effectively by the 'ordinary' probation officer as well.

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Not only is Don MacLeod gravely mistaken if he really supposes that there can ever be an infallible system of prediction but he is also under-valuing the Risk Scale's greatest strength. This is the fact that as a normative instrument it can tell us what *normally* would happen in any particular case. From this we may deduce the effect that other factors beyond those contributing to the risk score may have had in determining actual outcome.

Border-line Performance

Enquiries about the Risk of Custody Scale have been received from management and individual officers in over 60% of the Probation areas in England and Wales. In many of these areas the Scale has been tested. No major complaints have been received. If anyone still doubts the efficacy of the Risk Scale I would ask them to consider the following. In 110 of the cases I studied, the probation officer concerned assessed the likelihood of custody as 50/50. The Risk of Custody scale accurately predicted the

NOTE

The survey was undertaken by Alex Bell (Dorset), Andrew Bridges, Mike Howard (Oxfordshire), Julian Kohn (Dorset), Tom Williams (Wilts).

Further Evidence

In an earlier survey (1983) of contact by supervising officers with YCPs at Hindley YCC, conducted by Harry Hobbs, Liaison SPO, 77% had a contact of some kind during sentence. Nevertheless over 19% of Probation clients and 39% of Social Services clients had no contact by letter or visit; 34% (Probation) and 10% (Social Services) had contact by letter only. When the survey was repeated in 1986, only 49% had received a visit from their supervisor.

Mr Hobbs comments that the files point to some effective use of letters and visits, such as a letter from the supervisor informing the YCP of an intended visit, itemising the topics to be covered and asking the YCP to give these some thought so that joint decisions could be made on future plans. This contrasts with visits made apparently out of the blue, with little attempt to involve YCPs in preparing for their future.

outcome in 73% of these cases where the probation officer had been undecided. Therefore, far from being, as Don MacLeod implies, useful only in cases where the likely outcome would normally seem clear-cut, the Risk Scale can also perform well in assessing borderline cases.

It will be interesting to see whether the system of risk assessment that Don MacLeod and his colleagues have developed in Macclesfield, and for which his article seems in the end to be a mere trailer, proves to be equally as effective with borderline cases. I also wonder whether the Macclesfield method is really quite so revolutionary and original as Don MacLeod claims, since it would appear to rely still upon those same data collecting techniques that he criticises in my own work. I await the launch of his new initiative with great interest — but with even greater scepticism.