

“Inadequate ?”

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ONE OF THE most common expressions one hears or sees written these days is “Inadequate.” It is used as a means of assessment and description in a variety of ways. It has become an over used piece of jargon, something to be used when we can think of nothing else, an expression that on examination usually seems to be either ambiguous or means nothing at all.

After several years engaged on crime prevention, investigation and detection, I decided to spread my wings somewhat and move into the field of social work as a Probation Officer. Three years later I entered the Prison Service. During this time I found so many expressions coming from experts in a variety of fields, each trying to find for us “the answer” to crime and the criminal. I learned that offenders do not commit crime because they have had too much to drink, find themselves without means of support, succumb to temptation, find an easier and more profitable way of earning a living than working, or are just dishonest; they are psychotic, alcoholic, subnormal, are deprived, are the product of a bad environment or have inherent traits, depending on which school of thought one chooses to apply. If

nothing seems to fit they are just “Inadequate.”

I must confess that until recent months I have been inclined to fall into the same trap, making frequent use of the expression. Of late I have found myself interviewing for several purposes including court reports, allocation and other boards. I have re-read my own reports some time after the original interview and have studied the reports of others. The regularity with which the expression occurs is quite fantastic and I have come to the conclusion that it is, to say the least, “a most inadequate expression.”

In a survey of the Brixton Prison population some years ago,* it was found that people of “inadequate personality” made up nearly half the population. How easy it is to describe an offender as “inadequate” for who can dispute it? Who in fact knows what it does mean? Do we mean inadequate mentally, inadequate in isolation, inadequate in a given environment, inadequate because of deprivation and an inability to relate, inadequate because of inherent traits, or inadequate in any other way? How can a man, who becomes a

* de Berker, *State of Mind Reports*, Brit. J. Criminology, Vol.I. No.I. 1960

persistent offender after probably spending the major portion of his life as a useful member of society, suddenly be written off as simply "inadequate"? I have seen many offenders and suppose they can all be called inadequate, but I feel that they are only so in the isolation that is their lot in the outside world, for they function quite well in the various establishments they are sent to.

The things I find most frightening about this expression are, the extent to which it is being used, its brevity and apparent finality. One word, occasionally two, to write off a human being, a weak acceptance of another man's weaknesses, with no attempt to find out why, no attempt to look for his strengths, and little or no attempt to help.

Over the years, the expression "psychopath" has become widely used, yet it too has so many different interpretations, but all signifying a lack of hope. I would suggest that the expression "inadequate" is taking the same course and we now hear of the "inadequate psychopath."

Simply, inadequacy denotes an insufficiency. If we are to use this term at all, what means have we of assessing sufficiency or adequacy? Is it possible to have a single standard or do we need several? Does the expression as we use it at present mean the same thing to all of us? I would think not, in fact far from it.

It is my opinion that "inade-

quacy" and "failure" have become synonymous and it is here that the danger lies; the dull prisoner becomes an "inadequate dullard" with complete disregard for any good qualities that he may possess. We ignore so many other factors and often fail to take into account the standards adopted by the assessor and expectations of the person being assessed.

So far I have discussed the use of this expression in relation to the prisoner population and people generally who are problems in society, for its abuse is not limited to ourselves in the Prison Service but extends to many who are involved in other fields of social work. The gist of many recent articles has been that we ourselves are inadequate in dealing with the task we have before us. Is this true or is it simply that we do not recognise it? Do we find a way out with words rather than use all the resources that are available? We become angry at what we feel to be unjust criticism but perhaps we are all guilty of the same mistakes and the general use of the expression "inadequacy" is one of them.

Having said so much, it would seem that I am following in the pattern of many critics. I am being inconclusive, destructive and not so constructive. Working at a maximum security recidivist prison, I find myself faced with the problem that bedevils so many of us. I see only the failures, the "Inadequates?" and "Psychopaths?"

We have a prisoner population of approximately 1,500, presenting a minimum of 1,500 problems in the institution, apart from the problems of the families outside: 1,500 different and complex human problems. We have people who have passed through Approved Schools, Probation, Licence, After-Care, Detention Centre, Borstal, Star Training Prisons, each stage one step nearer to the apparent end of the road. They are labelled inadequate as are many others who have not been through the same phases. Many writers criticise our buildings, ourselves and the whole system. They point out faults that we are only too well aware of ourselves.

I would suggest that at least half the people who pass through our establishments are completely isolated in the world outside, many having been so for some time. It is easy, when people fail so regularly, to label them and pass the blame back to them.

One of the things that has struck me most forcibly at Wandsworth has been the recognition at all staff levels that there is a great deal to be done. What is even more important is the expressed desire of the majority to be personally involved.

At a Borstal Allocation Centre some time ago, I watched a psychological tester at work. He tested for reasoning, literacy, mechanical aptitude and perception. This was a search for a fuller picture of the person involved so that we might find a useful area on which we could

purposefully concentrate. I think we have to look at the wider situation in which we find ourselves in a similar way.

"Inadequate" is a negative expression and carries with it negative attitudes. I feel it is time that we ourselves and some of the experts who seem anxious to advise and help, worked together and accepted a basic principle of casework. For years there has been a deplorable lack of liaison between all the agencies involved and a general lack of public awareness. It is of little advantage to anyone to concentrate on the inadequacies or weaknesses. It is better by far to concentrate on and work through the positive strengths of our charges, ourselves and the Service to which we belong.

We may have reached a stage where there is a "wind of change for the better" where we can do this, for there are, in our own Service, new methods of Staff Training. There are attempts at constructive and purposeful work at our larger recidivist prisons. The P.O.A. have expressed a desire for the purposeful involvement of the discipline officer and there has been the recent A.C.T.O. report on After-Care.

If we are to succeed there must be effective communication between all the agencies involved. There must be clarity of thought and expression, especially in the descriptive phrases we use. We must be able to look at people as people and not just the subject of records.