

Short Sentence Recidivists, Groups and After-Care

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I HAVE FELT for some time that the institution in which a short sentence man serves his sentence should play a more direct part in his after-care. This is largely due to the experience I have had with various groups of short sentence men in Birmingham Prison. Often a man and his offences may be discussed in the security of prison when crime may be a thing of the past and it is easy to say "Never again." On release in an insecure world his problems catch up with him again and apart from the busy probation officer he is on his own at the time when he most needs help and support. If a man goes voluntarily to see a probation officer it may well be their first meeting so that each knows little about the other, if the ex-prisoner is looking for money and is disappointed he will not be seen again. It is with the institutional staff that he is most likely to have made relationships so that it seems a waste of potential help when he steps out of the gate and communication ceases until he returns.

This article describes an attempt with the probation services to meet with a group of short sentence

recidivists in a local prison during their sentences and to continue the group outside prison on their release. This idea was discussed with the Principal Probation Officer of Birmingham who kindly offered the probation and after-care offices for a meeting place should any of the men turn up on their release. It was agreed that one or more probation officers should join the groups in and out of prison as and when their commitments allow them to do so.

There are several reasons for using a group to do this. Among the most important is the fact that a large proportion of recidivists have difficulty in getting along with other people, whether it is with their fellows or with those in some position of authority. Often they have very little idea of the effect of their own personalities on others, so that meeting in a group provides an opportunity for examining these kinds of feeling as they occur. On occasion it is possible for a group to give a man some understanding of himself which may help him to begin to change his behaviour and it is likely that a prisoner will take more notice of what another

prisoner has to say about him in this respect than if it comes from a member of the staff. Secondly, if the subject is after-care then it may well be a more profitable use of time in seeing nine men together for 90 minutes than in talking with nine men individually for ten minutes. Thirdly, it was hoped that some community feeling could be engendered in the group sufficient to give some members a wish to continue meeting on discharge.

I began by seeing all ordinaries sentenced to six months imprisonment who were going out to live in Birmingham. There were two criteria of selection: (i) that a man should show some degree of concern about his record; (ii) a willingness to talk about himself in a group. Approximately one-half of those seen satisfied these requirements. The first group of eight men began meeting at the end of February and a second group started in the middle of March, 1965. The group met on one afternoon a week for two hours. More often than not a probation officer was able to join the groups.

At the start the project was explained again to each group together with the fact that attendance was voluntary and as long as a man remained on a group he would not be transferred. Because of the amount of work involved in keeping the groups up to strength, as in a voluntary group there is inevitably some turnover to begin with, the groups were merged from the beginning of May to form one group of nine men;

this continued until the last man was discharged in July.

All the members of the group had served at least four previous prison sentences; four were ex-convicts and three had been in psychiatric hospitals. Nevertheless, some useful discussion was had concerning their delinquencies but most valuable was the opportunity to get to know a probation officer to whom they could turn on release, and to begin to iron out in conjunction with the welfare department some of the difficulties, real or imaginary, which faced them on discharge. As an insight giving instrument the group was a failure. There was an almost continuous "flight" from the group situation to the world outside (which happened more often than with other groups I have been with in prison); this appeared to stem from at least four connected sets of factors. In the first place two men had particular problems waiting for them outside and this was where their attention was constantly focussed. Secondly, there was some doubt as to how freely they could talk in my presence; for example, the seed of misgiving was sown early on when there had been some discussion of rackets operating in one part of the prison, this was followed a couple of days later by a special search of some of the men who had taken part in the discussion and it was felt this was not a coincidence. Thirdly, there was the lack of confidence in each other; important here was the fact that a number

of the group were worried by their own states of mind—there was at one time a good deal of talk about madness, “nutters” and psychiatric treatments outside prison — but the fear of appearing foolish and losing face inhibited much airing of these feelings on a personal level within the group. Fourthly, there was the widespread desire among recidivists to blame other people for the cause of their failure and the after-care services are at times a sitting target for this kind of projection.

At the after-care offices the first man turned up on an evening in July, the day of his release, and he was drunk. Over the next seven weeks this man and three others made sporadic appearances. The high spot was one evening when all four were present together, one man bringing a workmate of his with no previous prison experience. This was the only occasion when we functioned as a group in trying to help a member. He was out of a job with no immediate prospects and what could he do? After some discussion of possible courses of action another member said he might be able to get him a job at his own place of work. After further discussion it was agreed that he would take him down the road after the group and show him the factory; then see the foreman first thing in the morning. If there was a suitable vacancy then the foreman would take him on. This all took place as arranged; the foreman agreed to take him and the man returned to the probation

offices in the morning with a note from the employer with a view to getting working clothes from the N.A.B. But something happened: he did not take the job, and did not appear again. The most valuable part of this episode eventually was to the man who had suggested the idea and done the work. He came along the following week complaining bitterly of the other man's behaviour and feeling naturally well and truly let down. In this situation it was possible to put back to him that these were exactly the sort of feelings often experienced by those trying to help delinquents; and to relate this to one of his anxieties in prison which was how did one climb over the fence from the delinquent to the non-delinquent side and begin to be accepted by “them”.

By the end of August, however, this group had disintegrated and by the end of the year only this one man out of four had not returned to prison.

The major impression I am left with from these groups in relation to after-care is the massive denial on the part of the inmates for any help other than material — “with a job and digs I'll be O.K.”—and the consequent amount of blame heaped upon officialdom when things go wrong; whereas, as has been frequently pointed out, it is in the realm of human relationships that the most help is often required. Secondly, the potential value of seeing men outside prison appears to be demonstrated both in terms of relating prison experience

directly to rehabilitation and also in terms of getting feedback about prison experiences in a safer environment; the details of racketeering, for instance, as an inhibiting influence on the group only became readily available outside prison. In this kind of way it can be seen that for some recidivists rehabilitation can be a continuous learning process, stretching sometimes over a number of sentences but involving the same people.

One of the implications of this project seems to be that much orthodox voluntary after-care work for a short sentence recidivist is as

irrelevant to his problems as are the few months he spends in prison. Neither is meaningfully related to the other and both must be equally frustrating to the services involved. These remarks are of course based on a small number of recidivists in a local prison where conditions are minimal for any attempt at positive training. The paradox remains that for a number of its inmates the local prison is ideally situated to maximize the integration of training and after-care, prison and probation services. Conditions inside make it difficult as yet to capitalize on the geographical advantage.

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