

# Absconding at Dover Borstal

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DISCIPLINARY break-downs of any kind interfere with the running of institutions. As an expression of significant conflicts they may have value but they may also cause a heavy diversion of staff time and energy from other important work. The offence most able to cause waste of time and energy and public expense is a successful abscondence. Measures approaching full precaution are also very expensive. In addition the waste of the inmate's time and the set back to his training is also, though not invariably, severe. The staff of Dover borstal, like staff at any other establishment, frequently discussed these problems. As discussion was busiest after the most recent abscondence the overall pattern was not easily perceived. It was overshadowed by details and sometimes by the activities required by pursuit.

Mr. K. Whetton, Deputy Governor at Dover from its opening as a borstal in 1957 until early in 1961 began to collect information about abscondence in 1960 to discover whether we could perceive

any pattern which would enable us to make prevention and understanding easier. Subsequent work on the information he collected brought to light some patterns from which we were able to profit and led us to believe that a more detailed survey of absconding in 1961 would be worthwhile.

What follows is mostly drawn from a much larger paper, prepared mainly for circulation amongst the staff at Dover, and which comprises the results of an analysis of all occurrences of abscondence during 1961 at Dover borstal.

Attempting and preparing to abscond are also sufficiently obviously relevant to be included. We also included Home Leave non-returners, and non-returners from Compassionate Paroles, since they also involve the intent to absent oneself from training and are disciplinary offences.

What follows has been drawn from a chapter of the original paper which contained the summary of the findings of the

research. Most of these have some statistical backing, and in some cases conclusions have been drawn as a result of applying simple tests.

Research was based on schedules completed by housemasters as soon as possible after the occurrence, and our thanks are due to them and to officers who act for them in their absence, for the trouble taken in completing these schedules. Thanks are also due to the Chief Officer, Mr. Price, and the Administration Officer, Mr. Macadam, who both helped considerably with the section on the cost of absconding.

The project was in no way intended to be exhaustive and indeed with the time available it can only be a pointer to what could be achieved by a more comprehensive study of a problem which has long worried penal administrators. Much of the work was done for local reasons, in the hope that we might be able to reduce abscondence, or at least understand the problem better, so many of the findings have a purely local significance, but we do feel that some of the results may apply more generally, and it is for this reason that we have felt justified in asking the PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL to publish our results, in the hope that this will stimulate more examination of the problem in other institutions. So far as we can discover no one has examined absconding from either Prisons or Borstals in this country before,

though since the original paper was written we have been able to examine findings from New Zealand,\* and it may be that these findings will have some relevance to conditions in this country.

### The Setting

Dover is classed as a medium security institution. During the period under review there were six houses each holding between 40 and 45 boys approximately. The institution is in an old military fortress, which stands above the modern town of Dover in a commanding position, and was designed to hold several thousand troops as a stronghold against invasion from the Continent. The main buildings date from the Napoleonic era, including the great dry ditch or moat which surrounds the institution and provides the main security line. It is at least 30 feet deep and more in width and consists of vertical brick walls on each side with rough land in the bottom. During the day parties work under supervision outside the ditch: mainly within a wire security fence, sometimes right outside all security lines. Football and many other activities are carried on outside the security line, but restrictions on boys taking part in such activities are applied by using the grade system. Certain lads, who are considered serious abscond

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\* Absconders from Penal Institutions, Department of Justice, Wellington, New Zealand, 1961.

risks, are not allowed outside the ditch.

Some figures, from the original survey started by Mr. Whetton, were available and some of the findings are related to changing trends in absconding at Dover between 1960 and 1961.

Fewer lads (59) were involved in 1961 as compared with 67 in 1960, and this decrease was almost entirely accounted for by the decrease in the number of lads involved in more than one offence.

Offences allied to absconding, never common, decreased in 1961 to such an extent that it was no longer possible to analyse them.

Home leave failures were nearly twice as common in 1961 as in 1960, but the total number of lads sent on leave increased and the change is not significant.

The average time in training for leave failures decreased between 1960 and 1961 by over two months; these lads tend to have bad records, and almost without exception to be ex-approved school or detention centre lads, as well as having to a great degree a known previous history of absconding. Almost without exception they have been committed to borstal for offences involving unlawful enrichment. (Mainly larceny and breaking). They appear to be conformers within the institution, as they take very little longer than expectation for a normal lad to earn senior grade and the consequent home leave.

There were two failures on parole in 1961. There were no failures on local parole due in main to the almost complete withdrawal of this privilege.

There was considerable variation in the absconding rate between months with a noticeable drop during the summer, but a rapid rise in the early autumn. The theory that absconding comes to an institution in patches was broadly confirmed.

### Time and Place

More than half the absconds occurred on Monday and Tuesday, and two thirds of the successful absconds took place on these days. Friday is no longer popular, due to the rearrangement of routine which took place at the end of 1960.

The number of absconds from labour has decreased by half, though the proportion of successful absconds among these remains disturbingly high.

Little change has occurred in the escapes from day recreation, and these seem to be the responsibility of long term lads who find difficulty with institutional life.

Evening absconds remain the most popular, apart from those going from labour, and the hours of darkness are preferred, though this may largely be explained by the lack of absconds during the summer months with their long light evenings. There is a distinct shift towards their being more successful, as also are the begin-

ners' grade, though there has been a marked decrease in the number of those who went. A higher proportion of training grade lads went, and whilst this may be accounted for by the earlier grant of this grade, many of them had been at Dover for such time as would have in any case entitled them to this grade in the light of average progress. Training grade lads were noticeably less successful than last year and also less successful than the beginners grade lads despite the greater freedom accorded to them. This shift may denote a general decrease in the level of casual attempts at absconding, coupled with some waiting for promotion to training grade and its added freedom, and it may be that an apparent shift is due in some measure to administrative action.

The timing of absconds as related to promotion boards was examined, but of the sample of 47 only seven could have been attributed to disappointment over board results, and this table largely reinforced the view that failure to get grades was conspicuous by its absence as a reason for absconding.

The trend during 1961 has been for the lads to go in groups of increasing size from within the security line; no lad succeeded in crossing the moat on his own; most lads who went alone went from outside the security line.

A higher proportion of lads successfully negotiated the moat, and to do this some aid, nearly

always sheets or rope, with grapple of bent poker or strip iron found on the estate, was used.

One may conclude that absconds from within the institution may be becoming better thought out, more determined and more organised, and as a result more successful, or that attempts to abscond are only being made by those who fully intend going, the more casual effort being discouraged by increased difficulty or easier dissipation of discontent.

Of those who went in the evening the gym has been used in many cases as the excuse to get out of the house; lads who went direct from the house were all caught within the precincts. As last year, most escapes from labour are successful, and so were all escapes from outside recreation.

Of the successful arrests a higher proportion were arrested locally, within a range of about ten miles, and the staff share of these arrests is rather more in 1961 than in 1960, though this is attributable to lads who went from outside the security line, which seems to imply that though the staff still have not been able to prevent such escapes they have been rather quicker off the mark once a lad is missed.

It was difficult to assess the reasons for leave failure; reasons for absconding seem far more connected with difficulties in the institution than at home. Far fewer lads abscond to a situation which they think has become unbearable

unless they can be present, than go from a situation within the institution which has got to the stage which they can no longer stand.

It is clear however that no simple analysis of the reasons for absconding can be made, and the problem offers scope for a much deeper investigation than that possible within this survey.

The attempts were recaptured most rapidly, followed by the absconds from outside the security line, and lastly those from within the security line. There is a very clear difference in speed of arrest between the three groups. Lads who stayed out for more than a day were all drawn from the group who went from within the security line, apart from three lads who went from outside recreation.

Most of the lads who went from outside the security line did not commit further offences, whereas the majority of those who went from within did do so, which is in keeping with the comment above that these absconds are becoming better thought out and more determined.

### **Punishments**

For those lads punished at Dover a fairly clear tariff emerges, invariably involving loss of time—usually one month for those who were successful; unsuccessful absconders were often only removed from house, though the majority lost a month as well. Those who commit further offences are more heavily punished, as might be expected. Absconding

does not seem to be heavily punished considering the inconvenience caused, as well as expense.

Difference between individual houses was not marked; Hastings had the worst record and Walmer the best. When the houses were considered in pairs, according to allocation policy, differences showed clearly, and the reception board seems to have had some successes in putting the better risks in Rye and Walmer, the two houses with least security. Romney and Hythe, with an allocation of lads with institutional history, showed a pattern of distinctly greater success in getting away.

Only a small proportion of absconds occurred within a lad's first month at Dover, and the majority occurred after the lad had been at Dover for at least two months.

The vast proportion of the absconders were not on a trade course, though in many cases they may have been at Dover long enough for them to be considered for a course, or at least for it to be clear whether or not they would get a course. This apparent failure to get on a course is not through lack of intelligence; very few of the lads concerned came in the D or E streams.

Lads seem to be giving the institution a try, but one may surmise that one of the underlying reasons for absconding is that lads get fed up because they feel that they are not getting any benefit from their time at Dover.

The lower intelligence groups tend to be more successful at absconding than the A or B streams.

Absconders are in the main drawn from lads committed to borstal for larceny, breaking offences and dishonesty generally, and the ratio of absconders to the total population convicted for similar offences is highest for this group, and lowest for those convicted of taking and driving away only.

Absconders tend to be drawn from those with high Mannheim Wilkins prediction scores, and the leave failures even more so, and the same pattern is shown in their criminal records; in particular leave failures had a great number of previous convictions and almost all had been either to approved school or detention centre.

An appreciable number of absconders had no previous institutional experience and this group was markedly less successful at getting away. A high proportion of leave failures had previous history of absconding, but amongst the absconders previous absconding, though quite common, does not appear to make them any more successful.

More lads registered as C. of E. abscond or attempt to abscond than one might expect, as compared with other denominations.

There does not appear to be any direct connection between the assessment of the home and absconding, which bears out previous comment that absconding seems to be more related to the institutional situation of a lad than anything else.

### Counting the Cost

The extra cost to public funds, directly attributable to absconding during 1961 was of the order of £150. This does not include any estimate of indirect cost which must have been much greater, and no attempt was made to assess the loss of time by already hard pressed senior staff which may well be of greater importance. Attempts cost much less than absconds, and any effort or expense which results in more lads being arrested within the precincts would be worth while.

The sample available for analysis was quite small, but was sufficient for a number of trends to emerge quite clearly. In a number of cases a comparison with a control group of non-absconders would seem to be called for, but it could not be easy to select such a control group, unless it were possible to take out data for the whole institution. Such a project would be much bigger than could be undertaken without a full time research worker and mechanical aids for analysis.

There are a number of points on which information might usefully be collected if the project is to be continued and revised. A much

closer look at the training plan of individual lads, and whether or not they had been turned down for a trade course must be of interest. If the theory that lads abscond because they feel that they are not benefitting from their time here, and as a result are becoming fed up in the broadest sense, is in fact true, then I think we must make some attempt to assess not only the excuse given for any particular abscond, but also the underlying reason. Similarly it will be important to take a closer look at the institutional situation of individual lads. Such assessments can only be made if housemasters are in agreement over the points to be examined and it will therefore be important to have a much greater degree of consultation if progress is to be made along these lines. Such consultation is time consuming, and whether it is worthwhile for such a project is difficult to say, though it should prove an illuminating exercise.

Further research about the actual means of absconding should be fairly easy and this may provide some information which will be of use in preventing the availability of aids and in more speedy arrest when the alarm is given.

It does seem possible that a number of factors might emerge as being predictive either of absconding or stability. It may be possible, with a much larger sample as well as a survey of non-absconders, to find a number of factors which are

either predictive of good or bad risk for absconding given certain institutional conditions. Many of these may be related to the existing Mannheim Wilkins system for it is already known that absconding is correlated with poor prognosis on release, and this seems to have been brought out in the present study. If this can be coupled to an objective assessment of the institutional system then it should be possible to predict bad risks within the institution and make arrangements accordingly.

\*Construction of prediction tables will however require far more exhaustive and elaborate research than can be carried out on a part time basis in one institution, and whether it is really justified when account is taken of the expense

\* NOTE.

Since this was written I have been able to study Chapter IV of the New Zealand report, which deals with this specific point. The New Zealand study covers both prisoners and borstal inmates and a prediction scoring system was derived from six factors found to differentiate absconders from non-absconders, but it turned out that these largely differentiated the men from the boys. The New Zealand study was far more exhaustive than the Dover one, and it is clear that the construction of predictive tables for absconders is going to require detailed research far beyond the scope of a local study.

involved is difficult to say. Absconding does cause great concern to the public in that it is apt to attract comment from the Press, but it will never be possible to prevent it completely in a penal establishment and it may be that the money would be better spent on devising more constructive means of training inmates rather than taking direct preventive measures against absconding which are more likely to accentuate the problem.

Absconding does seem to be concerned with the benefit in the broadest sense that a lad thinks he is getting, even if only unconsciously, and it may be that if we wish to prevent absconding the best way is to try and improve our training methods, and to see that

the intentions of the statutory rules are being implemented, and especially to help the lad to take part in the construction of a specific realisable training plan.

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I have been asked by Mr. Carter to be a cosignatory of this report. It is true that a few of the words are mine. I also had the pleasant duty of working over the proofs of this report and the main work on which it is based. The whole project was a joint one and involved many of us. However, the report is almost entirely Mr. Carter's work and, while I am extremely glad to be associated with it, it should be known beyond question as his work.

A. GOULD.

### EXCERPTA CRIMINOLOGICA

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