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A Synopsis of

X "THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION NEEDS  
OF ILLINOIS LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS"\*

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## Introduction

The criminal justice literature has generally ignored the role of local government officials (LGO's) as criminal justice decision makers. According to the Statutes, local government officials do have a criminal justice role. While that role is not always easily or clearly recognized, their responsibilities for planning, budgeting and the development of policy are fundamental to the administration of justice on the local level. Indeed, it has been asserted that how LGO's fulfill their role directly affects the quality of criminal justice services provided.

This paper highlights the methodology and some of the major findings of a project entitled, "The Criminal Justice Awareness Project." Funds to support this project were obtained from the Crime Prevention Commission, Jacksonville, Illinois and the Illinois Law Enforcement Commission. Determining the nature and extent of the criminal justice information needs of local government officials was one of the research activities.

### Research Questions

In Illinois, criminal justice services are organized, administered and financed largely at the local government level. This, together with the fact local governmental decision makers are, for the most part, laymen with respect to Criminal Justice, poses the questions: Do local government officials have sufficient information to make sound decisions about criminal justice matters? If not, what are their informational needs? Are LGO's interested in the results of criminal justice research and evaluation? and What is the likelihood they will utilize any technical information offered them, including the results of criminal justice evaluation?

### Operational Definitions

Prior to outlining the methodology, note should be made of how some key terms used in the study were operationally defined:

Local government refers to political units known as counties, municipalities, cities, and villages.

Local government officials (LGO's) refers to members of a body of elected representatives (boards, councils, commissions) and appointed chief administrators (city managers, county managers or administrators) who together constitute the governing authority of a local government unit.

Criminal justice refers to the functions and activities of police, courts, probation, parole, and corrections.

Knowledge refers to awareness of a fact, concept, technique, or process that may be gained through experience or instruction. Respondents who said they were familiar with a concept, had observed a process and cited appropriate sources of information were considered more knowledgeable than those who said they were unfamiliar, had not observed and were unable to cite appropriate information sources.

### Research Procedures

This was not an evaluation study per se but it could be considered a formative evaluation, an exploratory first step, since certainly a great deal about the predilections of local government officials was learned.

The major objective of the study was to identify the informational needs of local government officials in Illinois with respect to criminal justice matters. To assess these needs meant in part asking the officials themselves what their needs were and determining what was being done already to reduce these needs. But it also required determining what knowledge base were the officials bringing to criminal justice decision making. This meant, in turn, that to measure their knowledge levels, a base line or standard first had to be specified.

The methodological activities for the study were therefore divided into two phases: Phase One asked, What should they know? and What can they be tested on? Phase Two asked, What do they know?

In attempting to bridge the gap between social science method and practical realities, the political sensitivities involved in doing this kind of research presented some difficult problems. With this in mind, clearly the officials could not be tested on every facet of the field of criminal justice. And the practical limits on specialized knowledge expected of the more often than not part-time local governmental decision maker had to be considered. A body of knowledge had to be narrowed to that conceivably related to their statutory responsibilities for the administration of justice.

The method chosen for delimiting the field was judgment sampling. In a survey of practitioners, the universe of members of three professional criminal justice associations in Illinois were asked, in a mailed

questionnaire, to rate selected concepts, standards, techniques and legislation - in terms of their importance for local government officials to know.

A second judgmental sample - a panel of experts - was used in tandem with the survey of practitioners to help derive a standard. Eight known experts, familiar with administration of justice in the State of Illinois and with Illinois local government, served on the panel. Together they were broadly representative of the professions associated with the criminal justice system and, also, all with a background in local government. They were chosen according to their reputational base and inclusion on national commissions.

The panel was asked to consider the question: What do local government officials need to know in order to make sound decisions about criminal justice matters? An interesting feature of the research was the use at this point of a small group interaction technique known as Nominal Group Process. The technique was used to structure the panel's agenda. Its advantage was it ensured that each expert had an equal opportunity to propose and clarify items in response to the question.

The product of the nominal group process was a plurality of opinion as to what local government officials need to know about criminal justice. Involving experts in the identification of items supplied a legitimating base for the instrument to be taken into the field.

The benchmark or base line that came out of the two judgment samples encompassed four broad areas: concepts, processes, techniques, and laws. Among the top concepts were:

- (1) A system understanding of criminal justice.
- (2) A broader definition of crime climate.
- (3) The concept of due process.

- (4) Mythological assumptions about the system.
- (5) The broad spectrum of antisocial behavior.

The processes identified as important for the officials to know included system-offender transactions and steps in the general planning process. The legal aspects included standards for operating agencies and for facilities and the statutory definition of the criminal justice role of the local government official. The techniques included in the base line related to planning, budgeting, and financing and to utilizing results of criminal justice research and evaluation.

Moving now from getting a base line to doing the field work: A two-stage sampling technique was used in the study. The first stage involved drawing a stratified random sample - stratified on the basis of population - of Illinois local government units. The universe consisted of all 101 counties in the State (Cook County was excluded at the suggestion of the funding agency) and all municipalities having a population of 5,000 or more (excluding those within the bounds of Cook County). The sample, which included fifty (50) municipalities and twenty-six (26) counties, was found to be representative of the State in terms of population of the government jurisdiction and geographic location within the State.

In the second stage, individual members of the government units were chosen. The process for selecting respondents was:

- (a) The chief administrator of the jurisdiction was always chosen.
- (b) Then by random process a member of a criminal justice committee was chosen.
- (c) Last, a member at-large was chosen, again by random process.

Using the results of the judgment samples, an interview guide was prepared, pre-tested and revised. The instrument contained a variety of items, including:

- (1) Demographic characteristics of the officials.
- (2) Criminal justice information already offered.
- (3) Kinds of criminal justice decisions made.
- (4) Persons and agencies consulted in making criminal justice decisions.
- (5) Familiarity with regional planning units.
- (6) Observations of facilities and processes of the criminal justice system.
- (7) Knowledge of legal constraints and requirements.
- (8) Perception of LGO's role in relation to criminal justice.
- (9) Perception of local criminal justice problems.
- (10) Satisfaction with available criminal justice services.
- (11) Attitudes toward intergovernmental cooperation.
- (12) Informational needs and methods for reducing these needs.

Two hundred and four (204) personal interviews were sought. A total of 186 interviews, averaging one hour in length, were obtained with the help of the State and regional law enforcement commissions. This meant a 91 percent response rate. The respondents were found to be representative of the universe in terms of population of their jurisdiction.

#### Findings

##### A. Criminal justice role and activities.

The criminal justice role of local government officials is neither foremost in the minds of the officials nor perceived to be important by many of them. When asked, "As a local government official, what kinds of criminal justice decisions do you make?", forty-three (43) percent of the officials responded they do not make criminal justice decisions. Other

officials reported that they approve recommendations, but added that they regarded this as insignificant. One official commented, "My role amounts to so little, it doesn't really matter."

A number of officials characterized their role in relation to criminal justice as "minimal" or "indirect." Some of these responses reflected a certain concept of agency management. Some local governments assign the responsibility for overseeing specific agencies to committees. In these cases, committee members have a great deal of control over agency policy, practices and resources, while those officials not on the committee have little, if any, say about the agency. The role of the latter may be merely to review the committee's recommendations. In commission forms of government, the responsibility for a given operating agency may be assigned to a single commissioner, with the commission rarely modifying his or her recommendations.

The comment of one official with regard to his role was echoed by several: "I try to be as little involved as possible. I don't believe in infringing on department heads." Since agency-head positions within counties tend to be elective offices, this orientation seems more typical of county than city officials.

It was anticipated that most LGO's would feel they had little to do with the administration of justice. A checklist of activities that LGO's could perform in relation to criminal justice operations was therefore included in the instrument. The activities were: budget preparation, problem identification, goal setting, priority setting, program development, long range planning, short range planning, program evaluation, personnel decisions, seeking grants, and monitoring agencies and programs.

Significantly, the majority of officials reported they did engage



in each activity with the exception of monitoring agencies and programs. Budget preparation was the activity in which the greatest number (85%) of LGO's were involved. Nearly three in four officials engaged in short range planning and seeking grants. Thus it was found that local government officials are more involved in criminal justice planning than most of them realize.

B. Criminal justice decision making.

A series of questions were posed to determine from what agencies and persons local government officials seek information when making criminal justice decisions. The first question asked the officials what specific agencies at any level they consult when making decisions about criminal justice matters. Twenty-eight (28) percent of the officials stated they do not consult any agency when making decisions. Of those who said they did, the majority (62%) mentioned only local agencies. Only a small number of officials said they consult a state or federal agency and, of those, a greater proportion were LGO's of cities, not counties.

The second question asked the officials which persons presently employed by the criminal justice system they consult when making decisions about criminal justice matters. One in eleven LGO's said they do not consult any such person. Over eighty (80) percent of the rest mentioned only local system personnel. Fewer than fourteen percent specified state in addition to local personnel.

The third question in the series asked the officials to identify which persons not employed by the criminal justice system they consult when making criminal justice decisions. Two of three LGO's indicates they did not consult any person outside the system. A higher proportion of county officials (80%) than city officials (59%) so indicated. Of

those reporting they do consult persons outside the system, half consult other local government officials. This suggests that, in many cases, input is sought from merely a "circle of intimates." Only one in ten LGO's identified a former employee of the criminal justice system as someone he or she consults and only one in five indicated they consult citizens. Only eight respondents mentioned consulting persons in the community who have expertise in criminal justice, such as college faculty.

Thus it was found that local government officials tend to seek information for criminal justice decision making from only local agencies and persons.

#### C. Criminal justice planning.

Each region in the State of Illinois is served by a regional criminal justice planning unit. Although the regional support staffs are not the sole source of information, they are a basic source available to all local government officials. They distribute information on funding sources, cooperative agreements, innovative approaches to crime problems and so forth.

To determine whether LGO's are familiar with this source of planning information, the officials were asked to identify the name or number of their regional planning commission and the name of the regional planner. Only twenty-seven (27) percent of the respondents correctly identified their region and only thirty-seven (37) percent correctly identified their planner.

The emergence of criminal justice as a field of study and as a focus of increased attention by the federal government has resulted in the availability of numerous publications related to the administration of justice. Although some of these publications are expensive, some are available without charge. Many contain useful information on planning.

and evaluating criminal justice services.

With this in mind, the officials were asked what specific publications, including government documents, professional magazines, newsletters or journals, they now consult in making decisions about criminal justice matters. Over half (56%) of the officials reported they did not consult any publication. The publications most commonly mentioned by those who did were:

- (a) The Illinois Municipal Review published by the Illinois Municipal League;
- (b) Target published by the International City Management Association;
- (c) Police Chief published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police; and
- (d) The Illinois County and Township Official, published by the Illinois Association of County Officials, Township Officials of Illinois.

Thus it was found that local government officials are relatively unfamiliar with national criminal justice information sources.

According to the responses, the majority of officials were aware of the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. The majority of city officials had heard of the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals but the majority of county officials had not. Only one in nine officials knew of the National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

D. Information needs.

Since access to needed information has much to do with sound decision making, the officials were asked two questions related to their

perception of the availability of criminal justice information. The first asked, "When you are making criminal justice decisions, do you feel you always, usually, seldom or never have the information you need to make sound decisions?" Over sixty (60) percent of the officials responded that they 'usually' have the information they need. However, only one in seven felt they 'always' have the information. City and county officials did not differ on this item. Members of criminal justice committees were slightly more inclined than either chief administrators or members at large to feel they need more information.

The second question asked, "In relation to criminal justice matters at the local government level, what would you say are the principal information needs of local government officials?" The item mentioned most frequently was information on local criminal justice operations, i.e. expenditures, caseloads, crimes solved, etc.. Other items included information on: crime problems in their locale; special criminal justice topics, e.g. juvenile delinquency; new legislation that affects local operations, e.g. the 1976 Illinois Alcoholism and Intoxication Treatment Act; how the criminal justice system is organized and supposed to operate; funding sources; and how similar communities are handling problems and with what results.

#### Implications for Criminal Justice Evaluation

Local government officials are interested in obtaining more information on criminal justice planning. The results of criminal justice evaluation are one type of information they consider useful.

The fact that many have a full time occupation apart from serving as a member of local government plus the fact most are laymen in relation to Criminal Justice, implies that local government officials have neither the

time nor the technical knowledge to digest the quantitative evaluations produced by many evaluators. LGO's want information that is concise and useable.

Since local government officials seek information from other LGO's and from local system personnel, criminal justice evaluators might endeavor to get someone in the "circle of intimates" to present the results of evaluation to them.

In summary, local government officials are interested in the results of criminal justice evaluations but evaluators must develop a different strategy for providing the officials with the information if it is to be used.

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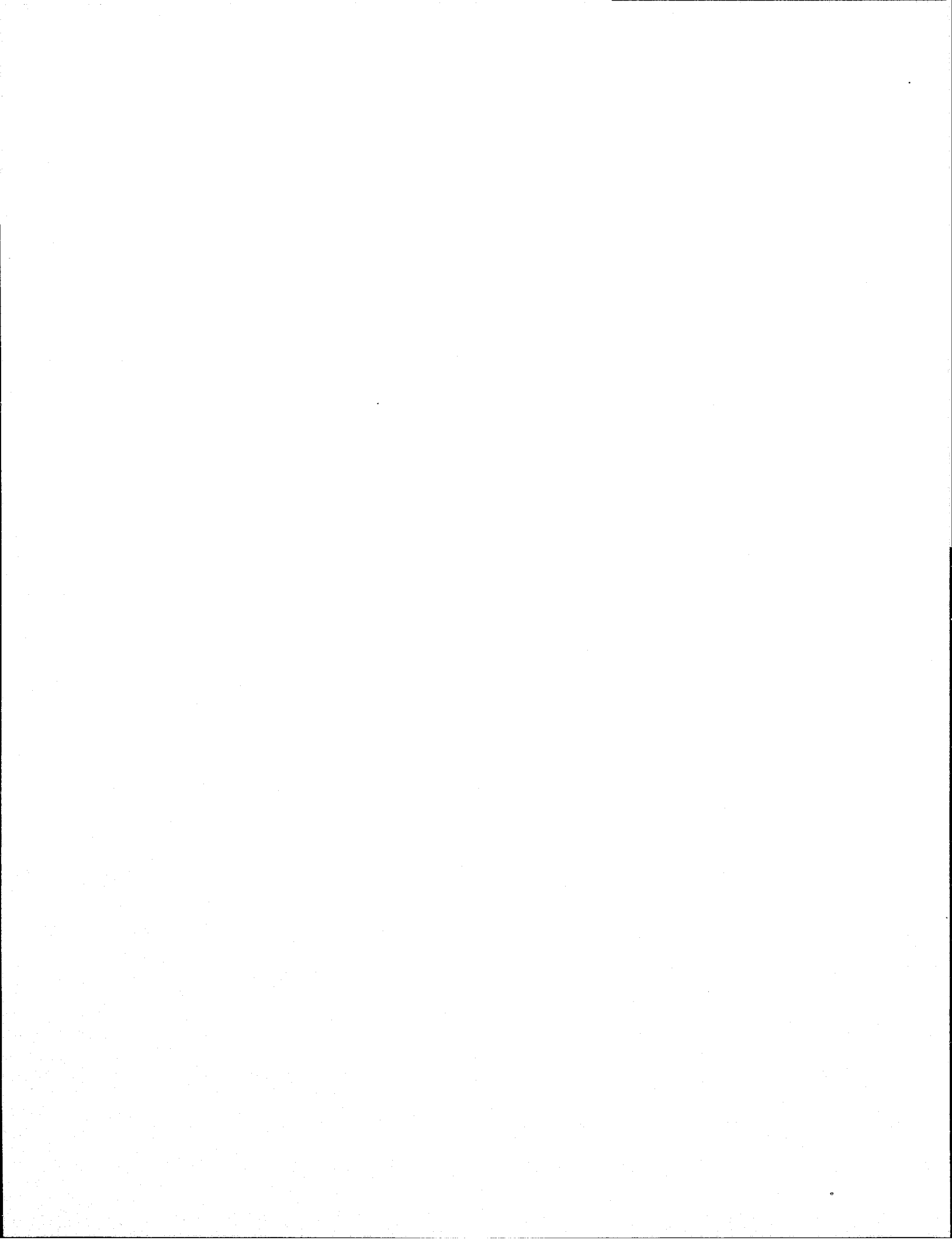
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