ATTITUDES OF PRISON INMATES

STATE OF IOWA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
DIVISION OF ADULT CORRECTIONS

by
Harlan J. Brady and James Boudouris'
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' See Notes at end of this report

STATE OF IOWA

Robert D. Ray, Governor

Dr. Michael V. Reagen
Commissioner, Department of Social Services

Harry Woods
Director, Division of Adult Corrections

Douglas Miller
Chief, Bureau of Administrative Support Services

ABSTRACT

A content analysis was conducted of 30 essays written by in-
mates at the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison. Although
the purposes for writing these essays were mixed and the sample
not completely random, the 184   items   are examples of the
kinds of concerns of these inmates, mainly during 1978. The
responses were tabulated according to three classifications,
and numerous verbatim examples are included.

Of the 184 items, concerns with counseling and release criteria
were most frequently mentioned.

Attitude surveys can be used to gain an understanding of the
social climate in correctional institutions, and can be utilized
in planning and evaluation.

ATTITUDES OF PRISON INMATES

Introduction

Various approaches have been utilized in attempting to measure correctional institutions' "social ecology" or "social climate", (Moos, 1975; Toch, 1977).

Toch addresses "the issue of significant variations in the environmental requirements of different people", and writes, "If we can identify differences in the personal worlds that people need for survival, we can deploy organizational options for the best 'fit'," (op. cit., p. 5).

While various commissions have stressed the need for classification procedures in prisons in order to match inmate needs with institutional resources (President's Commission, 1967; National Advisory Commission, 1973; Commission on Accreditation, 1977) this has been difficult to operationalize. Part of the reason for this may be the frequently mentioned ambiguity as to the goals of corrections, and particularly correctional institutions, and the low priority assigned to the research and evaluation function.

In the most recent manual of correctional standards (Commission, 1977), 43 standards (42 of them termed "essential") deal with "Security and Control", while only 11 essential standards are concerned with "Classification" and only 1 (one) deals with "Research and Evaluation".

Following the rationale of an earlier paper on former addicts' attitudes toward their treatment (Boudouris, 1976-1977), this study approaches the treatment of the prison inmate from the inmate's point of view, that is, his (or her) personal recognition of

his (or her) needs. The assumption here is that the persons who are in the best position to know what their treatment should be like are the persons being "treated", or incarcerated.

This study is the result of the content analysis of essays submitted by 30 inmates[2] to their counselors at the Iowa State Penitentiary, Fort Madison. The essays were in response to a variety of requests. The inmates were asked to write down their concerns, their suggestions on how to reform corrections, how to improve the penitentiary, how to reduce recidivism, or what they might do if they were warden. One inmate submitted a copy of a letter of grievances sent to the Prison Ombudsman for an inmate group.

Because of this heterogeneous set of motivations for writing these essays and the small sample size, this report is only meant to be suggestive of some of the concerns of inmates at Fort Madison. If a more specific questionnaire were designed on the basis of this preliminary information, (or on the basis of Toch's Prison Preference Questionnaire), it would be useful to determine how the results would compare with the present sample.

Description of Sample

Of the 30 inmates, socio-demographic data on only 28 were available.

In terms of ethnicity, the following characterizes this sample: 20 Whites (67%), 7 Blacks (23%), and 1 Hispanic (3%).

The inmates were serving sentences from one year to life, for 37 offenses distributed among the 30 inmates. Among these offenses, 10 (or 27%) were robberies, 7 (or 19%) were homicides, 4 (or 11%) were burglaries, and 4 (or 11%) were aggravated assaults. Other offenses included larceny, drunk driving (third offense), lascivious acts with a minor, carrying a concealed weapon, rape, and extortion.

The mean age of the inmates at the time of their admission was 27.8 years, and at the time of the interview, 32 years.

At the time of their writing of these essays, the inmates had been incarcerated for a mean of 4.2 years; the median was 3 years.

In terms of educational achievement, 4 inmates had completed some college, 7 had a G.E.D. certificate, 6 had graduated from high school, 7 had some high school, and 4 had some junior high school.

The marital status of the inmates was as follows: single, 12 (or 43%); married, 8 (or 29%); and divorced, 8 (or 29%).

Although the sample of 30 inmates was not a random sample from the entire prison population, chi-square tests did not reveal any statistically significant differences when comparing the sample and total population as to ethnicity, offenses for which sentenced, age, level of education, and marital status.

If any bias exists in the sample, it may be related to an exclusion of the more withdrawn or hostile inmate who does not choose to interact with, or communicate with, a counselor.

Presentation of Finding

Table 1 presents a detailed summary of the various concerns expressed by the inmates. The most frequently mentioned issues dealt with counseling and release criteria. Of the 30 inmates, 14 mentioned some aspect of counseling. The table also presents the percentages calculated on the basis of the total of 184 items that were identified, and counseling accounts for 7.6% of these.

Mentioned just as frequently was a concern with "release criteria" (46.7% of the inmates).

Examination of Table 1 reveals the frequencies and proportions that rank the concerns of the inmates.

The "others" category includes a variety of items mentioned only once by inmates.

In order to generalize about the concerns of this sample of inmates, Table 2 was constructed and the particular items from Table 1 have been collapsed into five subgroups: "policies" (or administrative issues) (33%), "interpersonal relations" (24%), rehabilitative programs (21%), "counseling" (19%), and "others" (3%) (which include broader societal issues).

Table 1 - Responses of 30 Inmates

		Inmates (N=30)		Items (N=184)
	N	%		%
Counseling	14	46.7		7.6
Release criteria	14	46.7		7.6
Attitude change/psychiatric treatment (explicit or implicit)	11	36.7		6.0
Inmate accountability/disciplinary procedures	11	36.7		6.0
Administration of the institution/correctional system	10	33.3		5.4
Classification procedures/orientation	9	30.0		4.9
Inmates' plans/contracts	8	26.7		4.3
Vocational training/educational programs	8	26.7		4.3
Inmate pay	8	26.7		4.3
Recreation/leisure activities	7	23.3		3.8
Inmate safety	7	23.3		3.8
Conjugal visits	7	23.3		3.8
Religious activities	6	20.0		3.3
Quality of correctional officers	6	20.0		3.3
Work assignments/prison industries	6	20.0		3.3
Volunteers, self-help groups, community groups	5	16.7		2.7
Goals of corrections/prison	5	16.7		2.7
Visitation procedures	5	16.7		2.7
Living conditions	4	13.3		2.2
Protective custody	4	13.3		2.2
Rehabilitation programs	4	13.3		2.2
Inmate/staff relations	4	13.3		2.2

Table 1 (continued)

		Inmates (N=30)	Items (N=184)
	N	%	%
Parole Board	2	6.7	1.1
Racial tensions (inmates/staff)	2	6.7	1.1
Medical/dental care	2	6.7	1.1
Racial tensions (among inmates)	1	3.3	0.5
Others (treatment according to offense, parole/ work release revocations, length of sentences, use of telephones, psychiatric evaluations, alcholic treatment, overcrowding in dining hall, spending of own money, societal awareness, preventive education, affirmative action, unitization, furloughs)	14	46.7	7.6
Totals	184	---	100.0%

Table 2 - Subgroupings of Responses

	N	Items (N=184) %
Policies: release criteria, administration of institution, inmate pay, goals of corrections, conjugal visits, living conditions, visitation procedures, treatment according to offense, parole/work release revocations, use of telephones, overcrowding in dining hall, spending of own money, affirmative action, unitization, furloughs.	61	33.2
Interpersonal relations: classification procedures, disciplinary procedures, quality of correctional officers, inmate safety, protective custody, inmate/ staff relations, racial tensions (inmates/staff and among inmates).	44	23.9
Rehabilitative programs: recreation, leisure activites, vocational training/educational programs, religious activities, volunteers, self-help groups, community groups, work assignments/prison industries, medical/ dental care.	38	20.7
Counseling: attitude change, psychiatric treatment and evaluation (explict or implicit), inmates' plans or contracts, alcoholic treatment.	35	19.0
Others: societal awareness, preventive education, length of sentences, Parole Board.	6	3.3
Total	184	100.1%

Although their responses may be useful from a descriptive or evaluative point cf view, if prison officials see the input of inmates as credible and worthy of response, the broader conceptual framework conflicts with the detailed tabulation. It suggests that inmates are more concerned with the immediate factors that impinge directly on their day-to-day lives, such as prison policies and procedures and their interpersonal relations, rather than the issues that in reality may be more important to them in the long-run, such as, "rehabilitation programs" or counseling.

Perhaps this can be interpreted as a more "passive" orientation rather than an "active" one. In other words, those things that are done to the inmates may appear to be more important to the inmates than what they might do for themselves, such as, participating in the available rehabilitation and treatment programs.

Table 3 is an attempt to fit these responses into the categories described by Toch (1977).

Toch's categories are as follows:

Support: concerned with counseling, self-improvement, and a need for reciprocity, and two-way communication.

Structure: concerned with clear cut rules, disciplinary procedures, and order.

Table 3 - Classification of Responses (after Toch)

	N	%
Support	25	25.3
Structure	20	20.2
Emotional Feedback	18	18.2
Freedom	10	10.1
Safety	9	9.1
Social Stimulation	9	9.1
Activity	5	5.1
Privacy	3	3.0
Totals	99	100.1%

Emotional Feedback: concerned with warm and responsive relationships, letters and visits, feelings, outside groups and volunteers.

Freedom: concerned with autonomy, being treated as a child and not as a man, harassment and abuses of authority.

Safety: concerned with personal safety, tension, and threats.

Social Stimulation: concerned with opportunities for social interaction and companionship.

Activity: concerned about boredom, understimulation, sources of creativity, and pride.

Privacy: concerned with isolation, peace, quiet, over-crowding, and territoriality.

Contrary to Toch's results, these inmates were less concerned with freedom than was his sample, and more concerned with "support", "structure", and "emotional feedback" (see Table 3).

While the essays can be analysed statistically through these kinds of content analyses and classifications, verbatim responses may give a better flavor of the inmates' experiences than can the statistical tables. The remainder of this report presents some of these responses. The inmates in this sample represented a variety of intellectual levels and verbal skills. At best, the comments came from an inmate who has had articles published

in a popular magazine, and from an attorney. At the other
extreme, some of the responses were only symptomatic of psycho-
logical disorders.

Although Table 2 shows "counseling" to be of lesser importance
when the issues or concerns are grouped, Table 1 shows that the
single most frequently mentioned concern of the inmates is some
aspect of counseling. This is included under "support" in
Table 3. Examples are as follows:

a) "I would take all of the miscellaneous duties and respon-
sibilities of counselors from them, and shift them to female
correctional officers and establish an (8) hour non-interference
counseling program per day. Counselors would be available and
easily accessible to the clients on his respective or their
respective caseload, and every inmate would have to spend so
many hours per month in his counselor's office".

b) "If a counselor runs an inmate up, he should always put
his full potential behind that inmate! He should fight for
that inmate to receive whatever program the counselor agreed
he was ready for or even if the counselor only feels that the
inmate will at least put forth a great effort to stay out, his
full support should be used! A counselor is there to help an
inmate to get ready to leave! He is not there to dominate, or
in any kind of way demand nothing of said inmates!"

c) "I am of the impression that prison counselors are in fact social counselors, in that their designated job or assignment is to show ways that a man can live in cooperation with the present social order.

"But for a man in prison there is only one dominant social order. It is that of the prison, and the methods by which he can one day be free, or survive in prison. So it is obvious that a prison counselor can only serve to instill a nature of cooperation in a man towards the prison structure. This in itself eliminates the potential to get a man to cooperate with the outside social order.

"Since a prison counselor cannot achieve effectiveness other than to make a man cooperate with the prison structure, it can be said that they achieve no real purpose and so there is no need for 'correctional counselors' in prison."

d) "There is no true treatment program - if a man realizes he needs some professional help, there is not any such help for him in here. Counselors who want to get along and have the respect of the men on their caseloads, need to learn how to be honest and straight forward and not make promises or stall the man."

On   occasion, the inmates may sound more concerned with law and order than the average citizen, and just as concerned with justice. The following were classified under "release criteria":

a) "And to tell you the truth, that is scary as hell! Unrehabilitated threats to society doing time, receiving walking papers, and then being sent on their merry way to infiltrate decent law abiding neighborhoods, yours and mine! And if you have children, you should be worried. Who knows what could happen? You want to be stabbed? Or how about robbed, shot, raped, beat up, murdered, killed in a car wreck by a drunk, or how about your daughter kidnapped? Well, neither do I! But the way that our system is set up now, they are leaving our safe streets open for 'more' added crime. How can we be so blind to this? I ask. Doesn't anyone care?"

b) "There seems to be no justice in the system for who gets a parole or who gets work release or sent to the farm. I have seen far too many men that cause trouble get paroled, or whatever, while men who go to school and keep out of trouble 'get no breaks'."

c) "Year after year, inmates are released who have not made slightest attempt to better themselves. They have refused to show stability in their job assignments, refused to be consistent in socially acceptable behavior, refused to better their qualifications through available educational and vocational programs, and yet every year the institutions continue to recommend paroles, work releases, minimum-security transfers and the like, for those who have failed to show a progressive pattern of acceptable behavior and attitude".

The need for change in the prisoners' attitudes is apparent to many:

a) "I would create a psychological, psychiatrical and sociological team that would be available right here within the walls that would have unlimited resources to treat every personality disorder and mental aberration manifested, in staff and inmates alike."

b) "I see a lot of guys tha. just lay back and do nothing with the time they have. I've talked to some of these guys and they've got some crazy idea that they're getting over on the man by not doing anything to better themselves."

c) "The change in an inmate's personality is a change that will also play a major part in his release! His personality upon entering is or was immature °or violent, etc.! Is what sent him here, attitude! So release of some kind is needed at the peak of the change!"

Frequently mentioned by the inmates was a desire to see a better classification system upon entry so that different types of prisoners are separated out. The most elaborate scheme that was proposed was the following:

"A. The ones who do not and will not accept any help.

"B. The ones who think they don't want help, but can be helped and will accept the help if worked with.

"C. Ones who are mentally ill or confused, that really need help
before it's too late.

"D. Ones who are devious and will lie, cheat and con, to gain
their way out of an institution. (But I trust that qualified
people will recognize these types of individuals before it's too
late).

"E. The ones who want to make an effort to change, and to try
and make up for their mistakes, and being sincere."

Another possibility suggested was the following:

"The state should modify its laws to provide for two different
types of criminal institutions. One strictly for incarceration,
and the other for rehabilitation in the true sense. That is, an
institution where the staff would deal mostly in attempting to cause
an inmate's attitude of himself and society to be acceptable.

"The basic set-up of the institution used for punitive measures
would be as follows: A maximum-security facility. No vocational
or educational schools. Inmate jobs provided by 'behind the walls'
industry, kitchen-help, housekeeping, etc. The inmates in this
facility would not be allowed the privilege of parole, work-release,
or minimum-custody. Those assigned to this institution would be
those who violated parole of their first conviction, and those who
had been convicted, when that conviction was not their first conviction.

"The set-up of the institution used for first offenders would be as follows: A medium/maximum facility. A setting with a home-like, or college-dorm like atmosphere, (i.e. bedrooms instead of cages). A realistic and meaningful vocational and educational program. A professional staff that would deal intensely, on a daily basis, with the inmate and his attitude."

A less complex answer to the problem of classification was the following:

"I would put all the trouble-makers in one cellhouse, and the lifers in one cellhouse, and the one's that just want to do their time in one cellhouse. Each cellhouse would have their own yard for recreation."

The problem of inmate accountability and discipline was described in the following ways:

a) "There is no equality in disciplinary reports--there is too many times that 'sentences' or dismissal or reprimands, etc., will vary widely for the same offense. This is a source for a lot of hard feelings, too."

b) "Throw out a lot of this court action on inmates. Afterall, we already got our sentence."

c) "Strict discipline should be set forth and by all means be the ground rule of all operations entirely. Without this, you will be defeating your purpose, and the institution will ultimately become abused, and remain merely a vacation spot for the inmate. Any and all rules, existing or forth coming, shall be obeyed no matter how great or minute. Any violation of any rule will be dealt with harshly. To be dealt with in any of the following: lock-up, loss of job or school, no canteen, no outgoing mail except for legal business only, no in-coming mail if can be warranted, no yard, no visits, no TV or radio, no blankets and/or bedding, or all of the above mentioned combined. Any inmate that complies with all rules and demonstrates a healthy disposition towards all rules and his fellow man will be credited for such, and it be recorded in his file for future reference as to his showing a positive nature while incarcerated."

Attitudes toward the administration of the penitentiary are sampled below:

a) "How many times do inmates receive a 'pat on the shoulder' for a job well done? Rarely! How can he have self-confidence if no one demonstrates recognition of acceptable behavior and attitude? Every successful employer will identify a token sign of appreciation and recognition as a method of achieving increased productivity and dependability. These methods for businesses are necessary to run the operation efficiently and profitability for the owners and/or stock holders. Unfortunately, prisons receive their funds

without having to demonstrate the operation's effectiveness. With no stimulus, there is rarely a mass drive to be ambitious or effective."

b) "Prison operates properly only by external or imposed discipline. In the two years I have been here, there has been a steady erosion of the command ability of the prison security director and his staff. I believe this resulted from a variety of factors, but certainly including a vacuum of leadership, feuding among department heads, and interference from Des Moines in the daily operation of the prison."

c) "This administration has employed so much bullshit (defamation of character, dehumanization, mental, and physical anguish), I am tired, and if this is what you people call rehabilitation, then the administrators at this institution can kiss my black ass."

d) "No way does this institution work hand in hand with its surrounding communities. The system used here is not at fault, it is the people who are in control of this system who are at fault. For some unknown reason the administration here seems to have no regard for human life."

This same inmate goes on to describe his sense of frustration, and concern for his safety:

"Upon your arrival here you complete the orientation period and
are totally unaware of the bullshit that goes down on the yard.
So should you become the victim of this senseless bullshit, just
what do you do? You definitely can't go to the administration
for fear of repercussions and a snitch tag. You can't go to another
inmate for fear of word getting back to the inmates who victimized
you. So what do you do? Live with it, or retaliate and take the
chance of getting caught and facing disciplinary action. Why the
administration allows inmates to run around in gangs under supposed
organizational names is a new one on me. I personally would bring
this to an abrupt halt. But as I mentioned before, the administra-
tion here has no regard for human life."

Conclusion

What do you do? Policy, organizational, and administrative changes
that take place can be expected to impact upon how the social
climate of correctional insititutions is perceived by the residents.
At present, the State Penitentiary at Fort Madison is being
modified structurally in order to implement the concept of "uniti-
zation", and the use of various instruments to measure these
changes has been suggested in this paper.

A survey of inmate attitudes using the U.S. Bureau of Prisons' format
and the 90-item Correctional Institutions Environment Scale (Moos,
op. cit.) has been administered in all of Iowa's seven correctional
institutions, and these data are in the process of being analyzed.
These results are intended to be used for planning and evaluation
purposes.

The planned and potential changes mirror to some extent the con-
cerns and issues raised by the prisoners. A regular channel of
communication between inmates, counselors, and administrators
can be established through the use of attitude surveys and
questionnaires. The response that the correctional system makes
to the concerns that are raised by the inmates is the crucial issue.
If inmates are not listened to and their suggestions not taken
seriously, the opportunity to design a correctional system that
is relevant and effective may be lost.

On the other hand, the experienced professional in corrections
becomes cynical in his contacts with prison-wise inmates whose
main motivation is in getting out. The challenge then becomes
maintaining some balance between a willingness to listen and act,
while at the same time not becoming manipulated and conned.

Notes

[1] Mr. Brady is a counselor at the Iowa State Penitentiary, Fort Madison, Iowa, and Dr. Boudouris is the Correctional Evaluation Program Director, Iowa Division of Adult Corrections, Hoover Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.

[2] Thirty inmates of a total population of 707 (December, 1978) represents a 4.2% sample. These essays were written between April, 1978 and June, 1979, and reflect the conditions and administration at the Iowa State Penitentiary during these times, but may not represent present conditions since most were written during 1978.

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