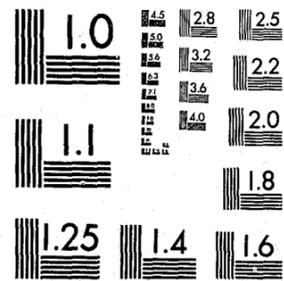


National Criminal Justice Reference Service



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✓Mississippi Department of Corrections

✓SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT

✓Explanation of Various Average Sentence
Lengths

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Systems Development

FEBRUARY 22, 1979

EXPLANATION OF AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTHS

Upon reviewing two of the mini-reports that we have previously submitted, as well as the larger study on armed robbers and the total inmate population now in progress, it has become apparent that we have presented a variety of average sentence lengths, none of which at first glance would appear to be congruous with any other. Naturally this can be confusing.

In the various analyses of non-identical study populations, it is normal for a multiplicity of variables, both internal and external, to influence results, e.g., to produce different average sentence lengths. Some of these variables can be controlled and some cannot. Many cannot even be identified. However, when large differences occur, it is possible for a single root factor to be the primary cause. Such was the case among these studies. A summary follows.

Report No. 5

Title: "A comparison of Total Average Sentence Length of all Offenders, First Offenders and Recidivists Committed to the Mississippi State Penitentiary for 1977 and 1978."

1977 N = 884

1978 N = 810

Approach: Life and death sentences were excluded. This was before we assigned a mathematical value of 50 years to life sentences for the purpose of averaging.

1977 Average Sentence Length All Offenders: 8.1 years

1978 Average Sentence Length All Offenders: 5.6 years

Report No. 6

Title: "An Analysis of Average Length of Sentence vs. Average Length of Incarceration, July-December 1978.

N = 491

Population: State prisoners released from MSP and county jails during the period of July-December 1978.

Approach: Revocated offenders were excluded from the study because information on total time served was not reliable. Crimes were "purified." In other words, offenders with sentences for more than one type of offense were excluded in the interest of purifying analysis. Eleven life sentences, valued at 50 years, were included.

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Excluded): 4.8 years.

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Included): 5.8 years.

Armed Robber and Total Population Study (in progress)

Target Population: Black Armed Robbers under Age 25

N = 283 Lifers = 9

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Excluded): 13.4 years

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Included): 14.5 years.

Total Population: All Active Inmate Records on Computer

N = 2,536 Lifers = 329

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Excluded): 10.7 years.

Average Length of Sentence (Lifers Included): 15.9 years.

Comparison and Explanation

1. Please compare the Total Population Average Length of Sentence, Lifers Excluded, (10.7 years) with the Average Length of Sentence, Lifers Excluded, shown in Report No. 6 (4.8 years). When this significant difference became apparent, it created a considerable amount of concern until the cause was discovered.

The population of Report No. 6 was "purified" by offense.

When this was done, the following percentages were obtained:

Violent Offenders = 22%

Property Offenders = 78%

When offenses are not "purified," and they were not in the

Armed Robber and Total Population Study, the following percentages are obtained:

Violent Offenders = 51%

Property Offenders = 49%

Since violent offenders receive longer sentences, when their proportion goes up, average length of sentence increases.

This same effect serves to explain the difference in average sentence length between Report No. 6 and Report No. 5. The population of Report No. 5 was not "purified" by offense and thus the shorter sentence lengths of Report No. 6 are in no way indicative of a trend in sentencing. However, the longer sentence lengths of the Armed Robber and Total Population Study, some of which were ordered several years ago, may be indicative of a downward trend, but caution should be used because we do not have enough data on past years to establish this as definitive.

END