

THE SELF-DEVELOPMENT GROUP AND RECIDIVISM

Introduction

In January, 1968 a descriptive study of the Self-Development Group at M.C.I., Concord was published by the research division of the Department of Correction.¹ In that study no attempt was made to evaluate the impact of the S.D.G. program in terms of reducing recidivism. It was felt that it was too early to carry out a meaningful evaluation of the program inasmuch as only 15 S.D.G. participants had been released early enough for a 2½ year follow-up period for determining recidivism. The 2½ year follow-up was considered necessary so that the definition of a recidivist² would be consistent with that of a previous recidivism study at M.C.I., Concord. In the Metzner and Weil study a recidivist was defined as any subject who was returned to a correctional institution for thirty days or more within 2½ years of his release from M.C.I., Concord. This definition is used in the present report, which will focus on the impact of the S.D.G. program in reducing recidivism.

Method

The sample was derived from three separate lists of S.D.G. membership - one from the executive director of S.D.G., another from a former coordinator of the program at M.C.I., Concord, and the third from the superintendent of Concord who received it from current members at the institution. Using these three sources it was felt that the most inclusive list of those who had been involved in the S.D.G. program was compiled. For the present analysis, only those who were released before Sept. 1, 1965 were studied. This allowed a 2½ year follow-up period, with a cut-off date of March 1, 1968. Forty subjects fell into this category.

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¹Ann Fuller, "An Analysis of the Self-Development Group at M.C.I., Concord," Mass. Department of Correction, January 10, 1968

²Ralph Metzner and Gunther Weil, "Predicting Recidivism: Base Rates for Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Concord," J. Crim. Law, Criminal. & Pol. Sc. (Sept., 1963)

The basic technique used in this evaluation was to derive the expected recidivism rate for the 40 S.D.G. participants and to compare it with their actual return rate. The expected recidivism rate was arrived at by applying the Base Expectancy Categories for Predicting Recidivism, as derived by Metzner and Weil, to the present sample. The expected recidivism rate is important because it controls - to some extent at least - for a selective factor. For example, it may happen that a large proportion of the lowest recidivism risks had participated in the S.D.G. program. This would probably result in a low recidivism rate for S.D.G. participants. However, it would not be clear whether the low return rate reflected the impact of the program or the type of inmates who were involved in it. The expected recidivism rate controls for the type of inmate and allows the researcher to measure in a more meaningful way the impact of the program.

Limitation

There is one significant limitation that should be stressed. Records of attendance at S.D.G. meetings were not systematic enough to provide a consistent measure of the degree of involvement of each subject in the program. Although it was known that many of these subjects attended a substantial number of S.D.G. meetings, all that was certain about some subjects was that they attended enough meetings to be included on the membership roster. The inconsistent record-keeping precluded the possibility of establishing a minimum number of meetings, which would constitute a meaningful involvement in the S.D.G. program, and studying only those subjects who attended the minimum number of sessions. Further, it also made impossible the comparison of short-term members with long-term ones in order to investigate whether or not the length of time in the program made a difference with respect to recidivism.

Findings

The expected recidivism rate for the S.D.G. participants was 57.9%, while the actual recidivism rate was 60.0%. Since the actual return rate was slightly higher than the expected rate, it appears that the S.D.G. program did not have an impact in reducing recidivism for the first 40 participants who were released to the community. In interpreting this finding, however, it is well to remember that it is based on only 40 subjects, some of whom may have had only a minimal involvement in S.D.G.

Another interesting comparison is between the expected recidivism rate of the S.D.G. participants and the overall return rate of M.C.I., Concord. In the study by Metzner and Weil,³ the recidivism rate for the 311 men released in 1959 was 55.9%. The expected recidivism rate for the S.D.G. participants (57.9%) is somewhat higher than this, indicating that the S.D.G. program was not attracting a high proportion of the good recidivism risks in the institution.

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