

THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY - A SUBJECTIVE CRITIQUE

Having recently received a copy of the proceedings of Training Project number 6, sponsored by the Australian Institute of Criminology, on the subject of "Crime and Delinquency in Urban Areas", I feel obliged to comment on certain misgivings that arose both during and after my attendance at the Training Project.

Having been nominated to attend the Training Project in October 1974, my initial expectations were, that, despite the very wide coverage offered by the topic, some attempt would be made to put into perspective the development of patterns of offending in urban areas, and thereafter, some attempt would be made to determine not only possible causes as far as they could be determined, but also the wide range of methods being utilised to counter crime and "treat" offenders. I felt that the Training Project would be the basis for an exchange of ideas and ideals by people from a wide range of experience and expertise. Most important of all, I expected a free exchange of ideas relating to those attitudes which regardless of indicators to the contrary (such as research) form the basis of much of the policy making undertaken by the bureaucracy and legislature today, e.g. the notion that the concept of deterrence is valid in the discharge of sentences by the Courts. In short, my expectation was that the Training Project would provide a stimulus to my own thinking away from the rather constricting environs of the agency in which I work.

The opening of the Training Project initially raised concern in that it was made clear to all participants that places in the Project, being limited, had been sought after, and as such, attendance at every session was mandatory. The structuring process had begun. Thereafter followed a process of structuring which not only involved the way in which the Project was administered but also the subject matter discussed. It became increasingly clear that the ideal of the multi-disciplinary approach had been subjugated by key individuals whose beliefs held that the "established" definitions of crime and delinquency should prevail. There was, to my thinking, little examination of traditional definitions of crime and delinquency. Further much emphasis was placed on ways of improving the effectiveness of established "agencies of social control", e.g. police, prisons, child welfare, probation and parole departments within the framework of those traditional definitions. The examination of concepts such as that of defensible space as proposed by Oscar Newman, was pre-eminent and while the concept has important ramifications, in my opinion, it should never be considered without relating it to the effects, on patterns of criminality, of the socio-economic deprivation experienced by those populations in areas of high criminality where the concept of defensible space would appear most applicable.

Similarly, the question of what is termed white collar crime, the very name of which sets criminal acts so described as somewhat different, and somewhat less serious than blue collar crime, was discussed so briefly and superficially as to render it of little importance in the total context of the Training Project.

The workshops provided some relief from what quickly became an oppressive intellectual environment within the formal lectures. The workshops were less structured, more disposed towards a wide range of discussion, yet too few in terms of time allotted to them to counter the structuring of the formal lectures. Nevertheless, within my experience the workshops provided a welcome forum for discussion and the expression of ideas by way of formal resolutions.

After the final workshop session, all participants were advised that the numerous resolutions would be considered by a panel consisting of various persons including, I believe, the visiting expert, some consultants, the workshop co-ordinator and the workshop leaders (there may have been others) to review the resolutions with the intention of producing a smaller number of resolutions "representative of those submitted". What eventuated was blatant censoring of all those resolutions which did not complement the "established" viewpoint. Despite objections from some of the participants the resolutions that emerged, as meaningless a set of platitudes as could possibly be devised, were accepted as the findings of the Training Project.

I understand the participants of a subsequent workshop carried their objections to the censoring of resolutions, to the conclusion of separately presenting their resolutions with the request that the Institute view their efforts as a separate report. I await the Institute's publication of that Training Project with the separate report.

The Institute, from the vantage point of its co-ordinating functions, has a pre-eminent role in the field of criminology in Australia. It is more than distressing to see it acting as a "mirror image" to those interest groups, mainly governmental agencies, who lent their support towards the creation of the Institute and who currently sponsor a large number of the participants of the Training Projects. This apparently symbiotic relationship appears to preclude the Institute from providing these "agencies of social control", who generally have demonstrated their ineffectiveness in carrying out their stated tasks, with the basis whereby they can examine the rationale upon which they function and provide the impetus for the change they should all undergo. Currently the Institute appears to be busying itself with tasks such as providing information on completed and ongoing criminology, and related, research in Australia and overseas, actually initiating research and running numerous training projects.

Initiatives designed to challenge or change established attitudes or structures appear very few.

In conclusion, my experience with the Institute of Criminology to date has served merely to reinforce the sense of frustration and intellectual stagnation that derives from working within "agencies of social control", that appear so often, impervious to change.

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COMMUNITY SERVICE ORDERS: A pseudo-alternative to imprisonment.

Newspaper reports in the "West Australian" of January 1976, have outlined this State's proposals for Community service orders with the headlines, "Alternative to Gaol: Courts to get new powers."

It is stated that the new powers will give the courts more flexibility in dealing with offenders. The orders will apply, "instead of imposing gaol sentences, fines and probation penalties".

"Practical advantages" of the new system are said to be,

- a) A greater likelihood of rehabilitating offenders by keeping them in the community and giving them a chance to serve it.
- b) Avoiding unnecessary disruption to family life and loss of employment that inevitably resulted from a prison term.
- c) The requirement for offenders to face the consequences of public disapproval for their conduct.

The report goes on to state three requirements for the scheme's success, viz. the selection of offenders who would respond, their placement in situations in which they are likely to respond best and the provision of adequate supervision.

After this impressive list of benefits and advantages it appears one would have to be very suspicious, indeed near paranoid, to believe that all was not well with this new venture. The face validity of the proposals are incredibly high. It may appear unimportant to some, but I suggest the issues are well worth study as an example of increased punitiveness and desire for control over offenders masquerading as a rehabilitative proposal aimed at the benefit of prisoners and the community. My argument is that we should call a spade a spade