"Pandora's Box"

A Survey of Reactions to a Statewide Data System

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to a Statewide Data System

Introduction

In the middle of May, 1976, in response to a general agreement that the

four codesheets utilized for the statewide data system by the Iowa Bureau of

Correctional Evaluation were in need of revision, I proposed that a letter

should be sent to all persons responsible for completing these forms in order

to elicit their assistance and cooperation. It was felt that the persons

with the most experience in providing the evaluators with data should have

an opportunity to provide their input for the revision of these codesheets.

The codesheets were originally prepared by Dr. Peter Venezia and Roger

Steggerda for the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's evaluation of

community-based corrections in Des Moines and Polk County of the Fifth

Judicial District, (1972-1974). Modifications of the codesheets were sub-

sequently made by Roger Steggerda of Justice Research and these codesheets

(see appendix) continued to be collected from pre-trial ("white", "yellow",*

and "pink/orange" codesheets) and post-conviction ("blue" and "green" code-

sheets) projects throughout Iowa when the Iowa Bureau of Correctional

Evaluation (BCE) was established in October, 1974.

Survey

Because of the amount of paperwork involved in any bureaucratic system,

it was apparent that revised codesheets would be helpful not only to the Bureau

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*The "yellow" codesheet was, until May, 1976, completed by project personnel
 and subsequently transcribed onto a "pink" or "orange" codesheet by BCE staff.
 At that time, the "yellows" were eliminated and the "pink/orange" codesheet
 substituted for completion by project personnel.

of Correctional Evaluation for purposes of research and evaluation, but also to project personnel interested in codesheets that might be more efficient, easier to complete, and comprised of items eliciting data that is accurate, and as much as possible, objective.

A letter was mailed to 179 persons (see appendix) who are in various ways responsible for the completion of the codesheets. It is difficult to quantify the response rate (and the responses) since in some instances one letter represented an individual's comments or suggestions for codesheet revision, and in other instances a single letter represented a composite response from a number of persons responsible for providing data, and forwarded to us by a supervisor as a single response. Therefore, a return of 71 responses represents more than a return rate based on 71 individuals and 179 letters. Persons from all eight judicial districts and involved in the preparation of all four codesheets responded to our request for their input, and their comments generally were positive, constructive, and professional. We wish to express our appreciation to them for taking time to make their criticisms and suggestions known to us.*

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* The title of this summary is taken from a comment from Parole Officer Robert E. Ross in Davenport referring to my request for input.

Data - Collection

The responses and comments on individual items on the four codesheets were categorized into eight kinds of comments, as follows:

A. Innaccurate, "hard to tell", information is not available, self-reports, unreliable.

B. Vague, unclear category or question, need to define, "don't understand".

C. Inadequate coding categories, change wording.

D. Too subjective.

E. Unnecessary, questionable value, should delete, not applicable, irrelevant.

F. Redundant.

G. Item needed, (that is, the person suggested an item(s) that was not noted on the present codesheets.)

H. Too time-consuming.

Then, in order to summarize and analyze these responses or criticisms they were tabulated according to the eight judicial districts, by specific codesheet, and according to the kind of data the particular item refers to.* All the items on these codesheets could be classified into five groups or kinds of data, as follows:

I) "Social-demographic data", including employment history, education, and history of abuse of alcohol and/or drugs;

II) "Arrest data" includes information on the initial arrest, criminal history, rearrests, convictions, etc;

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* Not all of this information is tabulated in this report, but specific tables are available for examination.

III) "cjs status" information refers to the persons' status within the criminal justice system, such as, pre-trial status, post-conviction status, prior correctional experiences, etc.;

IV) "court actions" include items on bail, disposition, adjudication, and sentencing; and

V) "program/project activities: include items dealing with services or activities performed by a project or client/probationer/parolee while the subject was in a particular program.

Table 1 tabulates the kinds of data elicited on the four codesheets. The table points out that the function of the "white" codesheet ("Defendant Characteristics at the Time of Arrest", Form 10274) is primarily to collect information on a person's social-demographic characteristics, their arrest, and their status in the criminal system.

Table 1.   Kinds of Data on BCE Codesheets

| | | Pre-Sentence | | | | Post-Conviction | | | |
| | | Arrest (White Codesheet) | | Pre-Trial (Pink/Orange) | | Entry (Blue) | | Termination (Green) | |
		Items(N)	%	Items(N)	%	Items(N)	%	Items(N)	%
I)	Social-demog.	23	40	4	7	23	58	13	30
II)	Arrest	10	17	8	15	9	23	2	5
III)	Cjs Status	18	31	4	7	4	10	4	9
IV)	Court Actions	7	12	22	41	4	10	-	-
V)	Program Activ.	-	-	16	30	-	-	24	56
	Total Items	58	100%	54	100%	40	100%	43	100%

The "pink" (Pre-Trial Services and Court Outcome Data", form 30274) codesheet's function is to collect information on a person's activities while in a program and what actions were taken by the court.

The "blue" (Client Characteristics Post-Conviction Programs, form 40274) codesheet emphasizes a person's social-demographic characteristics, and where a person has already had a white codesheet completed at the time of pre-trial, there would be considerable duplication of effort.

The "green" (Post-Conviction Program Data", form 50274) codesheet collects information on a person's activities while in a program or under supervision, mainly.

In terms of the total items on each codesheet that were considered satisfactory as presently collected, it appears that the "green" codesheet is most criticized (93% of the items requiring revision), followed by the "blues" (87% requiring revision). Of the "pink" codesheet items, 81% need changes and of the "whites" 53% of the items need some sort of revision, according to the project staffs.

The various criticisms made can be categorized by the above kinds of items on all the codesheets (195 items), and it was found that 77% of all items needed revision. Specifically, 90% of the items dealing with program activities were considered unsatisfactory, 88% of the court-actions items, 79% of the arrest-items, 73% of the items on social-demographic characteristics, and 53% of the cjs-status items were considered in need of some sort of change.

Criticisms of Codesheets

Tables 2 through 5 summarize the kinds of criticisms made of the various types of data on the four codesheets.

"White" Codesheet ("Defendant Characteristics - At Time of Arrest"):

Table 2 summarizes the kinds of criticisms made of the white codesheet by the project staffs, according to the types of data on the codesheet. Comparison of this table with Table 1 shows the extent to which the various types of data are found unsatisfactory by the project personnel. For example, although 17% of the items deal with "arrest" data, 51% of the criticisms focus on arrest data, in particular, problems in category A relating to the inaccuracy of the information.

A possible solution to this particular difficulty might be to collect such information at another point, or only under specific conditions. Rather than include inaccurate data in the data base, it might be better to ask that information on arrests and criminal history be recorded only if the data source is an official document, such as, a rap sheet or a pre-sentence investigation.

Fourteen per cent of the criticisms relate to a need to better define a vague question or coding category.

Table 2. White Codesheet - Kinds of Criticism, by Types of Data

	I. Demg. N	II. Arrest N	III. Status N	IV. Court Action N	Total N	%
A. Inaccurate	10	31 (44%)*	2	' ' '	43	61*
B. Unclear	4	5	' ' '	1	10	14
C. Wording	2	' ' '	1	2	5	7
D. Subjective	1	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	1	1
E. Irrelevant	5	' ' '	3	1	9	13
F. Redundant	' ' '	' ' '	1	' ' '	1	1
G. Needed	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '
H. Time-consuming	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	2	2	3
Total	22 (31%)	36 (51%)	7 (10%)	6 (8%)	71	100%

* All percentages are of the total N = 71

Pink (Orange) Codesheet - ("Pre-Trial Services and Court Outcome Data")

Table 3 summarizes the criticisms of the "pink" (or 'brange") codesheet.

The general criticism that "court actions" are too time-consuming to record is mainly from one judicial district, and this may reflect a need to alter the procedures for collecting this information, rather than the codesheet.

In some pre-trial offices (and in this particular one), the project personnel supply all data on the "white" and "pink" codesheets, whereas in others some of the data is obtained by the BCE staff from court records. It seems that in pre-trial offices with particularly high arrest rates, the BCE staff could be assigned the responsibility of obtaining some of the data for this form.

Also, by clarifying the items and the coding categories, and by modifying these, 32% of the criticisms would be answered.

Table 3. "Pink/Orange" Codesheet - Kinds of Criticism, by Types of Data

	I.Demog.	II.Arrest	III.Status	IV.Court Actions	V.Program Activities	Total	
	N	N	N	N	N	N	%
A. Inaccurate	'''	'''	'''	1	8	9	15*
B. Unclear	'''	'''	'''	7	2	9	15
C. Wording	1	'''	1	7	1	10	17
D. Subjective	'''	'''	'''	'''	'''	'''	'''
E. Irrelevent	1	'''	'''	1	5	7	12
F. Redundant	'''	4	'''	'''	'''	4	7
G. Needed	1	'''	'''	'''	'''	1	2
H. Time-consuming	'''	2	3	15 (25%)	'''	20	32
Total	3 (5%)	6 (10%)	4 (7%)	31 (51%)	16 (27%)	60	100%

*All percentages are of the total N = 60

"Blue" Codesheet - ("Client Characteristics - Post-Conviction Programs")

  The criticisms of the blue codesheet, summarized in Table 4, are similar to those of the white codesheet in their emphasis on the inaccuracy of the arrest data. The same remedy may be offered as in the earlier section, that is, that this data might be collected only if official documents are available.

  Forty-six per cent of the criticisms might be responded to through better coding instructions and through a modification of the items and coding categories.

Table 4. "Blue" Codesheet - Kinds of Criticism, by Types of Data

	I.Deomg.	II.Arrests	III.Status	IV.Court Actions	Total	
	N	N	N	N	N	%
A. Inaccurate	12	37 (24%)	2	2	53	34*
B. Unclear	21	16	4	6	47	29
C. Wording	17	3	2	5	27	17
D. Subjective	2	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	2	1
E. Irrelevant	21	' ' '	3	2	26	15
F. Redundant	4	' ' '	1	' ' '	5	3
G. Needed	1	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	1	1
H. Time-consuming	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '	' ' '
Total	78 (49%)	56 (35%)	12 (7%)	15 (9%)	161	100%

*All Percentages are of the total N = 161

"Green" Codesheet - ("Post-Conviction Program Data")=

Table 5 summarizes the reactions to the "green" codesheet and in terms of the number of specific criticisms (236 items) this appears to be the most unsatisfactory codesheet of the four. Reference to Table 1 indicates that this codesheet's function is to collect data on the program activities and services to the client/probationer/parolee and the information sought is particularly problematic. Project personnel see such data as especially inaccurate, subjective, and of questionable value.

What is needed, in my opinion, is an in-depth study of pre-trial counselors' and probation/parole officers' views as to what objective data can be obtained that will be measures of what programs are doing, for which people, and with what effects?

Table 5. "Green" Codesheet - Kinds of Criticism, by Types of Data

	I.Demog.	II.Arrests	III.Status	IV.Program Activities	Total	
	N	N	N	N	N	%
A. Inaccurate	1	'''	'''	48	49	21*
B. Unclear	9	3	'''	12	24	10
C. Wording	15	7	3	30	55	23
D. Subjective	1	'''	'''	23	24	10
E. Irrelevant	10	'''	1	62 (27%)	73	31
F. Redundant	1	'''	'''	2	3	1
G. Needed	'''	'''	'''	2	2	1
H. Time-consuming	'''	'''	'''	6	6	3
Total	37 (16%)	10 (4%)	4 (2%)	185 (78%)	236	100%

*All Percentages are of the total N = 236

Discussion

For purposes of comparison with Table 1, Table 6 summarizes some typical data collection instruments, using the same classification of "kinds of data" as was used above. It is apparent that the same kinds of data are recorded by various persons for various purposes within the criminal justice system. The need to interface the various data systems is apparent. An integrated criminal justice data system could result in the more efficient use of time by the people who must obtain these items of information. It could be a means toward dealing with the common complaint within any bureaucracy of too much paperwork.

It is my impression that the project staffs are generally aware of and support the need for the research and evaluation that BCE has been mandated to do by Senate Files 482 and 511, (Code 1973 with amendments and Department of Social Services rules). As stated therein, the community-based correctional programs are to be evaluated on the basis of these criteria:

a) community safety;

b) social effectiveness;

c) correctional effectiveness;

d) financial effectiveness;

and e) system impact.

It was with these criteria in mind that the codesheets were developed, before the BCE was established. This revision of the codesheets is expected to be only a temporary or interim revision aimed at dealing with the most serious defects. Not all of the problems can or will be solved at this time, but it does provide an opportunity to review both the details and general issues relating to a statewide data system for community-based corrections.

Table 6. Selected Data Collection Instruments

		U.S. Long-Form Pre-Sentence Inves.		5th J.D. (Polk Co.) Presentence		7th J.D. "Face Sheet" (Statement of Probationer)		5th J.D. (Polk Co.) Pre-trial Investigation		LEAA Off. Based Trans. Stat. (OBTS)	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I)	Socio-Dem.	113 (10 redundant)	76	122	85	40	73	81	57	4	7
II)	Arrests	10 (8 redundant)	7	5	3	5	9	18	13	4	7
III)	Cjs status	4	3	1	1	2	4	13	9	3	6
IV)	Court Act.	12 (2 redundant)	8	9	6	8	15	28	20	37	70
V)	Prog. Activ. & Evaluative Judgments	10	7	7	5	-	-	1	1	5	9
	Total Items	149	101%	144	100%	55	101%	141	100%	53	99%

As reflected in the comments and criticisms from the users of the codesheets, future codesheets and data system should adequately respond to the following issues:

1) Definitional problems = Items should be stated clearly and coding instructions must be understandable to the persons responsible for completing the forms.

2) Accuracy problems = Requests for information should be directed at sources other than self-reports. As much as possible, items should rely on behavioral measures, and not on the coder's subjectivity or guess.

3) Validity of data = Internal and external validity checks should be conducted by BCE staff on a continuous basis in order to assure us that the quality of the data entering the data bank is of high enough degree of validity and reliability upon which to base conclusions, make interpretations, and offer recommendations.

4) Timing problems = A data system should be designed with a minimum of time lag. If only one form were used to cover all possibilities in a client's career, it would reduce the amount of paperwork, but we would not know anything about the person until it was a permanently "closed" case, that is, at the time of his death. If every event were recorded and submitted at the time it happened, there would be an avalanche of forms. The solution to this dilemma is to determine what are the significant events to be input at the crucial decision points.

5) Processing problems = These issues are concerned with such questions as who are the best persons to complete which forms? What data is essential for which uses? These questions can be addressed by focusing on the functions of the data system.

Related to some of the present difficulties of the codesheets and data system is an unstated rationale for collecting a great variety of information. As presently designed, it seems that data are collected in order to correlate a large number of individual attributes with a large number of possible outcomes. The items appear to relate to the production of base expectancy scores, and the evaluation of plea-bargaining and pre-trial point systems, the effectiveness of rehabilitative activities, the utilization of community resources, the evaluation of client legal representation, and other monitoring functions.

The problem is one of developing a data system and accompanying codesheets that is a compromise between collecting basic data on individuals and their passage through the criminal justice system, and an overly ambitious attempt to answer all questions that might occur to a researcher. It seems to me that a data system should collect the basic information on individuals and programs that will reflect trends and major decision points, and also, direct the evaluator to certain areas or topics in need of more detailed analysis.

As examples, all codesheets might contain items necessary for the accurate calculation of base expectancy scores that can then be used by evaluators and decision-makers. But the codesheets should not be designed to produce a specific study on the pre-trial point system. When it is decided that such a study should be done it would be useful to know which persons were interviewed by which pre-trial programs, and the evaluative staff could then go to the appropriate files to extract the detailed information and additional facts needed to produce a report.

The issue remains problematic as to what are the "basic" data elements to be included in the data system. It is a dilemma facing every researcher and evaluator when designing a study. Rather than try to collect data on all questions that might be "interesting" to look at, in the interests of efficiency and the morale of the users/data collectors it might be better to include

only the data that is useful and essential. But as one of the respondents
to the survey points out, this leads to the questions that need to be answered:
"useful" or "essential" or "relevant" to whom? To the governor? To the Iowa
Crime Commission? To the community-based projects and their staffs and
administrators? To the researchers and evaluators? To the State Legislature?

This returns us to the title of this report. Not all of the above questions
and problems are expected to be solved by this first revision of the data system
and codesheets. What is needed to make some progress in the right direction,
however, is a flexibility of the data system and of the users. Revision and
improvement should be an ongoing activity, although not a capricious one.
As certain items are found to be inaccurate, they should be changed or deleted.
As other items are found to be important, they should be added. As items are
found to be useless, they should be dropped and the codesheets shortened.
The goal may be to develop a data system providing information that is "useful"
and "relevant" to different audiences and users at different times.
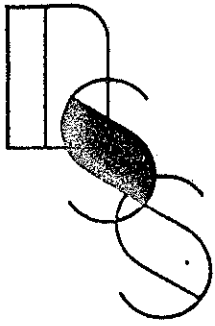
STATE OF IOWA

Department of Social Services

LUCAS STATE OFFICE BUILDING   DES MOINES, IOWA   50319

ROBERT D. RAY
Governor

May   , 1976

KEVIN J. BURNS
Commissioner

Dear

We are presently planning the revision of the enclosed BCE codesheets
that you have been responsible for completing and returning to us. We
are aware of a few of the difficulties that have been experienced in
the past in completing these forms accurately. We are sincerely interested
in enabling all of the people in the field in having some input into the
improvement of these codesheets so that the research and evaluation that
results from the data-collection is valid, useful, and relevant.

Consequently, we would like you to examine the codesheets that you are
responsible for completing and sending to our bureau, and on an item-by-
item basis, consider them in relation to the following questions:

What items need to be added to provide us with some information as to
your project, or work with service to the clients?

What items should be dropped because the information is so inaccurate
or unreliable that it should not be on the codesheet?

What items are not clearly defined and require clarification in the coding
instructions?

How would you improve the codesheets?

Kindly return your comments to us by May   , 1976. Although we cannot
guarantee everyone's comments will result in a change in our data-collection
efforts, we are convinced that your input is necessary for this revision
of the codesheets to be useful and constructive.

Sincerely,

Dr. James Boudouris, Associate Director
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507 - 10th Street
Des Moines, Iowa   50309

JB/bm

Please address all correspondence to "Attention" of appropriate person or unit