

RECIDIVISM

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A Comparison between Recidivists from Problem Families  
and Recidivists Currently in the Tasmanian Prison

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The present study arose as a logical development from the criminological findings of the Tasmanian research on social handicap in which it was found that a third of all the adult males were recidivists, in the sense of their having been three or more times in prison.

The research on social handicap started as a descriptive analysis of sixteen multiproblem families with 110 sub-families and almost 900 members (Davies and Dax, 1974; Dax and Hagger, 1977, 1978; Hagger and Dax, 1977). A quantitative assessment of their social pathology was made by ascertaining the extent of their involvement with the correctional services and the number and varieties of criminal and traffic offences they committed.

The members of these families were often in prison and in fact were sentenced about 250 times as frequently as were the members of the average Tasmanian family, whilst 64 of the 196 adult males had been committed on at least three occasions.

Since this series of multiproblem families supplied a disproportionate number of the recidivist population

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it would seem reasonable to assume that the many other such families in the community would add a comparable number of recidivists to the prison population.

If this were the case it would show that such families produced many of the recurrent offenders. However this would not be enough evidence to demonstrate that recidivists in general tend to have a multiproblem family background.

Consequently the first part of the present enquiry was undertaken to see whether the current Tasmanian prison recidivist population had a similar background to the recidivists known to come from multiproblem families.

(The second paper examines the similarities and differences between the recidivists and the first or single offenders whose history was available from the prison records.)

# 1. Difficulties of Comparison

There were many difficulties in making a close comparison between the recidivists from the multiproblem families investigated in the social handicap study and the recidivists currently in prison. This was because the problem family records had been collected over many years whilst the other group was currently in detention. Therefore the two groups had to be compared and contrasted rather than being able to be statistically related for the following more detailed reasons:

First, the problem family records ceased to be

followed after 1974 and therefore at least three years, and in many cases considerably more, separated the data collected from that applying to the current prison recidivists. Table 1 shows the years in which the 64 problem family recidivist members had their last prison sentences.

Table 1

1951-1960	-	10
1961-1970	-	20
1971-1975	-	34

However the criminal history of their relatives (parents, siblings and children) was recorded up to the end of 1974. Therefore in 10 cases the number of relatives who were committed to prison were counted over a further period of 15-25 years, in 20 this period was from 5-15 years and in 34 instances in the 0-5 years following upon the problem family recidivist member's last conviction. That is, for these findings to be comparable the convictions of the relatives of the present prison recidivists would have to be ascertained proportionately over the next 25 years.

The second difficulty in making comparisons was that the multiproblem families were chosen for a different reason from the prison recidivists. Their selection was for the express purpose of making a descriptive analysis and they were therefore collected from amongst the 30 families most frequently coming to the notice of six different welfare departments in Southern Tasmania. Therefore each family showed a considerable degree of

social pathology, was socially delinquent and tended to be of large size.

Nevertheless although they seemed to be extreme examples many others have since been identified which would have been interchangeable with them.

## 2. Method

Of the 196 adult males belonging to the multiproblem families 64 were studied, all of whom were known to have served three or more terms of imprisonment, the last term being after 1950.

The other group of 60 current recidivists were selected from those persons serving a prison term in 1978 who had previously been imprisoned on three or more occasions.

Twenty eight variables were chosen upon which information was available from both the multiproblem family data and the prison records.

The information from the problem families had been collected by consulting the case-notes and records held by the various welfare departments and by personal interviews with family members. That of the current prisoners was obtained from the prison and probation files and records and collected in strict alphabetical order.

The information obtained was then transferred from the case histories onto data sheets, tabulated and analysed.

## 3. Results

The factors examined were grouped under 5 headings:

3.1 Personal history

3.2 Correctional services history

3.3 Criminal offences

3.4 Demography

3.5 Family records

3.1 Personal history

Table 2

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
1. Ward of state	63% (38/60)	47% (26/55)
2. Intelligence	Dull 55% (33/60)	Dull-average 66% (37/56)
3. Schooling	Primary 60% (36/60) Secondary 30% (18/60)	Primary 17% (10/60) Secondary 83% (50/60)
4. Occupation	Unskilled 97% (58/60) Skilled 3% (2/60)	Unskilled 93% (56/60) Skilled 7% (4/60)
5. Alcoholism	Known history 93% (59/60)	Problem drinkers 43% (26/60)

The discrepancies would seem to be in schooling (3) and alcoholism (5).

In schooling the educational policy changed in 1969, so that it became more difficult to be exempted at an early age, or to avoid attending high school. Of the 60 current recidivists only 5 had more than 3 years secondary education, so the figures would not appear to illustrate meaningful differences, especially if taken in conjunction with the findings for borderline retardation which was approximately the same for both (2). Moreover both groups had low occupational achievements (4).

The alcoholism was differently measured in the two groups. In the problem family histories all those in

which alcohol was mentioned in one or another of the records are included, but in the current recidivists a note was made only of those who were "problem drinkers" and would have been suitable for treatment under the Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Act.

In general it would appear that the recidivists both from the problem families and from the current recidivists tend to come from broken homes (though fewer are institutionalised than previously), to be of borderline low intelligence, with less than average schooling, who follow unskilled and therefore casual employment and who take alcohol to excess.

### 3.2 Correctional services history

Table 3

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
6. Age of 1st conviction		
a. average	14 yrs.	14 yrs.
b. under 12	29% (17/59)	31% (18/38)
7. Children's court		
a. percentage	72% (43/60)	69% (41/59)
b. average appearances	4.0	3.7
8. Correctional homes		
a. percentage	63% (36/60)	46% (26/56)
b. in many homes	many	54% (14/26)
9. Court appearances		
a. total	1032	865
b. average	18.1	14.6
c. highest no.	one 328, two > 100	35
10. Average no. adult court appearances	15	12
11. Charges		
a. total	2611	2011
b. average	43.5	34

Table 3 (cont.)

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
12. Number imprisonments		
a. total	515	358
b. average	8.5	6.4
13. Years of sentence		
a. total	363	269
b. average	6.0	4.6
14. Life sentence	3 life + 20% (12/60) long	8.6% (5/58)
15. Prisons in other states	32% (19/60)	28% (17/60)
16. Psychiatric reports	frequently disturbed	81% (49/60)

The average age of the current recidivists is nearly 3 years less than the age of the problem family recidivist's last conviction (before 1975). In the next three years it is most likely that the current recidivists will in many cases be returned to prison and will be charged with multiple offences and this will tend to equal out the numbers of court appearances (9 and 10), the total charges (11), the total imprisonments (12) and the years of sentence (13).

For example, the members of the problem family recidivists with 10 years or less between their first and last offence had a total of 208 imprisonments in 156 years or 1.3 imprisonments a year, which gives a rough estimate of the rate of reconviction.

The only apparent discrepancy is in the percentage who have been in children's correctional homes (8). These figures are almost identical with those for the wards of state (1). Both probably reflect the change in

policy of the social welfare department over the past 10 years or so in which there has been a considerable movement away from the institutionalization of children.

### 3.3 Criminal offences

Table 4

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
17. Property offences		
a. percentage	100% (63/63)	98% (59/60)
b. average	18	16
18. Sex offences	16% (10/62)	17% (10/60)
19. Violence	56%	58%
20. Motor vehicle stealing		
a. percentage	67% (42/62)	71% (43/60)
b. average number	7	5

The criminal offences are remarkably similar in the two groups at present though they are likely to be higher in the current recidivists in the next 3 years.

### 3.4 Demography

Table 5

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
21. Age (Multiproblem family conviction or present age of current recidivist)		
a. average	29.5	26.7
b. oldest	(5 over 50)	(1 over 70)
22. Number of siblings		
a. 5 or more	90% (54/60)	58% (34/60)
b. most	8/60 had 12 or more	1 had 14 sibs. more

Table 5 (cont.)

Factor	Problem Family	Current Recidivists
23. Position in family		
a. eldest	10% (6/60)	46% (6/13)
b. youngest	13% (8/60)	30% (4/13)
c. middle	77% (46/60)	23% (3/13)
24. Marital status		
a. single	33% (20/64)	75% (45/60)
b. married	40% (24/60)	10% (6/60)
c. separated	27% (16/60)	15% (9/60)
25. Number of children		
a. had children	78% (47/60)	21% (13/60)
b. average/family	3.4	2.4

In comparison to the problem family recidivists those currently in prison may, on the average, have a few more years before their offences diminish and this would tend to make the ages of the last conviction (21) similar.

This difference in age is unlikely to affect the small number of siblings which will be born in the next three years (22). However oral contraceptives have probably diminished the size of families, though the effects are difficult to date or discern in different socio-economic groups. Also the choice of the multiproblem families, as being amongst the best-known to a number of social agencies, increased the probability of them being selected from particularly large families.

The position of the offenders in the family is difficult to interpret. The records of the current recidivists only showed the position of the subject in the family in 13 cases. It is to be noted that the findings have been controversial in other cases (Butherland and Gressy, 1970).

The difference in the marital status of the two groups is unexplained. The changing frequency of de facto relationships would not account for so great a discrepancy, nor would the differences in the ages.

A comparable finding with the difference in marital status is the number of recidivists in the two groups who have had children, those in the problem family group being considerably greater (25). This difference would not seem to be adequately accounted for by the change in social patterns over the last generation or less.

3.5 Family records

Table 6

Factor		Problem Family	Current Recidivists
26.	Parents with criminal record	67% (38/57)	only one found (1/60)
27.	Children with criminal record		
	a. percentage	84% (48/57)	34% (19/55)
	b. average no.	4.2	1.8
28.	Children with prison record	33% (9/27)	none

Here again there is a marked discrepancy between the two groups in the number of parents with a criminal record (26). The figure of less than 2% of parents of the current recidivists having a criminal record would sound an unlikely figure and below the average for the unskilled members of the community; but even if a few had been missed due to the prisoners denying that their parents had been in prison the differences still seem to be important (McCord and McCord, 1958).

The last two categories (27 and 28) probably have little meaning for the reasons noted in the introduction. The prison records of nearly half of all the siblings continued to be recorded for from 5 to 25 years after the last prison sentence of the problem family recidivists.

Similarly the children with a prison record might be convicted long after their fathers' last crime had been committed. Moreover 24 of the multiproblem family recidivists were over the age of 40 and would have children of the age when they might be sent to prison whereas only 3 of the current recidivists were of this age.

#### 4. Comments

Although the criminal records of the problem family and current recidivists are remarkably similar from childhood upwards and their types of offences are very alike there are marked differences in their marital status, the number of children they have produced and their parents' crime records.

It might be surmised on the figures shown that recidivists, whether or not they come from a multiproblem family, have certain generalised characteristics in common.

There is a tendency towards them being of lower than average intelligence, with less schooling, broken homes, following an unskilled occupation and using an excess of alcohol.

Their correctional history will start early and on an average 70% of them will appear in children's courts, generally at the age of 14, although nearly a third will

1

be convicted before the age of 12 and they are likely to appear 4 times.

In adult life they will on the average appear some 15 times in court and have over 40 charges. By the time they are 29 they are likely to have been imprisoned on about 8 occasions with sentences totalling 6 years. Additionally about 30% of them will also have been in prison in other states.

Many of them are psychiatrically disturbed and no less than 81% of the present recidivists in prison have been sent for psychiatric reports at one time or another.

Property offences are general, violence is recorded in over 50% of subjects, one of every six has committed a sex offence and 70% have stolen motor vehicles.

These figures give a general idea of the sort of persons they are and the type of correctional history they will have which is remarkably alike for them all, whether they belong in the series of multiproblem families or to the current recidivists.

On the very slender evidence available it might be supposed that recidivists have many common aspects to their correctional histories whatever may be their social background. Also that broken homes, failure in schooling and unskilled occupation, associated with a lower than average intelligence and the compensatory use of alcohol are common forerunners of eventual recidivism.

The multiproblem family research examines a very large number of factors not included in the present enquiry; because comparable information was unobtainable from the current recidivists a possible similar clustering

of their social pathology could not be investigated.

It might be suggested that one factor which characterises the multiproblem families is that the parents have been in prison more often than others. Or it might be supposed that an important common factor to present day recidivists was their failure to marry and to have children, but neither of these findings may be essential features in recidivism or even in differentiating those with a multiproblem family background from the current recidivists.

Certainly the correctional history and the types of crimes committed are similar enough to show that there are, in general, characteristics common to the majority of recidivists whatever may be the background factors. Also that these background factors occur very commonly within the multiproblem families which can thereby be a useful field for research.

Social change and modifications in the educational, welfare and correctional services have in a generation produced changes which make a comparison between the social background of the present day recidivists and their fathers difficult to sustain. Half of the recidivists from the problem families are now old enough to be the fathers of many of the current recidivists and this may account for some other differences.

This enquiry seems to have shown some common patterns in the criminal history of recidivists and some similar personal characteristics, but there is not enough evidence positively to relate recidivism in general to multiproblem families; considerably more social history would be

necessary.

It is important to see whether first and single offenders show differences from those recidivists and if so this might add some evidence to suggest that the recidivists come from a discrete group with common characteristics. Such an investigation may also assist in the elucidation of the causative factors.

## SUMMARY

The enquiry considered whether the current Tasmanian prison recidivist population had a similar background to recidivists known to come from identified multiproblem families, for it was known that these latter families supplied a disproportionate number of recidivists to the prison population.

Very few differences between the two populations studied were discerned, and they shared many characteristics in common on the 28 variables examined. These similarities included schooling, intelligence, broken homes, occupation, alcohol consumption, correctional history and psychiatric disturbance. Differences were noted in marital status, numbers of children produced and parents' crime records. Even so there was not enough evidence to positively relate recidivism in general to multiproblem families.

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