

In Search of a Yardstick

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THE measurement and evaluation of social work needs and services, which always has been one of the most fascinating and most perplexing of the problems that beset social work practitioners, lately has become even more pressing. The difficulty of finding a satisfactory basis for objective measurement of the intangible factors and the subtle movements that characterize the human situations with which social workers are concerned has not halted a steadily growing insistence that we shall come to grips with these delicate issues.

The profession itself demands this as the only firm basis of advancing insight and proficiency. At the same time many members of the community who in the past have shared our faith in the processes and methods of social work are no longer quite so sure either of the abundance of available resources or of the incontestable value of the services. Along with other less informed citizens, these good friends of social work feel that choices of social objectives must now be made with more careful discrimination, that all the values competing for public support must be reexamined and re-weighed. Social workers, with the rest, are called upon to produce more substantial proof than their own sincere faith as to the extent and pre-eminent importance of the problems they are treating, and the actual value of their particular contribution to community satisfaction and well-being.

It is a sign of health and growth that this challenge is being met with candor, courage, and inventive imagination. One of the significant signs of the times is the extraordinary development of systematic day-to-day statistical reports of the basic facts of social work experience, especially in the public welfare fields. It is easy to overlook the significance of this movement, but the fact is that nothing to compare with it ever has happened before in this country. Nothing, I believe, is more promising for the future of social work and for its sound and fruitful relations with its communities.

But with our rather impatient haste to master this mounting mass of factual data, we face certain inevitable hazards, not the least of them the temptation to expect and demand more impressive results from this material than can possibly be assured at once. We must not anticipate findings that are immediately valid and helpful, must not act as if they were time-tested and universal truths. If these tools of quantitative measurement are to be used with safety and profit, and in a professional spirit, we must be keenly aware of two basic considerations.

First of all we must recognize that quantitative measurements are not automatically dissociated from qualitative judgments. In the very act of defining the factors that are to be recorded and counted, the units of measurement that are to be applied, the tabulations to which they are to be subjected, we are inevitably entangled in the selection of certain objectives, upon which our attention primarily will be centered. If we leap too nimbly from the collection of figures to the application of findings in the or-

ganization and daily operation of social agencies, the nature of these underlying concepts that govern the measurement process becomes much more than a matter of merely academic concern to us, our clients and our communities; for they will determine, at least for a time, the direction our effort shall take and its impact upon the lives of those we serve.

If we set out, for example, to measure the quantitative need of a community for social case work service, it is obvious that we must have accepted in advance, consciously or unconsciously, some specific basis of judgment as to the kinds of service which social case work has to offer, the kinds of human needs that can be fulfilled by its processes, the prerequisite conditions that govern this fulfillment. Without such a frame of reference, this quantity which we term "need of service" has no stable meaning. But when we do set up such a framework of definitions and when we organize our operations on the basis of facts related to these definitions, we have then determined much more than the *quantity* of service required; we have helped to establish, at least for that time and place, the kind and the quality of that service.

The second consideration is closely related to the first. In setting up criteria of need for service we are doing much more than influencing our own professional functions and objectives. We are also helping the community to define its own social objectives and the scope of its wants, not merely with respect to social work standards but in relation to policies and institutions that reach far beyond those limits. The criteria of need for help, or of social fitness and adequacy, which we accept and act upon, will be a significant factor in determining the level of the community's own standards of a tolerable and acceptable minimum of life for its people—economic, social, and cultural.

It is a matter of supreme importance, therefore, that social workers shall scrutinize with the utmost freedom and earnestness every sincere and constructive effort directed to the measurement of social need and of the social services designed to meet that need.

FROM this point of view I propose to examine a recent ambitious and suggestive effort to measure a community's need for social work services, including, primarily, social case work.

The project is reported at length in a recent bulletin "Social Breakdown: A Plan for Measurement and Control" issued by Community Chests and Councils, Inc. It grew out of an admirable survey of the social work organization of a small eastern city, following others of the same sort. Since its main outlines have been covered in *Survey Midmonthly* [see "Stamford Studies Itself," by Bradley Buell, September 1939] I shall summarize them here only briefly.

A procedure is set up for measuring what is called "social breakdown," by reference to certain official records of social behavior and maladjustment in which govern-

mental action has been taken. A series of specific categories of such maladjustment is formulated, and within each category, as well as in all together, an annual rate of social breakdown is computed by dividing the number of families appearing in these official categorical records into the total number of families in the community. By comparison of these rates from year to year, a measure of the relative increase or decrease of social breakdown is afforded. By the same token, this rate also is regarded as a measure of the relative efficiency and sufficiency of the social services directed presumably to the prevention or amelioration of this social breakdown. This point is important. The report expressly declares that one conspicuous aim of the plan is to afford to "taxpayers and contributors" a *"simple method of determining the relationship of social agency services to the prevention and control of social breakdown."*

A significant aspect of the plan is a mechanism for making immediate use of the material derived from the recording and measuring process. There is to be no lost motion in focusing all the social work resources of the community, through a central "case committee," upon the families who find their way into the records, especially those who reappear there. Primary responsibility for helping the family is to be assigned to that agency which, in the judgment of the committee, is best able to meet the basic need of the family; specialized services of other agencies are to be rendered thereafter only with the approval of the primarily responsible agency. From time to time the central committee may transfer families from the primary supervision of one agency to that of another, in accordance with changing problems or circumstances.

WHILE we are concerned, here, with the problem of measurement rather than with treatment, it is easy to discern in this plan an interesting illustration of the principle already suggested, that the method and the criteria of measurement cannot easily be dissociated from the viewpoint that dominates the use to be made of the results and a judgment of their meaning. This is peculiarly true, of course, in a proposal such as this in which the results of a measurement of presumed need are to form the basis, directly and simultaneously, of an appraisal of the adequacy of service. For, if the adequacy of social work agencies is to be appraised, even in part, on the basis of their success in lowering the total need for such service in the community, we must assume that the philosophy and methods of the agencies are applicable to the need being measured, and that they are not being held accountable for results of operations that are not in accordance with their own practice.

Viewed in this light, it is not reassuring to observe the somewhat cavalier fashion in which the interests of clients are to be entrusted to one agency or another, without too serious regard for the initiative or preference of the families affected, for their own sense of need, or for their own desire and capacity to cooperate responsibly in meeting and mastering their own problems. In these days one properly may harbor philosophical doubt as to the soundness in a democratic society of a relationship between a community and its members such as is expressed in this rather one-sided and authoritarian pursuit of the community's ends. Moreover, for our present practical purpose we face the fact that most of our modern social case work agencies have come to regard a totally different basis

of relationship with a family as a prerequisite for the achievement of significant results. If the community's intervention in a family's affairs is not to rest upon the family's responsible acceptance of its own problem, nor upon its freedom to choose alternatives, including the alternative of complete independence, it is clear that the results of such intervention do not reflect or measure the adequacy of social case work or of social case work agencies, but of something else that may be masquerading under that name. For under these circumstances social case work as such has not been allowed to operate at all. Perhaps, under these conditions, the changing index of need or of social breakdown may be related to the efficacy of the police system or of some other agency of external influence or control, but not of social case work.

THE problem presented here finds its roots, perhaps, in the definition of social breakdown with which the whole process of measurement begins. At the beginning of the report, one definition is suggested in the statement that social breakdown occurs "when people are unable to make for themselves the adjustments essential for self-sufficiency." In this statement there is room for an interpretation of need on the basis of the family's own judgment of its own self-sufficiency. The particular problem of social breakdown would appear and be counted when the family felt it and sought help in doing something about it. In that case there would be a direct relation between the measurement of need and the measurement of service, for the definition of need would embody the essential condition of service. But elsewhere in the report it is intimated that social breakdown is somehow identified with "behavior that does not conform to currently accepted concepts of satisfactory social adjustment." Now, "currently accepted concepts of satisfactory social adjustment" lie outside the family. Under such a definition, the problem of social breakdown would appear in the statistical tabulation when the community wanted to do something about it, whether or not the conditions were present that made the problem manageable or corrigible through individual or family case work treatment. In that case, the counting of such need may have no relation to the measurement of social work service. Private social work, at least, is not generally geared to the fulfillment of need so discovered and so defined.

It may be worthwhile to point out another implication of this plan to measure social work service without regard to its relation to actual social work methods and operations. The report makes only fleeting reference to the fact that real social adjustment is more than a one-way process, that it involves the interaction of individual and environment, and that the incidence of social breakdown, in a true sense, is an index of the effectiveness of the community's basic social, economic, and political institutions, as well as of an individual family's self-sufficiency. It is important to remember, however, that to the extent that social case work agencies allow themselves to be measured by the changing rate of social breakdown in the total community, without equally precise measures of the operation of other dynamic forces, they are allowing themselves to be held accountable for community inaction in other directions, and they may be contributing to an intolerable public lethargy toward needed changes in fundamental social conditions.

The validity of this proposal for the quantitative

measurement of the community's needs and its social case work services by the same yardstick depends as largely upon the specific terms of the plan as upon its apparent philosophic base or its application in treatment. The plan itself raises at least two serious problems. The first concerns the nature of the categories that in the last analysis define social breakdown. The second is in the nature of the records upon which the rates of social breakdown are based. Some degree of valid doubt on both these scores is candidly acknowledged in the report. The selection of the particular categories is declared to be tentative and experimental, subject to variation in different communities. It is fair, however, to infer that the categories selected for this particular experiment adequately illustrate the basic principles involved in the plan. Seven categories are described: crime, juvenile delinquency, mental disease, mental deficiency, parental neglect, divorce (including desertion and non-support), and unemployment.

THE crux of the plan lies in the assumption that the extent of extreme manifestations of social maladjustment is a dependable index to the volume of more widespread, though perhaps less acute, social tensions and disorders—"the whole range of social difficulties"—which represent the community's total need for social services as well as the bulk of the problems with which its social agencies deal. The report draws an analogy between these evidences of the terminal outcomes of social maladies, and the deathrates in physical disease. As the changing statistical deathrates register in considerable measure the effectiveness of counteractive medical efforts, so the changing statistical rates of social breakdown may be presumed to register the effectiveness of the counteractive efforts of social agencies.

This assumption warrants further analysis. Obviously, if the analogy holds, it must be based on the fact that each of the categories of extreme trouble is related to the existence of underlying maladies of the same general nature. As the report states: "An increase in deaths due to heart disease . . . is an indication that heart disease is on the increase." Presumably, then, an increase of divorce, or of court action for desertion or non-support, is an indication that marital difficulties in families are increasing in the community.

But how about that assumption? Is it possible, on the basis of experience, or of any other evidence available to us, to say offhand that the divorce rate accurately reflects the prevalence of those various difficulties of marital adjustment, great and small, with which social agencies so frequently are concerned? Is this formal act of separation so usual and characteristic an outcome of these difficulties as to permit a count of divorces to be an accurate index to the need for social case work service in torn and divided families? The least one can say is that further statistical exploration is required to prove any such correlation and that to act immediately upon present data is to run grave risk of jumping to unreliable conclusions.

Even more important from the standpoint of the measurement of social services is the further question: Does the lowering of the divorce rate or the prevention or reduction of the temporary or final separation of man and wife, represent so definite or so dominant an objective in our treatment program that its attainment expresses in substantial measure the success of our efforts? Do we regard such separation always as a sign of social breakdown,

in the sense of a lack of self-sufficiency or of social fitness? May it not sometimes be an evidence, on the contrary, of positive growth in the capacity of people to face the realities that surround them and to work out for themselves a solution that represents for them, and probably for the community, a higher social value than the perpetuation of destructive internal conflict within the family unit?

Then, consider the number of criminal convictions in the community as an index to the extent of the underlying social frictions and frustrations and lacks of discipline, to which the services of social agencies are customarily addressed. To what extent are we prepared to say that these extreme manifestations of social revolt accurately gauge the total problem of irresponsible feeling and impulsive action in the community as a whole? Are social workers willing to accept the reduction in the rate of overt criminality—even among their clients, much less in the community as a whole—as an objective of their effort, so dominant in its importance that its attainment spells the relative adequacy of their services?

The fact is, is it not, that these extreme forms of behavior are so small a part of the total mass of social maladjustment with which we are continually concerned that they constitute what amounts to a separate problem. A rate of social breakdown defined by such categories as these is doubtless useful in measuring and guiding the community's action with respect to these particular problems, but to apply these same rates to the far larger area of less extreme needs is quite a different matter. At least, a flag of caution should be raised.

THE character and quality of the records upon which the plan relies brings up still another question. These are public records only. That is a primary element in the plan. The report itself calls attention to certain so-called "qualifying factors" that lessen the dependability of these records, even as an index of the specific problems that they register. At the head of the list stands the state of the law and of public policy, which govern what cases and how many shall be recorded in the categories. This includes such factors, for example, as the extent of hospital facilities for mental disease and deficiency, which obviously determine the number of official commitments that are made; the attitude and practice of the juvenile court, affecting the kinds and degrees of juvenile delinquency that will command its attention; the policy and practice of the police, in making arrests for different types of offenses. To such qualifying factors as these, one must certainly add the character and quality of the administrative organization to which and by which the records are made.

In view of such facts as these, the report on the social breakdown plan concedes that the records must be subjected to "critical common sense interpretations in the light of known facts about the community." But I find it difficult to share the optimism of the authors of the report that the community will readily find the capacity and courage really to know or to face all these facts about itself and its public authorities, or to apply such knowledge as it has to the interpretation of statistical data gathered routinely from year to year. It is not easy to see how this "common sense reinterpretation" can be placed on any basis sufficiently stable and uniform to make the corrected statistics dependable in any true sense.

Much the same doubt arises about other qualifying factors mentioned in the report, such as basic economic changes

or long term social trends which clearly affect the capacity of individuals in any locality to make the "social adjustments essential for self-sufficiency," as well as affect the standards of social fitness to which they are expected to adjust. These are not quite so elusive of measurement as shifting local policies of administration, for there are some statistical measures of some of these long term trends on a national scale. But are these measures so clear and so unquestionable that they can be applied confidently to the correction of local statistical data which are to be used to measure not only the total need but the adequacy of service from year to year? I personally have grave doubts. And I cannot forget that we are concerned not with measurement of abstract concepts, but of situations in which human beings find needs of service; we are applying these figures not to dreams and hopes, but to the daily services of operating social agencies. If we are going to rely upon statistical devices at all, I want to be sure that they are consistently sound and applicable to the material to which they are applied.

Despite all these questions and doubts—and others that seem less urgent at the moment—it remains true that this project is an interesting illustration of highly valuable current efforts to face the old and troublous problem of quantitative measurement and evaluation in a creative and inventive spirit.

In this somewhat critical comment on it, I have endeav-

ored only to emphasize three conditions that to me seem indispensable for sound progress in this direction:

First, that social workers as professional collaborators in these community studies shall discharge our full responsibility to be alertly aware ourselves, and to help our communities to become aware, of the inescapable relationships between the factors we select for measurement and the bases on which we and the community shall be encouraged to rest our judgment of the substances and quality of the job we are measuring.

Second, that we shall be guided by this responsibility to define with the utmost clarity the needs we set out to appraise, in relation to the functions of the agencies engaged in meeting and preventing these needs.

Third, that the data on which we rely shall be truly and demonstrably representative of the needs and the services to be appraised.

With these essential conditions clearly sustained in the process, we can hope for continual advance toward a more sensitive and appreciative understanding in ourselves of the community's problem in meeting the defects and inadequacies of our common life, and a more refined appreciation by the community of the technical demands and prerequisite conditions of effective social work as an instrument to that end.

This article is drawn from a paper given by Mr. Pray at the 1940 National Conference of Social Work.

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Our Social Geography

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IN the social geography of the nation no two states are alike. We know at a glance that great differences exist, but how wide and deep the divergence, what the origin of this or that phenomenon, and why it is found in a given area and not in another, are questions to which answers are not immediately apparent. In studying this diversity we call in the statistician, akin to the surveyor in his passion for orderly arrangement, and the researcher who, like the geologist, digs deep in his effort to discover the opposing forces of construction and erosion resulting in society as we know it today.

In an attempt to understand better this diversity in the social development of the country as crystallized in the public assistance programs of the forty-eight states, a study involving the methods of statistical research was carried out recently in the New York State Department of Social Welfare. Now, to paraphrase that well-worn witticism of Horace Greeley, I do not say that all Scotchmen are statisticians, but I do say that all statisticians are Scotchmen—at least in the sense that they are universally given to understatement. What appears to the layman looking at the relief legislation in the separate states as a labyrinth, a veritable hodgepodge of legal provisions resulting in public assistance programs in all stages of development, is calmly described by the statistician as evidence of "considerable variation."

To understand the nature of this variation and to discover factors common to the programs of many states, it is necessary to break up the public assistance program into its

component parts. Turning first to general relief, we find differences among the states as to eligibility requirements—particularly in definition of need, establishment of settlement, responsibility of relatives, recovery of funds, and limitations on recovery. Although the terms poor, needy, and indigent often are used, none of the states has an exact definition of need. Some states require residence, others do not; some insist that the relief applicant to be eligible for aid must have established local as well as state residence. The required length of residence varies from state to state and locality to locality.

About two thirds of the states require that legally responsible relatives support the needy person if possible. Recovery of funds is provided for in about half the states, with limitations on recovery in like proportion.

In their provisions for old age assistance, about two thirds of the states (usually those with higher percentages of foreign-born in their population) require citizenship. Almost all states have provisions regarding the maximum value of property or amount of income allowed for eligibility, about half setting a definite maximum and the other half stipulating that property or income must not exceed the amount needed for reasonable subsistence compatible with decency and health. One sixth of the states disqualify applicants for "lack of moral fitness"; more than one third disqualify those receiving or in need of other public assistance; and about half disqualify inmates of public institutions. Virtually all states set maximum old age allowances, varying from \$15 to \$45 per month.