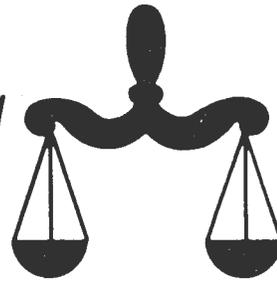


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A Research Agenda for Criminal Justice in Georgia: Consensus Across Agencies*

Robert R. Friedmann
R. Barry Ruback
W.S. Wilson Huang
Georgia State University

Abstract

The Georgia Statistical Analysis Bureau (SAB), a joint effort of Georgia State University and state criminal justice agencies, was established to integrate and analyze criminal justice data. Its research effort is aimed at providing timely, practical information regarding the criminal justice system to policy analysts, the Governor, legislators, other elected officials, and members of the public interested in criminal justice issues. The SAB's first goal was to develop an empirically-based systematic agenda for criminal justice research in Georgia.

To achieve this initial goal, the SAB conducted a mail survey of criminal justice practitioners. Across criminal justice agencies, there was a consensus regarding the research areas that the SAB should address in its initial years. This survey served as a basis for a systematic research agenda defined by the long-term interests of the entire criminal justice community. The research approach and the results reported here are valuable for criminal justice planners, policy makers, and researchers who are interested in making empirically grounded professional decisions.

* The SAB wishes to thank the SAB Sub-Committee on Research, which was chaired by Elaine DeCostanzo (Department of Corrections) and consisted of Sue Aiken (State Board of Pardons and Paroles), Holly Sparrow (Administrative Office of the Courts), Lisa Reid (Criminal Justice Coordinating Council), and Dr. Barry Ruback (Georgia State University). This sub-committee designed the questionnaire and identified the target sample. The SAB thanks the Office of Planning, Evaluation & Statistics at the Georgia Department of Corrections for the generous use of their computing facilities. The SAB also acknowledges the criminal justice officials who took time to answer the questionnaires. This survey was supported by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) SAC-1 funds awarded through the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council for 1990/91.

Background

Policy makers reach better decisions if they rely on empirical data rather than on intuition. Too often policy makers' beliefs do not adequately capture an overall view of government, partially because they have only limited information, partially because they are likely to perceive that information through the biased prism of their own agency, and partially because they have only limited insight into their own decision making processes (Konecni and Ebbesen, 1979). Objective data are likely to go beyond what any one individual knows and are less likely to reflect the biases of any one person.

But even assuming that empirical data are a better basis than intuition for decisions, not all data are useful for policy makers. Much of the information that academics bring to decision makers is of little relevance to them, both because it assesses the effects of nonpolicy factors (i.e., those over which policy makers have no control) and because it measures those effects on variables that policy makers do not consider important. Ruback and Innes (1988) have suggested that the only way researchers can deliver research that is relevant to policy makers is to focus on policy variables and important dependent measures. The judgment of what are policy variables and what dependent measures are important must be made by policy makers themselves. And, ideally, the resulting relevant research would be part of an integrated research agenda rather than a one-shot study.

One way to guarantee that research fits within an overall relevant research agenda is to have policy makers set that agenda. Even more important is that this research agenda be set empirically rather than by fiat. To date, there have been few attempts to shape empirically an agenda for research on criminal justice issues. Even in those few attempts, the resulting agenda was generally driven by political realities and not by research. Perhaps, the lack of an empirically-based research agenda can be explained by the failure to analyze available data. For example, research in the area of social indicators has pointed out the need for better use of existing sophisticated information (Fear, 1978) and the need to be aware of the value statements that social indicators provide at the policy level (Cochran, 1979). Researchers have also recognized that some criminal justice agencies, such as police departments, are (unnecessarily) underinformed about the public's expectations, are overloaded with unanalyzed data, and are not doing enough to produce scientifically acceptable research (Tremblay and Rochon, 1991). Analyzing such available data bases could help provide both an empirically based research agenda and a framework for formulating public policy.

Some of the agenda-setting literature relevant to criminal justice is found in the public administration literature, as in the case of determining policing policies. Beecher et al. (1981) reported that particular agenda issues concerning policing policies were associated with specific municipal power configurations. However, Beecher et al. were referring to the political agenda and not to the research agenda. In other public administration domains of policy

setting, a national survey (Streib and Waugh, 1991) found that county leaders believed meeting rising administrative and policy demands was the biggest challenge for county management. They thus demonstrated how the use of survey research could produce an agenda of important issues. Another example of agenda setting, this one nonempirical, was offered by Menzel et al. (1992) for the role of the county in the federal government system based on a "collective assessment of the literature."

Within criminal justice, much of the agenda-setting efforts for research have concentrated on needs assessment, planning, and program evaluation. However, most of this agenda setting has been on an ad hoc basis, and most of the planning efforts have been program-centered, usually at the local level. For example, Fagan (1987) reported on crime prevention efforts by neighborhood residents' councils, which included crisis intervention, mediation, family support networks, and youth skills development. The key point was that the residents' councils themselves were involved in a continual process of planning, evaluating, and revising the programs.

Other programs have had a wider scope and have been based on inter-agency cooperation, and their setting of a research agenda was directly linked to attempts to achieve concrete objectives. For example, Lindsey and Kurtz (1987) described cooperative service planning efforts between schools and courts, where school-court teams coordinated treatment plans for juvenile delinquents. In the area of comprehensive victim services, Blomberg et al. (1989) reported on efforts to provide planning and systematic evaluations for such services. In the area of mental health services, directions for future research were based on a literature review and intersected with the research priorities or policies already in place, as set by the National Institute of Mental Health (Koss, 1990). Koss's recommendations ranged from the need to tap into hidden violence to prevention efforts directed at high risk groups.

The literature is replete with recommendations for research based only on existing policies or, more often, only on a review of the relevant literature. For example, The National Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (1976) recommended different types of research and development efforts in criminal justice: on technology, on criminal justice organizations, and on new criminal justice problems. Based on the existing literature and on theoretically driven criminal justice assumptions, Ruth (1977) emphasized the importance of developing "system knowledge" as a preferred way to make sense of the agency-specific knowledge regarding police, courts, prisons, and crime causation. In other words, Ruth emphasized the need to examine each criminal justice area not only as a separate entity but also as a part of a system, that is, how it is affected by other areas, and in turn, has an effect on them. For example, arrest rates have an impact on sentencing load and the latter affects prison crowding. Specifically, Ruth recommended national research to improve criminal justice operations, to examine basic criminal

justice concepts, and to study philosophical and theoretical issues in the field.

Existing knowledge in criminal justice, rather than specifically developed priorities for research, has often been used as a basis for developing policy statements (Ewing, 1978). For example, an extensive review of the research on violent crimes and weapons provided a basis for a policy formulation concerning gun control (Wright et al., 1981). Because these priorities were not derived directly from a research agenda, however, it is highly likely that the research efforts were not parsimonious.

In spite of the general reliance on existing knowledge for agenda setting in criminal justice, there have been three notable exceptions. First, Molof (1979) reported the arrival at a research agenda by studying crime correlates. Opinions were gathered through a literature review, two colloquia, a two-stage mail survey of criminal justice employees, and a survey of ten federal agencies. Although the literature review utilized for this study relied heavily on crime correlates and not on previous attempts, if any, to develop a research agenda, the study itself is important because it attempted to define a research path in a systematic way.

The second study (Gettinger, 1984) assessed what leaders of the criminal justice system perceived to be the most important issues they face. The study surveyed attorney generals, police chiefs, chief justices, corrections directors, district attorneys, sheriffs, wardens, public defenders, court administrators, probation and parole directors, and heads of state criminal justice agencies. The survey, which had a relatively high response rate of 61%, found that prison and jail overcrowding was seen as the most important issue.

The third study, part of the National Assessment Program (NAP), reported that increase in work load, staff shortages, and prison overcrowding were the most cared about issues in the 1983, 1986, and 1990 NAP surveys (Webster and McEwen, 1992). The NAP 1990 survey added one more issue to those reported in the earlier surveys, that of funding shortage. Although the Gettinger (1984) and the NAP (Webster and McEwen, 1992) studies were not originally designed to produce a research agenda for criminal justice, they closely approximated an attempt at an agenda setting, as they successfully identified the issues that criminal justice officials considered important.

A question arises whether what officials see as "the most important issue" and what professionals define as an area worthy of further research are the same. It may be that the two notions are not that different. That is, it is probably safe to assume there is a correlation between "what is most important" and what is "most useful to know about," in that if something is important, it is probably also worth studying. The present study is an effort to form a research agenda, in a valid and systematic fashion, based on how criminal justice professionals perceive different criminal justice domains and issues as useful to know about. In short, this study offers the criminal justice professional interested in analysis, planning, policy, and evaluation the first

empirical, systematic approach to assess both (a) what the important issues are in the field, and (b) how useful they are for (further) study.

Introduction

The mission of a Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) is to provide state government with analyses of crime and the criminal justice system in order to facilitate legislative action and planning in the area of criminal justice. Often, however, these goals remain elusive in that the research content is determined by state employees who are subject to political influences. Moreover, results of such in-house research efforts may not receive the wide publicity they deserve.

In most states, with very few exceptions, the SAC is housed in a state-level department (e.g., corrections) or the governor's office. There are also some unique arrangements wherein the SAC is based in a university, as is the case in New Mexico and Alaska and more recently in Georgia and West Virginia. At the Georgia Statistical Analysis Bureau (SAB), a recently established university-based SAC, much of the SAB's efforts during its first year were dedicated to developing a clear understanding of what the SAB should and should not be involved in; promulgating specific rules and bylaws for governing the SAB's actions and decisions; and developing and agreeing on goals, objectives, and procedures for the SAB's operation. We operated on the assumption that this initial systematic and coherent effort would ensure that the SAB would provide quality research in the service of the criminal justice community in Georgia and would enjoy a degree of independence not always maintained by other SACs.

Coordination And Policy Relevant Analysis

The SAB's initial goals were concerned with agency coordination of data and with conducting policy relevant analyses. Three basic lines of inquiry made up the coordination area: (a) The SAB was to survey a broad spectrum of criminal justice practitioners in order to create a comprehensive list of issues that would serve as the basis for the State's research agenda for two years; (b) The agenda was to be followed by a breakdown of available data throughout the system, and (c) The SAB was further to seek inform and educate the criminal justice practitioners, the academic community, and the general public, concerning unanswered policy questions that are of interest to the State.

Policy relevance was an extension of the coordination area in three ways: (a) The SAB was to identify policy relevant issues through an agenda formation process; (b) The SAB was to cross-reference the issue list with available data to determine the areas where study could begin immediately, and (c) The SAB's research was to focus on utilizing available data to describe and quantify the effects of major policy initiatives on individual components of the State's criminal justice system and on the system as a whole. Topics for consideration might include utilization of resources, pre-trial and post-

conviction release practices, sentencing dynamics, and court system functioning.

In an attempt to achieve the first objective in the coordination and policy relevant analysis areas above, the SAB conducted a survey of research content areas among criminal justice practitioners. The survey's design, data collection, analysis techniques, and findings are described in the following pages. The report ends with the apparent consensus regarding the research content areas we need to focus on in the near future. This report allowed the SAB to move to its second objective, tying the issue list of the content areas to available data and then analyzing these data bases. Although it is possible to produce criminal justice research on the basis of ad-hoc needs, we preferred to learn what the criminal justice community identified as issues of concern and then to consolidate these identified issues into a coherent research agenda.

The Georgia SAB Survey

The Questionnaire

The literature on needs assessment, policy setting, and planning does not deal directly with research agenda construction efforts. The little that does exist is almost never grounded in any empirical data but instead relies on the existing literature. The few studies reviewed above (see Gettinger, 1984; Webster and McEwen, 1992) defined the issues that emerged as "important" in criminal justice. The present study goes one specific step further, in that it attempts to identify the issues worthy of further research.

The questionnaire consisted of 26 closed-ended questions asking how useful it would be to investigate various issues in criminal justice. The 26 questions explored the importance for research in several different content areas: Questions 1-6 dealt with "issues related to crime," questions 7-12 dealt with "issues related to the process," questions 13-19 dealt with "issues related to the system," and questions 20-26 dealt with "issues related to the offender" (see Table 1 for a listing of all 26 questions). These questions were answered on a five-point Likert type scale where "1" was "not at all useful" and "5" was "very useful." Question 27 was an open-ended question in which respondents were asked to list any other desired information.

The Sample

The purpose of this survey was to learn from policy makers and mid-level managers in various criminal justice agencies what issues deserve research attention and thus need to be studied further. To achieve this purpose, we sent 522 questionnaires to the following groups: corrections, judiciary, law enforcement and public representatives¹. Of the 522 surveys sent out, 322 (64%) of the questionnaires were returned. Table 2 details the agencies, surveys sent to each, surveys returned, percent returned, and percent returned of total returned.

Table 1

Twenty Six Questions of the Georgia SAB Survey	
Questions 1 - 26: "How useful would it be....."	
ISSUES RELATED TO CRIME	
1)to document the drug crime problem statewide through the entire criminal justice system not just at time of arrest?
2)to investigate the relationship of domestic violence and homicide?
3)to investigate the effect of heavier DUI penalties since 1983 on court processes and corrections?
4)to investigate the similarity of types of crimes committed in rural versus urban communities?
5)to investigate whether there is any effect on juvenile delinquent as well as status offense rate by in-school suspension and truancy intervention programs?
6)to determine the effect on court process and overall performance of increasing criminal caseloads?
ISSUES RELATED TO PROCESS	
7)to be able to follow individual criminals as they move through the criminal justice system (law enforcement to courts to prison to parole)?
8)to measure the backlog of cases at each stage of the criminal justice system?
9)to know the costs (time, salaries, and other resources) required to process a case at each stage of the criminal justice system?
10)	...to know the impact of the criminal justice system on other governmental systems (e.g., civil trials, unemployment, mental health)?
11)	...to know the effects of federal money on the operation of criminal justice agencies in Georgia?
12)	...to know what the sentence and actual punishment are for different types of crimes, for different types of courts, and for different parts of the State?
ISSUES RELATED TO THE SYSTEM	
13)	...to know which alternative works best for what type of offender?
14)	...to know what the impact is on the system of judicial discretion in sentencing?
15)	...to know how, in a time of limited resources, we decide which offenders get help and what kind of help (treatment, support programs) they get?
16)	...to know what relationships exist between the criminal justice community and other parts of society?
17)	...to know which correctional education/vocational programs are meeting the need to provide skilled, employable workers for the '90s?
18)	...to know if drug abuse treatment in a community setting is as effective as in-patient treatment?
19)	...to know why Georgia has such a high incarceration rate?
ISSUES RELATED TO OFFENDERS	
20)	...to profile drug offenders and their involvement with drugs (e.g., sellers vs. users, drugs used, treatment history)?
21)	...to have information about the criminal cycle (i.e. from juvenile through adult) of a particular offender group (e.g., property offenders, sex offenders, female offenders)?
22)	...to know what significant factors make a parolee successful (e.g., family, employment)?
23)	...to know the impact on an offender of fines and restitution obligations?
24)	...to know the reliability of in-prison Disciplinary Reports in predicting the future criminal behavior of an offender?
25)	...to know the impact of probation sentence(s) on an offender (e.g., likelihood of further arrests, technical violations, types of offenders more suited to probation)?
26)	...to know about the mobility of offenders (e.g., types of offenders most likely to travel to other states/countries to commit crimes)?

These items were answered on a scale of 1 to 5, with a higher number meaning greater usefulness

Table 2

Survey Return Rate by Agency				
Agency Surveyed	Surveys Sent	Surveys Returned	Percent Returned	% of Total Returned ⁷
Corrections	112	85	76%	25.6%
Judges	72	30	42%	9.0%
Parole	84	71	85%	21.4%
Dist Attorney	11	9	82%	2.7%
Sheriff	48	26	54%	7.8%
Police	35	18	51%	5.4%
Youth Services	39	19	49%	5.7%
Academics	17	13	77%	3.9%
Priv. Corps.	5	4	80%	1.5%
Co. Comm.	15	5	33%	1.2%
Ga. Bureau of Investigatons	4	4	100%	1.2%
Juvenile Judge	8	7	88%	2.1%
Media	20	9	45%	2.7%
House Rep/ GA St Senate	16	7	44%	2.1%
Other	36	18	50%	5.4%
Not Identified		7		2.1%
Total	522	332	63.6%	

⁷ Percentage points do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

This survey did not randomly sample all criminal justice personnel in Georgia. Rather, we identified policy makers in middle and upper management level positions in criminal justice agencies. These professionals were expected to be best able to determine what are and what ought to be the major concerns of the criminal justice community statewide. The sample was carefully designed using purposive sampling, whereby members of the SAB's research sub-committee and the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council identified the target sample in their respective agencies. Although random sampling may have been preferred, the present technique was used to save time and money, and to ensure the targeting of the middle and upper management level².

Statistical Analysis Techniques

Several statistical procedures were performed on the data. Analysis of weighted means of item responses was employed to rank items. Because of

the oversampling of some groups, the overall means of each item were weighted by group sample size to adjust for their represented percentage in the population³. Factor analysis was used to identify the dimension structure of the 26 item responses. Finally, one-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine possible differences of factor means among the four groups.

Findings

Listed below (using the overall weighted mean ranking) are the top five questions about which the criminal justice community in Georgia was most eager to gain additional information.

Question: How useful would it be to know ...	Overall Weighted Mean
13) ...which alternative works best for what type of offender?	4.55
19) ...why Georgia has such a high incarceration rate?	4.39
22) ...what significant factors make a parolee successful (e.g., family, employment)?	4.27
12) ...what the sentence and actual punishment are for different types of crime, for different types of courts, and for different parts of the State?	4.22
25) ...the impact of probation sentence(s) on an offender (e.g., likelihood of further arrest, technical violation, types of offenders more suited to probation)?	4.21

The criminal justice community was interested in knowing which alternatives work best for what type of offenders, what significant factors make a parolee successful, how sentencing and actual punishment differ, and what the impact of probation is. Also, there was keen interest in learning why there is such a high incarceration rate in Georgia. Interestingly enough, these items were ranked highest across all four groups. Thus, it appears that there is a general consensus across criminal justice agencies about what issues most require further research.

A factor analysis, using an orthogonal varimax rotation, was performed on the 26 items. This analysis yielded four distinct factors that corresponded to the four dimensions of the questionnaire^{4 5}. Factor #1 focused on issues related to the system, Factor #2 identified the dimension of issues related to process, Factor #3 identified issues related to the offender, and Factor #4 identified the dimension of issues related to crime.⁶

Table 3 presents results of one-way analyses of variance on each of the standardized factors among the four groups. Generally, the analysis suggested an overall consensus among the four groups on the factor structure of the questionnaire (see Table 3 for standardized group mean analysis). Most notably, all four groups viewed the system as the most important issue among all four factors. The analysis yielded no significant differences among the four groups on factors 1, 2 and 4 (system, process and crime), but showed

significant differences on the third factor (offender). We conducted Tukey's HSD Test (Sprinthall, 1990) to examine the pattern of group differences of various pairs on the offender factor. On this item the significant results were due to differences between corrections on the one hand and judiciary and public representatives on the other (see Table 3). Considering the small proportion of the explained variance of the offender factor in the factor structure (4.7%) and the relatively small differences involved, the mean differences among the four groups in this factor were probably not too important.

In addition to analyzing the 26 closed-ended questions, we also examined the responses to the open-ended question that sought "other information." Many respondents believed that the 26 questions exhausted the types of information desired in criminal justice. Most of the remaining responses fell within the four criminal justice content areas of the survey. Some responses highlighted specific questions for research, such as the effect of law enforcement consolidation on crime, arrest, and conviction rates or the effect of plea bargaining in assault cases on the likelihood of future assaults. Other responses suggested long-term projects, such as developing a statewide tracking system of career criminals.

Conclusions

The survey included a wide range of questions pertaining to four distinct areas: crime, process, system, and offender. The findings indicated a consensus

Table 3

Factor Means (Standardized Scores)* by Group⁸

Factor	Weighted Means	CORRECTIONS	JUDICIARY	LAW ENFORCEMENT	PUBLIC	Percent of Explained Variance
SYSTEM	4.15	4.27	4.15	4.00	4.17	31.8
PROCESS	3.62	3.57	3.58	3.62	3.72	7.9
OFFENDER	3.61	3.80 ^a	3.46 ^a	3.71 ^{a,b}	3.45 ^a	4.7
CRIME	3.34	3.33	3.16	3.41	3.45	5.3

* Factor score was created by dividing each relevant item by its standard deviation and then summing the items for that factor.

Note: Within a row, means not sharing a common superscript are significantly different ($p < .05$) according to Tukey's HSD Test.

⁸ A reliability test α , yielded the following reliability coefficients for the four factors:
 system = .83 offender = .77, process = .74, and crime = .76.

among criminal justice professionals, as well as representatives of the public, with regard to the criminal justice research agenda: It should focus primarily on issues related to the system, secondarily on process and on offender (which were about equal), and lastly on crime-related issues. The fact that the four groups in the study (corrections, judiciary, law-enforcement, and public representatives) agreed on the ranking of these issues is extremely important, as it suggests respondents believe that problems must be addressed in a coordinated manner by all criminal justice agencies.

Given the consensus about research priorities, the SAB defined and received Board approval for the following issues for its research agenda:

- Profile of sanctions available and distribution of sanctions used.
- Profile of offense type vs. sanction given.
- Profiles of sanctions by offense, geography, budget, and court type.

Based on these findings, the SAB located and identified various criminal justice data bases that were used to address these research issues. In doing this, the SAB attracted state and national attention from criminal justice policy makers and researchers interested in this systematic effort.

The present study proved to be a workable solution to the specific question we asked: What research issues in the Georgia criminal justice system should the SAB investigate during the next few years? This study achieved in a brief and non-costly fashion an empirical base upon which systematic agenda for research was constructed. Thus, it served as a consensus builder as well as a beacon to guide research for a few years to come.

As with any research, however, there is a need to consider the generalizability and impact of this approach. With regard to the first of these issues, whether this strategy can be used in other states, or by other agencies, the answer is certainly in the affirmative provided three conditions are met: (a) the research group has access to all agencies within the criminal justice community; (b) individuals in these agencies are willing to complete the survey because they believe the results will actually affect the research conducted in the future, and (c) the results of the survey are given to the respondents and to their agencies in a timely fashion, both so that they are aware of the findings and so that their comments can be incorporated into the final document.

With regard to the second of these issues, whether, after a research agenda is set, this approach results in substantive changes in the nature of the research conducted and in policy decisions, we do not have an answer as yet. Although researchers believe that empirical work should be the basis for policy decisions, legislators and agency heads are not always convinced that is true. Gaining their trust takes time and effort, an initial step of which is to involve them in the research process from the beginning by asking them what they would like to know. This project took that first step.

Notes

1 "Public representatives" included individuals in the media (policy and legislative reporters), university-based criminal justice departments, private corporations, county commissioners, the Office of Planning and Budget, the Legislative Budget Office, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the Georgia Department of Human Resources, the Georgia General Assembly, and the Georgia Municipal Association. The design of the study, its time frame, and its budget, did not allow a systematic sampling of citizens. "Public representatives" were used to solicit research preferences from other than criminal justice professionals. Because time did not allow for a sample of citizens to be included, this group of "public representatives" became its closest approximation.

2 We relied on existing mailing lists and contacts at the Governor's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. This method assured a rapid turnaround and a high return rate. Due to the disproportional representation of some groups (i.e., corrections), analysis was weighted to reduce possible sample biases.

3 The following weights were assigned to each group respectively: corrections (.464); judiciary (1.805); law enforcement (1.623); and public representatives (1.477).

4 Only loadings of .3 and above were used to identify factor items. An item was used only on the factor on which it had the highest loading.

5 Because of the unequal sample sizes, it was important to measure any possible impact of sample biases in the factor analysis. Therefore, in addition to factor analyzing all four groups together (n=332), we also performed the following independent factor analyses: (a) sampling the corrections group in order to equate its size with that of the other three groups (n=200); (b) adding the group variable to the 26 items and then conducting the factor analysis, and (c) separately analyzing the correction group (n=175) and the other three groups which were merged together (n=150). Because these three additional independent analyses yielded largely the same factor structures as the original analysis, the factor structure derived from the total sample (n=332) was used.

6 Factor 1 ("system") consisted of the following items: 5, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 23, 25. Factor 2 ("process") consisted of the following items: 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12. Factor 3 ("offender") consisted of the following items: 7, 20, 22, 24, 26. Factor 4 ("crime") consisted of the following items: 1, 2, 4, 10, 16, 21.

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