Courtroom Workgroup Characteristics

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Composition of the Courtroom Workgroup

Courtroom work is performed by several groups. These groups are interdependent, perform various functions, and interact in a variety of settings. Judges, prosecutors, and defence attorneys have their own job descriptions and assignments to perform. For instance, prosecutors represent the state in criminal cases; similarly, other participants have their own duties. Various other courtroom actors include clerks, i.e., law clerks or court clerks, police officers, witnesses, and the news media.

Characteristics of Courtroom Groups

A courtroom group can be defined by seven characteristics that its members exhibit while performing the tasks they are expected to do (Siegel & Worrall, 2018). These include displaying influence relationships, exercising authority, having common goals, using multiple working techniques, showing different degrees of stability, and performing a variety of tasks. Judges, defence attorneys, and prosecutors are the core members of these courtroom groups because their frequency of participation in courtroom processes is high. The professional backgrounds of these people are more or less similar, and their perspectives on managing court operations are also often shared. Other courtroom groups also participate, but their frequency of participation is lower than that of the core group. Workgroup members influence one another because they have different areas of knowledge, and the bases of power among these group members also vary.

Goals of Courtroom Workgroups

However, courtroom workgroups have four basic goals: seeking justice, maintaining group cohesion, managing the caseload, and reducing uncertainty. These groups can use certain techniques of interaction to obtain the maximum benefit from a situation. These techniques include negotiations, adversarial proceedings, and decisions made unilaterally (Kuipers, 2010). They must also follow a robust code of ethics and adhere to the law in both letter and spirit. Moreover, the prosecutor plays a vital role in these courtroom workgroups because he or she represents the interests of the state and works to maintain the public good. The prosecutor is required to perform three tasks. One of these tasks is deciding whether or not to start legal proceedings. The prosecutor decides this matter after the completion of preliminary investigations. For this purpose, a prosecutor is required to contact all parties related to a crime, i.e., the suspect, witnesses, and the victim. The prosecutor is also required to maintain active liaison with the police.

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Case Screening and Dismissal

Furthermore, if the criteria for taking a case were more stringent, there would be a high probability that many cases would be dismissed because they lack concrete evidence. As the historical trend shows, many cases are brought to trial with very limited circumstantial evidence but with eyewitness testimony present (Pound, 2018). On the other hand, if the criteria were less stringent, there could be a flood of cases entering the courts. This could cause a lack of proper attention to those cases that require it most. As the characteristics of crimes differ across offences and offenders, there is no single correct sentence for every particular crime. The judge decides a sentence according to the gravity of the offense (Ashworth, 2010). Further, the principle of proportionality is also taken into consideration. The court may follow a two-step method when deciding on a sentence. The first step concerns the objective seriousness of an offence, which means the seriousness of the case, and the second step concerns the personal circumstances that may have led to the crime.

Aggravating and Mitigating Factors in Sentencing

One important point to consider in this regard is that, when determining the sentence, there are aggravating and mitigating factors. The former refers to factors that may increase a sentence, while the latter refers to factors that may reduce it (Schmalleger et al., 2014). One of the essential concepts of society is punishment. It is imposed to correct the behaviour of those who deviate from the normal standards set by society. These forms of punishment include retribution, under which the offender suffers in proportion to the harm caused to the victim. Secondly, deterrence is another form of punishment that is inflicted to discourage criminal conduct.

Case Backlogs and Court Efficiency

The backlog of cases in the legal system creates various hindrances to the efficient and smooth functioning of the courts. There may be various reasons and procedures that cause an increase in the backlog of cases, such as complexities in the legal system, time-consuming processes, and issues that may arise in the pretrial phase. Whatever the reason may be, these backlogs have consequences. The most negative consequence is the delay in justice caused by this issue. However, effective case-management systems, the establishment of specialized tribunals, improvements in court administration, and, finally, an increase in the number of judges can help reduce these backlogs and curb their negative consequences. These measures are interlinked and must be considered collectively to regulate the whole system.

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