American Jails:

Raising the Research Profile

By Jeanne B. Stinchcomb and Susan W. McCampbell

Throughout the U.S., jails outnumber prisons nearly 2-to-1. However, considerably less is known about the nation’s 3,365 jails \(^1\) than its 1,668 prisons, \(^2\) largely because the vast majority of correctional research has been directed toward prisons. This general indifference has resulted in American jails being described as the “least studied of all correctional institutions.” \(^3\) Prisons have been — and remain — the predominate focus of corrections-related empirical analysis. For example, there were 41 prison-based projects funded by the National Institute of Justice between 1993 and 1999, and only five targeting jails. \(^4\)

Although a relatively substantial body of literature on prison issues exists (ranging from geriatric inmates to prison gangs), comparatively little is known about systematic issues facing jails across the country — and research on prisons cannot be extrapolated to jails. Because of their pretrial responsibilities, shorter sentences, felon/misdemeanant combinations and higher turnover rates, jails are unique entities. Even basic demographic statistics can become misleading when applied to jails. \(^5\) For example, population figures do not take into account the fact that in any given year, the jail population turns over many more times than its prison counterpart. Annually, there are almost 30 times as many admissions to local jails as new court commitments to state and federal prisons. \(^6\) This turnover generates issues that are fundamentally different than those found in prisons, “particularly in the areas of suicide, mental illness and medical procedures.” \(^7\)

### Jail Research and Public Policy

Throughout the literature, the absence of contributions from empirical research to the correctional policymaking process is frequently noted. \(^8\) Perhaps nowhere is this deficit more prevalent than in the arena of local jails. To the extent that policymaking is enlightened by research contributions, it is primarily prisons that are the focus of inquiry. Studies of the impact of presumptive sentencing guidelines, mandatory minimum statutes, three-strikes initiatives, reentry programming and the like have concentrated on state correctional facilities, \(^9\) even though considerably more offenders are convicted for petty crimes that are processed through local correctional systems. Since these sentences are shorter than prison terms, jail inmates return to the surrounding neighborhoods substantially more often than their prison counterparts. As a result, public policies guiding the operational practices of local jails have a more immediate impact on local communities than those pertaining to state prisons.

### Nature and Functions Of Local Jails

Jails represent the oldest and most neglected component of the justice system. \(^10\) Moreover, they incarcerate a diverse population that represents felons as well as misdemeanants and convicted offenders as well as pretrial suspects. Functionally, they do everything from booking new arrestees to readmitting probation, parole and bail/bond violators. As a result, jails struggle with unclear and continually changing missions, wide-ranging functions, diverse populations and ambiguous expectations. With thousands of such facilities spread throughout the country, it is not surprising that local jails have not been the subject of study with nearly the frequency of their higher-profile, more uniform state prison counterparts.

### BJA Jail Issues Identification Project

Given the lack of research on today’s jails, combined with the complexities of their multiple responsibilities, the question is how to begin to identify the most significant contemporary challenges that local jails confront, along with the public policy implications they present. From the perspective of jail leaders throughout the country, a recent project supported by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) has begun to provide some answers by identifying the most pressing issues for jails in an effort to prepare a valid foundation for establishing future jail-related funding priorities. \(^11\)

**Project methodology.** In order to prioritize the widespread challenges confronting American jails, two national focus groups (one in the East and one in the West) were convened in 2007, bringing together 45 sheriffs and jail administrators from throughout the country. Assuring balanced geographic representation and diversity in terms of jail size, participants were selected from recommendations provided by professional organizations and federal government agencies. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the overall composition of the groups generally reflects the proportionate geographic distribution of jails throughout the country, as well as the size of their facilities (based on...
number of beds, with some overrepresentation in the 1,000 to 1,999 range and a corresponding underrepresentation in the greater than 2,000 category.\textsuperscript{12}

To achieve the targeted outcome of providing specific, prioritized information to BJA, a detailed literature review and environmental scan were prepared, focusing on five topical areas that preliminary investigation indicated to be of primary interest. These included demographic projections and crime trends, work force issues, inmate management, special populations, and technology. As a result of this research, five “white papers” were developed and distributed to focus group participants in order to provide relevant background information and stimulate thinking in advance of the meetings. Each of the two focus group sessions began with an overview of white paper highlights. Participants were then divided into small groups (according to the size of the jail they represented) for further discussion and development of jail challenges and priorities.

**Research limitations.** It is important to note that the outcomes reported from this project are based on details obtained from qualitative discussions rather than quantitative calculations. Thus, they do not reflect the level of precise quantification or highly structured responses that can be produced by survey research. What subjective methods such as focus groups lack in structure and precision, however, they compensate for in deeper and more robust insights. Nevertheless, findings reported herein should be viewed more as exploratory and descriptive than explanatory and definitive.

**Project findings.** According to project focus groups, the priorities for jails revolve around the pressures of providing adequate inmate medical care and mental health services with inadequate resources. Following this primary concern are work force issues ranging from recruitment and retention difficulties to succession planning, leadership development and staff training. In fact, work force issues are of particular importance when considering that even the most progressive initiatives designed to address operational priorities cannot be undertaken effectively without qualified staff. At the tertiary level, reentry initiatives, security threat groups and technology issues dominated discussions.

A strong underlying current focused on the challenges of small (mostly rural) jails, which are eagerly seeking help in the form of best practices, evidence-based approaches and collaborative networking opportunities. Regardless of the jail’s size, however, there was a concern expressed by virtually all representatives that a concerted effort is needed to educate the community and elected officials to bring jail-related issues to the forefront of the public policymaking agenda.\textsuperscript{13} Otherwise, jails are destined to continue to struggle as the underfunded resource for responding to community problems ranging from inadequate medical care to insufficient mental health treatment. This “mission creep” for jails allows community-based organizations and public agencies to avoid their responsibility for handling the toughest cases and costliest clients. As was initially noted more than 20 years ago, jails have become the point of last resort for unsolved community problems — “the only place left to ‘put’ them and the only institution that cannot say ‘no.’”\textsuperscript{14}

**Conclusions and Follow-up**

Today’s local correctional administrators face the formidable challenge of addressing the issues identified as priorities by this project — along with clarifying ambiguous goals, establishing collaborative partnerships, addressing ongoing operational challenges, evaluating overall effectiveness, and bringing their facilities into the 21st century with limited resources. At the same time, administrators need to ensure that jails are not disregarded in the public policymaking process. In order to advance their efforts, phase 2 of this project took place in November 2007, at which time a subgroup of 15 phase 1 participants was assembled to “drill down” further into identified issues and provide BJA with the essential elements that are needed to issue requests for proposals related to potential future funding initiatives. For example, this follow-up group has been asked to:

- Develop a detailed statement of the problem to be addressed;
- Identify supporting data sources;
- Describe anticipated community benefits;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percent of Jails Nationally</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Participant Composition Proportionate To Geographic Distribution of Jails

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Jails Beds</th>
<th>Percent of Jails Nationally</th>
<th>Percent of Inmates Nationally</th>
<th>Percent of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50 – 99</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 – 249</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 – 499</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 – 999</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 – 1,499</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>22.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,500 – 1,999</td>
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<td>&lt;2,000</td>
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<td>30.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2. Participant Composition Proportionate to Jail Size
• Determine key stakeholders;
• Identify relevant outcome measures; and
• Determine eligibility considerations.

To what extent results will definitively guide future BJA funding initiatives remains to be seen. In the meantime, despite their limited visibility and extensive diversity, jails continue to significantly affect community health and safety. Likewise, local policies regarding issues ranging from the treatment of those with mental illness to the availability of public health services have an impact on jails. Moreover, this relationship is reciprocal; the problems with which jails are ill-equipped to cope will eventually reverberate in the community. Thus, whenever jails fail to contain communicable diseases, reduce substance abuse, treat the mentally ill or otherwise productively intervene into the challenges regularly deposited on their doorsteps, communities forfeit an opportunity to make a positive impact on the social problems affecting their quality of life.

Authors’ Note: Beyond the substantive issues described in this article, focus group feedback clearly indicates that jails are searching for procedural help in the form of guidelines, models, best practices, evidence-based approaches and, particularly, collaborative networking opportunities. To build on the research detailed above, BJA has awarded a grant to the Center for Innovative Public Policies Inc. to work with jail leaders to identify promising practices for recruiting, retaining and developing the 21st century jail workforce.

ENDNOTES


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