

# The National Jail Workforce Survey:

# Methodological Challenges

By Jeanne B. Stinchcomb and Leslie Leip

As correctional research has evolved, it has primarily focused on inmates and their adjustment to prison life. Few studies have explored issues related to the staff who supervise and manage those behind bars. Fewer yet have investigated the challenges faced by staff who work in local jails, although it has been acknowledged that the differences between jails and prisons may well generate a “unique work environment.”<sup>1</sup> Of the limited research that does address jail employees, the 2008 National Jail Workforce Survey (NJWS) is unprecedented. Nationwide in scope, it encompasses both operational and administrative personnel in small, medium and large jails.

With funding provided by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the NJWS was undertaken in an effort to improve staff recruitment, retention and leadership development by providing jail administrators with evidence-based work force insights. Conducted by the Center for Innovative Public Policies, it has generated a wealth of data reflecting the perspectives of both operational and administrative jail personnel. Overall results are described in the final report, *The Future is Now: Recruiting, Retaining, and Developing the 21st Century Jail Workforce*, which has not yet been released in published format, but is currently available online.<sup>2</sup> This brief overview describes the basic survey methodology, along with highlights of several key findings.

## Administration Challenges

With some 3,000 jails spread throughout various local jurisdictions across the country,<sup>3</sup> surveying jail employees is a methodological nightmare. In fact, simply identifying accurate, up-to-date locations, addresses and contact information for these thousands of jails is enough to discourage even the most dedicated researchers.

Such daunting challenges undoubtedly account, at least in part, for why jails have been underrepresented in correctional research. But with very limited jail-based workforce research available, and none of it national in scope, it was apparent that these challenges needed to be addressed in order to gather firsthand information targeted toward specific recruitment and retention issues.

While obtaining insights from jail managers undoubtedly would help to address those issues, entry-level line officers likewise represent a valuable source of relevant operational insights. Thus, two survey instruments were developed, which contained a core of identical questions, along with additional items unique to each of the two targeted populations, i.e.:

- **Line staff survey (officers/deputies).** Focused on how they became interested in corrections; what attracted them to the agency where they work; how they were recruited; why they stay on the job (or may be thinking of leaving); their level of job satisfaction and agency commitment; and what they think about various aspects of their job, work environment, future development and agency management.
- **Jail administrators' survey (captain or above).** Focused on information concerning attrition and pending retirements, as well as what jails are doing to develop effective strategies for staff recruitment, retention, and succession planning. Additionally, overlapping items enabled the researchers to compare administrative perceptions of the workplace to those of line staff.

Both instruments were subjected to review and critique by the project's national advisory committee, as well as

onsite (hard copy) and online pre-testing. However, the primary dilemma confronted by the researchers was not related to survey construction, but rather, to its administration.

## Implementation Strategies

Given the unknown thousands of jail personnel to whom the surveys were to be directed, it was apparent that it would be impossible to attempt to obtain specific employee names for sampling purposes. In fact, there was essentially no way to contact them individually. Moreover, the sheer numbers involved made paper-and-pencil administration and manual data coding unmanageable. As a result, the surveys were developed in a manner that would be accessible to jail administrators and line staff on the Internet through SurveyMonkey, a Web-based survey research site. The question then became how to contact these thousands of employees and encourage them to respond.

The answer came in the form of massive preliminary publicity, i.e., inundating agencies with multiple sources of information about the National Jail Workforce Survey. A hard-copy letter and detailed flyer (for facility posting) were sent to all jails on a national list provided by the American Jail Association (AJA), along with approximately 80 additional tribal jails from a list provided by the National Institute of Corrections. The letter described the purpose of the project, how to go online to complete the surveys via SurveyMonkey, and instructions for obtaining hard copies if necessary. More than 1,500 letters and flyers were also sent to jail leaders electronically, using e-mail addresses provided by AJA. Announcements were e-mailed to all state sheriffs' associations, and the project was highlighted in *Sheriff* magazine. In addition, members of the project's

national advisory committee assisted with alerting practitioners about the surveys by circulating information through word-of-mouth, state publications and various electronic listservs.

## Results

As a result of these multifaceted efforts, 2,106 staff members (from 45 states) and 569 administrators (from 48 states) completed usable surveys. For reasons discussed above, however, it is impossible to determine precisely to what extent these numbers represent the total population of either group. Moreover, in order to encourage participation, respondents were assured of anonymity. Thus, beyond geographic location (i.e., state), the only agency-specific identifying items in the surveys were those related to jail size. In that regard, statistical weighting calculations indicate that, compared to national data compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics,<sup>4</sup> the responding populations appear to be approximate to the populations from which they are drawn.

While space does not permit a detailed review of findings, a sampling of several notable results is briefly featured below:

- **Recruitment.** The majority of staff cited a “secure job” (81 percent) and “attractive salary and benefits” (66 percent) as influential reasons for accepting their current job, yet only 36 percent of jail administrators said that offering “competitive salary and benefits” as a recruitment incentive was effective.
- **Retention.** Nine out of 10 jail line staff said that being treated fairly on the job is important to keeping them. But only 74 percent feel treated fairly now, and even fewer (56 percent) think employee grievances are resolved fairly. In contrast, 92 percent of jail administrators believe that their employees are treated fairly, and 90 percent feel that most employee grievances are resolved fairly.
- **Leadership development.** A quarter of jails are facing the retirement of more than 50 percent of their leadership/management team during the

next five years, but only about half of jail administrators reported that their agency is ready to fill vacant management positions quickly as a result of planning ahead.

## Summary and Conclusions

The National Jail Workforce Survey will hopefully begin to propel jail employees closer to the forefront of the correctional research arena. But regardless of its long-term impact, such jail-related research cannot be conducted without overcoming multifaceted challenges. In contrast to the mere 50 state prison systems, there are some 3,000 jails spread in localities throughout the country, presenting challenges ranging from identifying the specific unit of analysis to individually contacting those in the target population and persuading them to respond. When these challenges can be met effectively, jail-related research will begin to make more widespread, substantive contributions to the correctional literature.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Castle, Tammy L. 2008. Satisfied in the jail? Exploring the predictions of job satisfaction among jail officers, *Criminal Justice Review*, 33(1): 48-63.

<sup>2</sup> Stinchcomb, Jeanne B., Susan W. McCampbell and Leslie Leip. 2009. *The Future is Now: Recruiting, Retaining, and Developing the 21st Century Workforce*, Working draft, available at [www.cipp.org/pdf/Developingthe21stCenturyJailWorkforceCopsenttoBJA.pdf](http://www.cipp.org/pdf/Developingthe21stCenturyJailWorkforceCopsenttoBJA.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Sabol, William J. and Todd D. Minton. 2008. Jail inmates at mid-year 2007, *Bureau of Justice Statistics: Bulletin*, (June) p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Stephan, James J. 2001. *Census of jails, 1999*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, (September), available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=486>.

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