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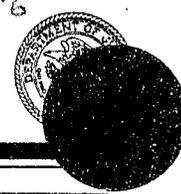
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National Institute of Justice

Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

August 1988

Nation's jail managers assess their problems

by Randall Guynes

Crowding remains the major problem of the Nation's large jails, a condition that has not substantially changed in the past 5 years.¹ Although jail budgets have increased, low salaries for jail personnel, compared with other criminal justice pay scales, continue to pose staff problems.² Space and other facility restrictions and inmate programming also remain operational problems.

This *Research in Action* summarizes results of survey forms completed by jail managers (sheriffs or administrators) in the National Assessment Program (NAP).

Purpose of the study. The National Assessment Program survey attempts to identify key needs and problems of local and State criminal justice practitioners. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) contracted with the Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., to conduct a national survey of approximately 2,500 practitioners from a sample of 375 counties across the Nation. Included were all 175 counties with populations greater than 250,000 and a sample of 200 counties having less than that number.³ Persons receiving surveys in each

sampled county included the police chief of the largest city, sheriff, jail administrator, prosecutor, chief judge, trial court administrator (where applicable), and probation and parole agency heads.

All questionnaires asked respondents to rank the most serious problems facing the criminal justice system. In addition, all questionnaires contained questions on personnel, operations, facilities, and information systems. Jail managers received questionnaires that also focused on the following topics:

- Jail crowding. What are the contributors to jail crowding?
- Staffing. Where are the major staff shortages? What are the operational problems with classification, medical service, programming, scheduling, and management information? What are the practices and needs for contracting with the private sector?

Jail Characteristics. Jail managers completed 268 surveys for a 72 percent return rate, substantially higher than the overall return rate for the survey.⁴

The average jail in this sample employs 50 sworn and 15 civilian employees.⁵

The average budget of \$2.2 million is significantly higher than it was 3 years ago. Only 2 percent of the jail managers reported a drop in budget, and 96 percent reported higher budgets (29 percent have budgets more than 30

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percent higher than their budgets 3 years ago). Slightly over half the jail managers consider their financial resources adequate.

The inmate makeup (Exhibit 1) is predominantly pretrial, presentence, or a combination of the two. Sentenced prisoners include 6 percent who are awaiting transfer to State correctional systems and 9 percent who are serving felony sentences in jails.

Nearly 55 percent of the jail managers report that their jails are filled beyond rated capacity. An additional 13 percent are between 96 percent and 100 percent of rated capacity. Over 38 percent of the jails are under court order with respect to conditions of confinement.

Exhibit 1
Jail population distribution

Reason for incarceration	Median number of prisoners/jail
Await trial	80
Await release decision	15
Await sentence (posttrial)	10
Await transfer to State corrections	10
Serve felony sentence	15
Serve misdemeanor sentence	29
Miscellaneous other	10
Total	169

Randall Guynes wrote this report at the Institute for Economic and Policy Studies, which conducted the correctional components of the 1986 National Assessment Program (NAP). Principal NAP contractor to the National Institute of Justice was the Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., Alexandria, Virginia.

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Criminal justice system problems

Jail managers were asked to rank-order the most serious criminal justice system problems. The ranking options distinguished prison from jail crowding and staffing shortages from staff skills. Exhibit 2 shows the average ranking of the seven serious problems listed on the questionnaire.

Jail crowding, staff shortages, and prison crowding lead the list in the eyes of jail managers. The average rank for jail crowding is 2.3 on a range whose high is 1 and low is 7. Just over 50

percent of the managers rank jail crowding first, while most of the others rank it second or third. The third-ranked problem, prison crowding (average rank of 3.5), contributes to jail crowding. Staff shortage is the second most critical problem for jail managers. Nineteen percent of the managers say staff shortage is the most serious problem. Others rate it high, and the average, as shown in Exhibit 2, was 3.0.

Crowding and staffing problems are so severe in jails that other problems pale in comparison. However, problems remain in other areas. "Coordination among criminal justice agencies," with

an average rank of 4.3, is ranked as the most serious problem by 6 percent, while "lack of staff skills" is ranked as most serious by slightly over 6 percent. "Agency management" has an average rank of only 5.5, but almost 3 percent ranked the problem as the most serious one.

Crowding

A jail population below 95 percent of capacity permits a jail manager some flexibility in assigning cells for effective management. When a jail exceeds 105 percent of capacity, such management purposes likely go unserved. One hundred five percent of capacity is used here to define "crowding." With the exception of the Great Lakes region, all parts of the country reflect greater than 105 percent of capacity for over 40 percent of the jails.

Exhibit 3 shows jail crowding by region. The Far Western States (predominantly California) show the most pervasive jail crowding pattern with over 70 percent reporting over 105 percent capacity. New England States are not far behind with 67 percent reporting crowding.

As shown in Exhibit 4, jail crowding correlates directly with size of community. In the smallest community size in the NAP sample, 54 percent of jail managers report that their jails are at or below 95 percent of capacity. Only 20 percent of these jails are above 105 percent capacity. The relationship appears to peak in counties of 500,000 to 750,000. Seventy-one percent of these have jail populations of more than 105 percent of capacity. In the largest communities, the percentage with populations exceeding 105 percent drops to 58 percent. However, only 3 percent of these communities have populations under 95 percent of capacity.

Contributors to crowding. To better identify problems and solutions, the questionnaire asked what factors

Exhibit 2
Average rank of "most serious problem"

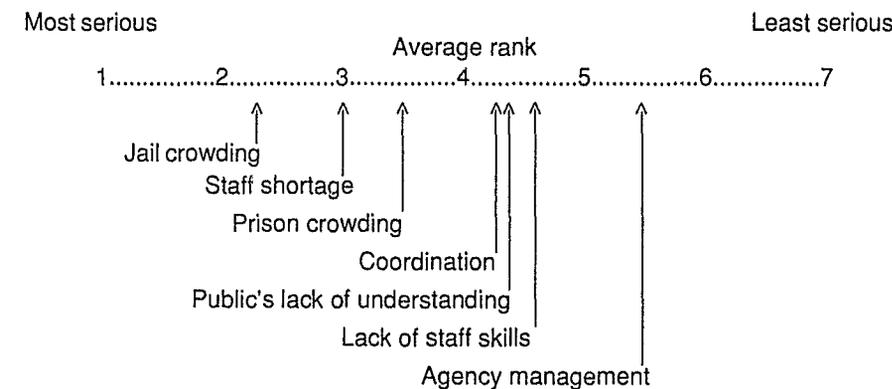


Exhibit 3
Jail crowding by region

Region ⁶	Percent of jails in sample with populations			Total number
	below 95% cap.	within 5% of cap.	above 105% of cap.	
New England	8 %	25 %	67 %	12
Mid-Atlantic	37	15	48	52
Great Lakes	45	30	25	53
Plains-Mountain	26	30	44	23
Southeast	32	23	45	74
Southwest	38	19	43	21
Far West	14	14	72	29
Total	33 %	22 %	45 %	264

contribute to crowding. According to 81 percent, the major contributor is clearly the increase in arrests. Increased sentences for driving while intoxicated are noted by 78 percent of the jail managers, followed by increases in length of sentence (61 percent), deinstitutionalization of mental patients (55 percent), increased facility use for sentenced felons (51 percent), and holding for State corrections (50 percent).

Although the degree of crowding is correlated with county size, the contributors remain amazingly similar. However, two contributors did show some regional variation. Holding State prisoners in local jails is a more significant issue in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions (67 percent and 57 percent, respectively) than in other regions. Apparently prison systems in these States are depending more upon jails to alleviate State system crowding.

All regions report pressure from increased sentences for driving while intoxicated. However, the highest frequencies come from New England (92 percent) and the Great Lakes (83 percent). After these two regions, the percentage falls to 71 percent for jails in the Southwest and the 62 to 69 percent range for all other regions.

Solving the crowding problem. Respondents were asked to identify innovative programs to resolve jail crowding. The number and variety of responses attest to the growing attention being paid to jail population control. Jail capacities are squeezed between increased pretrial incarceration pressures on one side and increased sentence pressures on the other. As a consequence, solutions must involve both pretrial and postconviction remedies.

The tone of the responses varies from confident, "We have several interesting ones; please contact us," to frustrated,

Exhibit 4
Jail crowding by county size

County population	Percent of jails in sample with populations			Total number
	below 95% cap.	within 5% of cap.	above 105% of cap.	
Below 100,000	54	26	20	87
100,000-250,000	33	21	46	48
250,000-500,000	27	13	60	70
500,000-750,000	11	18	71	28
Over 750,000	3	39	58	31
Total	33 %	22 %	45 %	264

"I wish I knew some." In the same vein, one jail manager replied:

We have been unable to keep our population below the cap (by consent decree). This is true even though the county must pay fines for those inmates sleeping upon the floor.

Another wrote with obvious frustration:

Turn them loose on the public is what we do. The State refuses to build and use prisons.

Postconviction approaches. In spite of obvious levels of frustration, 95 out of the 268 jail managers in the sample did attest to a number of problem-solving strategies. The single most noted example (40 responses out of approximately 80 postconviction solutions mentioned) is work release to reduce jail population.

Other postconviction solutions include: jail paroles (7 including three mentions of intensive supervision); community release responses (13); weekend sentences (11); early release systems (4). Home detention is mentioned 10 times (with electronic monitoring noted 3 times).

Pretrial approaches. Just over 70 jail managers mentioned pretrial solutions.

Pretrial release (PTR) systems (including diversion) account for another 33 responses. In addition to PTR solutions, 10 note citation release, 8 mention supervised PTR programs, and 20 report release on recognizance. Bond and bail changes are noted by 14 respondents.

In addition, a substantial number of jail managers are looking to new facilities (22), alternative housing (17), and other county facilities (6) as possible solutions to jail crowding. One unique system permits the sheriff to release on recognizance when population reaches a predefined level.

Organizational approaches. Organization, management, and interagency arrangements may also prove to be significant approaches in dealing with jail crowding. Among the more interesting of the 30 responses of this type, 14 managers are making improvements through internal management, which they believe will relieve crowding. Several noted improvements in daily population evaluations and "hustling out" eligible releases.

In addition to internal management changes, many others report new interagency cooperative approaches to resolving crowded conditions. Several managers note improvements in faster

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Exhibit 5 Personnel shortages

Staff type	Percent of jail managers reporting the degree to which jail is facing personnel shortages				
	Not at all (1)	(2)	(3)	Major degree (4)	(Combine 3 plus 4)
Correctional officer	9	22	34	36	(70)
Program	22	30	33	15	(48)
Facility maintenance	25	28	26	21	(47)
Clerical	23	34	31	12	(43)
Medical	28	31	25	16	(41)
Supervisory	28	35	25	13	(38)
Management	43	35	18	4	(22)

Exhibit 6 Jail staff recruitment and retention problems

Problem area	Percent citing problem for recruitment	Percent citing problem for retention
Low salaries	55 %	55 %
Poor image of jail work	63	42
Shortage of qualified minorities	29	na
Failing written tests	23	na
Hiring freezes	18	na
Failing physical tests	17	na
Inadequate career incentives	na	58
Burnout	na	48
Excessive overtime	na	19
Inability to use leave time	na	17
Substance abuse by employees	na	4

prisoner pickup by the department of corrections, while a large number of respondents mention cooperative efforts with courts or prosecutors.

One person stated specifically, "Only those programs which are coordinated with the court system are in any way effective."

Staffing

The greatest personnel need is for more correctional officers. Almost 69

percent of the jail managers report a shortage of officers. Respondents were asked to assess the degree to which they were facing shortages on the 1-4 scale from "not at all" to "major degree." Seven categories of staff were considered, with responses shown in Exhibit 5. The combination of scale values "3" and "4" (used throughout to identify a "need") are shown as a summary column on the right of Exhibit 5.

In jails, as in other law enforcement and correctional agencies, few staff shortages appear on management and supervisory levels. As relatively flat organizations, jails tend to lack room for advancement of personnel. Beyond management positions, at least 40 percent of the jail managers report shortages in all remaining personnel categories.

Providing specialists such as medical personnel has historically been a problem for jails, especially small jails. But while medical shortages are inverse to county size, there are almost no other discernible regional or size patterns in other types of staff shortages. The largest counties do have supervisory shortages (70 percent), but the pattern is not consistent throughout other county sizes.

Recruitment and retention. Respondents were asked to identify problems they faced in recruiting and retaining staff. Exhibit 6 lists the percentages of respondents identifying these as problems.

Jails face two major staff recruitment problems. First, 55 percent of managers report low salaries. This was most significant in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions (69 percent and 57 percent, respectively), while not quite so critical in the Far West (44 percent). Second, the poor image of jail work is rated as a serious problem by 63 percent of respondents without any significant regional variation.

Low salaries and lack of career incentives are mentioned as retention problems by over 55 percent. Burnout is mentioned by 48 percent while poor image is mentioned by 42 percent. Apparently, training and experience in the jail can lessen the poor image, but it cannot substitute for salary and career incentives.

Training needs. As shown in Exhibit 7, jail managers acknowledge training

needs in every area mentioned. Security and emergency medical procedures are mentioned by fewer managers. Security is perhaps the subject most developed in traditional training programs; emergency medical procedures have been the subject of intensive efforts in recent years.

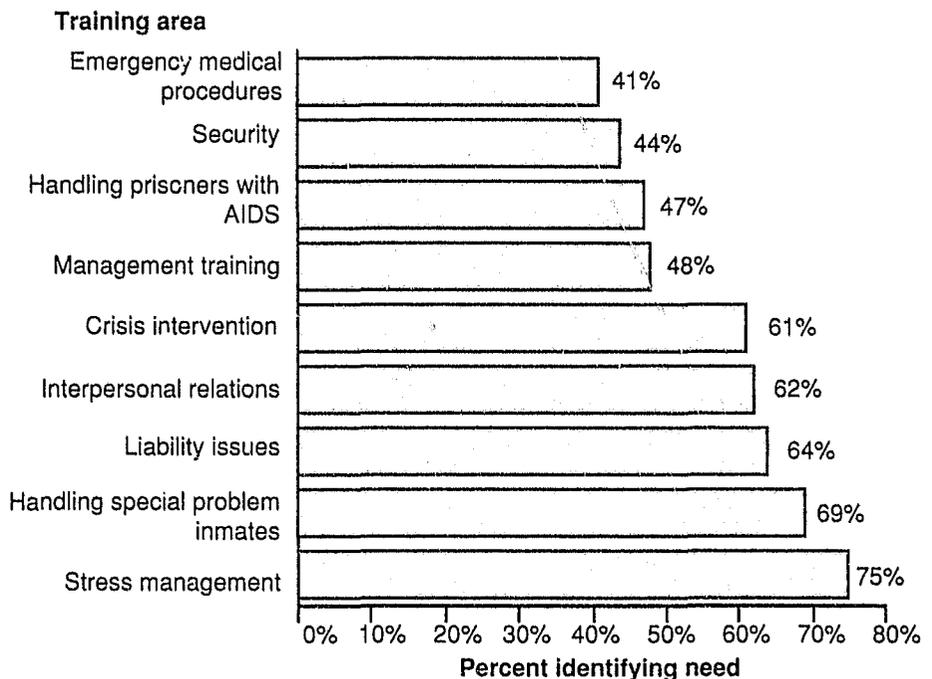
Growing professionalism in corrections may well be reflected in new training needs. Stress management received the most responses (75 percent). The high training needs for handling special problem inmates, crisis intervention, and interpersonal relations seem to indicate the realization of the complexity faced by the correctional officer in modern corrections.

The impact of legal activities in recent years is also viewed with concern: 64 percent of the jail managers note the need for training on liability issues. Management training is recognized as a need by 48 percent of the respondents. While this percentage is high, it is still substantially lower than typical replies 20 years ago, or even 10. While the current sample is different from those studied by Henderson et al.⁷ and Guynes et al.⁸, it is clear that correctional management has been continually improving over the past 20 years.

Training about acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) appears needed to 47 percent of jail managers. This need likely will grow higher, because the problem is still largely unrecognized in most jails. Sessions on AIDS are presented regularly at national conferences; however, the identified number of AIDS cases in jails, low at this time, is beginning to grow.

Training needs do not seem to vary by region, condition of crowding, or size of community. Generally, medium-size counties with populations between 250,000 and 500,000 report more training problems than either larger or

Exhibit 7
Training needs in jails



smaller counties. Possibly smaller counties have not yet experienced some of the extreme problems, while larger counties have already established training programs.

Personnel solutions. Significant efforts are being made to enhance the quality and numbers of staff in jails across the country. To an open-ended question about solutions to staff problems, the most often mentioned changes, regardless of the question, are those dealing with financial resources and salaries. Increased salaries and benefits are mentioned in the context of resolving shortage, recruitment, and retention problems.

As though to underscore the issue, one respondent succinctly states, "The problem [staff recruitment] will continue as long as salaries are low." To get these increased salaries, jail managers note that they are lobbying and using salary criteria from national jail standards⁹ to argue for higher pay.

Some jail managers have made use of merit award systems, career ladders, and regular promotion systems to enhance remuneration.

Lobbying for financial resources is not the only technique being used to enhance recruitment and retention of qualified jail personnel. Several jail managers report using public education programs to improve the image of correctional employment.

At the same time, jail managers are increasing their recruitment from colleges (12 reported using intern programs). Improved selection procedures and qualifying exams are noted by nine jail managers as improvements to recruitment, while another eight note task rotation and new work schedules as procedures helping with staff retention.

Facility and operations. As one would expect from the discussion of crowding, the dominant facility

Nation's jail managers assess their problems

Exhibit 8
Jail facility and equipment needs

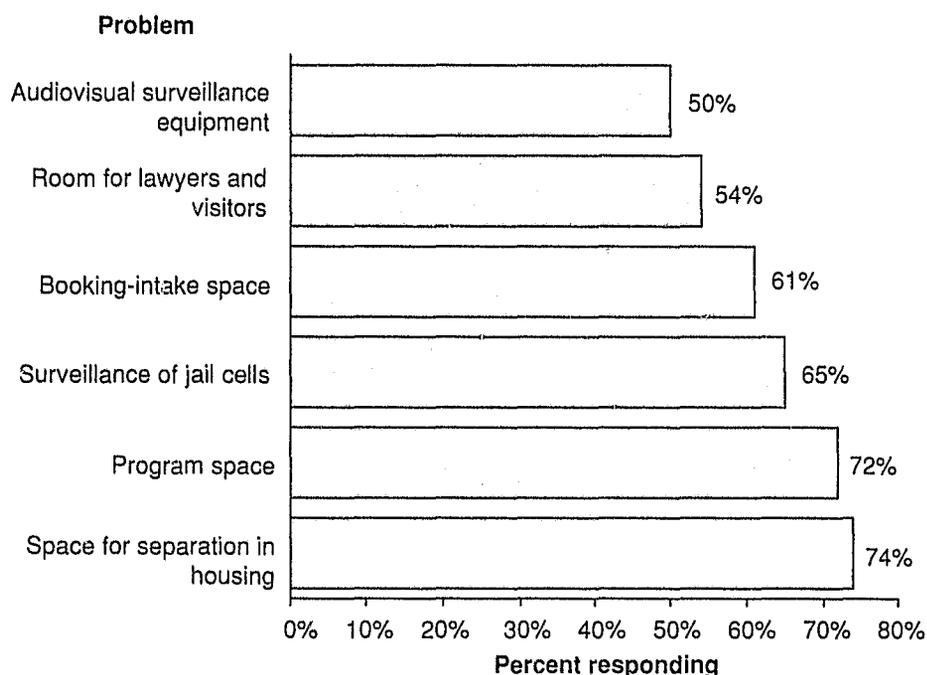


Exhibit 9
Future private sector need areas

Program area	Percent of respondents
Mental health service	63%
Medical services	51
Basic (academic) education	49
Vocational education	33
Food service	25

problems are associated with space. Of the top six problems identified by jail managers, four deal directly with space, and one with design (surveillance of cells). Only one, audiovisual surveillance, directly involves equipment. Exhibit 8 shows how managers identified specific facility and equipment problems.

Also included in the list are monitoring recreational and open areas, physical access to other departments and

agencies, emergency evacuation, controlling prisoner movement, and metal detection equipment. Only the latter two are identified as problems by as many as 40 percent of the respondents.

Classification. Two separate groups of needs are evident with respect to classification. First, facility constraints are noticeable among jail managers who identified problems with separating violent offenders (56 percent) and separating convicted from pretrial prisoner population (59 percent). Separation of convicted from pretrial is more a problem in the jails of smaller counties than larger.¹⁰

Second, early identification of problem inmates is needed. Over half (53 percent) the jail managers expressed a need for improvement in identifying suicide risks, while 51 percent noted a need for improvement in identifying mentally disordered persons. Only 41 percent indicated a need for improve-

ment in identification of drug and alcohol abusers, and even fewer (38 percent) listed improvement in the identification of special medical problems.

Improvements in medical procedures in jails over the past 10 to 20 years may account for the reduced needs in these latter areas. In five separate areas of medical needs, none is identified by more than 45 percent of the managers. The highest need is managing inmates with communicable diseases (44 percent). Managing prisoners with AIDS is noted as a problem by only 38 percent.

It is not clear in this latter case whether the relative low percentage is because jail managers have effective procedures, or because jails have not yet encountered inmates with AIDS. However, the survey researchers suspect that most have not encountered the problems. Some are taking extra precautions with AIDS now.

Program needs. From a list of 10 program types, over half the respondents recorded problems with four: indoor recreation (56 percent), drug abuse (53 percent), outdoor recreation (51 percent), and vocational education (50 percent). No consistent pattern related these problems to either size of community or region of the country. Basic adult education needs are related to community size, however. While 43 percent of the entire sample lists basic education as a need, 53 percent of managers in cities under 100,000 population specified adult education. In contrast, only one-third of managers in cities over 750,000 mentioned adult education.

The relatively new area of jail industries is mentioned by 47 percent of the managers, while work release is mentioned by only 37 percent. The 47 percent figure for jail industries is high considering that there are so few jail industries currently in existence.¹¹

Work release, on the other hand, is not a greater need because the program is already in use in so many jails. In the open-ended questions, it was the single most often mentioned solution to jail crowding.

Private sector involvement. In the future, jail managers see private sector involvement for jails primarily in the areas of mental health services, medical services, and basic education (see Exhibit 9). Vocational education and food services are mentioned to a lesser extent.

Management information systems. Jail managers were also asked their information systems needs. The results are fairly uniform. Of 13 management information issues listed, 9 appear as major needs by at least 35 to 40 percent of the managers.

Alcohol and drug history and medical or mental health needs are seen as problems by 53 percent and 59 percent, respectively. Court information is seen as an unmet need by 48 percent. At the other extreme, only 21 percent see a need for improved information systems for disbursements.

Thirty-eight of fifty-five open-ended responses on suggestions for workable solutions to management information needs mention computerized systems already completed or in some stage of development. Many of these systems are being developed by staff within a county data processing agency. A few managers seem to suggest totally internal development: "We designed our own MIS, and it works!"

Computerized management information systems are becoming increasingly common in jails throughout the country. However, there are still many jails of all sizes that are not yet computerized. Some very large systems have only booking, intake, and release computer-

ized while all other activities are completely managed by paper records.

In fact, information needs do not appear to be related to county size. The general consistency of needs at the 30 percent to 40 percent level probably indicates the degree to which use of computer information systems has spread throughout the country.

Summary

The major problems facing the Nation's jail personnel are clearly crowding and conditions related to crowding. Consider some of the findings summarized below:

- Over half the country's jails hold more inmates than their rated capacities.
- More than one-third (38 percent) are under court order for unconstitutional conditions of confinement.
- Almost 70 percent say they operate with a shortage of correctional officers.
- At least 40 percent report shortages of civilian staff of several types.
- Over 70 percent report shortages of space for both classification needs in housing and inmate program needs.
- Over 50 percent report shortages of space for booking and intake areas and for visitation (including lawyer consultation).

Jail managers report training needs often associated with crowded conditions. From 60 to 75 percent state that training is needed for stress management, handling special problem inmates, crisis intervention, civil liability, and interpersonal relations.

Crowding problems are nationwide. While New England States and West Coast States reported the heaviest crowding, all regions (except the Great Lakes) reported crowding. The crowding problem is also significant to all the urban counties. Only in small counties does the crowding problem appear less severe.

Notes

1. Crowding was the major correctional problem in the previous National Institute of Justice needs study by Abt Associates' Stephen Gettinger, "Assessing Criminal Justice Needs," National Institute of Justice *Research in Brief*, June 1984.

2. Dick Ford and Ken Kerle, *State of Our Nation's Jails, 1982*, Washington, D.C., National Sheriffs' Association, 1982.

3. The random sample was drawn from counties with populations less than 250,000 and more than 50,000.

4. This high return rate is in part attributable to the efforts of Dick Ford, Executive Director, and other administrative staff of the American Jail Association. The return rate for the entire set of respondents was 64 percent. Only probation officers, with a 75 percent return rate, and commissioners of corrections and wardens, both 83 percent return, were higher than jail managers.

5. All average figures are median values unless otherwise stated.

6. New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont. Mid-Atlantic: District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania. Great Lakes: Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin. Plains-Mountain: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming. Southeast: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia. Southwest: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas. Far West: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Washington.

7. Thomas A. Henderson, Randall Guynes, and Robert Grieser, *Strategies for Implementing Jail Standards/Inspection Programs*, Alexandria, Virginia, Institute for Economic and Policy Studies (IEPS), 1981. This study of State jail standards pointed to the major problems of jail management in meeting State jail standards.

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8. Randall Guynes, Robert C. Grieser, and H. Eugene Robinson, *Organization and Management of County Jails*, report to the National Institute of Justice, 1985. The major findings were that jail management was increasing in sophistication even in the small jails of the Nation.

9. American Correctional Association, *Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities*, 2d Edition, 1981.

10. Some jail managers noted that they use classification schemes, such as that of the American Correctional Association (ACA),

based upon institutional behavior rather than criminal charges. Consequently, violent crime charges should be distinguished from violence potential. Our question did refer to the violence potential. Similarly, pretrial and posttrial designations would not necessarily dictate a separation of inmates, although generally two such prisoners are not likely to share a cell.

11. Robert C. Grieser, Thomas McCrae Crawford, and Gail S. Funke, *Development of Jail Industries*, National Institute of Corrections (NIC), February 1985.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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