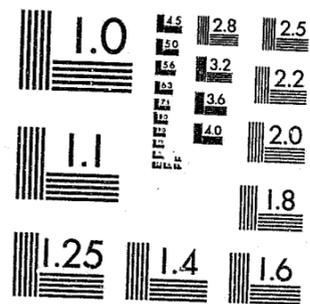


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Correctional Administrators' Perceptions of  
Contributory Factors and Effects of  
Prison Overpopulation

Introduction

Prison populations have increased dramatically in the past few years reaching an all time high in 1983. This study was designed to determine the effects of prison overcrowding and to ascertain the perceptions of correctional administrators of the factors contributing to prison overpopulation. The data were gathered from a self-administered questionnaire mailed to the directors of the 50 state adult correctional systems. After an initial mailing and one follow-up, a total of 48 state administrators returned completed questionnaires for a response rate of 96 percent. Two mid-western states, Illinois and Michigan, are the only states not represented in the study.

Questions were used to elicit responses on factors which contribute to the increased prison populations and on the effects of overpopulation. A combination of closed and open-ended questions were included to obtain the desired information and data. Many of the respondents included detailed responses and data with the returned questionnaire.

Perceptions of Factors Contributing  
to Prison Overpopulation

A total of 47 of the respondents responded to questions regarding opinions on factors which contribute to the overpopulation of Adult Correctional Facilities. The distribution of their responses to these questions is depicted in Figure 1.

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Figure 1  
Distribution of Responses on Contributing Factors  
To Overpopulation of Adult  
Correctional Facilities

Contributing Factor	Contributes to Overpopulation			
	Yes		No	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Longer sentences	41	87.2	6	12.8
Public Demands for Increased Sentences	40	85.1	7	14.9
Legislative Responses to Public Demands	37	78.1	10	21.9
Mandatory Sentences	31	66.0	16	34.0
Increase in Minimum Sentence Lengths	29	61.7	18	38.3
More Effective Law Enforcement and Prosecution	23	48.9	24	51.1
Increase in Crime Rates	18	38.3	29	61.7
More Stringent Parole Conditions	16	34.0	31	66.0
Other Factors	10	21.9	37	78.1

The state prison system administrators attribute much of the increase in prison populations to demands from the public for increased sentences and the criminal justice system responses to those demands. Of the 47 respondents, 41 (87.2 percent) indicated that longer sentences imposed on offenders by judges was a contributing factor to the prison overpopulation. Forty (85.1 percent) of the prison administrators pointed to the public demands for increased sentences as a major contributing factor and 37 (78.1 percent) selected legislative responses to public demands as a contributing factor. Some of the legislative responses mentioned included stricter laws on Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) and changes in sentencing of offenders. One state prison director pointed out that his state had enacted three major legislative acts which combined to drastically increase prison populations. These legislative enactments included a new determinate sentencing code, a Speedy Trial Program which speeds processing through the court system, and a new Parole Act which resulted in a 30 percent decrease in paroles of indeterminate sentenced inmates. Other respondents indicated that prosecutors and judges are also responding to public demands by the increased use of incarceration by judges and reluctance of prosecutors to recommend probation, even for first offenders.

Two-thirds of the respondents (31, 66.0 percent) perceived mandatory sentences and 29 (61.7 percent) feel that increases in minimum sentence lengths are contributing factors to the prison overpopulation problem. The length of stay in prison is increasing for the average inmate in several states. Some states have amended good time and good conduct laws to increase time incarcerated before parole or discharge. Three state prison administrators noted that an increase in parole and

probation revocation rates, again in response to public demands, have contributed to the problem in their states. Nearly one-half (23, 48.9 percent) of the respondents attributed more effective law enforcement and prosecution as contributing factors.

An increase in crime rates was a factor noted by 18 (38.3 percent) of the state administrators. Related issues included high rates of unemployment due to unsettled economic conditions. Others indicated that population changes were contributing to the overpopulation of prisons as the population at risk (18-29 age) group increased. The influx of immigrants, illegal aliens, migrant workers, and transients were also listed as contributors to the problem. Another related problem results from the reductions in other public programs, such as employment services, welfare and health services.

Sixteen (34.0 percent) of the prison administrators indicated that more stringent parole conditions had reduced the number of parolees thus increasing prison populations. Ten (21.9 percent) of the respondents noted that various other factors such as population growth had contributed to the prison overpopulation problem. Distribution of responses on perceptions of contributing factors was nearly identical across the regions of the country and across all sizes of prison systems.

#### Effects of Prison Overpopulation

A total of 48 state prison administrators responded to an open-ended question asking about the major effects on overcrowding in daily institutional operations. The responses were analyzed and grouped into similar problem areas. The results were six problem areas that have little overlap but which are closely inter-related. Each of the six areas is discussed below.

#### Budgetary and Resource Effects

The dramatic increases in adult prison populations place more strain on resources at all levels in the correctional system. Inadequate funds for personnel and operating expenses is an immediate effect of increased populations. The increased prison population requires greater utilization of existing resources and restraints on the provision of some services as resources are reallocated to basic pro-rams. One state provided an insight into some of the effects of an increase in prison population. An increase of 400 inmates in a given period requires the correctional system:

- (1) provide space and beds for 400 additional inmates
- (2) feed an additional 1,200 meals each day
- (3) wash approximately 2,200 additional pounds of laundry each day
- (4) find 400 more jobs for inmates
- (5) provide correctional supervision for 400 more inmates
- (6) provide complete medical, psychiatric and psychological health care coverage for an additional 400 inmates
- (7) make available a whole range of educational, recreational, spiritual, legal and rehabilitative services for an additional 400 inmates.

The problem is simple: not enough funds and resources to adequately respond to prison overpopulation.

#### Support Services and Facilities

Prison overpopulation has, perhaps, its most extensive effect in the area of support services and prison facilities. All of the operations of the institution are affected by overcrowding, including discipline, food service, visitation, sanitation, laundry, and security. The inmates are double or triple celled and hallways, gymnasiums, recreational yards and other facilities are crowded. There is an increased wait and length

of time for inmates to access basic services. There is a problem of maintaining daily schedules. Feeding schedules must be lengthened.

Support services such as health care and laundry are overextended and service is less satisfactory. Often classification and parole criteria are compromised to relieve overcrowding. Individual inmate needs tend to be subordinated to space availability and first term inmates are exposed to recidivists and violent offenders.

Facilities pressed into serving numbers of inmates above design capacity tend to deteriorate rapidly. The increased wear and tear lead to higher maintenance costs. Sanitation facilities often are unable to handle the increased population in the overpopulated facility leading to health hazards. Overall, lack of adequate support services and facilities place a serious burden on operational management.

#### Rehabilitative Program Effects

When prison populations exceed design capacity, rehabilitative programs become less effective because of the overload on staff, space, equipment and materials. There is an overall decrease in meaningful program opportunities and inmates who are able to access rehabilitative programs face longer waits for programs. Program capacity is soon exceeded and already scant programming resources are depleted. The placement and movement of inmates becomes more problematic and programs become more restrictive in enrollment. As a result, those inmates most in need of such programs are least likely to meet the more restrictive entrance criteria. Specialized rehabilitative programs housing such programs as drug rehabilitation, youthful offenders, work release and psychological services are compromised and contaminated by housing overflow inmates who would not qualify otherwise. Overall, the adult

correctional institutions are severely limited in their ability to provide program activities that could lead to a successful return to society by inmates.

#### Effects on Institutional Staff

Overcrowding of the prison facilities lead to deleterious effects on every member of the institutional staff. The staff, already often underpaid, is overworked as increased demands are placed on the staff. As program and security resources are overburdened, the staff functions in a more custodial role with less emphasis on rehabilitation. At the same time, there are increased difficulties surrounding security and custody and security coverage is less effective. In turn, there is greater stress for all institutional personnel, perceptions of greater danger and lowered employee morale. The staff is forced to operate in an atmosphere of stress, frustration and increased security risks.

#### Effects on Inmates

Several prison administrators noted that almost all other problems result directly from the effects of prison overcrowding on the prison inmates. Inmates are idled by the insufficient or overcrowded work and treatment programs and the idleness and overcrowding affects the inmates physically and emotionally. Inmates spend much more time in cells and inactivity. The prison administrator is faced with the problems of trying to find institutional or industry work assignments for those inmates who want to work. Program overcrowding reduces opportunity for meaningful inmate activity and idleness leads to lowered morale of the inmates. Overall, the general inability to adequately occupy the inmate in purposeful activity heightens tensions and increases the potential for incidents.

### Effects on Prison Incidents

The effects of prison overpopulation on incidents are both visible and frightening. Supervision of the inmates is less effective and the lack of adequate staff supervision leads to an increased vulnerability to incidents. There is an increase in rates of misconduct, assaults on other inmates and staff, and an increase in danger to the inmates and staff. Inmate complaints and grievances increase as levels of frustration rise.

The increases in violence, disturbances and various disciplinary infractions compound the increased tensions. The result is a situation that has explosive potential for riots and serious disturbances in the institution. Overall, the prison administrators feel that the prison overpopulation situation is dangerous to staff and inmates alike.

### Summary and Conclusions

The prison administrators who responded to the questionnaire for this study provided data on their perceptions of the <sup>factors</sup> contributing to prison overpopulation and the effects of overpopulation and crowded prisons. Much of the increase in prison populations is perceived as resulting from societal demands for increased use of incarceration and for longer sentences. The responses of the criminal justice system and of state legislatures to the public demand also are major contributors to the problem.

Prison overpopulation has consequences and effects in virtually every area of the correctional institution including budgetary and resources areas, support services and facilities, rehabilitative programs, staff, inmates and incidents. Perhaps the most serious effects

are the potential effects of prison disturbances and riots. All of the effects are interrelated and interact.

An obvious conclusion is that prison administrators are in a double bind situation whereby the factors leading to prison overpopulation are beyond their control. Societal demands for longer sentences and a greater use of incarceration create the overcrowded conditions as the state legislatures and the criminal justice system respond to the demands of the public. The prison administrator is faced with the myriad effects of increased prison populations but often is not provided the additional facilities, staff and resources to manage the overpopulated institutions.

If the public demands continue and those in the criminal justice system and in the state legislative bodies continue to respond to those demands, the prison populations will continue to increase. The public must be made aware of the effects and the costs of prison overpopulation and must be willing to either provide the necessary resources or to suffer the long term potential consequences of overcrowded, dangerous prisons.

**END**