

Just the Right Size:

# Data Helps New Orleans Rebuild Its Prison

By James Austin

*Author's Note: Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

For many years, the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) was one of the largest jail systems in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Before Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the total jail population exceeded 7,000 prisoners. With a pre-Katrina population of about 472,000, the incarceration rate for Orleans was about 6,600 per 100,000 population — a rate that greatly exceeded any other major city in the U.S.

Today, the jail population is approximately 3,000 — less than half of what it was six years ago. Admissions and releases peaked around September 2009 and have since declined consistently with crime and arrest trends (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

Katrina badly damaged the infrastructure of OPP. Sheriff Marlin N. Gusman had to close several facilities and renovate others. As the city began reconstituting itself after Hurricane Katrina and reassessing where it wanted to go and how it wanted to rebuild, there were no clear answers on what the proper size for the jail of the future would be. To come up with solutions about criminal justice matters, including the size of the future jail, the new mayor, Mitch Landrieu, convened a special task force called the Criminal Justice Work Group to explore options.<sup>3</sup> As part of the effort, the mayor's office contacted the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to see what research assistance was available.

**Table 1. Pre- and Post-Katrina Comparisons**

Miscellaneous Orleans-Related Data	Pre-Katrina (Sept. 2005)	2009	% Change
Population of Orleans Parish	472,744	354,850	-25%
Jail population	7,564	3,000	-60%
Reported crimes	31,205	15,558	-50%
Incarceration rate per 100,000 population	1,600	845	-47%
Crime rate per 100,000 population	6,601	4,384	-34%

Research projects often require several years to complete. It takes time to collect data, and analyze and report on the results. But New Orleans needed the analysis on the correct prison size to be completed in months, not years. So NIJ's Corrections Technology Center of Excellence contacted the JFA Institute, a nonprofit agency dedicated to evaluating criminal justice practices and designing research-based policy solutions, and asked them to help. The JFA Institute accepted the assignment to develop an objective forecast of the OPP population and do it within 90 days.

The task was twofold. First, the researchers needed to establish a "base" projection that would reflect the projected size of the jail population if there were no changes to current criminal justice policies, especially police- and court-processing policies and trends. Second, using the base estimate, the team needed to conduct simulations that would estimate the effects of several new policies the Criminal Justice Working Group was considering — an alternative to the existing pretrial process, for example, and innovative ways to handle warrants. The working group was also interested in finding different ways of dealing with the state prisoners who were serving their time in OPP.

## Developing the "Base" Forecast

To estimate the size of a new prison if New Orleans made no changes in policies or practices, JFA researchers collected an array of data. They received considerable assistance from Gusman's staff who had been operating a comprehensive information system for many years. Together, the JFA Institute and the sheriff's IT staff quickly extracted detailed data on all people who were recently admitted and released from OPP in the past 12 months. The New Orleans Police Department supplied recent data on the number of people arrested each month by type of crime.

The analysis showed that overall crime and arrests in New Orleans were declining, as it has been in many large urban areas in the U.S. It also showed that jail admissions and the jail population were beginning to decline. The team found that on the one hand, a large number of prisoners (about 1,300) in the jail were charged with felonies; on the other hand, a large number of the bookings (about 35,000 of the nearly 60,000 bookings) were for very minor crimes or for people who had outstanding warrants from neighboring Jefferson Parish. In addition, the data showed that unlike most county jails,

the jail housed a large number of people (about 1,000) who were state prisoners.

The researchers next took the data and “disaggregated” it, separating and analyzing the numbers into different categories to understand the relative influence of the different categories of populations within the jail. The final analysis showed that absent any change in current criminal justice policies and practices, the population of OPP would remain relatively stable during the next 10 years. This meant that New Orleans would not need to build a larger prison to hold a growing number of prisoners. Table 2 shows the projected inmate population by type of prisoner.

## Developing Alternative Options

With the base projection complete, the next step in projecting the long-term prison population was to estimate the effects that new policies and programs might have. The New Orleans Criminal Justice Working Group now knew that if they did nothing, their prison population would not grow larger. But they wanted more than a stable prison population; they wanted a lower prison population. And they wanted to know what impact two key reforms would have: implementation of a pretrial release program,<sup>4</sup> and reduction in the number of state prisoners now housed at OPP.<sup>5</sup>

The Criminal Justice Working Group was also interested in understanding what impact the following other changes would have:

- Increasing the use of summons in lieu of arrest;
- Increasing efficiency in the processing of felony cases not released in pretrial status; and
- Reducing the length of stay for probation violators.

When the research team from the JFA Institute created statistical simulations to help New Orleans leaders understand the cumulative effect of these changes, the data showed that the policy reforms would reduce the projected prison population by about 1,300 inmates.

**Table 2. Ten-year forecast if policies and practices remain unchanged by category of inmate**

Calendar year	Being held on a warrant	Being held pretrial on misdemeanor or other minor charge	Being held pretrial on felony charge	Serving a local sentence	Subtotal	Serving a state sentence	Grand total
Sept. 2010	114	597	1,359	169	2,239	950	3,189
2010	101	591	1,364	162	2,218	950	3,168
2011	93	582	1,384	161	2,220	950	3,170
2012	91	563	1,381	166	2,201	950	3,151
2013	84	546	1,396	165	2,191	950	3,141
2014	79	522	1,383	162	2,146	950	3,096
2015	77	487	1,357	163	2,084	950	3,034
2016	73	470	1,349	161	2,053	950	3,003
2017	66	448	1,372	168	2,054	950	3,004
2018	63	427	1,350	165	2,005	950	2,955
2019	65	392	1,349	158	1,964	950	2,914
2020	58	369	1,360	165	1,952	950	2,902
With 7.5% Peaking (monthly fluctuations)	62	397	1,462	177	2,098	1,021	3,120

**Table 3. Ten-year simulation of the effects of implementing a pretrial service agency and reducing inmates who serve state sentences in the New Orleans Parish Prison**

Calendar Year	Being held on a warrant	Being held pretrial on misdemeanor or other minor charge	Being held pretrial for felony charge	Serving a local sentence	Subtotal	Serving a state sentence	Grand total
Sept. 2010	114	597	1,359	169	2,239	950	3,189
2010	101	591	1,364	162	2,218	850	3,068
2011	93	519	1,168	161	1,941	250	2,191
2012	91	435	917	166	1,609	250	1,859
2013	84	418	917	165	1,584	250	1,834
2014	79	380	917	162	1,538	250	1,788
2015	77	359	917	163	1,516	250	1,766
2016	73	342	917	161	1,493	250	1,743
2017	66	320	917	168	1,471	250	1,721
2018	63	299	917	165	1,444	250	1,694
2019	65	250	917	158	1,390	250	1,640
2020	58	241	917	165	1,381	250	1,631
With 7.5% Peaking	62	259	986	177	1,485	269	1,753

**Figure 1. Current and Alternation Orleans Parish Prison Population Projections**

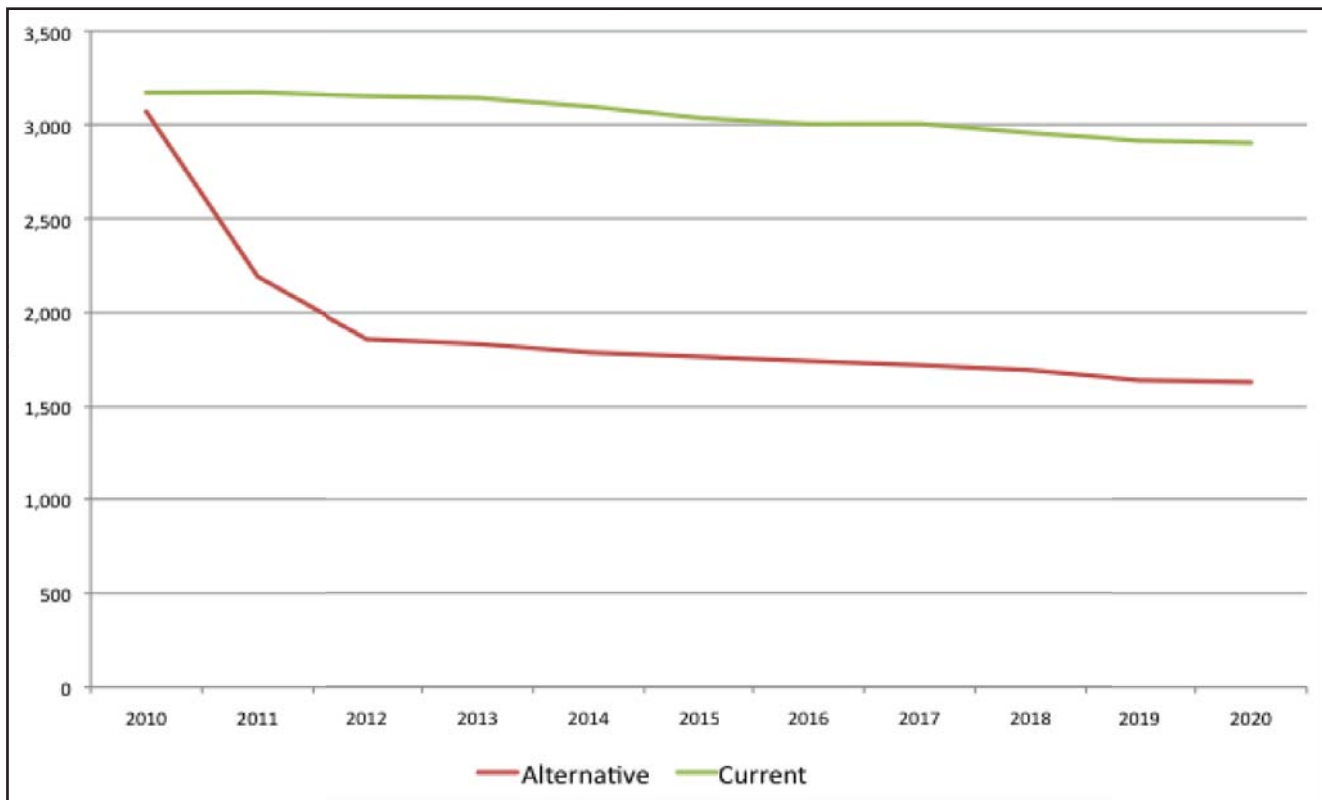


Table 3 shows the estimated prison population in OPP in major categories if New Orleans introduced a pretrial service agency and also stopped housing inmates who were serving state sentences. The researchers added a peaking factor of 7.5 percent to the estimates to account for seasonal fluctuations and the need to house special management inmates. The impact of those two policy changes would mean that the prison population would decline to less than 1,600 inmates compared to the base projection of 3,000 if policies and practices remained static (see Figure 1).

### Future Steps

During 2012, OPP and JFA staff will be monitoring and updating the projections based on the data that are now being received and analyzed each month. The criminal justice policymakers and practitioners in New Orleans have now established that objective

data analysis can contribute to the planning and decision-making process. Whether OPP’s population actually continues to decline will only be known in the future. Too many socioeconomic, political and cultural factors contribute to a city’s well-being, and projections about crime trends are never certain. But what is certain is that the parish is much better prepared to understand how key policy decisions that, if adopted, will impact the size and costs of its jail population.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Louisiana, the term “parish” is the equivalent to the term “county” as used elsewhere in the U.S. The city of New Orleans and Orleans Parish are coterminous; i.e., they are one, consolidated jurisdiction.

<sup>2</sup> All tables and figures from: Austin, J., W. Ware and R. Ocker. 2011. Orleans Parish Prison Ten-Year Inmate Population Projection. Washington, D.C.: JFA Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/233722.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The Criminal Justice Work Group consisted of representatives of the key criminal justice agencies, civic groups, community-based service providers, members of the City Council and the Mayor’s Office.

<sup>4</sup> The Bureau of Justice Assistance, a sister agency to the National Institute of Justice, awarded a grant to the Vera Institute to design and set up a new pretrial service agency. Read about the project on Vera’s website: <http://www.vera.org/project/new-orleans-project>.

<sup>5</sup> Additional analysis of OPP’s projected population was funded by the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Fund and Public Safety/Government Oversight Grants.

*James Austin, Ph.D., is president of the JFA Institute. The full report, “Orleans Parish Prison Ten-Year Inmate Population Projection,” by James Austin, Wendy Ware and Roger Ocker, is available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/233722.pdf>.*

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