Jail Research Meeting Establishes a Practitioner/Academic Interface

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For people working in jails and those individuals interested in doing research on jails one fact becomes clear very quickly: jails are often at the bottom of the ladder in terms of funding and visibility within the criminal justice system. In fact, I often tell my students that at times jails do not seem to be on the ladder at all. As a result of this state of affairs, very little was written about jails until the mid-1980s. There seem to be a variety of reasons for this.

First, jails have been out of sight and out of mind. There has been little public attention to jails or their operations and little public interest in the problems of jails in many jurisdictions.

Second, most academics teaching criminal justice, political science, sociology, and psychology have not been interested in studying jail problems. Consequently, few academic researchers have engaged in any meaningful research on jails. The result has been three sets of losers: jail administrators, academics, and the community.

A third reason for the paucity of jail research has been the lack of funding to do jail research. As a result, most academics engaging in jail research projects have had to rely on readily available large data sets such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Census of Local Jails,* or they have had to undertake projects with whatever local funding was available (including their own pockets at times).

A fourth reason for the lack of jail research has been a reluctance on the part of practitioners to have academics "poking around" in their jails. This concern has not been unwarranted. Most jails suffer from readily recognizable and easily located deficiencies, and no one is particularly fond of having deficiencies pointed out. Research can be a risky proposition for many practitioners, and often the easiest answer is "we can't do it."

Developing a Research Agenda

To overcome the obstacles to research on jails, the staff of the National Institute of Corrections' Jail Center in Boulder, Colorado, was approached about their interest in helping to develop a national jail research agenda for the coming decade. From the beginning, the Jail Center's staff was enthusiastic about the prospect and encouraged application for a grant to hold a conference that would bring together academics and practitioners to discuss what we would like to do and what needs to be done.

The essential question was: What can jail administrators and academicians do to help each other?

The central focus of the conference was to be the identification and prioritization of essential jail research issues and problems confronting jail administrators that are of interest to academicians as well. The essential question was: what can we do to help each other?

To answer this question, twelve high-level jail managers (all holding a variety of memberships in the American Correctional Association, the American Jail Association, and the National Sheriffs' Association) and twelve academics (representing a variety of locations and types of colleges and universities) were brought together for two days of intense interaction to identify the pressing problems facing jails that might be addressed by appropriately-designed and -conducted research projects.

Conference Format

The conference was designed for maximum sharing of ideas. Participants gathered in Denver, Colorado, on Sunday evening, September 16, 1990, for introductions and an overview of the meeting schedule. All participants had been instructed that the meeting would be conducted on a first-name only basis and that casual attire was preferred. This clearly was to be a working meeting.

There was much uncertainty among conference participants about what they would be doing and what was expected of them. There was a deliberate strategy to keep people informed only as they needed to know, in order to allow the conference format to reveal itself as the various sessions were conducted. Participants were informed that a balance had been struck between chaos and over-planning, with an "organized chaos" approach winning out.

The meeting was divided into four sessions with three academic presenters in each.

- **Session I** dealt with "Inmate Populations" and had as presenters John Klofas from the Rochester Institute of Technology, William Osterhoff from Auburn University at Montgomery, and Eric Poole from the University of Colorado at Denver. Joel Thompson, from Appalachian State University, North Carolina, served as the session facilitator and discussion leader.

  The practitioner/academic discussions in this session dealt with the nature of jail populations, including their size and composition. Practitioners and academics expressed concern about the lack/absence of effective mechanisms for monitoring and analyzing the ever-changing populations of jails. Practitioners were particularly concerned with identifying "what works" in jail programming. Some practitioners also expressed an interest in studies of jails that are permeable to outside programming efforts, e.g., drug treatment.

- **Session** II focused on "Jail Architecture and Operations" and included presentations by Barbara Price of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, Linda Zupan from Illinois State University, and Ben Menke from Washington State University at Spokane. The facilitator/discussion leader for this session was Mary Stohr-Gillmore from New Mexico State University.

  Much of the discussion in Session II centered on the desirability of regional jails as a mechanism to overcome some of the deficiencies in current jail operations. There was also considerable discussion surrounding personnel issues (including recruiting, training, and retaining jail employees) and participatory management processes in jails.

- **Session** HI addressed issues involving "Special Inmate Needs" and had as presenters Michael Welch from St. John's University, Stan Stojkovic from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and Dale Sechrest from California State University at San Bernardino. The session facilitator was Rosemary Gido of Social Research and Evaluation, Inc. The three presenters dealt with issues such as persons with AIDS in jails, inmates with drug problems who continue to get and use drugs in jail, and assaultive behavior by inmates. Participants discussed both the issues related to identification of these populations and the development of special programming geared toward their needs.

- **Session IV** involved discussions of legal issues and jails. Presenters included Kurt Siedschlaw from Kearney State College, Steve Cuvelier from Sam Houston State University, and Mark Pogrebin of the University of Colorado at Denver. The session facilitator was Larry Mays from New Mexico State University. This

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session dealt with some of the most volatile issues facing jails, including a whole range of jail lawsuits, the use of computer-based population projection models to deal with crowding and litigation, and the impact of litigation on inmate/staff and staff/administration relations.

Participants expressed concerns over issues such as the litigation crisis facing jails, inmate grievance mechanisms, and the influence of accreditation and standards in preventing lawsuits. A major concern also seemed to be the potential for litigation by employees against jails and jail managers, especially in areas like sexual harassment suits.

Conference Outcomes

Participants seemed to agree that the two-day conference had a number of readily identifiable outcomes. First, it provided an opportunity for practitioners and academics to try to get into each other's world for a look at the priorities and concerns of the other. Second, from this, several major research interests were identified:

- Studies analyzing the composition of jail populations (simply put, who we have in jail and the extent to which the types of populations are stable or changing).
- Research on operations and management concerns, such as the roles jails are playing and whether they will continue to play those roles, inmate programming, staff selection, performance appraisal and training, organizational structures, and consolidation of services.
- An inventory of "special" inmate populations focused on identification, treatment, young offenders, females, and parole violators.
- Investigation of jail litigation to determine the causes, consequences, and the possibilities of closure. A critical concern seemed to be the ability to *prevent* litigation before it ever happens.

A third outcome of the conference seemed to be an "action agenda." There were calls from both practitioners and academics to meet more often in these kinds of settings, to participate more frequently in each other's meetings, and to write, including co-authoring, for each other's publications. Each group appeared to be asking the other: how can we "use" (in the most positive sense of the word) each other to expand our knowledge base and problem-solving abilities in jails?

The final outcome of the meeting is something of an unwritten chapter. Participants from both groups will be compiling a set of conference proceedings, highlighting the position papers and some of the responses to them. Also, the jail research agenda for the 1990s and an action agenda will be part of this document. The culmination of the process will be a roundtable session on "Setting the Jail Research Agenda for the 1990s" at the annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in Nashville, Tennessee, March 5-9,199l.

Much like the first steps on the moon were "one small step for mankind," the efforts of the conference participants in Denver were one small step on the road to developing a jail research agenda that would have visibility and impact. In order for such an effort to be effective, however, it will take the continued interest, efforts, and support of practitioners and their professional organizations (such as the American Correctional Association, the American Jail Association, and the National Sheriffs' Association), academics and their professional associations (such as the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the American Society of Criminology), and agencies like the National Institute of Corrections to place jails and their problems higher on the agenda for research funding. To fail to do so leaves jails struggling to answer many of the essential policy questions facing them and often without any institutional mechanism for addressing them.

For further information on the meeting, contact Larry Mays, New Mexico State University, at (505) 646-3316, or Ginny Hutchinson, NIC Jails Division, at (303) 939-8866. ■