

TWO APPROACHES FOR DETERMINING JAIL NEEDS

by Allen R. Beck, Ph.D.

THE TWO APPROACHES

Jail needs can be determined in two manners, either by a "quick study" or an "offender population management study." These two types of assessments can be distinguished by the amount of new data collected and the thoroughness of inquiry. The utilities and outcomes of the two studies are usually much different.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE QUICK STUDY

The purpose of the Quick Study is to provide a description of needs drawn from available data and opinions of criminal justice agency representatives. As implied by the name, the level of effort in collecting new data is minimal. If the data are not on hand or easily obtained, the analyst resorts to filling in the blanks with opinions or omitting various aspects from consideration.

Typically, the Quick Study looks at a few types of data maintained by a jail:

- Types of offenses
- Simple demographic data, such as gender and age
- Legal status, i.e., pretrial and sentenced
- Length of stay
- Average daily jail population, ADP

Often in a Quick Study, information on the jail population is supplemented with a few interviews in which opinions about jail needs are obtained. Sometimes one or more meetings of criminal justice agency heads may be convened to develop a "consensus opinion" about needs. Such consensus tend to be reformulations of historical opinions and attitudes. New information, as opposed to available information, presented to the decision makers is usually offered as expert opinion rather than as an expert's analysis of new data.

The shortfalls of a Quick Study are sometimes obscured by an array of statistics, impressive graphs, pie charts, tables, and statistical discussions. Since most readers of studies are discomforted when they encounter statistics and are not aware of other types of studies, they tend to avoid challenging the adequacy of data collection and analysis.

One person, and sometimes two, can perform a Quick Study in several days. The credentials of the persons performing the study usually do not usually make much difference in the utility of the information. Limited data and information can only produce limited answers even if the analyst is a widely acclaimed expert.

The Quick Study is often used in prearchitectural assessments of jail needs because it is low in cost and can be accomplished in a short time. The quick study is responsive to the short time requirement for studies imposed by some communities. For some reason that puzzles planners, communities that have had jail problems for years will call for a study to be completed in a few weeks.

Rarely does the Quick Study build a strong case that describes how the capacity requirements of a future jail could be altered. Opinions may be offered about additional programs, but the information stops short of presenting the kind of analysis needed to develop a compelling case. As a result, counties trying to be frugal in the prearchitectural planning of a jail often end up paying much more in architectural fees (based on size/capacity), in construction costs, and in staffing and operation.

PURPOSE OF AN OFFENDER POPULATION MANAGEMENT STUDY

The purpose of the Offender Population Management Study is to provide information that will support development of a two pronged strategy which (a) controls jail population growth and (b) ensures that the jail is part of a continuum of appropriate supervision and treatment options. Rather than seeing a jail as a stand-alone entity, an Offender Management Plan would seek to raise the effectiveness of the jail as a means for supervising pretrial defendants, for punishing and changing behavior of sentenced offenders, and for deterring would-be offenders. This plan would apply to both the pretrial and locally sentenced portions of the offender population.

The underlying premise of the Offender Population Management Study is that all systems can be improved. Experience indicates that the improvements can be surprising in terms of impact on the jail and benefits provided to criminal justice decision makers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE POPULATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

There are four characteristics of an effective population management system that a study must address:

1. Comprehensiveness
2. Coordination
3. Timeliness
4. Explicitness

These four characteristics differentiate between a well functioning system that uses the jail in an effective and efficient manner and a loosely knit system that inflates jail bed requirements.

The first characteristic, comprehensiveness, pertains to the availability of resources. Judges often face the dilemma of not having adequate local pretrial supervision and sentencing options. In some communities a jail is the primary option for dealing with the majority of repeat minor offenders. Given the number of times that some offenders return to jail, the efficacy of jail as a deterrent must be questioned. For a large portion of returning minor offenders, jail is a place to watch television, play cards, talk with others, eat three meals a day, and sleep. None of those features hold any particular promise for changing behavior.

In developing an enhanced offender management strategy, an important step involves the assessment of the portion of coverage that each option contributes to a continuum of supervision and treatment. This assessment will help determine if any programs should be expanded and new options made available. Such an assessment would take into account the needs of the incarcerated population, program budgets, staffing, policies, and current practices.

The second characteristic of a local offender management system that a study must examine is the coordination of services. An effective system facilitates both the sequencing and combination of supervision and treatment options. Rather than using sanctions in an "either - or" fashion, consideration should also be given to "stepping down" or "stepping up" offenders from most to least restrictive supervision and treatment options. In this manner sanctions can be tailored to address the changing functional levels and needs of offenders as they move through a coordinated system that provides a progressive structure for change. Thus, an enhanced offender management system is more than a collection of loose-knit sentencing and pretrial release options.

Substance abuse is a major problem of the majority of jail inmates. The jail, by itself, does nothing to diminish the internal cravings associated with substance abuse. However, the jail, "step-down" supervision, and treatment can be integrated in innovative ways so that the potential for success in treatment is increased. This combination of services often produces greater accountability by the offender than in the traditional system of loosely knit sanctions.

The third characteristic of an effective offender population management system is that of timeliness of events. Delays in the processing of cases and in providing services affect the size of the jail population as well as reducing the impact

of some supervision and treatment options. Studies of delay reduction in moving cases through the criminal justice system indicate that frequently as much as one-fourth to one-third of the length of stay of defendants in jail can be reduced. Delays are also caused by insufficient program resources of treatment providers. This results in backlogs and waiting lists. Sometimes these backlogs can be reduced by modifying operations. Often, there is a cost-savings gained by funding additional resources in lieu of constructing additional jail beds.

The fourth characteristic, explicitness, means that essential features of the offender management system must be clearly defined and documented. Although this aspect sounds simplistic, often local systems do not meet the test of being explicit. Selection criteria for supervision options and treatment programs need to be objective and documented. There is a difference between being explicit and hobbling the prerogative of judges to administer justice. For example, the lack of objective screening criteria for supervision and treatment programs is often associated with ineffectiveness and high rates of program failure. Few judges are so short-sighted that they purposely want to see an offender fail in a program.

Program operations should also be defined and standardized to ensure establishment of an efficient and effective system that can be sustained. The process of documenting operational procedures for a continuum of options would work out the mechanics of how programs work in conjunction with each another. This would reduce conflicts in referral procedures and inconsistencies in operations that detract from the coordination of services.

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN AN OFFENDER POPULATION MANAGEMENT STUDY

The Offender Population Management Study pursues questions that facilitate development of a comprehensive, coordinated, and explicit plan for managing the offender population and controlling growth of the jail population:

- Why is the jail population growing?
- What arrest practices have changed?
 - What charging and diversion practices being used by the prosecutor have changed?
- What judicial policies have changed?
- How have community conditions changed?
 - How have criminal offending patterns changed?
 - How quickly are cases processed through the court system?
 - What delays exist in case processing?
- What are the levels of supervision needed by the inmates based on calculations using an objective classification instrument?
- What are the specific treatment needs of the inmates?
- How many inmates in the jail could qualify for various alternatives to incarceration if they existed?
- How do capacity and operations of agencies supervising offenders affect the size the jail population?
- Could the coordination between criminal justice agencies be improved as it relates to managing the jail population?
- Are there operational or location aspects that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of managing the offender population?
- What are the steps required to implement various changes and improvements?

The information needed to answer the questions above would require a variety of data collection activities including:

- Interviews
 - Staff in the county's law enforcement agencies including the organization's administrator and the manager of the patrol division
 - Jail Administrator

- Judges
- Prosecutor
- Public Defender
- County Commissioners
- Probation
- Youth Services
- Treatment providers
- Data Collection on Inmates
 - Information on inmates from paper files
 - Data from special interviews
 - Health provider/nurse/doctor assessments of individual needs
 - Jail staff assessments of inmate behavior
- Criminal justice system case processing data and estimates
- Review of policies and procedures of the various criminal justice agencies
- Review of program selection criteria used by the various agencies
- Review of some operational costs
- Site reviews to examine operational and layout considerations that affect agency interaction and efficiency in offender processing and management

PROCEDURAL ISSUES IN AN OFFENDER POPULATION MANAGEMENT STUDY

Although an Offender Population Management study is thorough, it is far from being an in-depth criminal justice system study. The focus of an Offender Population Management Study is on specific features of criminal justice agencies and service providers that affect growth of the pretrial and sentenced jail populations. Since the use or non-use of appropriate alternatives to incarceration affect the size of the detention population, actions that affect the intake of defendants, their length of stay in jail, revocation of offenders under supervision, and success in treatment must be considered. These actions span the entire range of the local criminal justice system from point of arrest to point of last service. Although the study cuts across the entire criminal justice system, the scope of study is narrower than a performance audit that examines details of management and daily operations.

Staffing of the Offender Population Management Study requires two to four persons, depending on how the activities are assigned. Two people are required to conduct interviews in jails of 100 inmates and more people will be required in larger jails. In small jails all inmates will be interviewed and in larger jails, a sample of the population will be taken. Often two people are involved in conducting interviews of criminal justice system representatives and treatment service providers.

The time required for data collection may span three to four weeks. Interviews of criminal justice system staff and treatment providers usually can be accomplished in a week, although conflicts in schedules of agency staff sometimes prolong the effort. Data requests submitted to local and state agencies often take two to three additional weeks to be returned because of processing delays.

Appointment of a project oversight committee can be very helpful in an Offender Population Management Study. This committee should include key representatives of the local criminal justice system. Committee members should meet as a working group to learn about methodology and logistical concerns relevant to them, to assist in coordinating study activities, and to discuss findings, recommendations, and agreements at conclusion of the study.

Although a wide range of issues will be examined, not all concerns will be discussed in an open forum. Some agency-specific issues will be addressed only with relevant agency staff. In this manner, ideas can be explored and developed in an atmosphere that respects managerial integrity. The process of exploring and developing ideas sometimes requires several on-site visits by project staff.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line of an Offender Population Management Study pertains to cost effectiveness and efficiency. Jail capacity requirements usually can be reduced, improved sanctions/options can be provided for judges, prosecutors, and public defenders, and the cycle of recidivism can be altered. If criminal justice system managers keep in mind that all systems can be improved, the possibility exists, with their help, that a thorough review of the offender management system will benefit their agencies and the community as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Allen Beck began examining methods of planning jails in 1977 and has performed studies of jail populations in more than 35 counties. The concepts in this article reflect an evolution of thinking during the course of those many jail studies. His knowledge about jails comes from experience in working with incarcerated populations, academic coursework, special funded research, examining many jails, training jail staff, and planning jails. Dr. Beck is a principal of Justice Concepts Incorporated. Dr. Beck can be contacted at Justice Concepts Inc., 417 W. 87th Place, Kansas City, MO 64114, Phone: (816) 361-1711, Email: abeck@justiceconcepts.com.

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