



Measuring Success: Improving the Effectiveness of Correctional Facilities

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INTRODUCTION

While headlines are trumpeting decreased crime rates across America, a different and troubling story lies just beneath them: The number of people in prison has continued to rise. Overall, the nation's correctional population is swelling at 3.2 percent per year; in some states, the growth rate among those behind bars is double the national average, led by Minnesota (up 11.4 percent), Idaho (up 11.1 percent), and Georgia (up 8.3 percent).¹

Those responsible for state and federal corrections face grim challenges when attempting to manage constantly growing populations. Public safety demands no-escape facilities, and public sympathy lies with the corrections staff, whose safety is critical. But public interest also favors lower taxes, which means fewer and fewer resources can be allotted to each individual incarcerated.

Communities across the nation are quietly feeling their own pinch. County jails are over-crowded, demanding more staff, more support, more overtime, and more money. Of those removed from the community to state and federal facilities, fully 97 percent will return to the community—most in about two years—triggering new public safety concerns.² Worse, those who have been imprisoned are statistically destined (68 percent) to be rearrested for new offenses. Even if we ignore the fact that so many offenders are returning to prison, the social cost to families and neighborhoods is enormous. Policing, criminal justice and court systems, public aid, public defense, and family interventions and support all drive costs constantly higher, prompting local officials to demand change in the system. Overall, there is growing concern that the system is ineffective in ensuring the 'punishment' and behavior modification desired.

Three realities have emerged from research across the nation. First, the "lock 'em and leave 'em" approach, in which "corrections" means little more than warehousing people, is a political agenda that has failed. It installs a revolving door on correctional facilities, taking in and sending out people who are more likely to return to prison than to succeed in their communities.

This method has left correctional professionals with short funding and inadequate tools to do a task that they know can be done successfully.

Second, the cost of a non-responsive corrections system is staggering. For a comparatively few dollars each day, funders can provide treatment for alcohol- and drug-dependence (which impacts a majority of those in prison) and learning which yields new skills, a mentality of self respect once they have success, new trades, and new opportunities for employment after release. These services cost mere pennies when compared to the dollars wasted on a system that refuses to fund the tools that will provide the appropriate corrective measures to reduce recidivism.

Third, with current metrics not working, both the public and the professionals are demanding accountability for outcomes-based management. Corrections facilities are increasingly being held to outcomes measured by post-release factors including not just recidivism, but continued education, employment, and the payment of taxes. Taxpayers and corrections leaders agree that a revolving door wastes both lives and dollars. The "savings" realized by cutting treatment and education are, in fact, the most expensive strategies imaginable in the world of corrections.

THE SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING

Of the prison population in state institutions alone, three out of four offenders have been convicted of non-violent crimes and, on average, will be released to return to our communities having served an average of 16 months behind bars.³ What happens during their incarceration will have a dramatic impact on the individual, the community, and the costs to government.

The return of these non-violent offenders to our community can be either a story of great success or a dismal failure depending on the 'effectiveness' of the time spent in prison. Was the 'punishment' effective, were they 'secure', was the community 'safe', did they receive 'humane' treatment, were they treated for drug and alcohol 'dependency', and was the time well spent getting the 'education and training' needed for them to succeed on the outside?

The fact is that, to date, our corrections system continues to fail in achieving these goals. Within three years of their release from prison, about 70 percent of nonviolent releases are rearrested for new crimes. In fact, if we look back, over 80 percent of these releases had prior convictions suggesting the 'failure' of their earlier prison experience.⁴ They are cycled in and out

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of our prisons, recommitting crimes in our communities along the way, and we continue to ignore the impact of new crimes and the escalating cost of crime, policing, and re-incarceration.

It does not and should not have to be this way. By in large nonviolent offenders are young, they have known drug and alcohol dependency, and they are severely undereducated and unskilled with obvious training needs. These offenders need the confidence that new skills provide giving them legitimate careers. There is clear and convincing evidence that successful, well-managed prisons can make small but significant program investments that are both cost effective and will reduce recidivism by up to 40 percent.⁵

The dimensions for defining a successful correctional facility are clear. They must be safe, secure, humane, provide effective correctional programming, and be well managed. Not only is crime and its associated costs reduced, but the overall effect is widespread.⁶ For every dollar spent on treatment for this population, somewhere between three and seven dollars in savings is gained in crime-related cost savings, increased earnings, and reduced health care expenditures, not to mention improved outcomes for offenders.⁷ Individuals who participated in correctional education programs earned higher wages upon release than non-participants.⁸ Recidivism rates of participants in correctional education, vocational, and work programs have been found to be 20 to 40 percent lower than those of non-participants. Participants in work programs are more likely to be employed following release and have higher earnings than non-participants.⁹ Correctional facilities without effective programs are only adding to the problem.

JUSTICE AS A BUSINESS

Deb Minardi, Deputy Administrator of Community Corrections Programs, Office of Probation Administration for the State of Nebraska, recently commented that “in the world of justice we have to start thinking like a business, and in business you wouldn’t do things that weren’t producing results. We do have to pay more attention to the research so the results make sense and have positive impact, in particular as it relates to recidivism. This is the wave of the future.”¹⁰
Gaseau, M. (2006)

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL CORRECTIONAL FACILITY?

A successful prison is one that can demonstrate to its elected officials, public, press, correctional agency managers, staff, and offenders that all mission critical areas are being addressed. Many corrections professionals say that their primary mission is to protect the public. However, they have yet to adopt the notion that this mission includes preparing the offender for successful return to society by providing programming that reduces the likelihood the offender will commit more crimes.

The determination of a successful facility includes the provision of a safe and secure environment where offender quality of life meets basic welfare needs. Additionally, the successful prison must have programs that prepare the offenders for reentry into society, thus protecting the public from further effects of crime upon the release of the offenders from custody. Finally, the successful prison must be accountable for and manage the scarce taxpayer provided resources to achieve the greatest impact, while continuously looking for innovative, efficient, and effective ways to improve service as well as identified outcome standards.

INDICATORS OF A SUCCESSFUL FACILITY

The main areas of correctional facility performance can be measured within four dimensions. These dimensions are not unique and every facility has the ability to gather data or to tap into these basic areas of facility operations. These dimensions can be further defined and subjected to systemic measurement either at the organizational or specific institutional level. They can be readily measured through classification records, infirmary visits, incident logs, grievance records, offender work records, disciplinary records, education records, mental health records, and personnel records. Further, surveys of offenders and staff can be employed like a census, to assess attitudes towards a wide variety of correctional facility issues.

Historically, correctional systems’ focus of primary concern is one of ‘public safety’ and punishment. However, corrections professionals tend to limit the scope of that activity to keep offenders within the prison. In actuality, successfully keeping the public truly safe would require reducing the likelihood that those released from prison will go on to re-offend. Therefore, in addition to punishment, it is time to

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reconsider the traditional goals of corrections—we must make the most of the time an offender spends behind bars in order to prepare them for their successful return to society. Truly, only then is long-term public safety and protection achievable.

HUMANE TREATMENT

While inmates are sent to prison as punishment by the community, corrections professionals understand that it is not their job to further punish them while they are incarcerated. Mistakenly, some in society believe this is or should be corrections' role. Warden Rich Gansheimer (2006)

All correctional facilities must be accountable to standard performance criteria that can be measured across the system. Only then can we identify successful correctional facilities as well as systems that are effective in reducing the number of offenders that return to the correctional system. Facilities that perform well in all of the following four dimensions of facility performance may indicate successful correctional facilities.

Safety and Security

- Correctional facilities must be secure places, without escapes.
- Since most offenders have had drug problems, staff must prevent drugs and other contraband from entering.
- Offenders and staff need to be kept safe (e.g. assaults, work accidents). There should be no murders, no hostage situations, few assaults on either offenders or staff, and a small number of racial disorders or gang related incidents.
- Disorder should be kept to minimum allowing offenders to work and attend programming.

Quality of Life

- Offenders are entitled to basic “core” human rights (e.g., proper housing, clothing and bedding, personal hygiene, health care, contact with the outside world, and access to a qualified representative of the offender’s chosen faith).
- Offenders should be housed in decent conditions; correctional facilities can be evaluated on the basis of crowding, population density, cleanliness, light, air quality, and sanitation.

- Facilities have an obligation to provide care, not inflict suffering, and to prevent suicide, malnutrition, and degradation of mental faculties.
- To establish a safe and orderly environment, there needs to be a due process system of discipline and sanctions.
- To address offender grievances with policy, practice, and staff members, a system of administrative remedies must be available.
- Successful facilities are those that deliver proper medical, dental, and mental health services, as well as provide food and recreation.
- Family networks are a connection to normalcy and visits are often an important factor in offender rehabilitation. Successful facilities provide continued contact with the outside and maintenance of positive family networks.

Reentry Preparation

- A system of risk/needs assessment leading to classification is essential to protect society and segregate offenders, while providing additional experiences where offenders can learn pro-social behavior. An orientation to program opportunities is a critical function.

ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE REDUCTION IN RECIDIVISM RATES

Work and Education Programs for the General Offender Population

- Basic adult education programs in prison –5.1%
- Vocational education in prison –12.6%
- Correctional Industries programs in prison –7.8%
- Employment training and job assistance in the community –4.8%

Programs for Drug-Involved Offenders

- Cognitive-behavioral drug treatment in prison –6.8%
- In-prison “therapeutic communities” with community aftercare –6.9%
- In-prison “therapeutic communities” without community aftercare –5.3%

Aos, et al. (2006)¹¹

- Because many offenders lack a positive work ethic and skills, facilities need to have a system that provides access to job training opportunities, enabling employment with career job availability

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that provides a living wage to support the inmate and family.

- As most offenders do not possess a basic education, educational programming geared toward diploma attainment is essential before returning to the free world.
- Substance abuse and other treatment programs address specific criminogenic needs that offenders have. Successful facilities provide cognitive behavioral treatment programs targeted to issues that contributed to the offender's incarceration.
- Offenders need to learn to use free time productively, through involvement in recreational activities and use of libraries. Successful facilities provide organized recreation programs that parallel programs outside of prison.
- When offender programming is implemented effectively, recidivism is reduced. Successful facilities (and systems) are those that reduce recidivism.
- Engaging private industry in building real factories behind fences that provide training, wage earning, and a product that can be sold unrestricted on the open market.

Management

- A stable staff complement provides a more responsive environment; staff turnover and absenteeism can contribute to security and safety gaps.
- With high levels of staff vacancy, overtime is required, resulting in staff burnout, morale issues, and training requirements that affect the overall performance and productivity of the facility.
- Monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of operation provides insight into what drives the per-diem costs. The public is increasingly aware of the cost associated with operating facilities and is demanding that tax dollars be spent wisely.
- Correctional facilities run on the basis of rules and fairness in the application of the rules; facilities must ensure that systems which address offender misconduct and provide administrative remedies for offenders are fair.
- Use of volunteers contributes to better community relations, a reduction in post release challenges, and expanded program services.
- Collecting input from staff and offenders on the facility operation provides valuable insight and

actionable ideas about all facets of the institutional environment.

- Planning for reentry from day one is consistent with the purpose of prison and supports offenders with what they need to be successful in society.

The most important ingredient in a successful facility is management. A safe, secure, and industrious facility depends on its staff. Indeed, the recruitment and retention of staff is the single most important ingredient in a successful facility. High turnover can be indicative of poor morale, which can lead to operational problems. A successful facility is one with "low" employee turnover and high levels of employee satisfaction, which can be measured or assessed through system-wide employee surveys.

SOCIAL CLIMATE AND FACILITY PERFORMANCE

The Federal Bureau of Prisons uses the Prison Social Climate Survey to gather extensive information on prison performance. The data are then subjected to close examination by highly trained researchers. Prisons can then be ranked on various dimensions to ascertain performance and evaluate management of its facilities.¹²

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Creating a national performance measurement system is needed to clarify misunderstandings, establish outcome-based standards, design measurable outcomes, allow cross-agency evaluations, encourage management to be future oriented, and provide motivation for using performance as a basis for management and the decision-making process.

There is a need to include both the agency and individual units or prisons as levels within the criteria.¹³ The driving forces behind both of these organizational levels are the mission, goals, and objectives. Understanding these guiding premises is essential in the broader context of prison operations and potential differences between institutions. Further, there is a need to capture data on important characteristics of the offenders (e.g., demographics—sex, age, race/ethnicity, offense type, average sentence length, and average time served). The data collection "should capitalize on the best information available, including prison audits, objective indicators, survey of staff and inmates, and under some circumstances, narratives of the context in which the analysis is done."¹⁴

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OUTCOME STANDARDS

A formal system of outcome standards for America's prisons will absolutely reduce crime, reduce costs, and significantly increase effective and humane treatment of inmates.

Consistent with the indicators of success, institutions need to be held accountable for outcomes and delivering services that meet performance standards. Outcome measures follow from the standards for a successful correctional facility mentioned above. The performance standards and related outcome measures would likely include:

Safety and Security

- Escape rate.
- Inmate death rate (i.e., homicides/suicides/natural).
- Disturbance rate.
- Assault (i.e., all types) rate.
- Sexual misconduct/harassment rate.
- Safety/incident rate.
- Amount and type of contraband found.
- Positive drug test rate.
- Inmate to staff ratio.
- Reentry failure rate.¹⁵

Quality of Life

- Proportion of inmates on treatment plans for chronic health, dental and mental health situations, and whether conditions were maintained or improved.
- Overcrowding rate.
- Degree of sanitation within the correctional facility.
- Perception of meal quality.
- Proportion of inmates actively involved in recreation program(s).

Reentry Preparation

- Proportion of offenders working in meaningful career building experiences.

- Proportion of eligible offender education (i.e., ABE, GED, High School, Post Secondary) completions.
- Career and technical training certificates.
- Proportion of inmates involved in product production or product services.
- Substance abuse education/treatment completions.
- Proportion of inmates participating in spiritual development program(s).
- Proportion of inmates actively involved in programs (i.e., all types).
- Proportion of inmates engaged with family and friends (i.e., phone calls, letters, and visits).

Management

- Staff voluntary and involuntary terminations (i.e., turnover rate).
- Overtime (i.e., hours and costs).
- Proportion of allocated funds not spent.
- Inmate daily per-diem cost.
- Proportion of staff who meet training requirements (i.e., type, level, proportion of staff).
- Proportion of inmate misconduct findings upheld.
- Staff misconduct rate.
- Proportion of grievances dispositions upheld (i.e., medical, dental, mental health and food).
- Volunteerism rate.
- Staff and offender perceptions (i.e., safety, security, quality of life, and management).

FACILITY COSTS

The cost of operations to any [contracting] entity is very crucial and will be a deciding factor in the public eye. Warden James Frawner (2006)

In addition to outcomes, there are a number of process actions (i.e., inmate screening, facility accreditation, inmate misconduct reports, frequency and efficacy of institutional searches, level of sanitation within the facility, inmate grievances filed by type, etc.) that institutions must also take into account to provide context for other performance measures.¹⁶ Prisons are responsible for effectively implementing actions and

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programs that will result in a reduction in the number of inmates who are returned to prison, leading to a count of inmates who failed to successfully reenter society (i.e., recidivism rate).

Facilities that uniformly work to improve outcomes within these dimensions are progressing towards a success-oriented model. Improving performance requires facilities to benchmark activities over time; performance data is essential to demonstrate progress.

PERFORMANCE DATA

Establishing outcome-based standards and associated measures for performance alone will not lead to better quality institutions. The Association of State Correctional Administrators (ASCA) recognized this need and is now developing a set of standard definitions and a national data collection system. Data needs to be collected on each outcome area and made available to the media, elected officials, and public. Demographic data will also need to be collected on inmates to help determine if any factors that are present are influencing the outcomes. The system must be standardized so that institutions can be compared for effectiveness. As of today, this system is still being developed.

Standardized measures of success are needed to track the correctional industry's progress in reaching the expectations for the nation, as well as to guide public planning and policy making. Comparative information on quality is also needed for use in selecting effective and efficient programs and institutions. Furthermore, valid and stable quality measures are integral to efforts to improve performance, and, when standardized, encourage correctional organizations to learn from each other through a process of benchmarking.

Despite the increase in frequency of efforts to measure and report on operational quality, useful information is neither uniformly nor widely available.

Improving our ability to measure quality has been the object of significant public and private sector activity over the last decade, reflecting the expectation that measurement can serve both as a catalyst and a tool for improvement. While considerable advancements have been made in the quality measurement field in recent years, current efforts fall short of fully meeting the outcomes necessary to support efforts to reduce recidivism.

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE

The quality of any decision is entirely dependent on the nature and use of the information available. It is well known that timely and reliable information guides the formulation of policy and initiates reform. Given the emphasis on reform in the present paper, this elementary point cannot be overstated. Results-oriented management establishes a basis by which policymakers and the public can assess long and short-term progress, as administrators monitor, evaluate, and report results to gauge success or failure.

Managing for performance and time-oriented outcomes contributes to fiscal efficiency, quality decision making, reliable operations, and the quality and utility of information at the disposal of the legislature and the public. Increasing public access and review of performance results enhances the information available to and incentives for managers in their quest for efficiency and effectiveness in delivering public services. Effective, well-performing institutions are models to emulate; such models require both accountability and transparency.

WE NEED ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The American Correctional Association (ACA) began the process of developing operating guidelines more than 125 years ago. The Association of State Correctional Administrators (ASCA) has also been very active in the development of an outcome-based performance measures system, with a recent major initiative to establish national standards, definitions, and counting rules. ASCA has created a technology infrastructure to facilitate data collection and exchange through a Web-based application. These are very important steps toward a uniform, performance-based measures system. However, there is need for more public awareness and completion of the project, which still has several standards remaining to be addressed. Further, some agencies nationwide still do not maintain a performance indicator system. (Sources: The ACA and ASCA Web sites, 2006).

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ACCOUNTABILITY: WHERE DOES THE BUCK STOP?

The public must hold correctional institutions and all those involved responsible for their actions. Traditionally, governments have emphasized organizational forms in which responsibilities are arranged hierarchically, with the ultimate responsibility for detailed decisions resting at the top, with the executive or legislature itself. A well-managed system is one that clearly identifies responsible parties for the governance over the use of public resources.

Institutional management and staff should be judged against a formal set of outcomes. In this manner, agency heads can take action when facilities underperform. Actions should be based on a system which includes a set of incentives for stellar performance, as well as sanctions up to and including replacement for failing to meet benchmarked outcome thresholds. In addition to this system of accountability, there is a need to tie in performance-based budgeting.

Performance-based budgeting for government services is one of the most advanced reforms sweeping the halls of government. Put simply, performance-based budgeting is the allocation of funds based on performance and results, not on political favoritism or arbitrary adjustments to last year's budget request. It effectively ties appropriations to outcomes so that agencies spend tax dollars on the programs or activities that produce the highest level of outcomes—in other words, the most “bang for the buck.” The use of performance-based budgeting leads to qualitative enhancements in public administration by promoting improved outcomes. Since performance-based budgeting shifts government agencies' focus squarely to how best to deliver results and performance, it not only reinvents the budgeting process, it reinvents government itself.

By implementing performance-based budgeting, the true cost of services can be known—and with the transparency of true costs, comparisons can be made to other programs and cost-benefit analyses conducted. Elected officials and the public should expect a high level of transparency. Operating under a condition of complete openness sustains elements of accountability, and thus, is important in establishing an environment that is accountable. Simply stated, a transparent environment means that “all the cards are on the table.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

It is critical to achieve a return on taxpayer investments in the corrections system. With performance measures and a system to capture and publicly display data, elected officials and corrections professionals can now discuss how to improve outcomes. With greater targeted investments in programs that demonstrate they work, more offenders will be leaving with the academic and technical skills needed to get and hold a job. If offenders leave better prepared to succeed in society and the workplace, criminal justice costs, such as policing, courts, and reincarceration, will be reduced. Further, reducing the collateral costs to the community and collecting taxes that might be paid by working ex-offenders all point to a huge return on the investment in corrections, specifically in regards to prison programs.

RECIDIVISM REDUCTION SAVINGS

Applying the average cost of \$64.10 per day¹⁷ with over 650,000 offenders being released each year¹⁸ and a return to prison rate of 51.8 percent within 3 years¹⁹, the estimated return on the investment of prison and reentry programming is well over \$100 million for incarceration costs alone, for every percentage point drop in recidivism achieved.

PUBLIC POLICY INVESTMENTS

Once performance based outcomes are established and information is publicly disclosed, legitimate discussions can take place about what type of investments are needed to address factors that adversely impact the outcomes that the public cares most about. Focusing on the real issue of achieving specific outcomes and delivering service according to performance standards eliminates arguments over who provides a service (i.e., public or private).

Reentry is a critical to the successful transition of offenders. We need a system that provides reentry guidance and supports the needs of offenders released under supervision, as well as processes that help those who are no longer under commitment to the criminal justice system. With a multitude of adjustments required, release and reentry programs are worthwhile investments.

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CONCLUSION

America's correctional professionals must focus on what works, and it is also time for our corrections system to focus on reporting outcome-oriented organizational and program results. The competitive nature of resource allocation requires correctional professionals to be clear about intentions, measuring and understanding results, and making adjustments where necessary, if they are to assure taxpayers that their money is being spent wisely, as well as secure continuing and additional resources.

The coming challenge in corrections is the development and implementation of outcome standards for effective facility operations and management. The problem with the American corrections system is not so much a lack of financial resources as it is a general failure to be held accountable for effective change for all who inhabit our correctional facilities. Corrections organizations must be held accountable to a standard greater than the current practice. Simply releasing offenders and "hoping for the best" is no longer viable given the financial burden on state and federal budgets. The public is demanding a more effective and efficient mode of operation, and it is our job to meet this need.

Policy-makers have a public responsibility to establish clear expectations for performance based on outcomes, holding those that do not measure up accountable. Hundreds of thousands of offenders flow through this country's prison and jails, and correctional administrators are at the mercy of the systems that shuffle around individuals who end up in the correctional web and strapped fiscal budgets. Correctional organizations exist in a larger complex environment heavily influenced by public opinion, the media, and political activity. However, managers overseeing poor performing facilities cannot expect to continue to collect more of the taxpayer dollar. Therefore, decisions must be based on performance, rather than politics.

There can be no clearer argument—an offender's time in a facility should be well spent in order to avoid a return stay. Maintaining a safe and secure facility is primary, for nothing goes further unless this mission is achieved. However, correctional facilities must be accountable for the time offenders spend behind bars and the degree to which efforts have improved the condition of the offender such that the propensity to re-offend is reduced. Without changing the current path, incarceration will rise, outpacing facility capacity and squeezing ever-shrinking resources.

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