

STAFF-INMATE RATIOS: WHY IT'S SO HARD TO GET TO THE BOTTOM LINE

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STAFF-INMATE RATIOS: WHY IT'S SO HARD TO GET TO THE BOTTOM LINE

By Barbara Krauth

Introduction

One of the first questions asked by many officials and administrators involved in planning a new jail is, “What should the staff-to-inmate ratio be?” It is natural for this question to emerge early in the planning process because its answer, more than any other factor, will determine the total cost of operations. In most jails, staff costs comprise as much as 70 percent of the budget each year.¹

Unfortunately, the real answer to the question is, “It depends. . . .” Although the response is obviously unsatisfactory, it is in fact the only correct one. Even if one compares two facilities with similar physical layouts, the same number of inmates, and the same general management philosophy, their staff-inmate ratios are much more likely to differ than to be alike. And because no two jails are exactly alike, it is impossible to suggest ideal ratios.

The purpose of this paper is to explain why it is so difficult to get to the desired “bottom line” on the issue of staffing ratios. The paper is not intended to define a specific process for conducting a staffing analysis.² Instead, it is meant to raise awareness about the range of decisions involved in defining the unique characteristics of each facility. Complex variables must be balanced throughout the process of planning a new jail; the resulting decisions must, at the end of that process, determine both the numbers and types of staff that will be needed.

The staff-inmate ratio in a jail is not simply an issue of efficiency or effectiveness; one approach to staffing is not wrong, another right. There is a tendency to believe that a larger staff means more effective operations—for example, that an increase in the number of security staff will create a safer, more secure environment, or that an increase in treatment staff will improve inmate morale. To test this hypothesis, the American Justice Institute conducted a study in 1984, concluding that “poor staff-inmate ratios are not the

¹ Jay Farbstein, *Correctional Facility Planning and Design*, 2nd ed.(New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co, 1986), 51.

² For a publication with this purpose, see *Staffing Analysis Workbook for Jails*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 1988).

key variables which determine the public safety, internal safety, climate and work . . .” and that “there is really no ideal staffing pattern.”³

An opposing theory is that a smaller staff is more efficient. According to this theory, it is desirable to employ fewer staff per inmate because this will save money. Again, the answer is, “It depends.” Whether or not a smaller staff will be more efficient depends on such things as the classification(s) of inmates in the institution, the design of the facility, the types and qualifications of staff, the management approach, and above all, on the correctional philosophy governing the operation of the jail.

To those not familiar with the differences between jails and other kinds of agency operations, staff-inmate ratios in jails often seem unnecessarily large. However, the bare numbers do not make evident the important fact that a jail must be staffed on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis. (On average, it takes five staff persons to cover one post that must operate on a seven-day, 24 hour basis.)

Depending on staff-inmate ratios, either to plan for staffing needs in a new facility or to evaluate staffing in an existing one, is misleading. Ratios do not give an accurate picture of how many people are working at one time or of what they are doing. A ratio also ignores the fact that some staff are in administration or support services and thus do not work directly with inmates. Nor does a ratio take into account that many agencies provide some services through contracts with other groups or individuals rather than through staff of the facility.

In terms of liability, as well, the ratio of staff to inmates is not the central issue. Instead, the central question is, “Did you have the right number of properly trained staff, in the right places, at the right time, doing the right things?” What is important is the way staff are trained, assigned, and managed, not just how many there are.

Although the process of determining staff needs is complex, answers to some basic questions provide at least a starting point for understanding what is involved:

- Who and how many will be in the jail, why, and for how long?
- On what operational philosophy will the facility be based?
- What kinds of services do you want to provide for inmates?
- What will be the jail’s physical layout?
- How do you want to supervise the inmates?

Each of these issues is addressed on the pages that follow, along with its implications for staffing.

³ American Justice Institute, *The Impact of Differing Staffing Ratios on Prison Environments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1984).

Basic Issues

Inmate Population: Who Will Be in the Jail—How Many, Why, and For How Long?

Jail size affects staff needs; small facilities often require more staff per inmate than large facilities. Although each housing unit in a small jail is likely to have fewer inmates than those in large jails, the same number of staff may be required to supervise each unit as in a larger jail.

Similarly, services in larger jails may benefit from economies of scale that are unavailable to smaller facilities. Certain staffing levels cannot be avoided in small jails, because some minimum number is necessary for continuation of basic operations. For example, a kitchen with one cook may be able to prepare food for twenty-five inmates or for seventy. Although the proportion of staff to inmates cannot be predicted simply by knowing the size of the inmate population, in general, a small jail is likely to require a higher staff-inmate ratio than would a large one.

Staffing patterns are also determined by the types of inmates included in a jail's inmate population. The custody level of inmates in the facility, for example, clearly dictates the level of control to be exercised and thus the number and types of staff needed.

Jails whose populations are comprised primarily of inmates held only for a short time—either pre-trial detainees or sentenced offenders—usually provide fewer services and thus require fewer staff than those holding mostly inmates who are serving lengthy sentences. Counseling and education, for example, are usually not available to inmates held for short periods in a local facility.

On the other hand, a larger proportion of intake staff is likely to be required in facilities with highly transient populations. Depending on their designs, these facilities may also require higher levels of staff surveillance in order to prevent suicide attempts, which are most prevalent among inmates newly admitted to custody.

On What Operational Philosophy Will the Facility Be Based?

The operational philosophy of a facility:

- is the starting point for determining the programs and services to be provided;
- provides direction for the facility design; and
- determines specific management approaches governing facility operations.

Questions related to design, level of service, and method of supervision can therefore be addressed only after this philosophy has been determined and articulated.

An operational philosophy is usually expressed by developing a mission statement early in the planning process. The operational philosophy reflects the beliefs not only of county

officials but of the community as a whole, as it expresses the emphasis given by the locale to benefiting: 1) the community, and/or 2) the inmates. The jail's major responsibilities, both to the community and to the staff and inmates, are to provide security, safety, and service, but the degree of emphasis placed on each of these aspects by a particular facility depends on the operational philosophy under which it is managed.

The relative importance given in a facility to the four conventional categories of broad correctional philosophy—incapacitation, retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation—serves as the basis for all decisions related to that facility. Most facilities are based on some combination of these approaches rather than on a single philosophy. The philosophy on which the facility places its emphasis, however, significantly affects where, how many, and when to assign staff. An agency emphasizing restraint, for example, will allocate more staff to security positions than will one stressing rehabilitation, which is likely to make heavy commitments of staff to education, treatment, and work programs.

Level of Service: How Much Service Do You Want to Provide?

Among the important elements determined by a facility's operational philosophy is the level of service that will be made available. The degree to which a new jail will be a vehicle for providing such services as education, counseling, or work depends in large part on the underlying premises that define its mission.

The discussion of appropriate service level must take place at the point of planning a new facility. Although there is some flexibility in adjusting services in facilities that are already operating, it is necessarily limited. A jail with no office space for counselors, for example, can probably add counseling services at a later date, but with more difficulty.

Professional jail standards and recent court decisions affecting jails provide guidance for a jail's minimum responsibilities. They define the requirements for a jail to provide certain services, such as health care, and make it clear that inmates have such rights as recreation time. However, standards and court decisions tend to address only minimum levels required; they do not provide guidance about appropriate or optimum levels of service to be provided. These decisions are based on planners' and administrators' agreements about each jail's mission and the degree to which it has a responsibility to meet inmates' needs.

For example, one jail planner/administrator may decide that a proposed jail will meet, but not exceed, the standard maintaining that inmates need at least one hour of recreation per day. The jail may then be designed with a single outdoor recreation area through which inmates will be rotated during the day. Another administrator, believing that inmate activity is important and should be encouraged, might include in a new facility an indoor recreation room, a multi-purpose room, and perhaps weights or other equipment. Such decisions, made on the basis of overall philosophy, have strong consequences not only for facility design and equipment costs but also for staffing. The level of service to be provided affects both the total number of staff and the kinds of staff that are needed.

Ultimately, determining the level of service to be provided is a process of balancing an “ideal” level, based on the operational philosophy, and the need to contain costs. The enactment of a particular philosophy, or ideal, is always limited both by the size of the facility and the need to preserve public resources. For example, while the reintegration model might be preferred by a particular jurisdiction, the need to allocate limited dollars among other necessary jail functions may inhibit the number and types of education or work opportunities that can be provided to inmates. And, as previously noted, a small jail is usually limited in the range of services it can provide.

The overall operational philosophy remains important from the beginning in guiding a number of decisions related to service levels. These decisions affect the eventual staff-inmate ratio. Even after the appropriate level of service has been determined, however, the question of who will provide these services remains for management to decide.⁴

What is the Physical Layout of the Facility?

The philosophy that will guide the service orientation of a new facility also determines its design. For correctional facilities, perhaps more than any other kind of building, design must complement purpose. All design decisions should be based on operational objectives.

The physical layout and design of the facility, in turn, affects staffing needs. Design affects:

- where staff will be stationed;
- how many staff will be needed to supervise an area; and
- how much movement of staff and inmates will be required.

Because staff costs are so high in relation to total costs over the life of a facility, a design should always be considered in relation to its effect on staff needs. Adjusting design features throughout the planning process can make it possible to minimize staff numbers without endangering security or giving up programs.

A few of the many basic design variables that affect staffing needs are discussed below. The wide range of decisions that can be made with respect to each of these variables underscores again the reason it is so difficult to get to the bottom line.

⁴ This issue is discussed on pp. 17-22.

How many posts will require 24-hour staffing?

Each 24-hour post needs approximately five staff persons to operate it. (This figure is based on three shifts daily, and includes days off, vacation, and training time.) The control room is, unavoidably, a 24-hour post because it is the center of responsibility for facility security and cannot be left unstaffed at any time. The number of additional 24-hour posts required by the design will obviously greatly affect the overall number of staff.

How does the design inhibit or facilitate movement of inmates, staff, and visitors?

Services and programs located at some distance from housing areas require more movement of inmates than those located near by. It is possible, for example, that a multi-story jail will necessitate more inmate movement—and more staff to supervise the movement—than if the areas were on a single level. Some facilities are designed so that inmates can move unescorted from one area to another. In other facilities, a staff escort may be necessary for virtually any inmate movement.

Are services centralized or decentralized?

Locating inmate services in an area associated with housing sometimes results in higher initial construction costs, but it may also mean that fewer staff are needed to escort inmates to service areas. This issue should be examined carefully during the facility design process.

How many areas can be viewed from each staff station?

The arrangement of space in a facility determines the degree to which observations of inmate behavior are possible. Maximizing direct sight lines through design may minimize the number of fixed posts or control centers that need constant staffing, as well as reduce the need to escort inmates. Some facilities are designed to provide “passive benefit” in staff locations. Posts are arranged so that an officer at one location engaged in a certain task may indirectly also perform a surveillance function at the same time.

How Will Inmates Be Managed?

A crucial decision with far-reaching implications for staffing is how much interaction will take place between inmates and staff—whether the facility will emphasize “surveillance” or “supervision” of the inmates. This is both a design and a management decision, and it has important consequences for all aspects of the proposed facility.

In traditional jail design, cells are arranged at right angles to corridors. This linear arrangement limits officers’ contacts with inmates to intermittent surveillance of them during periodic trips down hallways adjacent to the cells. More recently, jails have been built in podular arrangements, which enables a guard posted at a secure station outside each housing unit to observe activity within the unit. Inmate management in either of these arrangements can properly be termed surveillance: officers concentrate on observing inmate behavior and responding to it if necessary.

Podular/Direct Supervision Jails

There is, however, a newer approach to inmate management that allows greater interaction between staff and inmates. Since 1981, a number of local jails have been designed and staffed to permit “direct supervision” of inmate behavior. In facilities that emphasize direct supervision, an officer supervises inmates 24 hours a day from *within* the housing unit rather than either remotely from outside looking in or through intermittent patrols. In these facilities about 50 inmates are housed together in manageable units, or pods, arranged around a common, multi-purpose area.

Podular/direct supervision is both an architectural and a management concept. It is based on the belief that inmate management is improved by grouping inmates into units in which they are in direct contact with trained officers. Podular/direct supervision is intended to reduce tension in the facility, lessen confrontations between inmates and staff, and enable staff to have better control over inmate behavior. Direct supervision represents a major shift in detention philosophy by redefining the officer’s role. In direct supervision facilities, the officer becomes a supervisor of inmate behavior by interacting directly and constantly with inmates.

However, choosing the podular/direct supervision approach to facility design and inmate management does not thereby settle the issue of staff-inmate ratios, as some may believe. On the surface, it may seem easier to determine a staffing ratio up front in the case of direct supervision facilities. It is true that the ratio of corrections officers to inmates within the housing areas is determined by the capacity of each housing module—e.g., typically one officer each shift for 48-50 inmates. But this simple formula doesn’t take into account other, non-custodial staff, including administrative, maintenance, education, food service, and medical personnel.

Management Decisions Affecting Staff Needs

After addressing basic questions about facility design, level of services, and inmate management, administrators must still consider additional factors in determining staff needs. Among these are how staff will be deployed, how scheduling can be varied, and who will provide services to inmates. Practical management decisions about these issues are necessary in order to determine the appropriate number of staff for a specific institution.

How Will Staff Be Deployed?

A key variable in determining staff needs is the way in which staff are deployed. These require management decisions about staff assignments and schedules. Since the process of conducting a staffing analysis is creative rather than formula-driven, patterns of staff coverage can vary almost infinitely. Managers should conceive of the staffing analysis process as ongoing; improving staff assignments and schedules always has the potential for improving operations even without any change in total staff numbers.

Scheduling Activities

Times of peak activity in jail operations require more staff than periods of low activity. However, by adjusting the schedule of activities, administrators can even out staff assignments over the 24-hour period of jail operation. For example, demands on staff can be distributed more evenly if visiting hours are spread over two staff shifts. Rescheduling routine activities to a late night shift can enable staff who are underutilized during that period to relieve pressures on those who are on duty during periods of heavy inmate activity.

Adjusting Staff Schedules

Another factor in staff deployment is the way in which individual staff work schedules are shaped. Structuring shifts in a variety of ways can achieve the coverage of posts that is required to complete all necessary tasks. Because jails operate on a 24-hour basis, many alternative scheduling arrangements are possible, including the rotation of staff through a variety of shifts.

Overlapping shifts, in which there is a period of time after one shift of employees comes on the job before those on the previous shift leave, are often used in correctional facilities. Overlapping shifts are especially useful in the jail setting because they enable correctional officers and supervisors to brief their replacements for the next shift. A common approach is for staff on one shift, usually the midnight shift, to work four 10-hour shifts instead of the usual five 8-hour shifts.

In addition to its potential for reducing staff numbers, adjusting staff work schedules may improve employee morale. The effect of schedule adjustments often depends on how they are arranged and how they are presented to staff.

What You Get Out of the Staff You Have

After schedules have been adjusted and times of peak activity taken into account, still other changes can be made to increase the efficiency with which existing staff are deployed. The following variables, which can be addressed through management decisions, help to determine staff productivity and therefore, again, the total number of staff needed in the facility.

Competency and Productivity of Staff

If jail staff are not competent or productive, simply increasing their numbers will not improve facility operations. One jail may be run efficiently and effectively with 50 staff while another of similar size and design may have twice that number and still not function well. Competency and productivity of staff can be addressed through:

- **Good screening and hiring procedures**, which can produce professional staff with qualifications and abilities best suited to the jobs they are hired for.
- **Appropriate and adequate training**, which provides staff the basic knowledge and skills necessary to perform assigned duties, thereby improving job performance and staff morale. In addition, training staff to handle multiple positions enables management to be creative in scheduling activities.
- **Better staff supervision**, which ensures that staff know what tasks are assigned to them and the level of performance demanded in executing them.

Staff Turnover

Staff attrition also affects jail staff-inmate ratios. For example, if a facility has a 30 percent attrition rate among its 60 line staff, 18 officers will need to be replaced every year. Although it is impossible to predict precisely the degree of staff turnover that will occur in a new institution, experience has shown that the rate of attrition for a particular jurisdiction is likely to remain about the same in a new facility as it was in the old one.

Streamlining Operations

Eliminating unnecessary tasks and avoiding duplication of effort will decrease workloads and free staff for important functions. Staff efficiency can be increased if administrators look for ways to ensure that facility operations neither waste nor underutilize staff on duty during all periods of the day.

Job Classification vs. Job Function

In the jail setting, nurses sometimes function as booking officers, correctional officers as clerks, recreation directors as maintenance staff, and so forth. It is important to identify the extent of this crossover in job function because, in general, it is an inefficient use of staff resources for personnel to perform duties other than those they were hired to perform.

Job classifications are so limited in some facilities that they provide no information about the job actually performed. In other places, there is only a single job classification—“deputy sheriff” or “correctional officer”—which does not define function at all. A “deputy sheriff” thus performs all functions within the jail: inmate supervisor, food service worker, mechanic, librarian.

Who Will Provide the Services?

A crucial issue—and one that is sometimes overlooked in considering staff-inmate ratios—is which of a jail’s services will actually be provided by employees of the jail. Since the 1970s, many jurisdictions have chosen to contract with private providers to deliver jail services and programs. In other jurisdictions, administrators have developed

contracts and interagency agreements with other public agencies and made extensive use of volunteers from the community. These policies can make it possible to provide a broad range of services even with limited staff. The variety of possible answers to the question, “Who will provide the services?” illustrates again the difficulty of using staff-inmate ratios or even overall staff numbers in analyzing or planning a facility.

The degree to which a jail administrator chooses to use outside resources rather than staff to provide services is an important management decision. It is based on operational philosophy as well as on questions of cost, efficiency, and liability.

Arrangements with Other Public Agencies

In a variety of situations, jail administrators have chosen to develop cooperative agreements with other community agencies instead of using jail employees to provide inmate services. Public mental health agencies provide drug and alcohol counseling services to inmates in some jails, often relieving these jails of the need for counselors on staff. Jails can also provide food services through arrangements with county hospitals, education programs through local schools and colleges, or can obtain data processing services through local governments.

By analyzing the structure of local government in their area, jail administrators can sometimes identify other county agencies to provide services more efficiently and at less cost than jail employees could. To support these formal arrangements with other agencies, contracts are developed that specify each cooperating agency’s responsibilities, expectations, and procedures.

Using Other Community Resources

In addition to developing agreements with other public agencies, jail managers have found that non-profit agencies and volunteers in the community also offer resources that can reduce staff numbers. Bringing community resources into the jail can sometimes make needed services available at less cost. Using volunteers can also inform a segment of the public about the way a jail operates, thereby improving community support and understanding. In many instances, the jail in turn becomes a resource to the community by providing educational and/or work experiences for those who are involved.

It is important to remember, however, that despite the appeal of using “outside” resources, there are costs associated with doing so. Facility staff are needed to recruit, train, and supervise the volunteers and to develop, manage, and evaluate their programs. Without this staff involvement, volunteer and community programs can easily fail.

Following are some of the most common ways in which community resources are being used in jails:

- Education programs—work-study and internship students provide tutoring and teaching assistance; public schools coordinate and staff education programs.

- Drug and alcohol programs—groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor meetings in the jail; private, non-profit agencies provide evaluation or one-on-one counseling.
- Religious programs—local churches and religious organizations hold services and meetings in the jail.
- Library services—books, services, and/or staff are donated by local public libraries.
- Entertainment—local performers provide entertainment programs for inmates.
- Recreation and self-help programs—exercise, yoga, meditation, sports programs are provided by various non-profit groups and individuals.
- Transition programs—local groups provide short-term housing, counseling, and job referrals to inmates upon release.
- Other—students in criminal justice, law, corrections, social sciences, recreation, and psychology fulfill internship requirements in the jail by performing a variety of functions otherwise done by staff.

In addition to these fairly common ways of utilizing community resources, some jails have developed highly original projects in cooperation with local groups or individuals.

Community resources can be used both to provide services that would otherwise not exist and to augment staff needed to ensure basic service provision. In the latter case, at least, using such resources will lower overall staffing requirements.

Use of Inmate Workers

Using inmates to perform jail functions may also reduce staff numbers. Sometimes, of course, using inmates actually requires more rather than fewer staff because staff are needed to supervise inmates in order to ensure that safety and security are maintained. However, it is possible to have inmate workers take the place of maintenance or kitchen workers, for example, if adequate professional workers are available to supervise and monitor their activity.

Contracting With Private Providers for Services

Probably the most significant management decision to affect staff-inmate ratios is whether or to what degree to contract with private providers for services. After determining the level of service desired, administrators must carefully analyze several factors in deciding whether or not to use private providers: fiscal impact, availability of personnel and equipment, liability, and degree of control desired.

Fiscal Impact

The need to control costs is often an important factor in the decision to contract for certain programs or services rather than to provide them through jail staff. For example, jails commonly contract for support services such as laundry, food service, and maintenance because cost comparisons have shown contracting to be cost-effective. The reasons contractors can often provide services for less include expertise in specialized areas, economies of scale, and, sometimes, lower overhead costs than government-operated programs.

Availability of Personnel and Equipment

Contracting for some services, such as medical care, often lessens the difficulty of recruiting specialized personnel. The level of expertise available to some jails is limited; in others, special equipment is unavailable or prohibitively expensive to buy. Both personnel and equipment can sometimes be made available through contracts with private service providers.

Liability Issues

Contracting for services can reduce counties' and jails' exposure to liability.⁵ The county shares liability with the contractor for constitutional violations that occur as a result of the jail's policies and procedures, but not for violations caused by independent actions of the contractor's employees. If the contract defines the rights and duties of each party and if performance is monitored for compliance, protection from liability is possible. Monitoring contractor performance is therefore crucial in limiting the degree of liability.

Degree of Control

In contracting for services, an administrator is agreeing to relinquish a degree of direct control over facility operations. Weighing the disadvantages and advantages of lack of direct control in specific instances is an important part of the decision. Some administrators may be more willing to give up direct control over services such as food or laundry, which are neither programmatic nor custodial in nature, than over services that do affect either programs or custody.

A final point about contracting for services: the widespread use in jails of privately contracted services is yet another illustration of the limits of focusing on raw staff numbers or staff-inmate ratios in analyzing, comparing, or planning facilities. A jail

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see William C. Collins, "Privatization: Some Legal Considerations from a Neutral Perspective," (Parts I and II) *American Jails*, Spring 1987, pp. 40-45, and Summer 1987, pp. 28-34.

whose staffing chart reflects no medical personnel, for example, may actually provide an excellent medical program through other agencies or private contractors.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the fundamental questions of staffing rather than on its technical aspects. It is not a substitute for a complete staffing analysis, but an attempt to raise awareness of the complex process that is required *before* determining staffing levels.

Jail administrators often use comparative staffing ratios because they are a convenient way to justify staffing levels to public officials. Understandably, administrators are inclined to imply the inadequacy (or adequacy, depending on the point being made) of their own facility's staffing by comparing ratios or rates of staff per 100 inmates.

Ultimately, however, general guidelines or "average" staff-inmate ratios are more misleading than helpful because they reflect none of the analytical or philosophical steps to be taken in planning a new jail. Staffing patterns must be based on the mission and goals of each facility. The arithmetic of staffing can be computed only after the policy decisions have been made. If the numbers that result are unrealistic or unworkable, policy decisions must then be re-examined and revised before another set of numbers can be derived. It is hard to get to the "bottom line" because many decisions, both major and minor, have to be made first.