

Comparing the Cost of Direct Supervision with Traditional Jails

Towles Bigelow

Abstract

This study examines several direct supervision jails and several traditional supervision jails. It evaluates the two types of operation and their associated costs to see if cost should be a determining factor in the selection of a particular type of supervision. The economic hard times that face local, state, and federal governments heightens the importance of the cost factor in making decisions on which type of jail the taxpayer is willing to support.

Introduction

The dilemma of having enough space to incarcerate criminals while controlling costs is a major concern and the most serious problem facing the criminal justice system today. Approximately 400,000 people are incarcerated in local jails across the country today, a population that is growing at a rate equivalent to three new 400-bed jails every week (Quinlan, 1990).

Jails constructed in the past decade have used two primary types of design: traditional supervision jails, with podular or linear intermittent surveillance; and direct supervision, or podular direct supervision jails.

In a traditional supervision jail, inmate housing areas are divided into units/pods of approximately 50 single occupancy cells, clustered around a common area and a secure control booth where an officer observes inmate activity. The pods may be further divided into subsections to control the inmates. The officer enters the unit/pod on an as needed basis to perform inspections, handle laundry, distribute meals, make medical calls, etc.

The concept of direct supervision originated approximately 10 years ago with the staffing of the Contra Costa County Detention facility in Martinez, California. Since then, many of these jails have been built across the country. Such jails have been called the "new generation jails."

Direct supervision contrasts sharply with the conventional or traditional approach; in direct supervision jails, about 50 inmates are housed together in a unit or pod arranged around a common multipurpose area. An officer remains inside the unit/pod with the inmates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This approach encourages interaction between staff and inmates, and causes a shift from reactive inmate management to a proactive approach based on control and intervention.

Direct supervision design is intended to reduce tension, lessen confrontations, and enable staff to have better control over inmate behavior. Some jails have reported that incidents of violence dropped by 50% and assaults on officers became almost nonexistent after the switch to direct supervision. In addition, use of disciplinary segregation diminished (Nelson, 1988). They also reported reduced sick leave, increased staff safety, reduced construction costs, reduced maintenance costs, reduced violence, and improved working conditions, etc., and claimed that it takes less staff to operate (Nelson, 1988).

Given such positive reports regarding the direct supervision approach, this study

examines several traditional and direct supervision jails in Florida. The study compares construction, personnel and operating costs, and asks some questions about the future of jails in Florida.

Comparing Traditional with Direct Supervision

In most counties, the sheriff is responsible for the operation of the county jail, and the jail constitutes the largest allocation of financial and manpower resources and the greatest liability exposure for the sheriff's office. Hence, it is important to consider when savings are possible as these relate to the construction and operation of the local jail.

A 1991 study by the National Institute of Corrections reported that construction of a direct supervision jail cost 40% less than a traditional or indirect supervision jail. This lower cost occurs, in part, because direct supervision jails do not need to use vandal-proof stainless steel toilets (\$800, compared to \$260 for a porcelain toilet) and lighting fixtures; doors, frames and hardware can be commercial quality rather than heavy duty (\$700 for a high-security steel door, compared to \$200 for a solid core wooden door (Parrish, 1992)).

To compare operational expenses, three direct supervision jails, one each from Hillsborough, Orange, and Leon counties, were examined and compared with three traditional supervision jails, one each in Brevard, Volusia, and Marion counties. Operational costs were calculated based on cost per day per inmate. This method is derived by taking the total annual budget and dividing it by the average daily population and then dividing that figure by the number of days in the year. Because it is a cost-per-day-per inmate, the figure is comparable from jail to jail regardless of the number of inmates being housed in any particular jail.

The study of the six jails showed that the average cost of operating a direct supervision jail is \$21.14 more per day per inmate than that of a traditional supervision jail. In Hillsborough County, the average cost per day per inmate is \$57.18. Orange County pays an average of \$54.92 per day per inmate. Leon County inmate costs are even higher at an average of \$58.18 per day per inmate. In comparison, Brevard costs average \$38.57 per day per inmate; Volusia, \$36.81 per day and Marion, \$31.40 per day per inmate.

Personnel expenses represent the greatest cost, about 70%, of operating a jail. Because of this it is important to consider the ratio of inmates to staff members in consideration of the operational cost of a direct supervision jail compared to the cost of a traditional supervision jail. This study showed that it takes approximately one-third more staff to operate a direct supervision jail than it takes to operate a traditional supervision jail. In Hillsborough, Orange and Leon counties, there were 2 to 2.4 inmates per officer compared to 3 to 4.2 inmates per officer in Brevard, Volusia and Marion counties. Primarily, this additional cost occurs because each officer is responsible for fewer inmates.

Thus, although it is less expensive to construct a direct supervision jail, there are considerable additional operational personnel costs related to this type of design. Some questions arise that must be considered, and cannot be answered by this study:

1. Will the taxpayer support this additional operating cost?

2. Do the claimed benefits justify the additional cost?

3. Does the Direct Supervision concept produce the desired results?

Captain Towles Bigelow is a 33-year veteran law enforcement officer, having begun his career with the Marion County Sheriff's Office in 1961. He has served under three different sheriffs and has held many different jobs, including Chief Deputy, Jail Administrator and Chief of Investigations. Presently, he is Bureau Chief of Internal Support. Towles was a member of the Charter Class of the Senior Leadership Program.

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