

2009

Jail Visitation: An Assessment of Organizational Policy and Information Availability

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Publication Info

Published in *Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, Volume 5, Issue 3, 2009, pages 207-220.

Sitren, Alicia H., Smith, Hayden P., Applegate, Brandon K., Gould, Laurie A. 2009. "Jail Visitation: An Assessment of Organizational Policy and Information Availability." in the *Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice* [Online Journal], Vol. 5(3). Available at <http://utsa.edu/swjcyj/>.

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Jail Visitation: An Assessment of Organizational Policy and Information Availability

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Abstract

Jail inmates face substantial emotional, economic, legal, and other challenges when they are incarcerated. The extent to which they are able to maintain contacts with individuals on the outside can substantially determine how well they cope with these concerns, and visitation is the primary way that such links may be maintained. To date, no systematic assessment of jail visitation policies has been conducted. The current study examined the availability of visitation policy information and the content of policies for national samples of large and small jails. The results suggest that large jails provide more opportunities for visitation and that they provide more information than small jails. Overall, there exists an opportunity for jails to substantially increase the availability of crucial visitation information. Policy implications are discussed.

Key Words: jails, visitation, inmate families, correctional policy

INTRODUCTION

In 1961, sociologist Erving Goffman defined total institutions as “place[s] of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an

appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (p. xiii). Local jails were among the institutions Goffman sought to capture with this description. He observed that within these institutions, scheduled activities occur predominately within groups, with all of one’s basic daily functions (e.g., work, sleep, recreation) taking place exclusively within the confines of a sole, isolated structure. Whether modern jails truly constitute total institutions is debatable. Several scholars have observed that other actors in the local criminal justice system largely determine the size of a jail’s inmate population (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2000; Hall, Henry, Perlstein, & Smith, 1985; Surette, Applegate, McCarthy, & Jablonski, 2006). More broadly, Klofas (1990) argued that jails are best understood when considered within their larger social context, and Sturges and Hardesty (2005) suggested that jails should be viewed in reference to the ecosystem within which they exist. Farrington (1992, p. 6-7) contended that jails operate “in a relatively stable and ongoing network of diverse transactions, exchanges and relationships.” Many jails are not self sufficient in matters of health care, food, clothing, work, education and spirituality, and staff routinely “carry” the facility into the community and the community back into the facility. Thus, jails may be more open than the “total institution” label suggests.

Nevertheless, Goffman’s (1961) conception highlights one of the fundamental features of local jails—isolation. Inmates are separated from the general public as well as from family and friends. Some of the detrimental effects of isolation can be mitigated through visitation. Not all features of visitation at jails, however, are currently clear. In particular, no systematic evidence exists regarding the availability of information on visitation policies. Further, only one prior study has documented the restrictions that jail policies place on those who may wish to visit a friend or family member who is incarcerated. Sturges and Hardesty (2005) reported on the existence of seven possible visitation policies among Pennsylvania county jails. Based on survey responses from jail wardens, the authors discovered that most jails in this state required visitors to present identification, to sign in prior to visiting, to have their name on an approved list, to visit during a scheduled time, and to abide by a dress code. No study has yet looked beyond these particular policies or at jails in other states. The current study seeks to begin addressing these gaps in the literature. As a prelude to our analysis, we begin by reviewing the existing literature relevant to jail visitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Transition from Society to Jail

The transition from society to jail can be a psychologically and socially jarring experience. Gibbs (1982) describes the process with adjectives such as “disruptive,” “debilitating,” “traumatic,” and “cataclysmic”; an event associated with increased risk of self-injury and suicide. Toch (1975) states that this loss of equilibrium, coupled with missing social contacts and support from the family, can lead to a crisis of abandonment. Critics of local incarceration argue that jail operators actively punish inmates experiencing this transition through malign neglect (Irwin, 1985). Specifically, Irwin (1985) suggests that jail inmates experience a process of disintegration, disorientation, degradation, and preparation that strips the bonds between the inmate and the broader society. The aspect of this process most relevant to the issue of visitation is disintegration, the term Irwin uses to describe how being jailed erodes inmate ties to existing formal and informal social relationships. To Irwin, when the inmate is not given the

opportunity to meet basic obligations through interpersonal and familial interactions, an overall weakening of the family unit develops.

Interestingly, previous experiences with incarceration do not safeguard one from the psychological distress associated with adapting to the jail environment. In his qualitative study, Fleisher (1995) followed the lives of street dwellers in the Seattle area. Fleisher discovered that while jails frequently provide stability to street dwellers through a multitude of services and programs, the process of being jailed highlights and exacerbates the street dweller's minimal social networks. Without street-level interactions used to secure alcohol, drugs, and a place to sleep, this vulnerable population is also prone to dwell on past mistakes while in jail. A lack of social interaction with the outside world furthers the risk of chronic depression and anxiety. It appears that while street dwellers may have been frequently jailed in the past, having even a lone family member or friend visit can represent a crucial factor in their ongoing psychological adjustment and resilience.

According to Gibbs (1982), maintaining links with persons in the outside world is crucial to the street-jail transition. The importance is twofold. First, external relationships can offer financial support. Second, they offer "a sense of hope and adequacy in an uncontrollable and uncertain situation" (p. 100). Hairston (1988) also notes the significance of maintaining outside social networks for inmates. Families provide resources, information about life on the outside, and encouragement to participate in rehabilitative services. Similarly, a *lack* of family visitation has been associated with increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, guilt, anger, and despair (Gordon, 1999).

The Importance of Family Visits

Imprisonment produces far-reaching psychological, social, and financial damages that extend beyond the prisoner to the family (Arditti, Lambert-Shute & Joest, 2003). Incarceration places an immense strain on marriage and family life, as relationships with spouses and children become gradually more difficult to maintain (Gordon, 1999; Komorsky, 2004). For families, the emotional effect of incarceration has been likened to the death of a family member (Komorsky, 2004). In addition to the emotional trauma of incarceration, families have more practical concerns relating to finances. While the family unit often remains intact when a male is incarcerated, wives and partners can find themselves in the role of primary caretaker and provider for the family. In fact, two pressing issues for the wives and partners of incarcerated males repeatedly mentioned in the literature include raising children alone and dealing with financial problems (Arditti et al., 2003; Christian, 2005).

Arditti et al. (2003) describe the family members and children of incarcerated inmates as "survivor family members," acknowledging that they are left to confront daily life challenges without the support or contribution of the individual who has been incarcerated. In a separate analysis, Arditti (2003b) reported that these survivor family members also view themselves as victims of the criminal justice system. Both studies utilized data collected from interviews with caregivers and children visiting family members at a local jail. Survivor family members noted stresses on several dimensions including emotional, financial, parenting, and social stigma due to their connection with the inmate. The environmental conditions of the facility were typically unsanitary, crowded, and noisy. Visitors reported and interviewers witnessed incidences of being

disrespected and humiliated by correctional staff. Speculations of child stress were also made due to the loss of involvement with the incarcerated parent and the changing role of the other.

From the inmate's perspective, lost or weakened connections with family are a major concern. Hairston (1991) conducted a study that examined the importance of visitation for mothers incarcerated in jail. Through personal interviews with 38 women, Hairston revealed that separation from children was one of the most difficult aspects of incarceration. Indeed, most inmates indicated that their children had not visited them during their period of incarceration. Reasons for lack of visitation included distance from the child's home, lack of adequate transportation, and the institution's visiting policies. The institution's visitation policy allowed children to visit only on Saturdays for 30 minutes, and the maximum number of family visits allotted to each inmate was two per month. These findings are not gender specific. Weisheit and Klofas (2002) found that over 60% of male inmates in their research identified weakening family relationships as the primary jail-related problem they faced. The deleterious effects on the family bond were more significant to these inmates than were concerns for financial stability, living arrangements, ownership of property, and physical health.

Visitation provides a means to alleviate the stresses associated with incarceration and regular visits from family members are critical to adjusting to incarceration (Hairston, 1988; Hairston, 2004; Sturges, 2002; Sturges & Hardesty, 2005). There is some evidence to suggest that inmates who receive regular visits from family members are less likely to cause institutional problems. In a study conducted by Wooldredge (1999), frequency of visitation was significantly correlated with psychological well-being among inmates. Additional research indicates that inmates who receive regular visits are also less likely to recidivate upon release (Hairston, 1988; Howser & Macdonald, 1982; Kieser, 1991; Girshick, 1996; Martin, 1997).

Despite the importance of visitation for both inmates and families, very little research has investigated the nature or process of visitation. The work that has been done suggests that the visitation process is sometimes less than ideal. Correctional institutions play a major role in facilitating or blocking the visitation process, depending on the nature of their visitation policies (Rosen, 2001). In fact, several authors surmise that visitation procedures actually impede inmate-family connections (Hairston, 2004; Sturges & Hardesty, 2005).

Sturges (2002) conducted a qualitative evaluation of visitation at several county jails to assess the concerns that correctional officers and visitors had about the visitation process. Drawing on in-depth interviews and observations of visitation procedures at five county jails, Sturges found that correctional officers most often were concerned about safety and security issues and with problems related to unruly visitors. Different issues were salient to those seeking to visit an inmate. Many family members indicated that the "first-come-first-serve" visitation policy at one institution hampered their visiting experience because it increased the amount of time they had to wait. Other notable concerns included perceived mistreatment by correctional officers, the absence of physical contact visits, and the lack of activities in the waiting room.

Arditti's (2003a) largely descriptive study revealed some of the same challenges. The researcher conducted interviews with 56 family members of jail inmates and found that the lack of physical contact was the single largest concern, with 87% citing it as being a serious problem. Other serious concerns included the short length of the visit, no privacy, and long wait times. It is notable that Christian's (2005) examination of visiting at state correctional facilities

produced similar results and confirmed that a facility's visitation policies and procedures can have dramatic effects on inmates' and visitors' experiences.

In addition to these problems, families of inmates have found a lack of written rules and procedures for visitation. Obtaining information about facility visitation is often described as a frustrating experience (Arditti, 2003b; Hairston, 2004). The distribution of visitation rules and regulations to family members is not a standard correctional practice (Hairston, 2004). Edensfeld (2005) found the visitation policies of the jail where her husband was incarcerated so confusing or simply nonexistent that she penned an article in *American Jails* calling for improvement in 14 areas. In particular, Edensfeld recommended a clearly written handout for visitation that would provide "the address and directions to the jail, parking suggestions, hours and days of visitation, any restrictions, dress requirements, and rules regarding infant supplies" (p. 54). While organizational concerns for visitation programs becoming a vehicle for contraband smuggling are both valid and understandable, Edensfeld's request likely would increase the efficiency of the jail while decreasing stress for inmates and their visitors.

Summary

To date, research on the jail environment has focused on the significance of distal attributes such as drug addiction, poor health, and low socioeconomic status on the adaptation of the individual to the jail environment. Unfortunately, a gap remains in terms of the organizational directives that influence the level of access that jail inmates have to external social contacts. The loss of contact with family imposed by jail institutions represents a collateral cost to the inmate, one that occurs in addition to the overt loss of freedom. Additionally, these social and financial strains extend beyond the prisoner to the family. The current study is the first of its kind to systematically examine on a national level what information on visitation is made available to inmates and family members. Sturges and Hardesty (2005) examined only a few policies in only a single state. Furthermore, prior studies of the opportunities and restrictions that jails place on visitation have examined one or only a handful of institutions. We complement these studies by examining the content of visitation policies across a broader sample of local jails.

METHODOLOGY

The sampling frame for this study was the dataset of the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Jail Census, 1999, provided through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). The National Jail Census of 1999 identified 3,376 jails in operation in the United States. Of these, 3,084 provided data and were included in the ICPSR dataset. To avoid overcomplicating our analyses, we chose to focus only on locally administered jails. Eliminating regional, federal, and privately-operated jails resulted in a sampling frame containing 2,995 facilities. This sampling frame was then stratified by jail size—small jails were defined as having a capacity of 55 inmates or less, and large jails were defined as having a capacity of 800 inmates or more.¹ We randomly selected 30 small and 30 large jails. Despite the small number of cases selected, the

1. Definitions of jail size vary widely. Mays and Thompson (1988), for example, defined small jails as those with a capacity of ten or fewer inmates. Others might contend that jails of 100 inmates are still small compared to the largest jails in the country, which can house several thousand or more (Harrison

sample of small jails represents approximately 2% of the 1,528 small jails in the country; our sample of large jails constitutes approximately 20% of the 148 jails with a capacity of 800 inmates or more nationally. We chose to select an equal number of large jails despite the fact that they account for a far smaller proportion of jail facilities in the United States because they incarcerate the bulk of jail inmates. In 2006, jails with an average daily population of 1,000 or more inmates held half of all jail inmates in the country (Sabol et al., 2007).

For most of the sample, contact information was found in a directory produced by the American Jail Association (2003). Each jail was contacted by telephone. We requested that any materials relating to visitation that were normally provided to inmates and visitors be mailed or faxed to us. Specifically, we sought visitation policies and procedures, visitation schedules, standard operating procedures, and any information provided to the inmates in an inmate handbook. Typically someone in an administrative position, such as the sheriff or jail manager, had to approve sending visitation information in response to our request. In some cases, the researchers were directed instead to a recorded message about visitation that could be accessed by telephone.

A key concern of this study was the availability of information for visitors. We felt, however, that it would be inappropriate to mislead jails about the purpose of our request for information. When we contacted a jail, we did not pose as people wishing to visit an inmate. Therefore, our approach to obtaining information likely differed from that of potential visitors. All jails were initially contacted via telephone, and multiple contacts were necessary in most cases because the procedures for obtaining information varied from institution to institution. Following initial contact, a letter was mailed to the institution formally requesting the visitation information and indicating the purposes for the research. In five cases, the telephone number for the jail could not be located despite extensive searches of the American Jail Association (2003) directory, the Internet, and telephone directory assistance (i.e., “411”). These facilities were contacted by mail only. The extensive efforts we undertook to locate contact information highlight the potential difficulty that a visitor might encounter when trying to obtain necessary visitation information.²

Once visitation information was received, we coded the data into 17 dimensions of specific policy content. Six continuous variables were coded: the maximum number of visits allowed per week, the length of the visitation in minutes, the number of days a week available for visitation, the number of visitation hours available per week, the maximum number of adults allowed during a visit, and the maximum number of children allowed at a visit. The remaining eleven variables were dummy coded yes (1) or no (0): contact visitation; written information provided to inmates; inmate right to refuse the visit; written information provided to visitors; posted visitation information for visitors; posted visitation schedule only, not provided in writing, and

& Beck, 2005). We elected to cut “small” jails at 55 because the result was to place approximately half of the jails in our sampling frame into this category, and because it is approximately equal to the definition of small jails (average daily population of fewer than 50 inmates) adopted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Sabol, Minton, & Harrison, 2007). Defining “large” jails as those with a capacity of 800 or more encompassed approximately 5% of all jails at the upper end of jail size.

2. Because of resource constraints, we did not physically visit any of the jails in the sample. In this way, we did not attempt one of the avenues that might result in information being provided to a potential visitor—appearing at the jail and requesting a visit.

subject to change; visitors required to schedule an appointment; visitors required to provide valid photo ID at the time of the visit; locker provided to visitors; and visitors allowed to bring designated items for inmates during visitation. We also coded whether visitors were logged in manually (0) or electronically (1).

RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections. First, to demonstrate the availability of information, we compare what data were provided by small and large jails across all variables. Second, among those jails that made information available to us, we assess the content of jail visitation policies for small and large jails.

Table 1 [below] reports the availability of visitation information and allows comparison by jail size. There are three important results that can be surmised from this table. First, despite our repeated efforts to obtain information, a substantial number of jails did not make visitation information available. Only 58% of all the jails contacted provided visitation information. Of the 30 large jails contacted, 23 or 77% provided information, and of the 30 small jails contacted, 12 or 40% supplied information about their visitation policies. The gap between large and small jails was a statistically significant difference ($t = -3.051, p < .05$); thus, large jails were much more likely to provide visitation information than small jails.

TABLE 1. PERCENT OF JAILS PROVIDING VISITATION INFORMATION

	All Jails (n = 60)	Small Jails (n = 30)	Large Jails (n = 30)
Any Information	58	40	77
Specific Policy Areas			
Visits per week	45	23	67
Visitation length	45	23	67
Days per week	47	27	67
Hours per week	47	27	67
Adults	40	17	63
Children	13	3	23
Contact visit	43	30	57
Written for inmate	57	40	73
Refuse visit	13	0	27
Written for visitor	42	27	57
Posted for visitor	33	23	43
Posted schedule only	30	23	37
Schedule appointment	22	13	30
Photo ID	47	23	70
Visitor log-in	27	10	43
Locker	27	10	43
Specified items for inmate	42	27	57

Second, regardless of jail size, a large amount of information about specific areas of visitation policy is not being made available. As shown in Table 1 [page], less than half of all jails provided information in almost all of the areas under examination, with the exception of written information provided to inmates (57%). Jails supplied particularly limited information in the following areas: the maximum number of children allowed at a visit (13%), whether an inmate has the right to refuse a visit (13%), appointment scheduling (22%), availability of lockers for visitors (27%), and the posting of the visitation schedule (30%).

Third, large jails were far more likely to provide information on specific policy areas than were small jails. For example, whether visitors were required to show valid photo identification at the time of their visit was made available by 70% of the large jails compared to only 23% of small jails. Additionally, 63% of large jails made available information concerning the maximum number of adults allowed at a visit compared to 17% of small jails. As demonstrated in Table 1, less extreme examples still indicate that large jails were substantially more likely to provide information than small jails. Whether a visitation schedule was posted only and not provided in writing was made available by 37% of large jails and 23% of small jails. Whether visitors were required to schedule an appointment for visitation was made available by 30% of large jails and only 13% of small jails.

Among those jails that provided information to us, we next evaluate the content of jail visitation policies for small and large jails. Table 2 [below] reports mean values and *t*-tests for differences in visitation policy variables by jail size. The first few variables presented in the table focus on the parameters that jails set for visitation. For both large and small jails, rela-

TABLE 2. CONTENT RESULTS FOR JAIL VISITATION POLICY VARIABLES BY JAIL SIZE

	Small Jails	Large Jails	<i>t</i>
Visits per week	2.43	2.65	-0.293
Visitation length (minutes)	32.86	44.00	-1.105
Days per week	3.50	5.15	-2.068*
Hours per week	9.06	32.28	-4.031*
Adults	2.20	2.32	-0.301
Children	1.00	1.43	-0.750
Contact visit (0=no, 1=yes)	0.56	0.65	-0.440
Written for inmate (0=no, 1=yes)	0.67	0.95	-1.929
Refuse visit (0=no, 1=yes)	N/A	1.00	N/A
Written for visitor (0=no, 1=yes)	0.00	0.53	-4.243*
Posted for visitor (0=no, 1=yes)	0.57	0.92	-1.627
Posted schedule only (0=no, 1=yes)	0.71	1.00	-1.549
Schedule appointment (0=no, 1=yes)	0.50	0.44	0.171
Photo ID (0=no, 1=yes)	1.00	1.00	N/A
Visitor log-in (0>manual, 1=electronic)	0.00	0.31	-2.309*
Locker (0=no, 1=yes)	0.67	0.85	-0.683
Specified items for inmate (0=no, 1=yes)	0.12	0.29	-1.000

* $p < .05$

tively few visits were allowed—less than three per week. Average visitation length also was modest for both small and large jails—44 minutes for large jails and 33 minutes for small jails. The average number of days per week that visits are allowed was significantly greater for large jails. Additionally, large jails also reported a significantly greater number of hours available for visitation per week compared to small jails. The average number of hours of visitation among large jails was more than three times greater than the hours of visitation among small jails. The maximum number of adults allowed during a visit was not significantly different for large and small jails; approximately two adults were allowed during a visit. The maximum number of children allowed during a visit was relatively small for large and small jails alike, often limited to one or none. Approximately 56% of small jails allowed contact visits compared to 65% of large jails, a difference that was not statistically significant.

The remaining variables in Table 2 describe how information is provided to inmates and visitors and what visitors can expect to experience when they call on someone at the jail. Written information was provided to inmates at a greater rate for large jails, 96% of the time, compared to small jails supplying information to inmates only 67% of the time. Inmates had the right to refuse a visit 100% of the time for large jails. Unfortunately, we were unable to report the content of this policy for small jails because this information was not made available to us. Large jails posted and provided written visitation information to visitors at a significantly higher rate than did small jails. In fact, written information was not provided to visitors by any of the small jails that responded to our request to provide information about their policies. In contrast, about half of the large jails provided visitation information to visitors in a written form. Visitation information was posted for visitors 57% of the time for small jails compared to 92% of the time for large jails. Large jails also posted a visitation schedule more often than small jails. A visitation schedule was posted by 100% of large jails that provided information and 71% of small jails. Visitors were required to schedule an appointment for visitation by half of the small jails and a slightly smaller portion of the large jails. Visitors were required to present valid photo identification at the time of their visit 100% of the time for both large and small jails. Results indicated significant differences for the visitor log-in. Small jails recorded visitors manually 100% of the time; thus, electronic recording or the use of a computer system was not employed. Nearly 70% of large jails tracked visitors through a manual system, but the remaining 31% utilized an electronic system. Small jails provided lockers to visitors at the time of the visit for personal belongings 67% of the time compared to 85% of large jails. And finally, nearly 30% of large jails allowed visitors to bring specified items to inmates at the time of their visit, compared to only 12% of small jails.

DISCUSSION

There are several key findings in this research that require explication. First, we found that a large number of jails were reluctant to supply even basic information regarding visitation. The researchers clearly identified themselves and their purpose, yet the responses to requests for information in many cases ranged from confusion to outright suspicion and refusal. A potential visitor's request may well have been viewed differently—hopefully, with fewer questions about its legitimacy—but prior research on actual visitors' experiences suggests that they frequently confront similar difficulties (Arditti, 2003b; Arditti et al., 2003; Hairston, 2004). The resistance by jails to reveal how they handle visitation is a notable finding. Specific pieces

of information—days and hours of visitation, the number of visitors allowed, restrictions on the number of visits per week, the need to show identification, and so on—are critical for potential visitors to know *before* they undertake the sometimes substantial effort required to make a visitation trip (Arditti, 2003a, 2003b; Sturges, 2002; see also Christian, 2005). Hairston (2004) further notes the additional strain placed on inmate-family connections when visitation policies and procedures are unclear to visitors.

Second, some rather substantial gaps were uncovered between the content of large jails' and small jails' visitation policies. For every jail visitation variable, large jails were more likely to provide the service than small jails. This was particularly salient in the statistically significant differences for written instructions for the visitor and the accessibility of days/hours for visitation. None of the small jails surveyed had developed written instructions for visitors. Lacking a written document may mean that information is less accessible for visitors and that policies may be applied less consistently.

The relatively narrow window of opportunity for visitation at small jails suggests that separation problems for inmates and families may be more difficult to overcome. The available visitation hours in small jails constituted a 9-hour-per-week window compared to a 32-hour-per-week window in large jails. Gibbs (1982) observed that people booked into jail experience anxiety and other emotional problems stemming from their separation from society. They also may need help with even simple tasks such as learning about their legal status or informing employers about their situation in hopes of keeping a job. Families and friends are important sources of emotional, psychological, and instrumental support (Arditti, 2003b; Hairston, 1988; Hairston, 2004; Rosen, 2001). When visitors must make appointments, and days and times are limited, fewer visits may be possible. Moreover, visitation sessions, particularly at small jails, were relatively short, demanding a level of efficiency during a visit that may be beyond the abilities of many inmates and their visitors.

Several possible explanations for the large jail-small jail policy gap may exist. Economies of scale could be partly responsible for these differences; that is, large jails may possess more resources to develop these strategies. Large jails also need to pursue formality and efficiency to handle the larger number of visitors that likely come with a bigger inmate population. Another possibility is that the differences in jail visitation policies between the large and small jails indicate broader differences in functionality. Klofas (1990) has demonstrated that differentiating jails by their average daily population rate and booking rate predicts several jail characteristics, including crowding, percent female, percent sentenced, and the percentage of inmates held for other jurisdictions. Although we examined only one dimension of jail size, our results reveal another area of differences between large and small jails.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Visitation represents a critical dimension of understanding jails within a larger social ecosystem, and the results presented here suggest some fruitful avenues for jail policy. Jail administrators should seek to make information on their jail's policies, processes, and procedures for visitation as easily and widely available as possible. Dissemination of such information requires relatively little effort and resources compared to the strains that miscommunication and misunderstanding among visitors can cause for jail staff (Sturges & Hardesty, 2005). A clearly written handout as recommended by Edenfeld (2005) would help educate inmates and potential

visitors about expectations and requirements. In our sample, less than six in ten jails provided written policies for inmates and fewer than half of the jails provided them for visitors. Other options for disseminating visitation information also exist, including a visitation “hotline.” A few of the jails in the current study have already implemented a dedicated telephone number that potential visitors can call to learn about a jail’s visiting hours, dress code requirements, and other essential information.

Jails should also consider whether their policies truly help them reach their organizational goals. Certain policies are necessary to maintain institutional security, foster the safety of inmates and correctional officers, and allow for possibilities of reformation and reintegration. Indeed, the universal requirement for visitors to present valid personal identification is a very minor burden to potential visitors—particularly if they are informed ahead of time about what identification will be accepted—but promotes smooth institutional operation and accountability. In contrast, tight restrictions on the number of visits per week or the number of hours that an inmate may receive visitors might be relaxed without compromising organizational objectives.

It is notable that we also uncovered substantial variations among jails, particularly between small and large facilities. Standardization of jail policies, as recommended previously by Sturges and Hardesty (2005), could be beneficial in numerous ways. Such standardization would make officer training more consistent and universal. Sturges and Hardesty (2005) suggest that it would also decrease confusion among visitors and reduce inmates’ and visitors’ feelings of discrimination and arbitrariness that can arise from confronting different policies at different institutions. National organizations such as the American Correctional Association, American Jail Association, and National Institute of Corrections already pursue efforts to develop standards, disseminate information about best practices, and provide training. They are well situated to lead standardization of visitation policies and could be particularly influential in bridging the gap between large and small jails.

There are certainly compelling operational and safety reasons for jails to control and limit visitation. Most of the Pennsylvania wardens in Sturges and Hardesty’s (2005) study expressed concern for security and passing of contraband, and some worried about visitors creating complications for jail officers by attempting to contravene policies. Lankenau’s (2001) finding that black-market economies were more likely to develop in prisons where inmates had greater interaction with other inmates, staff, officers, and visitors lends some support to these concerns. Our results demonstrate, however, that there may be room to reconsider the content of some visitation policies. More importantly, at least some jails could make substantial strides increasing the availability of crucial visitation information. Restrictions and conditions of visitation may support a jail’s pursuit of its institutional mission to keep inmates, staff, and the general public safe and secure. It is unclear, however, what is to be gained when contacts with friends and family members are impeded by a lack of information. The only result seems to be to harm family relations, increase inmate isolation, and interfere with the ecological interconnections between the jail and outsiders, moving the jail toward a more total institution.

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